

tiger's quest



tiger's quest



by COLLEEN HOUCK



SPLINTER
New York



SPLINTER

An imprint of Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.

www.sterlingpublishing.com

STERLING and the distinctive Sterling logo
are registered trademarks of Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lot#:

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

04/11

Published by Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.
387 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016
© 2011 by Colleen Houck

Distributed in Canada by Sterling Publishing
% Canadian Manda Group, 165 Dufferin Street
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6K 3H6

Distributed in the United Kingdom by GMC Distribution Services
Castle Place, 166 High Street, Lewes, East Sussex, England BN7 1XU

Distributed in Australia by Capricorn Link (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
P.O. Box 704, Windsor, NSW 2756, Australia

Manufactured in the United States of America
All rights reserved.

Sterling ISBN 978-1-4027-8404-0

For information about custom editions, special sales, premium and
corporate purchases, please contact Sterling Special Sales
Department at 800-805-5489 or specialsales@sterlingpublishing.com.

Designed by Katrina Damkoehler.

Some of the terms included in the book may be trademarks or registered trademarks.

Use of such terms does not imply any association with
or endorsement by such trademark owners

and no association or endorsement is intended or should be inferred.

This book is not authorized by, and neither the Author nor the Publisher is affiliated with
the owners of the trademarks referred to in the book.

*For my husband, Brad—proof that
there really are guys like that out there.*



contents



<i>Prologue</i>	Going Home	1	<i>Chapter 15</i>	Yin/Yang	231
<i>Chapter 1</i>	WOU	3	<i>Chapter 16</i>	The Ocean Teacher	243
<i>Chapter 2</i>	Wushu	19	<i>Chapter 17</i>	Spirit Gates	256
<i>Chapter 3</i>	Dating	29	<i>Chapter 18</i>	Good Things	270
<i>Chapter 4</i>	A Christmas Present	43	<i>Chapter 19</i>	Bad Things	294
<i>Chapter 5</i>	Return	54	<i>Chapter 20</i>	The Tests of the Four Houses	309
<i>Chapter 6</i>	Choices	70	<i>Chapter 21</i>	The Divine Weaver's Scarf	338
<i>Chapter 7</i>	Back to School	91	<i>Chapter 22</i>	Exit	356
<i>Chapter 8</i>	Jealousy	109	<i>Chapter 23</i>	Going Home	375
<i>Chapter 9</i>	Kishan	127	<i>Chapter 24</i>	Confessions	393
<i>Chapter 10</i>	Hired Guns	135	<i>Chapter 25</i>	Saving Ren	409
<i>Chapter 11</i>	Return to India	162	<i>Chapter 26</i>	Baiga	430
<i>Chapter 12</i>	Of Prophecies and Practicing	182	<i>Chapter 27</i>	War Stories	441
<i>Chapter 13</i>	Vatsala Durga Temple	201	<i>Chapter 28</i>	Worst Birthday Ever	460
<i>Chapter 14</i>	The Friendship Highway	217	<i>Epilogue</i>	Unloved	475

the loom of time

Author Unknown

*Man's life is laid in the loom of time
To a pattern he does not see,
While the weavers work and the shuttles fly
Till the dawn of eternity.*

*Some shuttles are filled with silver threads
And some with threads of gold,
While often but the darker hues
Are all that they may hold.*

*But the weaver watches with skillful eye
Each shuttle fly to and fro,
And sees the pattern so deftly wrought
As the loom moves sure and slow.*

*God surely planned the pattern:
Each thread, the dark and fair,
Is chosen by His master skill
And placed in the web with care.*

*He only knows its beauty,
And guides the shuttles which hold
The threads so unattractive,
As well as the threads of gold.*

*Not till each loom is silent,
And the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God reveal the pattern
And explain the reason why*

*The dark threads were as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
For the pattern which He planned.*

PROLOGUE



going home

I clung to the leather seat and felt my heart fall as the private plane rose into the sky, streaking away from India. If I took off my seatbelt, I was sure I would sink right through the floor and drop thousands of feet, freefalling to the jungles below. Only then would I feel right again. I had left my heart in India; I could feel it missing. All that was left of me was a hollowed-out shell, numb and empty.

