"We can't let them steal the cubs," cries Sandhya, echoing the feelings of the entire Varma family. On a holiday in the Rajkhand jungle, they are enchanted by three tiger cubs frolicking with their mother. Blind to the charms of this happy domestic scene, Mohan Chand and Dharam Raj plan to capture the cubs. Not if the Varma can help it. With a varied dramatis personae, the adventure in the jungle spirals to a thrilling climax in the bid to rescue the cubs from the poachers.
A JUNGLE TALE

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Children's Book Trust, New Delhi
The firelight shone on the three excited, young faces, as the flames danced merrily in the centre of the clearing. The only light for miles around came from the fire and from the full moon high above. A few feet away from the fire, a group of villagers sat huddled around a hookah (hubble-bubble), their blankets clutched tightly around them to protect them from the chill of the December night. A bag of peanuts made the rounds, its contents diminishing rapidly. This was the scene that would have met your eyes, if you happened to pass by this little clearing in the heart of the thick jungle of Rajkhand, in the Lansdowne Division of Shivalik hills.

The children whispered, although there was no need to.

“Do you think Papa will get a glimpse of the tiger?” Sandhya asked.

“It has been such a long time. If he hasn’t seen it yet, I doubt if he will. He will probably be back any minute now,” said Akshay.

“I do wish he had taken us up on to the machan (elevated platform used in tiger-shooting) with him,” sighed Vasant. “I can sit as still as a mouse. But you two are small. You would probably have fidgeted and made a noise.”
"We are only a year and a half younger to you," said his sister indignantly. "Ever since you turned thirteen, you think you are terribly grown-up."

"He is right, though," said Akshay. "It is much better for Uncle to be alone, than having to look after us as well."

"All the same, I do wish we could have got a glimpse of the tiger in his natural surroundings, in all his majesty, rather than seeing tigers cooped up in a zoo. It is dreadful," Vasant shuddered as he spoke.

"Just a minute, what was that?" said Sandhya. Her sharp ears had caught an unfamiliar sound. The children held their breaths and listened. The sound came again. It was something between a crack and a crash.

"What is that sound?" Vasant asked Nandu and Ramu, the two shikaris from the nearby village.

"This is elephant country," Nandu replied. "That must be the sound of trees being broken by elephants."

"Oh, but Papa is sitting up on one of those trees," said Sandhya. "What if..."

"Don't worry, miss-sahib, elephants stay away from the tiger's domain. They won't go anywhere near the tiger's kill. Sahib is perfectly safe."

"And all animals stay away from fire, so we are safe, too," said Vasant. "But I say, you two, isn't this quite an experience? I mean, sitting here in the heart of elephant and tiger country, even though we know they won't come anywhere near us."

The minutes ticked by slowly. One of the men got up and put some more wood on the fire. The children held out their hands towards its comforting blaze. The mid-December night was bitterly cold, but they were somewhat protected from the breeze by the trees all
around, and, of course, the large camp-fire provided a cheery warmth.

The sudden hush in the conversation was disturbed by a rustle in the nearby bushes. A khaki-clad figure stepped into view. He was accompanied by two shikaris carrying powerful torches and big sticks. The children jumped up in excitement and cries of 'Papa' and 'Uncle' rent the air.

"Did you see the tiger? Did you get any photographs?"

The tall, bearded man smiled at the excited youngsters as he drew near the fire to warm himself, handing his camera to Vasant as he did so. "The tiger, my dears, is a tigress, and what is more, she has three beautiful cubs. I got a wonderful view of them and some excellent photographs."

"Oh, how lovely! I wish I could see them. The cubs must be so cute. Oh, Papa, couldn't we see them sometime?" Sandhya held on to her father's arm and looked up at him appealingly.

"I can't take you into the forest, darling. A tigress with her cubs around her is dangerous. No, you will have to be content with looking at the photographs. Ah, thank you," he said as one of the shikaris handed him a steaming glass of tea.

The clearing in the middle of the forest was the camping ground for the grass-cutters who made their living by cutting bhakhar grass, local to the Himalayas, for the paper mills in the neighbouring towns. Nandu, Ramu and the other two shikaris were from the village of Kaliganj. Born and bred in these parts, they knew every inch of the forest. They knew all about the ways of the jungle and were expert trackers.

In the years gone by, when shooting was still allowed on a permit, they had followed the pug marks of many a panther or a tiger that had become a cattle-lifter and thus a menace to the villagers, whose livelihood depended on their cattle. In the recent past, they had also helped to track a notorious man-eater, a panther which had killed, and mauled dozens of villagers. An army officer, known for his good marksmanship, had been requested by the forest department to track and kill the animal. With the help of the shikaris, he had been able to do so.

Sumant Varma, his two children and their cousin were animal lovers. Mr. Varma had taken some superb photographs of jungle life for various wildlife magazines. The children went with him whenever they could. This holiday in the Rajkhand rest-house was something they had been looking forward to for months. Rajkhand is in the Himalayas, a few kilometres from Hardwar, north of river Ganga.

Around eleven o'clock that cold December night, our little group wound its way through forest paths to the pick-up parked not far on the main road. Amid yawns and sighs, the pick-up started on its journey back to the rest-house.
Gopal had been hard at work. So, for that matter, had Mrs. Varma been. An aroma of aloo parathas (fried pancakes of unleavened bread, with potato filling), filled the rooms of the rest-house. Three hungry children bounded in and made straight for the kitchen. Mrs. Varma smiled to herself as she set out the plates on the small table in the kitchen which the family used for eating. An early morning walk and a game of tag, she knew, made for hearty appetites, and hearty appetites were what she was catering for this lovely sunny morning. While the children were busy helping themselves, her husband walked in.

“Nina, have you seen these pictures? I developed this roll last night. There are some lovely shots of the tigress and her cubs.”

Breakfast forgotten for the moment, four pairs of hands reached for the photographs.

“Just a moment, no greasy hands on the pictures, please. Children, if you keep your hands behind your backs, I will hold the pictures up for you to see.”

The children crowded around him. There were ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs’ as one picture after the other was held up.

“Oh, Papa, they are lovely,” Sandhya breath ed. “Oh, just look at those beautiful cubs.”

They were indeed a delightful sight. Mr. Varma had managed to click the cubs in different situations and angles. First, as they approached the kill, keeping close to their mother’s side, then sniffing at the kill wonderingly, as if to say, “Mama has some peculiar tastes.” The last picture was of the tigress enjoying her meal while the cubs tumbled over each other beside her.

“Didn’t the flash disturb them?” Vasant asked.

“The first one very nearly did frighten them away. The tigress waited and looked around her for about five minutes. When nothing happened, she must have presumed all was well. She had her back to the camera for the other two, so she couldn’t have seen the flash.”

Later, when breakfast had been cleared away, Mr. Varma announced that he had to go to Hardwar for some work. He asked his wife and the three children if they would like to accompany him. They all agreed.

Soon they were speeding along through the forest roads towards Hardwar in their old pick-up. It was a lovely drive. The trees on either side were ablaze with blossoms. The lantana bushes too brightened up the scene with their pink, yellow and orange flowers. The thickly wooded trees, mostly sal, wore a look of glossy green. Once in a clearing, a little off the main road, a herd of cheetal (spotted deer) could be seen, grazing peacefully; a little further on, a wild boar crossed the road.

The family reached Hardwar around lunch time and made for their favourite restaurant. After lunch, Mr. Varma went to a colour photo-processing laboratory to order enlarged copies of his jungle photographs. Mrs. Varma shopped for provisions which would not be available at Rajkhand. The children were given some money and allowed to browse around in a bookshop. Their day in town well spent, everyone got into the pick-up for the trip back to the forest rest-house.

About a kilometre from the rest-house, before the dense forest began, was a little tea-shop. It catered mainly to the lorry drivers who would stop on their way into or from the forest, on their grass or timber collecting
missions. This was where the pick-up now stopped. The owner of the tea-shop, Som Lal, knew the children well by now. Even before they could tell him, he proceeded to make the piping hot pakoras (fried salty pastries stuffed with vegetables) for which his shop was famous, while the tea brewed on the other stove. Akshay, Vasant and Sandhya jumped down from the back of the pick-up, eagerly waiting for their pakoras and tea.

Twenty minutes later, the pick-up drew up at the rest-house. Gopal came rushing out to greet them. He looked as if he had some exciting news to give.

"Sahib, two sahibs came in a jeep. They say they too have a permit for the rest-house, and will be staying for about two weeks."

"Oh, blow!" said Akshay. "It won't be the same, having to share the rest-house with strangers. I wish they hadn't come."

"I, too," said Sandhya. "It was so nice having the place to ourselves. Strangers will be a nuisance."

"They will probably want to rest in the afternoons and expect us to be quiet," said Vasant, as displeased as the other two.

"Just a minute, children," said Mr. Varma. "We don't own the rest-house, you know. We were only given a portion of it for our stay. The forest department is perfectly free to give out the other half to anyone else, Fortunately, it is a double-storeyed house. We have the ground floor, and these people must have been given the first floor. I don't want you children to behave as if the whole house belongs to you. Please be considerate and courteous."

"We could do with a little less noise and confusion, too," Mrs. Varma said good-naturedly. "Now remember not to run around the house like little hooligans."

"Where is their jeep anyway? I don't see signs of anyone around. Gopal, sahib-log kahan hain (where are the gentlemen)?" Mr. Varma asked.

"They left their luggage upstairs and said they were going out for a drive into the forest. They said they would be back in an hour or two."

"Well, we have an hour's freedom at any rate. Let us play outside before it gets too dark. Masi (maternal aunt), can Gopal play with us for a while?" Akshay asked Mrs. Varma.

"Yes, I don't need him yet."

The children brought out a ball and divided themselves into teams—Akshay and Gopal versus Vasant and Sandhya. The idea was to hit the members of the opposite team with the ball to get them 'out'. The game was carried on amidst much shouting and laughter. As the light began to fail, the four of them, exhausted, headed slowly towards the house. Just then, a jeep could be seen making its way up the drive.

"Here they come," grumbled Vasant. "Anyway, as Papa says, they will have the first floor. And they are bound to be out during the day. We probably won't see anything of them at all."

He had no way of knowing how wrong he was.
Mr. Varma stretched out his long legs as he picked up one of the newspapers he had been lucky enough to get in Hardwar the other day. The headlines did not seem to have anything of interest, so he turned to his favourite page, the sports page. He shot a quick glance at his wife, who was thoroughly engrossed in her book on computer programming.

The children must have endless energy, he mused, as they never seemed to get tired of running around. Gopal had joined them. He was a lad of thirteen, and the family encouraged him to play whenever he had the time. In addition, Nina Varma was teaching him to read and write. He was a bright lad and enjoyed reading story-books. The children willingly helped him when he stumbled. Gopal was their friend.

The old rest-house at Kunaon, now abandoned, had an eerie charm of its own. Kunaon is the forest block, north of Rajkhand. Deep in the heart of the forest, it abounds in game of every kind. The new rest-house was built about a kilometre and a half further up the road. Since no one ever used the old one, the Varmas had taken permission to picnic there.

It was a ramshackle building and bore signs all around it of damage done by elephants. All the window-panes had been smashed and the front door broken down. In an effort to provide some safety to the occupants, although it was doubtful that anyone ever stayed there, a deep pit had been dug all around the house. A narrow plank in the front of the house served as a bridge for people to cross over; certainly no large cats, or elephants, could cross over it. This pit, or rather trench, all around the house, was what made it safe for the family to be there.

Soon it was time for lunch and Mrs. Varma called out to the children. They came and flopped down on the mat, panting.

"Ooooh, Mum, let me get my breath back, and I will give you a hand with the basket," Sandhya said.

"Right, but I suggest you all wash your hands first. Vasant, there is the jerrycan. There is enough water, so do try and get your hands clean."

Soon a merry little picnic was in progress. There were puris (small rounds of fried wheaten cake), vegetables, pickle and salad. The puris seemed to disappear at an amazing rate.

"Oh, Papa," said Vasant in between mouthfuls, "did you know the army is carrying out shooting practice a few kilometres from our rest-house? Mr. Dharam Raj, one of the two gentlemen at the rest-house, told us about it this morning."

"Yes, the ranger told me about it, too. It is quite an event around here. Actually, I happen to know the Colonel commanding the regiment. I will see if I can get permission for you children to visit the camp one of these days."

"That would be terrific," said Akshay. "Uncle, do you think we could go to the firing range?"

"No, son, that would be completely out of bounds for all civilians. But I believe they carry out training drills at the camp itself. They would probably be able to show you the artillery guns with the instruments that they fit onto them."

"Oh, look," said Akshay suddenly, "peacocks. Dozens of them."
Everyone looked in the direction he pointed. A large number of peacocks pecked on the ground, not more than fifteen metres away from them, completely oblivious of their presence. Everyone watched them for some time until a barking deer called and the birds flew off into the bushes, alarmed.

“Sandhya, will you take the apples out of the basket, please?” Mrs. Varma said, when it looked as though everyone had finished. “Vasant, please give Gopal some more puris.”

“I am going to have a snooze after this,” Mr. Varma said as he reached for an apple. “Do you children think you could sit quietly and play for a little while?”

“Oh, yes,” said Akshay. “We brought our Monopoly set along, Uncle. Come on, you two, let us call Gopal and the four of us can play.”

“How about helping with the clearing up first?” said Mrs. Varma.