The worst part was . . . I did this to myself.

How was it possible that I had fallen in love? And, with someone so . . . complicated? The past few months had flown by. Somehow, I had gone from working at a circus to traveling to India with a tiger—who turned out to be an Indian prince—to battling immortal creatures to trying to piece together a lost prophecy. Now, my adventure was all over, and I was alone.

It was hard to believe just a few minutes ago, I had said good-bye to Mr. Kadam. He hadn't said much. He had just gently patted my back as I'd hugged him hard, not letting go. Finally, Kadam pried my arms from the vise I'd locked him in, muttered some reassurances, and turned me over to his great-great-great granddaughter Nilima.

Thankfully, Nilima left me alone on the plane. I didn't feel like having company. She brought lunch, but I couldn't even think about eating. I'm sure it was delicious, but I felt like I was skirting the edge of a pit

of quicksand. Any second, I could be sucked down into an abyss of despair. The last thing I wanted was food. I felt spent and lifeless, like crumpled-up wrapping paper after Christmas.

Nilima removed the meal and then tried to tempt me with my favorite drink—ice-cold lemon water, but I just left it on the table. I stared at the glass for who knows how long, watching the moisture bead on the outside and slowly dribble down, pooling around the bottom.

I tried to sleep, to forget about everything for at least a few hours—but the dark, peaceful oblivion eluded me. Thoughts of my white tiger and the centuries-old curse that trapped him raced through my mind as I stared into space. I looked at Mr. Kadam's empty seat across from me, glanced out the window or watched a blinking light on the wall, I gazed at my hand now and then, tracing over the spot where Phet's henna design lay unseen.

Nilima returned with an MP3 player full of thousands of songs. Several were by Indian musicians, but most of them were by Americans. I scrolled through to find the saddest breakup songs on it. Putting the plugs in my ears, I selected Play.

I unzipped my backpack to retrieve my grandmother's quilt, remembering only then that I had wrapped Fanindra inside it. Pulling back the edges of the quilt, I spied the golden serpent, a gift from the goddess Durga herself, and set it next to me on the armrest. The enchanted piece of jewelry was in a coil, resting; or at least, I assumed she was. Rubbing her smooth, golden head, I whispered, "You're all I've got now."

Spreading the quilt over my legs, I leaned back in the reclined chair, stared at the ceiling of the airplane, and listened to a song called "One Last Cry." Keeping the volume soft and low, I placed Fanindra on my lap and stroked her gleaming coils. The green glow of snake's jeweled eyes softly illuminated the plane's cabin and comforted me as the music filled the empty place in my soul.



The plane finally landed mind-numbing hours later at the airport in Portland, Oregon. When my feet hit the tarmac, I shifted my gaze from the terminal to the gray, overcast sky. I closed my eyes and let the cool breeze blow over me. It carried the smell the forest. A soft, dewy sprinkle settled on my bare arms from what must have been a recent rain. It felt good to be home.

Taking a deep breath, I felt Oregon center me. I was a part of this place, and it was a part of me. I belonged here. It was where I grew up and spent my whole life. My roots were here. My parents and grandma were buried here. Oregon welcomed me like a beloved child, enfolded me in her cool arms, shushed my turbulent thoughts, and promised peace through her whispering pines.

Nilima had followed me down the steps and waited quietly while I absorbed the familiar environment. I heard the hum of a fast engine, and a cobalt blue convertible pulled around the corner. The sleek sports car was the exact color of his eyes.

Mr. Kadam must have arranged for the car. I rolled my eyes at his expensive taste. Mr. Kadam thought of every last detail—and he always did it in style. *At least the car's a rental,* I mused.

I stowed my bags in the trunk and read the name on the back:

Porsche Boxster RS 60 Spyder. I shook my head and muttered, "Holy cow, Mr. Kadam, I would have been just as happy to take the shuttle back to Salem."