A few minutes later, the three children and Gopal sat engrossed in their game of Monopoly. Mrs. Varma returned to her book while her husband dozed. It was a peaceful scene indeed and a passer-by may have found it hard to believe that a little distance away, ferocious yet beautiful and majestic animals roamed the forest. This was their domain where they had the right to live without being disturbed or harassed by human beings. Wild animals live by the law of the jungle, following their own God-given instincts. The only time they turn enemy to man is when their domain is tampered with and the balance of the forest upset. More often than not, man is to blame for that.

Nothing disturbed this quiet winter afternoon, except the occasional squawking of a wild fowl or the chirrup

of a sparrow. The children spoke in low tones. All of a sudden, a sambar called loudly. It seemed to be greatly alarmed. Mrs. Varma glanced at her husband but he was still sleeping peacefully. She was about to return to her book when she remembered that the call of a sambar usually meant that one of the large cats was in the area. She motioned to the children to be quiet and very gently nudged her husband awake.

“I heard a sambar call,” she whispered. “It seemed to be quite close.”

Mr. Varma sat bolt upright. His camera, which he always carried with him, was on the ground by his side. Quietly he fitted the zoom lens onto it. The children understood that something exciting was afoot. Like Nina Varma, they too knew the call of a sambar meant that it had sensed danger and was issuing a warning. Hardly daring to breathe, they scanned the forest with their eyes.

“If there is anything around, it will be behind the house. This side is too close to the main road,” Mr. Varma whispered. “Let us go inside the house. We can look out from the windows. We will be less likely to be seen, too.”

The little group arose noiselessly and moved towards the house. The front door had been broken down and it took Mr. Varma and Gopal just a minute or two to move the broken planks of wood so that everybody could enter. They went into the last room, the one overlooking the rear part of the rest-house. All eyes looked out eagerly. The sambar called again, sounding louder and more agitated than before. The warning was clear and unmistakable.

It was Vasant who saw them first through his binoculars. Without a word, he pointed a little towards the right. The sight that met their eyes was one that caused each
one of them to gasp. Frolicking on the ground with her three cubs was the beautiful tigress that Mr. Varma had seen from his machan. She would cuff them hard with her front paw, and they would roll over onto their backs, kicking their little legs in the air, obviously enjoying themselves enormously. After rolling over once or twice, they would come back for another round.

Mr. Varma took a number of pictures with his zoom lens while the others watched excitedly, taking turns at looking out through the binoculars. The tiger family was about sixty metres away; they had to strain their eyes from time to time to catch a glimpse of the felines as they kept getting hidden by the undergrowth. At last, apparently tired by all the romping around, the tigress and her adorable offsprings rose and disappeared into the bushes, perhaps to partake of a supper hidden away somewhere in the heart of the jungle.

4

Mr. Dharam Raj’s jeep would not start. He and his brother-in-law, Mr. Mohan Chand, had taken turns to start it, to no avail. The children were watching from their bedroom window.

“It is the thin one’s turn now,” giggled Sandhya. “They look so funny jumping in and out turn by turn.”

“Sandhya,” said her mother sternly. “There is nothing to laugh about. Why don’t you children offer to help instead of standing here and laughing? Maybe you could push the jeep till it starts. I will send Gopal out too if he is needed.”

The children went out obediently. Spurt-spurt, went the jeep’s engine. It seemed to have no intention of responding to its owner’s coaxing. The two men had some rather impolite things to say about it but that did not work either!

“Can we help you, sir?” asked Vasant politely. “Would you like us to push?”

Mr. Dharam Raj mopped his brow and sighed. He was short and fat and had a bushy moustache of which he was very proud. He had a habit of twirling the ends, specially when he was deep in thought. He gave them an extra hard twirl now.

“Can’t understand why it won’t start. The battery seems to be weak.”

“It is the cold, sir,” put in Akshay. “My uncle’s pick-up too needs a push sometimes before it starts in the mornings.”

“All right. Let us try pushing,” said Mr. Mohan Chand. He was ‘the thin one’. It was difficult not to think of
Laurel and Hardy when looking at them.

Gopal was called and the four of them, with Mr. Dharam Raj puffing and panting beside them, began to push. They pushed the jeep down the length of the drive and then back again, but the engine still showed no signs of coming to life. It was apparently more than just a starting problem.

"What are we going to do?" said Mr. Dharam Raj, breathing hard. "I have a bag of tools with me but I don't know what the problem is. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"There is a mechanic next to the tea-shop, just where the forest starts. The truck drivers stop there when they have problems," said Vasant. "He is supposed to be very good."

"Would you children like to come along? We could walk down there and bring the mechanic back with us."

"We will have to ask our parents," Vasant said doubtfully. He went into the house to get permission and was back a moment later saying his parents had agreed.

The children enjoyed their walk with the two men who seemed to be interesting and pleasant. On the way, they pointed out some of the areas that they had explored and told the men about the animals they had seen or heard.

Very soon the little shops loomed into view. There was Somu, their friend, sitting cross-legged on a wooden platform in front of his two kerosene stoves. He had no customers and seemed to be looking long and hard at his beedi (cheap cigarette of rolled leaf), turning it this way and that. When he saw them coming, he changed his mind about lighting it and tucked it away behind his ear.

"Well, then, what will you have?" he asked, in his thick village Hindi.

"Somu, we have come to see the mechanic. These sahib-log need his help. Where is he?" Vasant asked.

"He has gone home for a little while. He will be back soon," replied Somu.

"Could you call him for us?" Akshay said. "We don't know how long he may take."

Somu rose obligingly and ambled off in the direction of the little hamlet, about a hundred metres away. Akshay had been right. Time meant very little to the village folk, and 'a little while' could well mean half a day. The truck drivers who stopped at the mechanic's shop were never in any particular hurry. Perhaps they welcomed the rest after their long and tiring drives. These halts were good for Som Lal's business, too.

"Are you on holiday, sir? Or have you come on some kind of business?" Vasant asked. He suddenly realised his question may have sounded unnecessarily inquisitive. "I hope you don't mind my asking," he added quickly.

"Not at all, son. We work for a timber company and have come to survey the forest and the kinds of timber available before we ask for permission to cut wood."

"Oh, but isn't it dangerous? I mean, going into the forest to cut wood with so many tigers and elephants around," said Sandhya.

"It is, child, but the local people we hire know the forest well. They understand the behaviour of the animals. They anticipate danger. After all, they have an instinct for survival. Generations of forest-dwellers have made their living either by cutting grass for the paper mills, or by taking their cattle into the forest to graze."

"That is true," said Akshay thoughtfully. "Also, they
stay in groups and there is safety in numbers."

"I know," Sandhya persisted. "But what I mean is, suppose they were to come across a tigress with her cubs. I have always been told that a tigress may imagine that her cubs are in danger, even if they aren't, and attack. That is why Papa wouldn't take us into the forest to see the cubs."

"Has your father come across a tigress with cubs? That is most interesting. How many are there, and in which part of the forest?" It was Mr. Mohan Chand who spoke now. Mr. Dharam Raj twirled his moustache silently.

The children explained where it was that Mr. Varma had first seen the tigress. They also told the men about the broken down rest-house at Kunaoon.

The two men listened intently. They were obviously enthralled by the whole account. It seemed to the children that, like them, they, too, were animal lovers.

Som Lal appeared just then. He was accompanied by a tall man in grease-stained kurta (loose-fitting tunic)-pajama. This was Kallu, the mechanic.

"Somu, you took a long time. Did you have to go to Hardwar to find Kallu?" Vasant teased.

Som Lal laughed and climbed back onto his perch behind the stoves. "I had to search the whole hamlet for him. The rascal had simply disappeared."

Mr. Dharam Raj proceeded to tell Kallu about the problem with his jeep and Kallu agreed to come up to the rest-house with them to have a look. He went into the little tin-covered shack which housed his tools and emerged with a bag of assorted tools. With a word of thanks and a wave to Som Lal, the little group started on the winding, uphill road back to the rest-house.

Soon Kallu had the bonnet of the jeep open. The boys watched him, fascinated. They had always been interested in motor engines and had managed to learn quite a lot about how they worked. Kallu tinkered around for a few minutes, reaching into his bag of tools every now and then. Finally he straightened up and said, "I will have to remove the starter motor. My spanners are not the right size. What do we do now?"

"I have a monkey-wrench in the front of the jeep. I will get it for you," said Mr. Dharam Raj. He was sitting in an armchair on the veranda. He knew very little about engines and was quite content to leave the matter to the mechanic. With a great effort, he pulled himself out of the low, easy chair.

"I will get it for you, sir," Vasant offered and moved towards the driver's side to look for the wrench. The floor of the jeep was covered with gunny sacking and tools of various shapes and sizes seemed to be protruding from under it. He reached out to remove the sacking when suddenly a hand clamped down on his wrist in a grip of iron.

"No, you don't," said Mr. Mohan Chand, between clenched teeth. He had been standing near the jeep all the while. Vasant looked at him in surprise and then at Mr. Dharam Raj who had reached them by now, his moustache fairly bristling with anger. Akshay had joined Vasant beside the jeep and the two boys looked at each other in amazement. What could all this mean?
Nandu and Ramu, the two shikaris who had served as trackers and guides for Mr. Varma, arrived at the rest-house, breathless and excited. It was about ten o’clock in the morning.

“Sahib, sahib, kill ho gaya (a kill has been made),” they said.

Sumant Varma eased his tall frame into one of the veranda chairs and lit his pipe. “Sit down,” he motioned with the pipe, “and tell me all about it. When did it happen?”

The two men squatted on their haunches on the veranda and proceeded to make their report. Apparently, a cow belonging to one of the villagers had strayed quite far into the forest the previous afternoon. The poor man had collected some of his relatives and armed with lathis (long iron-bound sticks used as weapon), the little band ventured into the forest to look for the cow. There were no known cattle-lifters in this area, so he was hopeful of finding it.

Making a loud noise and thrashing the undergrowth with their lathis, the men continued their search for the lost cow. Suddenly one of them came across the carcass of a sambar. It seemed to be a fresh kill and only partially eaten. The pug marks of a large panther were visible beside it.

The kill had been covered with dry leaves and branches, a clear indication that the panther intended to return to it later. The men were all the more hopeful of finding the cow now as it was unlikely that the panther would attack two animals in quick succession. They were right.

Soon they found the frightened cow and led her back to safety.

“Would you like to come and see the kill, sahib?” Nandu asked. “The panther is bound to come back to it some time this afternoon. We could construct a machan for you.”

“All right. Let us go now. I will get my things ready.” Mr. Varma rose and went in to collect his photographic equipment, a coat and a muffler. His wife went in to the kitchen to make some sandwiches and a flask of tea for him. She knew he would not be home for lunch. The children had been listening with great interest, taking in every detail.

“Papa, in which part of the forest is this kill?” asked Vasant.

“In the eastern part of Rajkhand, somewhere near where we went for a drive the other day, though much further into the forest. Actually nobody ever goes that far in. If it hadn’t been for the fact that the men had to look for the cow, the kill would never have been discovered. So I am really very lucky.”

The three children helped Mr. Varma carry his things into the pick-up. The shikaris climbed in beside him. “Where are the two gentlemen this morning, children? They asked me to let them know if ever I heard of a kill.”

“They left at about eight o’clock, Papa,” said Sandhya. “They said they had a lot surveying to do. I heard them talking to each other as they got into their jeep.”

“Oh, well, there is nothing I can do then. Thanks a lot,” he said as his wife handed him the packet of sandwiches and the flask of tea. “I should be home before dark. See you, folks.” He waved to the family who waved back and called out, “Best of luck.”
About an hour later, the three children were seated on the veranda steps, reading. Akshay turned to the other two. “What shall we do this morning? Shall we go for a nice long walk, and then stop at Somu’s for pakoras on our way back?”

“Oh, yes, let us,” said Sandhya. “I will go ask Mummy.”

Soon the three were on their way, with strict instructions from Mrs. Varma that they were not to leave the main road at any point. Whistling and singing as they went, the trio turned right from the rest-house and followed the road towards the north, which would eventually end up at Lachmanjholo, a beautiful and picturesque picnic spot. About three kilometres up the road they turned and started heading south again, in the direction of Som Lal’s shop. Tired out by now, they sank gratefully onto the little wooden bench in front of his shop.

“Somu, let us have some nice hot pakoras,” said Vasant as he took off his jersey and knotted the sleeves around his waist. It was hot now in the midday sun. Somu handed them a glass of water each while they waited.

Suddenly the faint but unmistakable sound of several gunshots, fired in quick succession, reached their ears. All four looked up, surprised. Somu was the first to speak. “The ‘militrrry’ must be doing its ‘phairring’,” he said.

“What military, and what firing?” said Akshay.

“Don’t you remember, Mr. Dharam Raj told us the army was using the forest, or some part of it, as a firing range. Somu is right. That is what it must be,” said Sandhya.

“I hope it isn’t anywhere near where Uncle is. It will keep the panther away,” said Akshay.

“Well, if it is, there are bound to be signs all over warning that firing practice is in progress, and Papa will see them. He probably won’t sit up on the machan at all. There wouldn’t be much point,” Vasant said. Then as an afterthought he added, “But I thought the firing range was in a different direction.”

“Those other sabib-log from the rest-house were here this morning,” Somu said, as he handed the children their pakoras on pieces of paper. “Bhole Ram from the village joined them and they all went off together in the jeep.”