"What?" Nilima asked politely.

"Nothing. I'm just glad to be home."

I closed the trunk and sank down into the two-toned blue and gray leather seat. We drove in silence. Nilima knew exactly where she was going, so I didn't even bother giving her directions. I just leaned my head back and watched the sky and the green landscape zip by.

Cars full of teenage boys passed us and whistled. They were admiring either Nilima's exotic beauty and long, dark hair flying in the wind or the nice car. I'm not sure which inspired the catcalls, but I knew they weren't for me. I wore my standard T-shirt, tennis shoes, and jeans. Wisps of my golden-brown hair tangled about my loose braid and whipped at my brown, red-rimmed eyes and tear-streaked face. Older men cruised past us slowly too. They didn't whistle, but they definitely enjoyed the view. Nilima just ignored them, and I tuned them out, thinking, *I must look as awful as I feel.*

When we entered downtown Salem, we passed the Marion Street Bridge that would have taken us over the Willamette River and onto Highway 22 heading for the farmlands of Monmouth and Dallas. I tried to tell Nilima she missed a turn, but she merely shrugged and said we were taking a short cut.

"Sure," I said sarcastically, "what's another few minutes on a trip that has lasted for days?"

Nilima tossed her beautiful hair, smiled at me, and kept driving, maneuvering into the traffic headed for South Salem. I'd never been this way before. It was definitely the long way to Dallas.

Nilima was driving toward a large hill that was covered with forest. We wound our way slowly up the beautiful tree-lined road for several



miles. I saw dirt roads leading into the trees. Houses poked through the forest here and there, but the area was largely untouched. I was surprised that the city hadn't annexed it and started building there. It was quite lovely.

Slowing down, Nilima turned onto one of the private roads and followed it even higher up the hill. Although we passed a few winding driveways, I didn't see any houses. At the end of the road, we stopped in front of a duplex that was nestled in the middle of a pine forest.

Both sides of the duplex were mirror images of each other. Each had two floors with a garage and a small, shared courtyard. Each had a large bay window that looked out over the trees. The house's wood siding was painted cedar brown and midnight green, and the roof was covered with grayish-green shingles. In a way, it kind of resembled a ski cabin.

Nilima glided smoothly into the garage and stopped the car. "We're home," she announced.

"Home? What do you mean? Aren't you taking me to my foster parents' house?" I asked, even more confused than I already was.

Nilima smiled understandingly. She told me gently, "No. This is your house."

"My house? What are you talking about? I live in Dallas. Who lives here?"

"You do. Come inside and I'll explain."

We walked through a laundry room into the kitchen, which was small but had brand new stainless-steel appliances, lemon-yellow curtains, and walls decorated with lemon stencils. Nilima grabbed a couple of bottles of diet cola from the fridge.

I plopped my backpack down and said, "Okay, Nilima, now tell me what's going on."

She ignored my question. Instead, she offered me a soda, which I declined, and then told me to follow her.



Sighing, I slipped off my tennis shoes so I wouldn't mess up the duplex's plush carpeting and followed her to the living room, which was small and cute. We sat on a beautiful chestnut leather sofa. A tall library cabinet full of classic hardbound books that probably cost a fortune beckoned invitingly from the corner, while a sunny window and a large, flat-screen television mounted above a polished cabinet also vied for my attention.

Nilima began rifling through papers left on a coffee table.

"Kelsey," she began. "This house is yours. It's part of the payment for your work in India this summer."

"It's not like I was really working, Nilima."

"What you did was the most vital work of all. You accomplished much more than any of us even hoped. We all owe you a great debt, and this is a small way to reward your efforts. You've overcome tremendous obstacles and almost lost your life. We are all very grateful."

Embarrassed, I teased, "Well, now that you put it that way—wait! You said this house is *part* of my payment? You mean there's more?"

With a nod of her head, Nilima said, "Yes."

"No. I really can't accept this gift. An entire house is way too much—never mind anything else! It's much more than we agreed on. I just wanted some money to pay for books for school. He shouldn't do this."

"Kelsey, he insisted."

"Well, he will have to un-insist. This is too much, Nilima. *Really.*"

She sighed and looked at my face, which was set with steely determination. "He really wants you to have it, Kelsey. It will make him happy."

"Well, it's impractical! How does he expect me to catch the bus to school from here? I plan to enroll in college now that I'm back home, and this location isn't exactly close to any bus routes."

Nilima gave me a puzzled expression. "What do you mean catch the

bus? I guess if you really want to ride the bus, you could drive down to the bus station."

"Drive down to the bus station? That doesn't make any sense."

"Well, *you* aren't making any sense. Why don't you just drive your car to school?"

"My car? What car?"

"The one in the garage, of course."

"The one in the . . . *Oh, no!* No way! You have *got* to be kidding me!"

"No. I'm not kidding. The Porsche is for you."

"*Oh, no, it's not!* Do you know how much that car costs? No way!"

I pulled out my cell phone and searched for Mr. Kadam's phone number. Right before I pressed SEND, I thought of something that stopped me in my tracks. "Is there anything else I should know?"

Nilima winced. "Well . . . he also took the liberty of signing you up for Western Oregon University. Your classes and books have already been paid for. Your books are on the counter next to your list of classes, a Western Wolf sweatshirt, and a map of the campus."

"He signed me up for WOU?" I asked, incredulous. "I'd been planning on attending the local community college and working—not attending WOU."

"He must have thought a university would be more to your liking. You start classes next week. As far as working goes, you may if you wish, but it will be unnecessary. He has also set up a bank account for you. Your new bank card is also on the counter. Don't forget to endorse it on the back."

I swallowed. "And . . . uh . . . exactly how much money is in that bank account?"

Nilima shrugged. "I have no idea, but I'm sure it's enough to cover your living expenses. Of course, none of your bills will be sent here. Everything will be mailed straight to an accountant. The house and the car are paid for, as well as all of your college expenses."

She slid a whole bunch of paperwork my way and then sat back and sipped her diet soda.

Shocked, I sat completely motionless for a minute and then remembered my resolve to call Mr. Kadam. I opened my phone and searched for his number again.

Nilima interrupted, "Are you sure you want to give it all back, Miss Kelsey? I know that he feels very strongly about this. He wants you to have these things."

"Well, Mr. Kadam should know that I don't need his charity. I'll just explain that community college is more than adequate, and I really don't mind staying in the dorm and taking the bus."

Nilima leaned forward. "But, Kelsey, it wasn't Mr. Kadam who arranged all of this."

"What? If it wasn't Mr. Kadam, then who. . . . *Oh!*" I snapped my phone shut. There was no way I was going to call *him*, no matter what. "So *he* feels strongly about this, does he?"

Nilima's arched eyebrows drew together in pretty confusion, "Yes, I would say he does."

It almost tore my heart to shreds to leave him 7,196.25 miles away in India, and somehow he still manages to have a hold on me.

Underneath my breath, I grumbled, "Fine. He always gets what he wants anyway. There's no point in trying to give it back. He'll just engineer some other over the top gift that will only serve to complicate our relationship even further."

A car honked outside in the driveway.

"Well, that's my ride back to the airport," Nilima rose and said. "Oh! I almost forgot. This is for you too." She pressed a brand-new cell phone in my hand and hugged me quickly before walking to the front door.

"But, wait! Nilima!"



"Don't worry, Miss Kelsey. Everything will be fine. The paperwork you need for school is on the kitchen counter. There's food in the fridge, and all of your belongings are upstairs. You can take the car and visit your foster family later today if you wish. They are expecting your call."

She turned, gracefully walked out the door, and climbed into the private car. She waved gaily from the passenger seat. I waved back morosely and watched until the sleek black sedan drove out of sight. Suddenly, I was all alone in a strange house, surrounded by quiet forest.