“Who is Bhole Ram?” Sandhya asked.

“He used to be an expert tracker at one time. But that was a long time ago. He has taken to gambling and drinking now and has lost all his money. He is a clever man; it is a pity he has ruined his life this way.”

“I wonder what he is doing with the sabib-log,” Akshay said.

“They wanted him to take them far into the forest to see if certain kinds of trees are to be found there. No one knows the forest like Bhole Ram,” answered Somu.

“Well, I am glad he is doing something. He will probably be paid well for it,” Sandhya said.

“He will only gamble away the money, miss-sahib,” Somu shook his head knowingly. “Why, just last night he lost about two hundred rupees to Babu. It is a good thing he had the money to make good his loss, because Babu is a tough one.”

“What about you, Somu, do you gamble?” Akshay asked with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“Arre na baba na (oh, no, no), I don’t touch cards,” Somu’s hands flew to his ears and his face took on a horrified expression. “I have a wife and two small children
to support. This little tea-shop of mine just about gives me a living." He returned to his large frying pan.

"Let us have another round of pakoras," said Akshay. "They are really delicious."

"Goodness, no. It is almost one o'clock. We will be late home for lunch as it is," Sandhya said. "Besides, I want to pick some wild flowers before we get home. Mummy asked me for some. Come on, let us hurry."

Vasant reached into his pocket for the money to pay Som Lall. "Bye, Somu, we will see you some other time," he said as he handed him the money. "Come on, you two."

On the way back to the rest-house, the hunt for wild flowers began in earnest. Sandhya wanted to pick up some of the bright red flame-of-the-forest, but they were too high for her to reach and the two boys seemed none too eager to climb the trees to pick them for her. They kept walking on, hoping to find something a little lower down.

"Oh, look," said Sandhya suddenly, pointing. "There seem to be plenty of flowering bushes and trees this side." She had stopped at the beginning of a small kutch (unmetalled) track leading into the forest. "This path comes out again on the main road just past the rest-house. I know it well," she said. "Come on. There are some really lovely flowers here."

The two boys followed her doubtfully. They had been told not to leave the main road; they knew this little path did not lead deep into the forest and was, in fact, a well-used short cut for the goatherds and grass-cutters on their way back to the village after a day's work.

Sandhya had been right about the flowers. Most of them grew on bushes which they could easily reach. The boys helped her and soon she had an armful of flowers of various colours and varieties. Their little venture into the forest finally brought them out onto the main road once more. The children had seen this path many times but had never taken it before. Sandhya's calculations had not been very accurate; they now found that they had overshot the rest-house by almost a kilometre.

"Oh, no! Just look where we are now," Akshay said. "Now we have to walk all the way back to the rest-house. I thought you said this path came out close to the rest-house."

"Well, that is what I thought. I can't help it now. Anyway, it is not all that far. Don't waste time grumbling. Let us go."

She had just started off down the road when a familiar sound came to their ears from behind them. They turned around to look. It was Mr. Dharam Raj's jeep. "Oh, good. We can ask them for a lift," said Vasant.

The children waved out to stop the jeep, grateful for the chance of a lift home. They were tired by now, and they knew they would be late for lunch. Surprisingly, instead of stopping, the occupants of the jeep waved back and drove right on. The children looked on in astonishment as the jeep swung around the bend and out of sight, leaving a trail of exhaust smoke behind it.
It was a little past four in the afternoon when Sumant Varma and the two shikaris returned to the rest-house. They were tired and cold after their long vigil on the machan. The deepest parts of the forest never saw sunlight, so thick was the vegetation there. The spot where the kill had taken place was about four kilometres from where the pick-up had to be parked. The journey on foot was through thick jungle and since it was mostly uphill, it had been tough going indeed. Nina Varma and the children knew this. Their eager questions had to wait till the fire was blazing in the fireplace and a steaming mug of tea had been placed in Mr. Varma’s hands.

“Nina, will you give the shikaris some food, please?” he said as he sipped his tea. “They haven’t had any lunch.”

Mrs. Varma gave instructions to Gopal to make some chappatis. She served the food out onto two plates and called the men into the kitchen. Then pouring herself a cup of tea, she sat down and waited for her husband to start.

“The whole story is a bit of an anti-climax really,” Mr. Varma said at last. “I didn’t get to see the panther. It didn’t turn up.” He put his tea down to light his pipe.

The children said, “Oh, no, what a pity.”

Only his wife noticed the frown on his forehead. He seemed to be taking an unusually long time to pack the tobacco into his pipe. She knew something had upset or worried him.

“Did anything go wrong?” she asked gently.

“I don’t know, but I think someone was there before us. The position of the kill had been changed.”

“Maybe it was a hyena,” said Vasant. “They do have a few bites of a panther’s kill if they are sure it is nowhere around, don’t they?”

“Yes, but somehow I don’t think that is what happened. There are no tracks of any other animal anywhere near it. Nandu and Ramu are sure about that.”

“Could the panther itself have come back for a feed and then changed its mind for some reason? Its pug marks could have got mixed up with the previous ones,” Mrs. Varma said.

“Yes, that is possible. There are overlapping sets of pug marks. Although the position of the kill was changed, nothing more had been eaten out of it. What made the panther abandon its meal?”

“Papa, I wonder if the shots frightened it away. We heard a volley of shots this morning. The army is out firing, you know,” Vasant said thoughtfully.

Mr. Varma nodded absently, but said no more. He gazed into the fire, chewing on his pipe from time to time. He seemed to be lost in thought. His wife and the children shared his disappointment. It was not just the photographs he was keen on, although those were important. It was the sheer pleasure he drew from seeing the beautiful cats in their natural environment, lord of all they survey, fearful of no one. Their movements were marked with grace and majesty—each muscle spelling strength and power. Of course there had been other occasions when the animals had failed to turn up as expected. Something else was troubling him now. Why had the panther’s kill been tampered with?

Later, after dinner, Vasant motioned to the other two to follow him into the bedroom he shared with Akshay. Seated on the bed with the door carefully closed behind
them, he whispered, "What do you make of this whole thing? I think somebody is out to shoot that panther and I think I know who the poachers are." His eyes rolled upwards to the ceiling as he spoke.

"Not—not our friends upstairs?" Akshay asked, aghast. "They wouldn’t do a thing like that. I am sure of it."

"They look extremely law-abiding," Sandhya put in. "But then, you never can tell."

"What makes you think they are the ones? It could be anyone from the village. It would have to be someone who knows the jungle through and through. They have been here a few days," Akshay said slowly.

"Yes, and they have the help of Bhole Ram, an expert tracker, don’t forget," Vasant said. "Anyone could show them the trees in the forest. Why do they need someone like Bhole Ram?"

"You could be right," Akshay said, excited. He was sitting bolt upright on the bed now. "Their story about surveying the forest for a timber company is probably just a cover for poaching."

"It may not be. They may be who they say they are all right. They could just be taking advantage of being here to do some poaching on the sly. Panther skins are worth a lot, you know."

"Oh, I could wring their necks," said Sandhya angrily. "To think that people can kill such beautiful animals for the sake of their skins."

"There is nothing some people won’t do for money," said Akshay. "But now that we know what they are up to, we have got to do something to stop them. I think we should tell Uncle."

"No. We have no proof at all. Papa would think we
are saying it because we don't like them. After all, we have very little to go by. No, I think we should keep an eye on them and their activities and see what we can find out.

"Well, we can't follow them around the place, can we?" said Sandhya. "How do we keep an eye on them?"

"Yes, I know, it is going to be difficult. But we can keep our eyes and ears open for anything unusual," Vasant said.

The children were quiet for a while, their minds hard at work. Then Akshay brightened up. "I know what we could do for a start," he said. "We could try and find out something about Bhole Ram. According to Somu, he is a gambler and a heavy drinker. Perhaps, he is unscrupulous enough to try and use his skills as a tracker to help them. He may even give the game away if he is questioned closely enough."

"Yes, I think that is an excellent idea. We can easily find out from Somu where he stays. The only trouble is, how do we question him? I mean, we can't come straight to the point, can we?" said Sandhya, always the practical one.

"Well, we will think of something. You are right, of course, Sandhya. Those two would realise that we are on to them and that would never do," Vasant said thoughtfully.

"I wonder where they are right now," said Akshay. "It is almost nine o'clock. I don't think they have been in since we passed them on the road today before lunch. It is terribly quiet upstairs. We usually hear them when they are in."

"Let us see if their jeep is outside, where it is usually parked," said Vasant, rising from the bed. He was back a moment later. "You are right. They are not in. That is funny. Where could they be at this time, I wonder."

"Surveying timber, I suppose," said Sandhya with a little giggle. "They obviously take their work very seriously, seeing that they couldn't even stop to give us a lift back to the rest-house this morning. Or perhaps they thought we were merely waving to them."

"Yes, I daresay that is what they thought," Vasant said absently. He had a faraway look in his eyes and seemed to be thinking of something else. He turned to Akshay and was about to say something when his mother came into the room.

"Sandhya, come and change for bed now. You boys too had better go to sleep. Good night."

When Sandhya and her mother left the room, the boys got up and changed into their night clothes. But they had no intention of going to sleep for a long time yet. They lay on their beds and talked in whispers. Much later, when all the lights in the house were out and they were certain that everyone was asleep, they got up quietly and pelling their dressing gowns around them, crept out of the house. They had something important to do.
The next morning turned out to be bleak, cloudy and foggy. Sandhya was up at her usual time, but the boys seemed to show no signs of getting up. It was past nine when Mrs. Varma finally went into their room to wake them up. Later, at breakfast, they were still trying to rub the sleep from their eyes. “It is the weather,” they said by way of explanation. “Weather like this always makes one want to stay in bed and sleep a little longer.”

“I suspect you two boys have been up talking till late at night,” said Mrs. Varma with a smile. “Well, what are you three going to do today? I don’t suppose you would want to go out in a weather like this.”

“Oh, no, Masi,” said Akshay quickly. “The best way to stay warm is to be out walking briskly. A good long walk will tone us up and keep us warm for the rest of the day.”

“Yes, you are right. Do make sure you are well clad though. You all have wollen caps, don’t you? I would wear gloves too, if I were you. Brrrr, it is cold.”

By the time the children were dressed and on their way, the sun seemed to be making an attempt to come out from behind the clouds. The first halt was Somu’s tea shop. They had decided to find out as much as they could about Bhole Ram, and Somu seemed to be the most likely person to give them the information they needed. Seated on the little wooden bench outside his shop, they cupped their hands around steaming glasses of tea, peering up at the sky every now and then to make sure the sun had not abandoned its decision to shine that day.

Somu was more than a little surprised at their interest in Bhole Ram. Vasant decided to be honest with him and tell him the truth, or at least some of it.

“We wondered why the sahib-log employed him of all people to be their guide in the forest. You told us he was a heavy drinker and a gambler. Why choose him, when they could have got almost any local person who knows the area well enough to show them around? Is it because he is an excellent tracker? That seems to be his only plus point. Why is it so important to them? We don’t think they are naturalists or wildlife photographers like my father. What then are they up to?”

“You think they are poaching? It is quite likely. We do have people coming in now and then and trying their luck with wild boar or a sambar. They make good eating, you know. And there are plenty of them in the forest.”

Vasant shook his head. “No, Somu. We think they are after something bigger. Now tell us, when do you think Bhole Ram is likely to be home? Can you take us to his place? We want to meet him.”

Somu had been puffing away at his beedi. He took it out of his mouth and held it between his thumb and forefinger as he spoke, “He doesn’t spend much time at home these days. When he is not out with the sahib-log, he visits the gujjar in their camp.”

“Who are the gujjars?” Sandhya asked.

“They are nomadic folk who come down from the higher regions of the Himalayas every winter to graze their sheep. The place they come from is covered with snow now, so they have to come down looking for grass for their flocks.”

“He is probably there now,” Akshay said thoughtfully.
“Those two have been out since yesterday afternoon. They probably went into town on some work and decided to stay the night. So Bhole Ram should be free. If he is not at home, he must be with the gujjars.”

“Yes, I saw him leave the village when I was coming to my shop this morning,” said Somu. “I am surprised he was sober enough to go anywhere today, after the way he drank last night. He had got hold of some foreign liquor and he and his friends made quite a racket at his place. The whole village is talking about it.” He shook his head solemnly as he spoke, “So close to the holy city, too. It is terrible.”

The children exchanged glances. Foreign liquor! It was not difficult for them to guess where that had come from. For what was Bhole Ram being so liberally rewarded?

“Can you tell us where the gujjars’ camp is?” asked Vasant.

“It is about two kilometres from here, along the river. Just follow the river upstream. You will see tents pitched on the grass.”

“Thanks a lot, Somu. You have been most helpful. By the way, don’t talk about this to anyone, will you?”

“No, I won’t. Don’t worry.”

On their way to the gujjars’ camp, the boys told Sandhya about their little adventure the night before. With the two men apparently away for the night, they had decided to creep upstairs and prowl around their portion of the rest-house to see if they could get a clue to what the men were up to. It had been easy for them to slip into the chowkidar’s (watchman) room at night to pick up the duplicate keys that he kept hanging on a nail on the wall. They had been able to take a good look around, while keeping a wary eye out for the jeep’s return. Their efforts, however, had not proved very successful. There had been some clothes, a few books and files and a hypodermic syringe with a large needle. That was all. There was nothing among the men’s belongings that pointed to any suspicious activities.