Once Nilima had gone, I decided to explore the place that I was now going to call home. Opening the fridge, I saw that the shelves were indeed fully stocked. Twisting a bottle cap off, I sipped a soda and peeked into the cupboards. There were glasses and plates, as well as cooking utensils, silverware, and pots and pans. On a hunch, I opened the bottom drawer of the refrigerator—and found it full of lemons. Clearly, this part was Mr. Kadam's doing. The thoughtful man knew drinking lemon water would be a comfort to me.

Mr. Kadam's interior design touch didn't end in the kitchen, though. The downstairs half bath was decorated in sage green and lemon. Even the soap in the dispenser was lemon-scented.

I placed my shoes in a wicker basket on the tiled floor of the laundry room beside a brand new front-loading washer and dryer set and continued on to a small office.

My old computer sat in the middle of the desk, but right next to it was a brand new laptop. A leather chair, file drawers, and a shelf with paper and other supplies completed the office.

Grabbing my backpack, I headed upstairs to see my new bedroom. A lovely queen-sized bed with a thick ivory down comforter and peach accent pillows was nestled against the wall, and an old wooden trunk



sat at the foot. Cozy peach-colored reading chairs were arranged in the corner, facing the window overlooking the forest.

There was a note on the bed that lifted my spirits right up:

*Hi, Kelsey!
Welcome home. Call us ASAP!
We want to hear all about your trip!
All of your things are stored away.
We love your new home!
Love,
Mike and Sarah*

Reading Mike and Sarah's note in addition to being back in Oregon grounded me. Their lives were normal. My life with them was normal, and it would be nice to be around a normal family and act like a normal human being for a change. Sleeping on jungle floors, talking to Indian goddesses, falling in love with a . . . tiger—well, none of that was normal. Not by a long shot.

I opened my closet and saw that my hair ribbon collection and all my clothes had indeed been moved from Mike and Sarah's. I fingered through some things I hadn't seen in a few months. When I opened the other side of the closet, I found all the new clothes that had been purchased for me in India as well as several new items still in garment bags.

How on earth did Mr. Kadam get this stuff here before me? I left all this in my closet back in India. I closed the door on the clothes and my memories, determined not to open that side of the closet again.

Moving to the dresser, I pulled open my top drawer. Sarah had arranged my socks exactly the way I liked them. Each pair of black, white, and assorted colored socks was wound into a neat ball and placed



in a row. Opening the next drawer wiped the smile right off my face. I found the silky pajamas I had purposely left in India.

My chest burned as I ran my hand over the soft cloth and then resolutely shut the drawer and moved to the adjoining bathroom, which was white and soft, powdery blue with glistening tiles. Turning to leave the bright, airy room, a detail suddenly hit me, causing my face to flush scarlet red. My bedroom was peaches and cream.

He must have picked these colors, I surmised. *He'd once said that I smelled like peaches and cream. Figures he'd find a way to remind me of him even from a continent away. As if I could forget . . .*

I threw my backpack on the bed and instantly regretted it, realizing that Fanindra was still inside. After taking her out carefully and apologizing, I set her on top of a white pillow with peach embroidery. I stroked her golden head for a minute and then set to work putting away my traveling clothes.

When that was done, I lay back on the bed and pulled my new cell phone out of my jeans pocket. Like everything else, the phone was expensive and totally unnecessary. It was designed by Prada. I turned the phone on and expected *his* number to show up first, but it didn't. There weren't any messages either. In fact, the only numbers stored on the phone were Mr. Kadam's and my foster parents'.

Various emotions raced through my head. At first, I was relieved. Then I was puzzled. Then I was disappointed. A part of me pondered, *It would have been nice of him to call. Just to see if I arrived okay.*

Annoyed with myself, I called my foster parents and told them I was home, tired from the flight, and that I would come over for dinner the next night. Hanging up, I grimaced, wondering what kind of tofu surprise would be in store for me. Whatever the health food meal turned out to be, I would be happy to sit through it as long as I got a chance to see them.