“What did you expect to find, anyway?” asked Sandhya, somewhat scornfully. “A book called How to go Poaching?”

The boys shook their heads. “No,” Vasant said, “but if there were any firearms or cartridges or anything like that, we would know what they were up to, for sure. But there was nothing of the kind.”

“If they have any firearms, they are sure to be with them. They would never leave them lying around in the rest-house,” Sandhya said. “The only thing is, where would they hide them in a jeep? I mean, it is quite open. It is not like a car where you can hide things quite safely in the boot. You said they keep their tools in the front under some sacking…” She stopped suddenly when she saw the boys’ faces. They looked at her and at each other, both of them stopping in their tracks with excitement written all over their faces.

“Of course! That is it. Sandhya, you are a genius.” Vasant caught her arm. “Remember the time when their jeep was having starting trouble, and Kallu came to look at it? I offered to get the monkey-wrench for them from the front of the jeep. Do you remember how furious they were? They caught my wrist and wouldn’t let me touch anything. I bet that is where they had the gun, hidden under the sacking. It was probably dismantled, so its shape was not at all obvious.”

“Yes, that is exactly what I was thinking,” said Akshay. “I am sure of it, too. That is where they had their gun
hidden. Why else would Mr. Mohan Chand have stopped you from reaching for the wrench? And I remember the look on both their faces. They really had a bad moment when they thought you might find their precious weapon.”

All three were convinced that their conjecture had been right. The men’s frequent trips into the forest with Bhole Ram, the best tracker in the village, were certainly not to survey timber. And if they possessed a firearm, as their furtive behaviour seemed to suggest, then they were out to break the forest laws, for no shooting was permitted in the jungle.

A sudden droning sound came to their ears. The sound grew louder. They looked up to see a small, light aircraft go zooming past. Before they knew it, it was out of sight.

“That must be the army reconnaissance aircraft,” Vasant told the other two. “Papa was telling me about it the other day.”

“Why do they have to do a recce in this area?” Akshay asked.

“They are working with the artillery. They spot the target from the air and give the information to a manned army observation post over the wireless. They, in turn, pass it on to the firing point.”

“You mean, they can’t see their targets? I thought it was normal target practice,” Sandhya said, sounding incredulous.

“Goodness, no. These guns remain well behind the enemy lines. If they didn’t, they would be spotted and fired upon too, wouldn’t they?”

“I guess so,” said Sandhya. “Oh, I hope Papa can arrange for us to visit the camp.”

They had reached the gujjars’ camp now. There were tents, pitched a little distance from the river, as Somu had said. A few women sat outside their tents. Some were cooking over little wood fires, while others just sat around talking, or keeping an eye on their children as they scampered about.

The sun was out now and its warmth after the bleak, dismal morning was delightful. A few curious children stopped playing and gathered around them, laughing and chattering. A little girl of about four held a puppy in her arms. Sandhya reached out for it and the girl handed it over at once.

“Oh, what a darling! Just look at it. It is nothing but a little ball of wool. My, aren’t you beautiful!”

It certainly was an adorable puppy. The boys took it from Sandhya and in turn and fondled it affectionately. Their interest in the puppy broke the ice, and a few moments later a young man appeared.

“Do you want to buy the puppy?” he asked.

The children looked at each other doubtfully. They knew they would have to get permission before they could commit themselves.

“What breed is it?” Vasant asked.

“Our dogs are all bhotiyas,” the young man answered.

“They are sheep dogs. They come with us from the mountains every winter. They help us look after our flocks. Do you want to see some more?”

“Oh, yes,” said the children.

The man took them around the camp to show them some more dogs. The gujjars were friendly folk and willingly answered the children’s questions about their lives in the high regions of the Himalayas. It was some time before they finally remembered the real purpose of their visit.
Bhole Ram seemed to soften a little. The children had chosen the right approach when they decided to flatter him about his tracking abilities. Although Bhole Ram had not done as much tracking in the recent times as he used to, there was no denying that he had been one of the best trackers ever known in this area. But for several years now shooting had been banned and his services were no longer required by hunters. He worked from time to time as a labourer, loading the trucks that came into the forest to collect bhathar grass for the paper mills, or timber.

Of late he had started mixing with some dubious company and had got into the habit of having a few drinks and indulging in a bit of teen patti (a game of cards). This greatly angered the village: who felt that such activities ought not to take place so close to the holy city of Hardwar and the sacred Ganga. All said and done, Bhole Ram had lost none of his keen tracking abilities. Once in the jungle, on the trail of an animal, his senses were alert. He seemed to work more by instinct than anything else, which was seldom, if ever, wrong. He put his hammer down and sat back on his heels, arms draped over his knees as he eyed the children curiously.

"Well, what do you want to talk to me about?" he said at last.

"When we get back to school we will have to write about our activities in the holidays," said Akshay. This was what the children had planned on saying and was partly true. "We thought if you could tell us some of your experiences, it would help us understand the ways of the animals and the laws of the jungle better."

"The ways of the animals! Yes, who would know the ways of the animals better than Bhole Ram. I have escaped
being trampled to a pulp by a rogue elephant. I have tracked man-eating tigers and was badly mauled by one once. Look.” He took off his coat and rolled up his sleeve. The children could see the scar clearly. It ran right down the length of his arm, a thick jagged scar, dreadful to behold. They shuddered.

“What happened?” asked Sandhya.

“I was sitting on a machan with the sahib when the tiger appeared. We both knew it was the man-eater I had been tracking for days. At that moment, the sahib began to hiccup.” The children longed to laugh at this but Bhole Ram looked so angry as he recalled the incident that they decided not to. He then launched into a description of what he would have liked to do to the sahib; that would be best left unsaid. It seemed the tiger looked straight up at them and leapt up on to the machan.

“I thought tigers didn’t climb trees,” said Akshay.

“That is not true, chotey sahib (young master). It is true that they normally don’t climb trees but they certainly can if they want to. Anyway, this one was on us in one great leap. He came straight for me and clawed me on this arm as you have just seen. He was about to go for my neck, when the sahib showed great presence of mind. He held his gun against the tiger’s head—from the side, thus keeping me out of his line of fire—and with one shot, the tiger fell dead at the foot of our tree.”

“What happened with the rogue elephant?” Sandhya asked.

“I was returning to the village with another shikari one afternoon. We had finished making a machan on a tree. We suddenly realised the rogue was somewhere in the vicinity. We could hear him breaking branches with his trunk. He was in a terrible fury. We did the only thing we could. We quickly climbed up two of the sturdiest trees we could find, though not before the elephant saw us.

“He went for my tree, wrapping his trunk around it, trying to uproot it from the ground. However, it was very firm and so, crook that he was, he went to a nearby stream and filled his trunk with water to soften the ground. He repeated this thrice and each time the tree seemed a little looser than before.

“I knew it was now or never. I quickly took off my turban and coat, and hung them on the tree and climbed down. My friend saw me and did the same. Fortunately my ploy worked. Seeing my clothes and thinking I was still up in that tree, the elephant went back to his task of loosening the roots with water. This gave us the time we needed to get away from him. We were not so far, however, that we couldn’t hear the sound of the tree as it came crashing down.

“When he found nobody on the tree, he worked off his fury on my clothes. Many days later, when we knew that he had moved away from the vicinity, a group of us ventured up to the spot to see what had happened. The sight of the branches, broken as though they were that many matchsticks, and my clothes reduced to shreds, had their own tale to tell.”

The children had been listening to this account with fascination. Sandhya found herself shuddering with horror; the boys too were speechless for a moment when Bhole Ram ended his tale. Finally, Vasant, remembering what they had really come for, said, “You must find it very dull now that shikar is not allowed. What do you do with your talents and your knowledge? Have you had a chance to use them again?”
Bhole Ram sighed. “It has been a long time since my abilities were truly appreciated. Now I work as a labourer whenever I can.”

“We saw you once with the sabib-log from the rest-house,” Akshay said, not very truthfully. “We heard you were taking them around the forest. Do you find that interesting?”

“Hmmmmph! Those two haven’t a clue about animals or the ways of the jungle. All they are interested in is timber. But they pay me well, so I am not complaining.”

“Do these surveys of yours take you right into the heart of the jungle? I mean, where the tigers and panthers are?” Sandhya asked.

“Oh, yes. Why, only yesterday afternoon we came across the pug marks of a tigress and her three little cubs. They were fresh marks, not more than an hour old, or two hours, at the most.”

“Oh, those are the cubs we saw one day,” Vasant said. The children were really interested now. “My father has photographs of them. He has got them on video, too.”

“What is this video?”

“Never mind that,” said Akshay, a trifle impatiently. “Tell us where you saw the pug marks.”

“If you go along the road to Rishikesh and turn off into the forest to the right at the fourth milestone from the rest-house, it would be around three or four kilometres into the forest. They are probably still there.”

“How do you know?” asked Sandhya.

“I think the tigress was stalking an animal. There is a water-hole not far from there. She may have made her kill somewhere near the water-hole. If that is the case, she will stay around for a couple of days. Having the cubs with her makes it difficult for her to move around as freely as she would otherwise have done. It is easier for her to stay closer to where the food and water are.”

The children lingered a few moments longer with Bhole Ram. Then, as he seemed impatient to return to his work, they thanked him and rose to leave. They had enjoyed talking to him, and apart from the interesting tales that he had related, another fact had become clear. These forays into the forest took him and his two employers deep into the forest, far deeper than a survey of timber would seem to require.
On their return to the rest-house, the children had a surprise. Seated on the veranda with Mr. and Mrs. Varma were Mr. Dharam Raj and Mr. Mohan Chand. They were all sipping cups of tea and seemed to be engaged in pleasant conversation. The children greeted them with a polite namaste (a spoken greeting accompanied by bowed head and palms folded together). Then, as there were no more chairs available, they sat down on the veranda steps, glad to have a rest after their long and tiring walk that morning.

"Look what Mr. Dharam Raj and Mr. Mohan Chand have very kindly brought us," said Mrs. Varma, picking up a plate of sweetmeats from a table by her side. "Come and help yourselves. Sandhya, will you pass them around, please?"

The children enjoyed the delicious barfis. Sandhya offered them to the two men, too. Soon they said goodbye, and murmuring something about important work to do, went upstairs. A few moments later, they got into their jeep and drove away. The children helped in picking up the cups and plates, and the family moved indoors.

At lunch, Mrs. Varma said, "Wasn't it nice of these two gentlemen to bring us a box of sweetmeats? They went to Dehra Dun on some work and bought it there."

"Apparently they are very fond of sweetmeats themselves," Akshay giggled. "You wouldn't have thought anyone with diabetes would have such enormous pieces of barfi!"

"What makes you say they have diabetes?" Sumant Varma asked, surprised.

"The boys saw a syringe in their room. We thought one of them must be taking insulin injections," said Sandhya before the boys could get a chance to kick her under the table and stop her.

"You saw a syringe in their room?" said Mr. Varma, looking at the two boys who by now were extremely red in the face. He put his fork down and looked at them squarely. "I hope you had a good reason for going into their room. Judging from your faces, I would say you have been up to some mischief. Out with it now."

Vasant hesitated, wondering for a moment whether to make up some excuse. But he was a truthful boy by nature and he knew that one fib would only lead to another. In any case, his father was far too sharp and would see through his flimsy explanations.

"Papa, it is a long story. We might as well tell you everything." He looked at the other two who were picking at their food uneasily. Akshay could have bitten off his tongue as soon as he had made that chance remark which led to Sandhya's thoughtless disclosure. Between mouthfuls of food, Vasant brought his parents into the picture, with Akshay and Sandhya joining in once they had got over their embarrassment at their foolishness. Mr. and Mrs. Varma listened, aghast.

"Do you mean to say," said Mr. Varma, when the children had finished, "that you think these two gentlemen went after the panther that I sat up for yesterday? That they are the ones who altered the position of the panther's kill? But why would they do that?"

"If they intended to kill it," Nina Varma said slowly, "they could have changed the position to give themselves a better view and better aim from wherever they were hiding as they waited for it."
“Yes, that could be it,” Sumant Varma said thoughtfully. “In fact, Nina, I wouldn’t be surprised if they actually succeeded in shooting it. That would explain two things—why they didn’t stop when the children waved out to them yesterday...”

“You mean, they may have had the panther in the jeep with them? Of course! That must be it. They must have known that we wanted a lift back to the rest-house. And if they had the dead panther concealed at the back of the jeep, then they couldn’t have stopped for anything or anyone!” Vasant said, excited. The other two were sitting bolt upright too, their eyes wide with excitement.

“You said that would explain two things,” Mrs. Varma said, motioning to the children to be quiet. “What was the other?”

“Their absence from the rest-house for a whole day and a night. They would have had to take the body of the panther to a taxidermist to have the skin treated. In any case, there is no way they could have kept it here. A panther is not an easy thing to conceal. They had to get it away quickly, before anyone got wind of it.”

“Yes, it seems pretty evident that we have a pair of poachers in our midst,” said Mrs. Varma. “And the fact that the army is carrying out firing in the area would provide an excellent cover-up for them. Any shots they may fire could be attributed to the army firing. Well, I must say you children were very smart to have caught on to them.” She smiled at them proudly.

“Actually, the first time I got an inkling that something strange was afoot was when Som Lal told us that Bhole Ram had lost two hundred rupees while gambling, but had been able to pay it up at once,” Vasant said. “It struck me that our friends upstairs must be paying Bhole Ram handsomely. Otherwise, where would he have got the money from? And would they pay him so much merely for showing them trees?”

“Yes, Vasant. You were absolutely right,” said his father. “They bribed Bhole Ram into helping them track and shoot the panther. I think this ought to be reported to the forest authorities to prevent them from doing any more damage.”

“There will be no proof, Papa,” Sandhya said, “unless...unless Bhole Ram can be persuaded to talk.”

“I know. Let me think about it for a while.”

“There is another thing that puzzles me,” Akshay frowned. “Bhole Ram said he saw tracks of the tigress and her cubs yesterday afternoon. But our friends had already departed with the panther they had shot. Or at least, that is what we are presuming. Remember? They passed us in their jeep before lunch yesterday. How could they have been in that area in the afternoon? They were heading in the opposite direction.”

Mr. Varma’s eyebrows had shot up in surprise at the mention of the tigress and her cubs. “Just a moment,” he said, “you haven’t told us much about your visit to Bhole Ram. Start at the beginning and tell us the story carefully. This may be important.”

Prompted by the other two, Vasant recounted their meeting with Bhole Ram as accurately as he could. When he had finished, Sumant Varma puffed long and hard at his pipe and nodded. “Yes,” he said, “yes, I thought as much. They proceeded to Dehra Dun, leaving Bhole Ram to carry on with their ground work.”

“What do you mean, Papa?” Sandhya asked curiously.

Her father merely shook his head. Rising from the dining table he said, “I am sitting out in the veranda
for a while. I need to think clearly. Don’t disturb me, please. And well done, you three, shabash!”

“I wonder what is going on in Papa’s mind now,” Sandhya said. “Perhaps he is thinking of a way to prove they have been poaching.”

“Perhaps. Now let us clear the table since we have all finished eating, then you three can go out to play,” Mrs. Varma said.

A little later the children were outside with Gopal when they heard Mr. Varma summon the chowkidar and tell him, “Go and call Nandu and Ramu from the village quickly. Tell them it is urgent. I want them to leave everything and come at once.”

The chowkidar set off down the drive immediately. The children gazed after him, wondering what Mr. Varma had up his sleeve.

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10

Bhole Ram laid down his hammer and looked at his handiwork with satisfaction. Yes, the cage was well made, large enough and strong enough for its purpose. The sabib-log should be pleased. For the amount of money they had already paid him and for the handsome sum they promised to give if their work was carried out to their satisfaction, Bhole Ram would have done almost anything to please them.

These sabib-log from the town were fools really, he thought. They did not know the first thing about animals or their habits. Fancy wanting to trap three little tiger cubs to send to a circus to be trained to perform tricks. Bhole Ram had been to a circus once when he was a little boy and he had hated it. Why, he wondered, did people want to pay money to watch tigers and lions jump through rings of fire? Forest-born and bred, he had known even as a child that the big cats would have to have their spirits broken before they would submit to the will of man. Bhole Ram had a healthy respect for the animals so he had instinctively disliked the idea. Unfortunately, however, he had a greater respect for money, so he was easily able to shrug off any misgivings he may have had about his role in the kidnapping.

Ah! Here were the sabib-log now. Good. The cage was ready, just in time.

“Is everything ready?” Mr. Dharam Raj inspected the cage carefully. It looked strong enough and had a little door with a latch as they had wanted. He stood back and twirled his moustache while his brother-in-law had a good look at the cage.
"Does anyone know what you have been making?"
Mr. Mohan Chand asked.
Bhole Ram shook his head. "No, sahib. The gujjars stay in their camp. No one comes this way. The children from the rest-house were here this morning, but the cage was nowhere near ready then, so they couldn't possibly have known what I was making."

The two men frowned at the mention of the children. What business did the children have with Bhole Ram? And how did they know where to find him? Bhole Ram answered all their questions patiently. What he did not know was that a large glass marble that had fallen noiselessly on the carpeted floor in Mr. Dharam Raj's room now lay nestling in his pocket. Bhole Ram's information about the children's visit confirmed the men's suspicions that one or both boys had paid a nocturnal visit to their room. What were those children up to?

* * *

The little bhotiya puppy settled itself comfortably in Sandhya's arms and gazed at her adoringly. From time to time it would aim a lick at her chin, but she had managed to evade its damp overtures. "What a licky little thing you are," she said, rubbing her cheek against it.

"Come on, Sandhya, let us go," Vasant called out. He had finished paying for the puppy, to the complete satisfaction of its erstwhile owner. The children waved goodbye to their new gujar friends and turned to go. They were thrilled with their pet. Mr. and Mrs. Varma had raised no objection when they had told them they wanted to buy the puppy. "You will have to house-train it," Mrs. Varma had said good-humouredly. "I refuse to go mopping up puddles all over the floor."

"Oooh, it is hot now. I am going to take off my jersey. Wait for me a minute, you two," Sandhya said. But the boys had spotted an unusual bird in the bushes ahead and they motioned to Sandhya to be quiet as they tiptoed on to have a closer look at it. She sighed and put the puppy down on the ground while she stopped to remove her jersey. She tied the sleeves around her waist and then bent down to pick up the little thing. To her surprise, it was nowhere to be seen. She was about to call out to the boys when she saw it scampering off as fast as its little legs could carry it, its tiny tail wagging for all it was worth. "Oh, Licky," she scolded, "where do you think you are off to?" The puppy must have spied a squirrel or a rabbit for it made its way quite purposefully towards the clump of bushes that marked the beginning of the forest.

The boys would be cross if she called out to them now, she thought, so she followed the puppy quietly. The little fellow had taken off at top speed and had now reached the bushes. Sandhya caught up with it and bent to pick it up. As she took the puppy in her arms, she heard soft, muffled voices. Still crouching, she peered over the bushes to see who it could be.

To her amazement she saw Mr. Dharam Raj and Mr. Mohan Chand moving towards their jeep, carrying something between them. It looked like a large wooden box. Sandhya wondered what the box was for. The men were about to get into the jeep when the puppy gave a little yelp.

Mr. Dharam Raj stopped abruptly and walked right up to the bushes where Sandhya crouched holding on to the excited little puppy.

"What are you doing here, little girl? What do you
mean by hiding in the bushes and spying on us?” He looked really angry and Sandhya was frightened.

“I...I wasn’t spying,” she said. “I just came to pick up my puppy.” She straightened up as she spoke. “He ran off into these bushes and I had to come after him.”

“Hmmmm,” said Mr. Dharam Raj, twirling his moustache, which had already been twirled to a point, “I see...and you came here to get the puppy all by yourself? Where are the boys?”

Sandhya pointed to the boys, who were slowly making their way down the path leading from the gujjars’ camp. “There they are. We were all leaving together. I just came after my puppy.”

“Hmmmm. All right then.” Mr. Dharam Raj did not look too pleased with Sandhya’s explanation but he said no more and went off to join his companion in the jeep. Sandhya fled, running all the way until she caught up with the boys. They were surprised to see her out of breath and obviously agitated. Still panting, she quickly gave them an account of her unexpected encounter with the two men. The boys listened, astonished.

“What made them think you were spying on them? Obviously because they are up to no good. If they were doing something perfectly harmless and innocent, they would never have used the word,” Vasant said.

“Well, I must admit that crouched behind those bushes I must have looked as though I was there as he said, to ‘spy’ on them. But you are right, the way he said it sounds as if they have a guilty conscience about something. Unfortunately, I didn’t hear a word of what they said.”

“It must have something to do with the wooden box they were carrying. Bhole Ram was working on it when
we saw him this morning. He must have finished whatever he was making for them and they must have gone to collect it. What could it be?” Akshay said.

Vasant shrugged and shook his head. “Search me,” he said.

The children walked on in silence. Soon they could hear a familiar rumble behind them which increased in volume. They turned to look. The jeep drew up and stopped beside them. “Would you children like a lift back to the rest-house? We are going there,” Mr. Dharam Raj said, beaming affably at them, giving Sandhya a special smile, perhaps to make up for his sharpness to her earlier.

“All right, sir. Thank you,” Vasant said and beckoned to the other two to get into the back of the jeep. All three climbed in gratefully. The gujjars’ camp was quite a long way from home.

“I wonder if you boys would be interested in watching a training drill,” Mr. Mohan Chand turned around to address the children. “You too, little girl,” he added as an afterthought. “We can easily arrange with the Colonel who is in charge of the training here in the forest. They may even let you load the guns with dummy ammunition.”

The children’s eyes lit up. “Oh, we would love that, sir. Do you really think you can arrange it?” Akshay leaned forward excitedly as he spoke. “My uncle has been planning to do it, but I guess he has been too busy.”

“It is no problem. Be ready at 10 o’clock tomorrow morning and we will take you there. The camp is quite far away so we will request them to bring you back when they finish in the afternoon. They have plenty of vehicles and can easily accommodate you three.”

“We will have to ask our parents, though I am sure they will agree. We will confirm it with you at the rest-house once we have asked them,” said Vasant. “Thank you very much. It sounds a splendid idea.”

They drove along silently for a few more minutes and presently Somu’s tea-shop loomed into view. “I wonder if you would mind stopping at the tea-shop for a moment,” Sandhya said. “I want to buy some biscuits for my puppy.”

Mr. Dharam Raj obligingly slowed down to a halt in front of the tea-shop. Sandhya clambered down to buy the biscuits.

“I may as well pick up a box of matches,” Mr. Mohan Chand muttered and alighted from the jeep. He had his back to them while he made his purchase and Mr. Dharam Raj was looking out of the window, his attention focussed for the moment on the contents of Somu’s little shop. The boys looked at one another quickly and then their eyes darted to the mysterious square-looking shape on the floor of the jeep in front. It was covered with a large piece of cloth. Both boys had noticed it and knew it must be the wooden box that Bhole Ram had made. But what was in it? If they wanted to know, then it was now or never.
"I do hope it is absolutely safe," Nina Varma had put down the book she was reading; her usually smooth forehead creased in a frown. "What do you think, Sumant?"

"Oh, they don't actually use any ammunition in these training drills. This is what they call 'dry' training. It is just to make sure that the men handling the guns get enough practice so that when they actually use them at the firing range, they know the procedure so well that they can almost do everything mechanically. Also, if there is any fault in the guns, it can be rectified," Mr. Varma smiled as he answered. Women, he knew, were sometimes inclined to worry unnecessarily about this sort of thing.

He glanced at his wristwatch. "I know what I could do. It is about five o'clock now and the men must be back in their camp. I have met the Colonel in charge of the regiment; I could have a word with him, after these two gentlemen have spoken to him and made the arrangements. I will ask him if one of his junior officers would tell the children something about other aspects of jungle warfare. They would find it most interesting. And I will ask him to keep an eye on these young scamps as well."

A little later, the family was gathered around the large log fire that blazed in the fireplace of the living room. The children were excited and could hardly think of anything other than their forthcoming trip. Presently there was a knock. Vasant rose to open the door. He ushered Mr. Dharam Raj and Mr. Mohan Chand into the room. Mr. Varma got up politely and asked them to be seated. They declined, saying they had some business to attend to.

"We just came to tell you it is all fixed for tomorrow. The Commanding Officer of the regiment said he would be happy to have the children over in the morning. His officers will show them how the firing drill takes place."

"Well, that is very kind of you, Mr. Dharam Raj," Mr. Varma said. "The children will find it most interesting. Thank you for taking the trouble of making the arrangements. By the way, I hope it won't be inconvenient for you to take them down to the camp tomorrow. As it happens, I have work in Hardwar which will take the whole day, or else I would have taken them across."

"Oh, no, it is no trouble. No trouble at all. We will take them there and the Colonel will arrange to have them brought back around four in the afternoon. So we will leave here at about ten tomorrow morning," Mr. Dharam Raj said, turning to the children. "By the way, you are invited to lunch. The Colonel was most insistent. He said it would be their privilege."

The children were surprised and pleased. They thanked the two gentlemen and told them now much they were looking forward to the outing.

When they were by themselves again, Vasant said, "Papa, you didn't tell us you were going to Hardwar tomorrow. What do you have to go for?"

"I don't," was his father's astonishing reply.

"But you said..."

"I have been doing a lot of thinking ever since you three told us about your suspicions. All their activities seem to point towards..." he lowered his voice at a warning glance from his wife, "...towards the fact that they are making preparations for kidnapping the three tiger
cubs. They seem to be all set now and I am fairly certain they will act tomorrow. They have the cage ready for the cubs, and the tranquillizer to shoot at the tigress to put her to sleep while they steal the cubs. Yes, boys, that was the syringe you saw when you went to their room.”

“But, Uncle, the tranquillizer would have to be inside a shell like a bullet. You can’t fire a syringe from a gun,” Akshay put in.

“Yes, son. They must have got that as well. It is a bullet-shaped shell which contains the tranquillizer and has a needle protruding from it. When the needle makes contact with the animal’s flesh, the medicine is released. But, to be on the safe side, they would probably carry an ordinary syringe as well. If their job seems to be taking longer than they expected, and they are afraid the tigress may awaken, they can inject another dose— this time directly with a syringe, since she is already asleep.”

“So that is their plot. They are out to kidnap those beautiful cubs. How mean, how heartless,” Nina Varma said angrily. “I think it is a really wicked thing to do.”

Sandhya was almost in tears. She turned to her father imploringly. “Papa, we can’t let them steal the cubs. You will have to do something to stop them. Report them to someone, have them arrested or...or something.”