I wandered downstairs, turned on the stereo, made myself a snack of apple slices with peanut butter, and started rifling through the college



papers on the counter. Mr. Kadam had chosen international studies as my major, with a minor in art history.

I looked through my schedule. Somehow, Mr. Kadam had managed to get me, a freshman, into 300- and 400-level classes. Not only that, but he had also booked my classes for both the fall *and* the winter terms—even though winter registration wasn't available yet.

WOU probably received a big, fat donation from India, I thought, smirking to myself. I wouldn't be surprised to see a new building going up on campus this year.

**KELSEY HAYES, STUDENT ID 69428L7
WESTERN OREGON UNIVERSITY**

FALL TERM

College Writing 115 (4 credits). *Introduction to thesis writing.*

First Year Latin 101 (4 credits). *Introduction to Latin.*

Anthropology 476 D Religion and Ritual (4 credits). *A study of the religious practices around the world. Delineates religious observance as seen through anthropology, while focusing on particular topics including, spirit possession, mysticism, witchcraft, animism, sorcery, ancestor worship, and magic. Examines the blending of major world-religions with local beliefs and traditions.*

Geography 315 The Indian Subcontinent (4 credits). *An examination of South Asia and its geography, with emphasis on India. Evaluates the economic relationship between India and other nations; studies patterns, issues, and challenges specifically related to geography; and explores the ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity of its people historic and modern.*

WINTER TERM

Art History 204 A: Prehistoric through Romanesque (4 credits). *A study of all art forms of that period with specific emphasis on historical and cultural relevance.*

History 470 Women in Indian Society (4 credits). *An examination of*

women in India, their belief systems, their cultural place in society, and associated mythology, past and present.

College Writing II 135 (4 credits). *Second-year class expanding research-based document writing and skills.*

Political Science 203 D International Relations (3 credits). *A comparison of global issues and the policies of world groups with similar and/or competing interests.*

It was official. I was a college student now. Well, a college student and part time ancient Indian curse breaker, I thought, remembering Mr. Kadam's continuing research in India. It was going to be difficult to focus on classes, teachers, and papers after everything that happened in India. It was especially odd knowing that I was supposed to carry on and go back to my old life in Oregon just like that. Somehow my old life didn't seem to fit anymore.

Luckily, all of the WOU courses sounded interesting, especially religion and magic. Mr. Kadam's selections were subjects I probably would have picked for myself—other than Latin. I wrinkled my nose. *I'd never been too good with languages. Too bad WOU didn't offer an Indian language. It would be nice to learn Hindi, especially if I'm going back to India at some point to tackle the remaining three tasks outlined on Durga's prophecy that will break the Tiger's Curse. Maybe . . .*

Just then, "I Told You So" by Carrie Underwood came on the radio. Brushing a tear away from my eye, I considered that *he* probably *would* find somebody new very soon. I wouldn't take me back if I were him. Letting myself think about him for even a minute was too painful. I tucked away my memories and folded them into a tiny wedge of my heart. Then I shoved a whole bunch of new thoughts in place of the painful ones. I thought about school, my foster family, and being back in Oregon. I stacked those thoughts like books, one on top of the other, to try to suppress everything else.

For now, thinking about other things and other people was an effective distraction. But, I could still feel his ghost hovering in the quiet, dark recess of my heart, waiting for me to be lonely or to let my guard down, so that he could fill my mind again with thoughts of him.

I'll just have to stay busy, I decided. That will be my salvation. I'll study like mad and visit people and . . . and date other guys. Yes! That's what I can do. I'll go out with other people and stay active and then I'll be too tired to think about him. Life will go on. It has to.

By the time I headed for bed, it was late and I was tired. Patting Fanindra, I slipped under the sheets and slept.

The next day, my new cell phone rang. It was Mr. Kadam, which was both exciting and disappointing at the same time.

"Hello, Miss Kelsey," he said cheerfully. "I am so glad to hear that you have arrived back home safely. I trust everything is in order and to your satisfaction?"