“We have almost come to think of them as our cubs. Specially since we have photographs and a video of them. It would be dreadful to think of them cooped up in some zoo, when the whole forest is theirs by right,” Vasant said, as distressed as his mother and Sandhya.

“Isn’t there some way of saving them?” Akshay asked gloomily. “They would be miserable without their mother, and I guess she would go crazy with grief.”

“I feel as strongly about this as you all do. Yes, I do plan to do my best to save the cubs. I have sent Nandu and Ramu to survey the area where Bhole Ram told you he saw the pug marks. With their knowledge of the jungle, they will easily be able to say whether the tigress is still in that area, and whether she is likely to remain there till tomorrow. I am waiting for them to return and give me their report; I then plan to pay a visit to the forest ranger and tell him of my suspicions. I shall try and persuade him to come with me. Together we can lie in wait for Mr. Dharam Raj and Mr. Mohan Chand and hopefully catch them red-handed.”

“It is a very risky plan, Sumant. I am not sure I like it. You would have to be on the ground because you may have to follow them at a distance. Unless you plan to wait up on a machan?” Mrs. Varma said, frowning.

“No. It would be impossible to pinpoint a particular spot where they are likely to come across the tigress. We will be lucky if we can narrow it down to within a radius of a kilometre or so. But don’t worry. The ranger carries a gun for self-defence. I hope we won’t have to use it, because you know I hate killing, but if we are caught in a tricky situation, then we will use it if we have to. This is our only chance if we are to save the cubs.”

“You may have to wait for hours, Papa,” said Sandhya.

“I know. I think these two plan to venture into the forest after dropping you children at the army camp. That arrangement, by the way, is to make sure you are out of their way. It seems you have the happy knack of coming across them on your daily wanderings. They have probably realised that you are suspicious of them. So it is now or never for them. They will have you three safely out of the way and I am supposedly away at Hardwar for the whole day.
“Oh, yes, another important thing. I learnt from Mukhtiar, the chowkider, that they have settled their dues and plan to leave the rest-house tomorrow. You see what that means? If they do manage to steal the cubs, they only have to leave. There is no way they can come back to the rest-house and hope to conceal three lively, noisy cubs!”

“And if they don’t get them? Do you think they will try again?” Vasant asked.

“They will probably give up for the time being. They may come back later for all we know,” Sumant Varma gazed pensively into the fire as he spoke.

Just then, footsteps were heard on the veranda outside. Mr. Varma got to his feet and went to the door. A moment later he was ushering Nandu and Ramu in. Nina Varma rose and went into the kitchen to make some tea for them. The two shikaris proceeded to give a report of their investigations, while the family gathered around them and listened, all attention.

Captain Natarajan smiled at the four excited youngsters, who were hanging on to his every word. He had been detailed to look after them, show them around the camp and answer all their questions. Gopal had been given the day off and the children were delighted to have his company.

Captain Natarajan certainly knew how to keep their interest alive. He was a good-looking young man of about twenty-five. His eyes had a merry twinkle in them and it seemed to the children that he had not left his childhood too far behind. In the armed forces, nicknames are almost inevitable, so “Natty” quite naturally became his, and it was by this name that he insisted the children called him.

The regiment and its Commanding Officer had given them a hearty welcome. The attention and hospitality offered to them really made them feel important.

“I say, the army really knows how to look after its officers and men, doesn’t it?” Akshay said.

“And its guests,” Vasant added, sipping his tea appreciatively.

Natty smiled. “Yes, we are fairly well organised, I would say.”

“Fairly well organised! That is the understatement of the year,” Sandhya laughed. “I expected you to be eating out of tins or something. But from what we have seen, you could probably host a banquet if you had to.”

“If you youngsters have finished your tea, I will show you around the camp,” Natty got up as he spoke.

As they approached the tents, the children noticed
the precision and symmetry with which they had been pitched.

“These are the mess tents,” said Natty, pointing. “We have separate messes for officers and jawans (private soldiers in Indian Army). Here is the store tent.”

It was a large tent, about forty feet by twenty feet. Natty told them that they carried all their provisions with them for the fifteen-day stay. Milk, fresh vegetables and the like were brought to them everyday from the village.

“Here are the officers’ tents. Would you like to have a look inside?” Natty ushered them into one. “These, in army parlance, are called 180 pounders. They are like little rooms, really.”

They certainly were. The children gazed around them, taking in the neat little camp cots, folding chairs and tables. There was a large rough rug, or durrie, on the ground, and a centre table with a jug of flowers on it.

“This is the maintenance area.” They had moved away from the tents and Natty showed them where the guns were being cleaned and oiled. “These men are experts. The guns are all checked and calibrated by the armourer, who is a specialist in his field.”

“Where is the ammunition?” Gopal asked.

“It is kept some distance away. We dig a large pit and store it there for safety.”

“What happens when you go into the forest for your range firing?” Sandhya asked. “Do you have people guarding the camp? It wouldn’t be safe to leave it unattended.”

“Well, no, young Sandy. It isn’t and we don’t. In the first place we all don’t go together. We are divided into batteries, and only one battery at a time goes into the forest. In any case, we have armed sentries guarding the camp round the clock.”

“Do you ever get to see any big game?” Akshay asked.

Natty shook his head regretfully. “We light two enormous camp-fires at night, for warmth as well as safety, so the animals stay well away from us. All we ever get to see are the camels with their load of bhabhar grass. One of them followed me once. I made a bee-line for the nearest tent, which turned out to be the store tent. When he discovered where he was, he forgot all about me and made for the sack of beans instead. It took four men to get him out of there.”

Everyone laughed. “We have been luckier than you then,” Sandhya said, and prompted by the other three, proceeded to tell Natty about the tigress and her cubs.

“My father has some beautiful snaps of them. If you come and visit us at the rest-house, we will show them to you,” Vasant said.

After a moment’s silence, Akshay said thoughtfully, “You know something, you guys really shouldn’t be disturbing the peace of the jungle this way. The animals have a better right to the forest than you have. It is their home, after all, and here you come frightening them away with your never-ending firing.”

Natty chuckled. “We do have to defend our country, you know. The artillery supports the ground troops who are in actual contact with the enemy, or the tanks that are engaged in a tank battle. Since we stay far behind the enemy lines, we don’t see our target. That is why we have to be guided by manned observation posts at high points, or by infantry patrols who give us the enemy position over their wireless sets. So you see how important this training is.”
“You have your aircraft hovering around for the same purpose, don’t you? We have been seeing them from time to time,” Vasan said.

“That is right.” Natty stopped abruptly and turned his head towards a rustling sound that seemed to come from the nearby bushes.

“What is that?” Gopal asked.

Natty frowned. “I don’t know, but once or twice we have had curious children from the village hiding in the bushes and watching us.” He got up to investigate. He was soon hidden from their sight. There was some more rustling in the bushes and then the muffled sound of voices. He was back in a few moments.

“Just as I thought. There was a lad hiding in the bushes and watching us. This entire area is cordoned off and we have a standing sentry during the day and a patrol at night. Still these kids manage to give them the slip. I threatened the lad with a sound hiding and swore I would take him down to the local thana (police station) if I caught him lurking around here again.” Natty’s eyes twinkled merrily at this point and he continued, “I have to confess that my threat carried very little weight with him. He turned around and informed me quite saucily that the thanedar (police officer) was his uncle!”


“Here at the camp, yes. The same youngsters sometimes follow us into the forest when we actually carry out our range firing. They try and pick up the pieces of shell that fall to the ground. Metal is valuable, and they make some money by selling them. It is highly risky and they know it. In fact, all civilians are forbidden from entering this part of the forest until the army gives the local police the clearance stating that it is safe.

“I saw this little boy at the range once. That was why I had to be firm with him. He will get himself killed one of these days.” Natty rose from the ground where he had been sitting with the children. “Will you four make yourselves at home for a little while? I have some work to do. I will join you as soon as I can.”

“See you later,” the children choroused. They watched him go and then settled back to relax for a while. They could see the mess orderlies at work through the open flap of the mess tent. It was a little while before lunch and a delicious aroma wafted through the air. The boys sprawled out lazily on their stomachs, their chins cupped in their hands, while Sandhya found herself a tree to rest comfortably against and took out the book she had brought along to read. The boys started to talk softly amongst themselves.

“I wonder what those men from the rest-house are up to,” Akshay said, looking at his watch. “So much could have happened by now. Oh, I do hope those cubs are safe.”

“I know. We have been so preoccupied with looking around the camp and talking to Natty that I almost forgot about them,” said Vasant.

“What are you saying about the cubs?” Gopal asked in Hindi. He understood enough English to get the gist of what the two boys had said. Quickly, they told him the whole story. Gopal listened, aghast. Like the others, he too had been delighted to watch the cubs as they frolicked with their mother. Having witnessed that touching, domestic scene, it was indeed heart-breaking to think of the cubs being taken away.

In a little while, lunch was served. Natty came for
them and they joined the other officers. Everything was done in style, in true army tradition, and the children were suitably impressed.

The afternoon passed quickly enough and a little before four o'clock, Natty came up to them and asked them if they were ready to go home. Although they had enjoyed themselves enormously, they were longing to get back and find out the latest developments. After thanking the Colonel and saying goodbye to the others, they followed Natty down the little kutcha track through the dense undergrowth till they came out into the clearing where the vehicles were parked.

13

The forest ranger was a sturdy, well-built man of about forty. He had thick, bushy hair, just greying at the temples, that kept falling across his forehead and he had the habit of flicking it with the back of his hand. He had been ranger in this forest for a number of years; he had come to look upon it as his home. It was, in fact, the only home he knew. He lived alone in the small ranger's cottage, a stone's throw from the village.

It was just as well, he often told himself, that he had never married, for this was no life for a family. He kept himself busy with his work. At home he tended his little garden and with some part-time help from the village, managed to cook and keep his house clean. He loved the forest and took his job of protecting it and the wildlife that dwelt in it, very seriously. He was fond of reading and had been sitting in his cottage reading the evening before when Sumant Varma had called on him.

Viren Bakshi had listened intently while Mr. Varma narrated his story. He had agreed to accompany Mr. Varma into the forest the next day to try and foil the attempted kidnapping of the tiger cubs. He knew the area that Mr. Varma was talking about well and confirmed that his forest guards too had reported seeing the pug marks of the tigress and her cubs. The two men had talked at length over a cup of tea and chalked out their plans for the next day. They had taken an instant liking to one another, perhaps because they both shared a common love of wild animals and an aversion to poaching.

The morning had dawned bright and clear. All events seemed to point to the fact that, with luck in their favour,
they stood a very good chance of catching the crooks red-handed. On their return from the forest the evening before, Nandu and Ramu had reported that the tigress had made a kill not far from the water hole where her pug marks had last been seen.

This was good news indeed. It indicated that the tigress would most probably be in the vicinity of the kill and likely to return to it some time during the day. Had she been alone, she might have travelled miles away from it but with the three cubs in tow, her wanderings would be decidedly restricted. According to the shikaris, the cubs had been introduced to a non-vegetarian diet, obvious from the tiny bites that had been taken from the kill. Any time could be mealtime for these little ones and the mother would be wise to stay close to the food!

The two men, accompanied by Nandu and Ramu, had set out at about half past nine that morning in Sumant Varma’s pick-up. They could not leave the pick-up parked on the roadside, for the crooks would have seen it and that would have given the game away at once. So they took it a little further, and on the other side of the road they were able to take it a little way into the forest and partially conceal it among the bushes. To complete the camouflage, they cut some branches and stacked them against the pick-up, thus hiding it completely from view from the main road. The four of them then crossed the road and with the shikaris in the lead, began their long walk, single-file, through the jungle in the direction in which the tigress’s kill lay.

The going was slow for, as they proceeded, the jungle became thicker and the undergrowth at times difficult to penetrate. The shikaris often had to clear the way with their sticks, holding the thick, thorny bushes back or move the brambles away from the path for the men who followed. All four had wound puttees (long strips of cloth) around their legs up to their knees, for the prickly kavaunda (a thorny shrub) bushes abounded in the jungle. The bushes had tiny berries which the children would have loved to eat.

After about an hour of walking, much of it uphill, the shikaris paused abruptly. Beckoning to the sahib-log to come up alongside, Nandu pointed triumphantly to the half-eaten carcass of the tigress’ kill. After some moments spent in inspecting the pug marks all around it, the shikaris were able to make a fair estimate of the direction in which the felines had gone and from where they could be expected to return. It then remained to look for a suitable place to hide. Nandu came up with a suggestion.

“Sahib, here is an excellent tree for you to sit up on. Its branches are thick enough and you will be well hidden. You will get some excellent pictures from here.”

Sumant Varma nodded. He had allowed the shikaris to believe that his purpose was only to take photographs. He had brought along his camera for this reason. He felt he was not in a position to tell them of his suspicions. What if the two men never showed up? The ranger had agreed with him.

Mr. Varma looked up at the tree. It certainly seemed the obvious place from which to get his photographs. The only problem was that it was also the most likely tree for the crooks to choose as their own hiding-place. He glanced at the ranger, whose understanding smile indicated that he was thinking along the same lines. Viren Bakshi moved closer to him and spoke softly, “I think we will have to tell the shikaris part of the truth. We are going to need their help, you know. Let me talk to them.
This is, after all, my department."

"Nandu, Ramu, Varma sahib and I suspect that there may be some poachers in this area. We are going to seek your help in apprehending them. You can be sure the forest department will not forget your little baksheesh (gratuity)," he said to them. "And now, we do not have much time. Our guess is that the poachers might very well choose this very tree to wait up on, too. So we need to find a place a little further on, from where we could watch them unobserved."

Nandu shook his head sadly. "Why must people go against the laws? Now if they are caught, they will be in trouble." Still shaking his head, he started walking on, the other three following. There was a steep uphill climb a little to their right and this was where he led them. The men had to clamber on their hands and knees to get a foothold. Soon they found themselves on level ground again. Nandu stopped. Just behind the little hillock on which they now stood ran a deep nullah (ravine). He pointed across the nullah. "This is where the tigress will come from, sahib. If you wait here, you will get a good view of her. She is not likely to look up unless something catches her attention. You can remain concealed behind those bushes there."

Ramu had been quiet till then. Now he had a suggestion to make. "I think the sahib-log should split up. One of you could remain here to watch the tigress as she approaches and the other could move up to the edge of this pahadi (hillock) overlooking the kill. The person who sees the tigress coming could signal to the other to be ready for action."

Sumant Varma nodded. "Better still, why don't you and Nandu keep an eye out for the tigress? With your sharp eyes and instinct, you are likely to spot her first. The ranger sahib and I will wait further on. But what signal will you give us? We can't risk any noise or movement."

"Have you heard Nandu's imitation of a koel (Indian cuckoo)?" the ranger asked Mr. Varma. He turned to Nandu. "Let sahib hear your koel call."

Nandu grinned, suddenly looking very mischievous and boyish. He cupped his hands around his mouth and the sound that came forth was clear and melodious, an excellent imitation of a koel. Ramu, who had heard it many times before, laughed. "He will have all the koels in the forest at your feet in a moment."

Sumant Varma patted Nandu on the back. "That was perfect. Suppose you call out twice as soon as you spot the tigress. Don't make a move towards us till we call you." He turned to the ranger. "I think we should take up our positions now. If my guess is right, those two should be making an appearance pretty soon, after dropping the children off at the camp."

They settled themselves comfortably on the ground, well concealed by the thick, prickly bushes, yet able to get a clear view of the little clearing below them which would be the scene of action if their conjecture proved to be correct. They did not have to wait for long. About half an hour later, a rustling could be heard in the bushes, along with a low muffled sound of voices. Soon three men came into view. Between them they carried a large wooden cage, a rifle and a stout pole. The men who were watching them silently looked at one another and smiled. How right the children had been and how accurate their own estimates. If the tigress and her cubs turned up as expected, it was just a matter of time now.
It proved to be a long wait. The first hour or so went by in watching Bhole Ram deftly construct a machan on the very tree that Nandu and Ramu had first chosen. Once it was up, all three of them climbed up onto it. Then began the long, patient vigil. The minutes ticked by slowly. Sumant Varma and his companion sat silently for the most part, hardly daring to move. Once or twice they spoke softly in whispers.

It was around three in the afternoon when they heard the koel call—twice as arranged with Nandu. Both men were instantly on the alert. Everything seemed to be happening exactly as expected. The shikaris had been dead right in their reckoning of the tigress’ movements.

It was several minutes after Nandu’s call that they were able to spot the tigress, for animals move slowly and warily in the jungle. She approached the kill cautiously, pausing every few paces and looking around her. Once she deemed it safe to begin her meal, the little ones came scuttling up for their share.

It was then that the men on the machan took careful aim with their rifle. The needle containing the tranquilizer hit the tigress squarely in the neck. She looked up in surprise as she felt the sharp sting. A moment later she lay crumpled on the ground, stunned into temporary oblivion. Her offsprings were too hungry to notice. Not until they were lifted up bodily and placed in the cage did they realize that something was amiss!
The forest guards looked at their watches for the umpteenth time that afternoon. They had been at their posts since ten o'clock in the morning. It was now after three. There was not much to do, sitting on the Hardwar-Rishikesh road winding through the heart of the forest. The two guards had run out of conversation long ago and sat moodily astride their motorbikes, wondering if anything was going to come of this long, weary vigil. They had not dared to leave their post for a cup of tea although they were longing for one.

The ranger sahib's instructions were that they wait where they were till they heard from him on the walkie-talkie. He would then tell them what to do. But there was one thing they could not understand. What had happened to the jeep? The ranger had told them to wait with their bikes a kilometre or so before this spot until a jeep with a specific registration number passed them. They were to follow the jeep and when it stopped, discreetly, keeping out of sight, they were to park their bikes off the road among the bushes. This they had done. They were trained men and knew how to tail a vehicle without being seen.

Their instructions had been to keep an eye on the jeep and await further orders. This sounded simple enough and would have posed no problems had the jeep been there. It had stopped all right, three men had got off, walked into the jungle and soon disappeared from their sight. They seemed to be carrying something between them; they were too far away for the guards to make out what. The jeep had immediately shot forward and was gone in a matter of seconds. The guards wondered for a moment if they ought to follow, but decided against it. So here they were, with nothing to keep a watch on and no orders forthcoming!

The two men would probably have dozed off in the warmth of the afternoon sun if nothing had happened. But something did. Suddenly the calm of this quiet scene was disturbed as two shots rang through the air, echoing against the surrounding hills. The men were wide awake in an instant. They had guessed that the ranger was on the trail of poachers. Had the men succeeded in their loathsome, sly killing? Or had they turned their guns on the ranger in the process of being found out? It had been known to happen before. The men were tense now, and alert, waiting for a voice to come over the walkie-talkie. But the set remained silent.

It was quiet in the rest-house. Nina Varma had welcomed the thought of a day spent peacefully by herself. She had decided to go for a long walk with the puppy on a leash. Upon returning she made herself a sandwich and a cup of coffee for lunch. The silence was eerie almost, and her footsteps echoed in the large, empty rest-house. She fed the puppy some bread and milk which he lapped up happily. Then she pulled a chair out on the veranda and opened her book, basking in the warm sunshine. But the book stayed open at the same page, for her thoughts were far away. Soon it slipped and fell to the ground.

She was awakened by the agitated ringing of a bicycle bell. The man on the bicycle was panting and out of breath,
for he had ridden uphill at a tremendous speed. He stopped at the veranda steps and got off the bicycle. It was some seconds before he could speak.

"Elephants..." he panted, "sahib..."

"What is the matter? Pull yourself together and tell me what has happened," Mrs. Varma was up in a trice. She held on to the handlebar of the bicycle and shook it impatiently. The man had got his breath back by now and was able to speak calmly.

"Sahib’s pick-up was found in the jungle, smashed and overturned by elephants. A truck driver passing that way saw it. He arrived at Kallu’s workshop and reported what he had seen."

"Did he see anyone near the pick-up? Were there any bodies?" Mrs. Varma forced herself to say that last word.

The man shook his head. "There was no sign of anyone around the pick-up. The driver didn’t want to stop in case the elephants were still in the area."

"Has anyone seen the ranger sahib?"

"No, memsahib."

"Wait a minute." She spun around and disappeared into the rest-house. She was back in a moment. Picking up the puppy, she put him inside and locked the front door. She then slipped a ten-rupee note into the man’s hand and the next thing he knew, she had taken the bicycle from him and was off and away down the front drive. She turned around and called out to him, wobbling slightly as she did so, "You can pick up the bicycle from Kallu’s shop." The man gazed after her and then, pocketing the money, started walking down the drive.

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At the army camp, their goodbyes said, the children were being ushered towards the Colonel’s jeep, in which Natty would drive them home. It was now around four in the afternoon.

Suddenly Sandhya saw a faint movement in the bushes. "Natty, I think there is someone hiding there," she said, pointing.

Natty had just got into the driver’s seat. He got down and walked in the direction Sandhya had indicated. He came back holding a lad by the arm, a village boy about twelve or thirteen. Far from looking scared, the boy had a sheepish grin on his face.

"This is the boy I came across earlier," said Natty. "I am going to take you to the thanedar," he told the boy sternly. "I am glad the thanedar is your uncle. He ought to know what you have been up to. Perhaps he will give you a hiding, or at any rate, pull your ears! Where do you live?"

"In Lakhanpur," the boy answered. "The thana is in the same village."

"Good," said Natty. "Get in."

Soon they were speeding along the forest road in the direction of Lakhanpur, a half-hour’s drive away. Natty had no intention of taking the boy to the police station. He knew he ought to have reported him to his Commanding Officer, but he was a soft-hearted young man. He decided, instead, to take him home and hand him over to his parents, with a strict warning that he would be in trouble if he was found hanging around the camp or the firing range again.

The boys soon struck up a conversation with the lad. Vasant and Akshay found it difficult to follow his village dialect, but Gopal slipped into it easily enough.
“What were you lurking around the camp for?” he asked. Village folk have little time for politely-worded questions and the boy did not seem offended.

“It is none of your business,” he replied with a cheeky grin. In true village style, Gopal accepted that as a fitting reply. The boys chatted for a few minutes. Their new acquaintance had the fresh, ruddy cheeks and light brown hair quite common among these northern hill folk. He had an impish grin and an appealing frankness.

The thickly wooded jungle sped past them on either side. It was cool and breezy in the open jeep and the children’s hair was blown back from their faces. They were loving every minute of their drive and found themselves wishing Lakhapur was far away.

As they drove along, Vasant leaned forward. “Natty,” he said, “I meant to ask you earlier, don’t you sometimes fire shells that don’t explode? And if so, isn’t there a danger of their exploding later and injuring someone?”

Natty nodded. “You are absolutely right, Vasant. They are called ‘blind’ shells. We have to look for and destroy all blind shells. We cover them with gun-cotton slab and fix a detonator attached to a delayed fuse wire. We light the fuse wire, then run for our lives!”

“Does that give you enough time to escape?” Akshay asked.

“Oh, yes. But here again, if there are villagers lurking around, they could get injured or even killed.”

They reached the village all too soon. Natty began to slow down and asked the boy for directions to his house. The boy was about to answer, when Vasant motioned to him with his hand to be quiet, and with the other hand he pointed straight ahead.

“Wha...” began Natty. But the other three had seen it at once. On the road in front of them, some fifty metres away, was a familiar blue jeep. They were too far to recognise the occupants, but they could make a pretty good guess as to who they were.

“Natty, don’t stop now. Follow that jeep,” said Vasant.

“Follow the jeep? What on earth for?”

“Oh, please, just listen to us. This is important,” Akshay begged. With Sandhya adding her pleas, Natty had no choice but to drive on.

“Duck down, all of you,” ordered Akshay. “They may see us in their rear-view mirror. They don’t know Natty, so it won’t matter if they see him.” The four of them, including Gopal, crouched down on the floor of the jeep. Their new friend wondered what was going on. There was no need for him to hide, so no one said anything to him.

“We have got to see what they have in the jeep with them,” Vasant said. “Natty, we have got to get them to stop. Oh, what can we do?” He thought hard. Natty maintained a certain distance from the jeep. There was no point in overtaking it; indeed if they did, the children would be seen and that would never do. Vasant had a brainwave.

“Natty, you carry a service pistol, don’t you? Shoot at their back wheel and puncture their tyre. Then they will have to stop. They are crooks. Please believe us.”

Natty shook his head firmly. “I have no authority to use my pistol in civilian matters. I will get into trouble if I do. No, son, I am sorry.”

The children pleaded in vain. Natty was adamant. “I am an army officer and cannot misuse my weapon.”

It seemed such a pity. Were the crooks going to get away after all? It looked as though they were.
Kallu looked up in surprise as the memsahib from the rest-house alighted from the bicycle outside his little shop. He put down the tools he was holding and wiped his hands on his grease-stained overalls. Next door to him, Somu stepped down from the wooden platform of his little tea stall and came and stood next to Mrs. Varma. Both men had heard about the fate of the pick-up and they were concerned. The Varmas had always been polite to them and the children were their friends. They were willing to help if they could.

“Kallu, Somu, I need a vehicle. I must get to the site where the pick-up was trampled upon. I don’t think sahib or the ranger sahib who was with him are hurt, but I must make sure. In any case they would need a transport. You have got some trucks standing here at your workshop. I am sure one of the drivers will agree to give you his truck.”

Kallu nodded. “I have just finished with one. It is ready for the road now. Give me a minute.” He walked across to where a group of truck drivers sat in the sun with their cups of tea. Nina Varma saw him talking to them earnestly, gesticulating and pointing towards her.

A moment later, a big burly Sikh got up and came across to her. “We will go at once, behenji (sister),” he said. “I will be glad to take you in my truck. Kallu and Somu will come with us.”

She heaved a sigh of relief, and thanking the driver, climbed into the front seat. Kallu and Somu got into the back. They called out to the little group that remained behind, asking them to keep an eye on their respective shops, and with that, the truck sped on its way.

Nina Varma said a little prayer in her heart for the safety of the men in the forest. The big man behind the wheel had his eyes fixed on the road ahead. For all his apparent toughness and his rough ways, Surinder Singh had a soft heart. In his own language and in his own way, he too was praying that all be well.

The sight that met their eyes when the truck drew to a halt made them all shudder. The pick-up, not a small vehicle by any standards, had been turned over its side. The windowpanes were completely smashed. There was a large dent in the fender. Had anyone been in, or around it at the time, no doubt they would have been reduced to a pulp.