"I didn't expect any of this," I replied. "I feel supremely guilty about the house, the car, the credit card, and school."

"Don't give it a moment's thought. I was happy to arrange it for you."

Curiosity getting the better of me, I asked, "What's going on with the prophecy? Have you figured it out yet?"

"I am attempting to translate the rest of the monolith you found. After you left India, I went back to Durga's temple and took pictures of the other three pillars. It appears each pillar features one of the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire."

"That makes sense," I said, remembering Durga's prophecy. "The original pillar we found must have been related to earth since it showed farmers offering fruits and grains. Also, Kishkindha was underground and the first object Durga asked us to find was the Golden Fruit."

"Yes, well it turns out that there was also a fifth pillar that was



destroyed long ago. It represented the element of space, which is common in the Hindu faith."

"Well, if anyone can figure out what's next, it's you. Thank you for checking in on me," I added before we both promised to speak again and signed off.

I studied my new textbooks for five hours and then headed to a toy store to buy orange-and-black stuffed animal tigers for Rebecca and Sammy since I'd completely forgotten to bring them back something from India. Against my better judgment, I also ended up buying an expensive, large, white stuffed tiger.

Back at home, I grabbed the tiger around the middle and buried my face in the fur. It was soft but didn't smell right. *He* smelled wonderful, like sandalwood and waterfalls. This stuffed animal was just a replica. It had glassy, lifeless, dull blue eyes. *His* eyes were bright cobalt. And, its stripes were different.

What on earth is wrong with me? I shouldn't have bought it. It was just going to make forgetting him that much harder.

Shaking off the emotion, I pulled out a change of clothes and got ready to visit my foster family.

As I drove through town, I went the long way around so I could avoid the Polk County Fairgrounds and more painful memories. When I pulled in front of Mike and Sarah's house, the door opened wide. Mike hurried toward me . . . but couldn't resist getting a better look at the Porsche and ran past me to the car.

"Kelsey! May I?" he asked sweetly.

"Knock yourself out," I said and laughed. *Same old Mike*, I thought and tossed him the keys so he could drive himself around the block a few times.

Sarah put her arm around my waist and guided me toward the house. "We're so glad to see you! Both of us are!" She yelled and frowned at Mike who waved happily before backing out of the driveway.



"We were worried when you first left for India because we didn't receive too many calls from you, but Mr. Kadam phoned every other day and explained what you were doing and told us how busy you were."

"Oh? And what did he say, exactly?" I asked, curious to know what story he had made up.

"Well, it's all very exciting, isn't it? Let's see. He talked about your new job and about how you will be interning every summer and working with him on various projects from time to time. I had no idea that you were interested in international studies. That is a wonderful major. Very fascinating. He also said that when you graduate, you can work for his company full time. It's a fantastic opportunity!"

I smiled at her. "Yes, Mr. Kadam's great. I couldn't ask for a better boss. He treats me more like a granddaughter than like an employee, and he spoils me terribly. I mean, you saw the house and the car, and then there's school too."

"He did speak very fondly of you over the phone. He even admitted to us that he's come to depend on you. He's a very nice man. He also insists that you are . . . how did he say it . . . 'an investment that will have a big payoff in the future.'"

I shot Sarah a dubious look. "Well, I hope he's right about that."

She laughed and then sobered. "We know you're special, Kelsey, and you deserve great things. Maybe this is the universe's way of balancing the loss of your parents. Though I know nothing will ever take the place of them."

I nodded. She was happy for me. And, knowing that I would be financially secure enough to live comfortably on my own was probably a big relief to them.

Sarah hugged me and pulled a strange-smelling dish out of the oven. She placed it on the table, and said, "Now, let's eat!"

Feigning enthusiasm, I asked, "So . . . what's for dinner?"



"Tofu and spinach whole wheat organic lasagna with soy cheese and flax seed."

"Yum, I can't wait," I said and wrestled a half-smile to my face. I thought fondly of the magical Golden Fruit that I had left behind in India. The divine object could make the most delicious food appear instantly. In Sarah's hands, maybe even a healthy meal would taste good. I snuck a bite. *Then again . . .*

Rebecca, six years old, and Samuel, four years old, ran into the room and bounced up and down trying to get my attention. I hugged them both and directed them to the table. Then I went to the window to see if Mike was back yet. He had just parked the Porsche and was walking backward to the front door, staring at the car.

I opened the door. "Umm, Mike, it's time for dinner."

He replied over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off the car, "Sure, sure. Be right there."

Sitting between the kids, I scooped up a wedge of lasagna for each of them and took a tiny piece for myself. Sarah raised her eyebrow, and I rationalized it by saying that I'd had a big lunch. Mike finally came in and started chatting animatedly about the Porsche. He asked if he could take Sarah on a date and borrow the car some Friday night.

"Sure. I'll even come over and babysit for you."

He beamed while Sarah rolled her eyes. "Are you planning on taking me out or the car?" she asked.

"You, of course, my dear. The car is just a vehicle to showcase the beautiful woman sitting at my side."

Sarah and I looked at each other and snickered.

"Good one, Mike," I said.

After dinner, we retired to the living room where I gave the kids their orange tigers. They squealed in delight and ran around growling at each other. Sarah and Mike asked me all kinds of questions about India, and I talked about the ruins of Hampi and Mr. Kadam's house. Technically, it



wasn't his, but they didn't need to know that. Then they asked me about how Mr. Maurizio's circus tiger was adapting to his new home.

I froze, but only for an instant, and told them that he was doing fine and that he seemed very happy there. Thankfully, Mr. Kadam had explained that we were often out exploring Indian ruins and cataloging artifacts. He'd said my job was to be his assistant, keeping records of his findings, and taking notes, which wasn't too far from the truth. It also explained why I was going to minor in art history.

Being with them was fun, but it also wore me out because I had to make sure I didn't slip and tell them anything too weird. They'd never believe all the things that had happened to me. I had a hard time believing it myself sometimes.

Knowing they went to bed early, I gathered my things and said goodnight. I hugged them all good-bye and promised to visit again the next week.

When I got home, I spent a couple of more hours studying and then took a hot shower. Climbing into bed in my dark room, I gasped quietly as my hand brushed against fur. Then I remembered my purchase, shoved the stuffed tiger to the edge of the bed, and tucked my hand under my cheek.

I couldn't stop thinking about *him*. I wondered what he was doing right now and if he was thinking of me or if he even missed me at all. Was he pacing in the steamy jungle? Were he and Kishan fighting? Would I ever get back to India—and did I really want to? I felt like I was playing whack-a-mole with my thoughts. Every time I punched one thought down, another one would surface in a different place. I couldn't win; they kept popping up from my subconscious. Sighing, I reached over, grabbed the leg of the stuffed tiger, and pulled it back onto the bed. Wrapping my arms around its middle, I buried my nose in its fur and fell asleep on its paw.



The next few days spun past quickly and uneventfully, and then it was time to start school. I collected my term assignments from each class and realized that my prior experiences in India would come in handy. I could write about Hampi for my research paper on an Indian metropolis, discuss the lotus flower as a religious symbol in anthropology, and theme my world religion final around Durga. The only class that seemed overly challenging was Latin.

Soon I had settled into a comfortable routine. I saw Sarah and Mike often, went to class, and I spoke to Mr. Kadam every Friday. The first week he helped me with an oral report on the SUV versus the Nano and between his vast knowledge of cars and my hair-raising description of actually driving in India, I got the best grade in the class. My mind was so full of assignments that I had very little time to worry about anything else—or to think about anyone else.

One Friday phone call brought an interesting surprise. After chatting about school and my latest paper about the weather patterns in the Himalayas, Mr. Kadam broached a new topic.

"I've signed you up for another class," Mr. Kadam began. "One that I think you will enjoy, but it will take up more of your time. If you are too busy, I'll understand."