The four of them looked around the forest for some distance. There was no one to be seen. Mrs. Varma fought back tears of utter relief. Clearly her husband, the ranger and the shikaris had not been caught in the elephants’ path of fury. Where were they now, she wondered. If they had succeeded in catching the crooks, they would need a vehicle to transport them to the nearest police station. If not, then she did not know what their plan of action would be. She would have to wait and see.

She did not have to wait too long. Very soon, footsteps could be heard behind them. She spun around.

“Nina, what on earth are you doing here? Whose truck is this? Why...”

Wordlessly, she pointed.

“Oh, my goodness!” Sumant Varma gazed in horror at his smashed pick-up. “I can hardly believe this.”

The ranger was by his side now. He gasped when he saw what had happened. Mrs. Varma noticed that he was limping badly and had to be supported by the shikaris.
“Mr. Bakshi, you are hurt! What happened?”

Viren Bakshi pushed his hair back in the habit that he had and winced with pain. He tried to smile. “It is nothing much. Just a thorn in my foot.”

“A very large and poisonous thorn. Fortunately, Nandu and Ramu here knew the antidote for it. The leaves that take away the poison always grow near the thorn bushes. Nature’s way of providing a remedy, I suppose. All the same, he must get medical treatment; I don’t know how effective those leaves are. I must get him to a doctor. But my pick-up...what do we do now?”

Nina Varma looked helplessly at the truck driver. He jerked his thumb towards his truck, and without a word climbed into the driver’s seat. The rest of them helped the ranger into the front. Mrs. Varma sat beside him. The other men piled into the back.

“There is a first aid post in Lakhapuri,” said Surinder Singh. “We will take the ranger sahib there.”

In the flurry of all these events, Mrs. Varma had almost forgotten what the others had come here for in the first place. She turned to the ranger. “What happened in the forest? Did those men turn up to catch the cubs after all?”

“They turned up all right,” the ranger’s face showed signs of pain. “And we would have caught them if this hadn’t happened to me. Everything was going according to our expectations. We were watching them from a small hillock. Just as they alighted from the machan, after doping the tigress, we prepared to climb down and catch them red-handed. That was when I got the thorn in my foot. Your husband and the shikaris wouldn’t leave me, and indeed, I don’t know if I would be alive now if they had. We had to let them go.

“As luck would have it, my walkie-talkie set slipped and fell and was completely damaged. If I could have spoken to my forest guards who were stationed on the main road, I would have instructed them at least to follow the jeep and notify the District Forest Officer. He may have been able to do something.” He shrugged and shook his head. “Anyway, Mr. Varma immediately took some shots of the men in the act of lifting the cubs into the cage. We can always use those as evidence against them. I am not going to give up.”

“You have done your best,” Nina Varma tried to comfort him. “Perhaps, as you say, with the help of the evidence on film, they may still be caught.”

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your husband’s role in this. There are not many people who would be willing to take such a lot of trouble and so many risks in order to help preserve the wildlife in our jungles. And I believe your three clever children had much to do with detecting the men’s motives.”

Mrs. Varma smiled proudly. “Yes, they are smart youngsters. They fell in love with the cubs when they saw them fretting with their mother one day. They couldn’t bear the idea of their being sold into captivity.”

They talked for a few more minutes. Soon signs of habitation began to appear. The truck had to slow down to allow the inevitable goat or buffalo to cross the road. Lakhapuri consisted of a little cluster of huts, the police station, a few shops and a dispensary.

Nandu and Ramu jumped out of the truck and went in to look for the doctor or his assistant to get help for the ranger. The door of the dispensary was wide open but there was no one in sight. The shikaris did not seem at all surprised. They evidently knew their way around here, for in a few minutes they had managed to summon
the man in charge. He was a medical assistant, a man who fortunately seemed quite familiar with the procedures involved in treating a victim of the dreaded thorn. He gave the ranger an injection, applied a salve on his foot and gave him some pills to take to keep out infection.

Viren Bakshi sank back into the front seat of the truck once again. The pain was less now and he could think clearly once more. He thanked everyone for their help and leaning back, shut his eyes to think.

It was such a pity they had come so close to catching the crooks and saving the cubs. He shuddered to think of the tigress’ reaction when the tranquillizer wore off and she found her cubs gone. She would probably attack anyone or anything in her fury. She might even turn into a man-eater. Oh, he could not allow that. Was there nothing he could do to return her cubs to her? The ranger was tired and dejected, and still in some pain, but he did not want to accept defeat.

“Mr. Varma,” he said finally, “let us drive down to the police station. It is around the corner. We can report what happened and ask them to try and trace the jeep. The trouble is, I don’t even know which direction they would have taken. The obvious route would be via Hardwar, but they might go in the opposite direction to throw us off their tracks. If only my guards had been there where I had positioned them. They would at least have been able to tell us which way they went. I wonder what can have become of them.”

Surinder Singh obligingly drove them down to the police station. Once again, the ranger was helped down and he limped into the police station to make his report. He planned to ask them to radio the police outpost, both on the Hardwar as well as Rishikesh roads, and instruct them to look out for the jeep. Fortunately he had the registration number. He did not hold out much hope, for he did not think the village police would be very alert. However, at this point it seemed the only thing he could do.
The motorbike rider maintained a steady distance behind the jeep. There was another jeep behind him, and it almost seemed to him that the second jeep was tailing the first one. He smiled to himself. 'Now I am really letting my imagination run away,' he thought. There was an army officer at the wheel in the second jeep. He thought he had spotted some children too, but they were nowhere to be seen now. Funny, the jeep had not stopped anywhere, so they could not have got down.

He slowed down and allowed them to overtake him. The children were clearly visible now, crouched on the floor of the jeep at the back. He looked hard at them, trying to place them. It came to him suddenly. Of course, these were the children from the rest-house. But why were they crouched like that, from whom were they hiding?

His mind raced. They must be trying to hide from the occupants of the jeep in front. Those two men were living in the rest-house too, so they would recognise the children at once. His earlier hunch had been right then, though he had dismissed it at the time. They were tailing the jeep in front—there could be no doubt about that now. They could have overtaken it many times but they stayed behind it.

Well, if they were following the jeep, he thought wryly, they had an advantage over him. At least they knew why they were doing it, while he did not have the faintest idea! All he knew was that the jeep in front was the one the ranger had asked him to keep an eye on. When there had been no communication from the ranger over the walkie-talkie, his colleague and he decided that one of them would follow the jeep, while the other would remain where he was in case some instructions did come across. So here he was.

* * * *

Mr. Mohan Chand and his brother-in-law looked at one another and slow satisfied smiles spread across their faces. They had been tense up to now, concentrating only on making a quick getaway. What a stroke of luck the ranger had had that accident with the poisonous thorn. Whew, that had been a close one. And that darned Varma from the rest-house—what had he been doing in the forest? He had told them quite clearly the day before that he would be spending the whole day in Hardwar. Oh, well, they had got away and that was the main thing.

There had been no sign of the pick-up following them. They had even made a halt at Lakhnpur. There was a small primary school in the village, deserted now because it was evening. They had driven around to the back of the building and parked there, completely out of view from the road. The cubs had been given a tranquilizing shot each too, so they would be quiet for some hours yet. Their cage was covered with an old sheet and would, to all appearances, look like a large covered trunk. If the pick-up had followed them, they reasoned, it would have overshot the village by now.

They had eaten their little packet of sandwiches while they waited. They had not dared to eat on the machan in case their movements attracted attention. It was just as well they had something to eat with them for they were starving by now. It would never have done to stop
in the village and try and buy some food, because they would have been noticed and if the villagers were questioned, they might remember the sahib-log in a jeep. But no one had come after them and enough time had elapsed by now. They reckoned they were safe. If anyone had followed them at all, they would be miles ahead of them by now.

The two men had a look of smug satisfaction on their faces as they thought of the money that awaited them. They had allowed Bhole Ram to think they were selling the cubs to a circus. Had he known that they were being taken to a wealthy Arab sheikh who wanted them as pets, he would have demanded a larger share of the spoils. The Arab was generous, as well he could afford to be, and the amount of money he had promised them was a fortune indeed. It was all within easy reach now. And to think those meddlesome children had almost spoilt it all for them.

The light was beginning to fail now. Good. They would soon be travelling towards their destination under the cover of darkness.

The forest guard swerved into the middle of the road and flagged the army jeep to a stop. He pulled up beside Natty and spoke urgently, taking no notice of the surprise on the latter’s face.

“Captain sahib, I am a forest guard. I am acting under the instructions of the forest ranger to watch that jeep ahead. I can see that you are tailing it, too. Please tell me whatever you know so that we can work together.”

Vasant’s eyes had a gleam of hope in them when he saw him. He recognised this man. He had seen him with the forest ranger. But what caught Vasant’s eye was the rifle slung across his back.

“These men are poachers, and they have just kidnapped three tiger cubs,” he spoke fast for there was little time to lose. “My father was with the ranger and both of them were out to catch them. Something must have gone wrong. We have to stop them. You have a gun. You must fire at their tyres and stop them. Meanwhile we could nip back to the police station at Lakanpur for help. It isn’t too far behind.”

The forest guard nodded, swung his motorbike around and took to the road again. He had seen Mr. Varma when the latter had visited the ranger’s house the evening before. What the boy said must be true since Mr. Varma and the ranger seemed to be working together. He could do what the boy had suggested, acting on the ranger’s authority. He accelerated and in a few minutes had caught up with the jeep ahead of him.

This is not going to be easy, he said to himself. It was not. In fact it was extremely difficult. He swung the rifle against his shoulder and holding it steady with one hand, he took careful aim. No one was more surprised than he when the jeep immediately swerved to one side, skidding to a stop. Silently congratulating himself on his excellent marksmanship, he emptied the second barrel of his gun into the other rear tyre.

Three very angry men got out to survey the damage. Their eyes went from the two flat tyres to the retreating figure on a motorbike, a rifle slung across his shoulder. It would not have taken exceptional powers of deduction to reconstruct the sequence of events. While Mr. Dharam Raj twirled his moustache furiously, it was Mr. Mohan
Chand who swung into action. Aiming his rifle at the forest guard, he pulled the trigger.

The forest guard reeled with pain as the bullet got him in the left shoulder. He fell to the ground, his motorbike on top of him. In a few seconds, the three men were by his side. Half carrying the wounded man, they moved towards their jeep. It was a matter of moments before he was gagged and bound and pushed into the jeep. The motorbike was wheeled up, lifted and thrown into the back.

It was almost dark now and the man and his bike would not be noticed inside the jeep, but lying on the road they could attract the attention of a chance passer-by. What a lucky thing they happened to have two spare tyres with them. With three of them working at it, it should not be long before they were on the road again.
Viren Bakshi sighed impatiently. He had repeated his story twice to the constable at the thana. Why was the man so slow on the uptake? Trying to curb his impatience, he said, “You know the forests in this region are under my jurisdiction. I have explained my problem to you. Why don’t you try to co-operate?”

The constable scratched his head and looked more confused than ever. He was the only person manning the small police station. There was no police officer stationed here. Hardwar and Rishikesh were the nearest places to have senior police officers. Kishen Lal had never had anything more serious than a stolen cow to handle before.

Meanwhile, as the minutes sped away, Sumant Varma and the ranger looked at one another in exasperation. Som Lal and Kallu sensed the urgency of their mission.

“Why don’t you just take Surinder Singh’s truck and go after them? He is a good chap. A friend of ours. He won’t mind. You can give him something towards the petrol,” suggested Som Lal.

“We don’t know which way they went. Besides, they have had a long start over us. We would never catch up with them. No, I will have to report the matter to the District Forest Officer. He can take it up with the police at a higher level.”

The little group was despondent. They rose to leave since they were evidently going to get nowhere with the constable. Suddenly, there was a screeching of tyres outside as an army jeep ground to a halt. Everyone looked at it in surprise. In a flash, five children and an army officer came tumbling out of it and raced up the steps. Mr. and Mrs. Varma looked at the children in astonishment. What were they doing here? They had a duplicate key to the front door and should have been safe at home by now. The young man, of course, was the officer who was escorting them, but who was this lad? He looked like a boy from the village. It was he who rushed straight into the thana, took the constable by the arm and looked up at him earnestly.

“Chacha (paternal uncle, father’s younger brother), you have got to come to the rescue. Get out your handcuffs and come with us, quick. There is not a moment to lose.” As quickly as possible, he told his uncle everything.

Kishen Lal’s slow, plodding mind began to make sense of the whole affair. What his nephew now told him seemed to tie up with what the ranger had been talking about. The lad kept urging him to hurry.

The ranger said, “I have the authority to make arrests. This is still my region. I will take the responsibility.”

Kishen Lal nodded, and quickly opening a small cupboard, took out two sets of handcuffs. With the ranger making the arrests on his own authority, he had no objection to slipping on a couple of handcuffs.

No doubt his nephew’s involvement in the affair had also helped him to make up his mind. This was what the children had banked on. They remembered that the boy had said the thanedar was his uncle. When they had turned around and sped back towards Lakhapur, Gopal had told him the whole story, speaking to him in his own dialect. The children knew that the boy would get across to his uncle more effectively than they could and they had been right.
Nina Varma and the children stayed back at the police station. The children were most disappointed.

"This isn’t fair," said Akshay. "We don’t want to miss all the excitement."

"Yes," said Sandhya, "after all, we have had so much to do with helping to catch the crooks. Why should we be left out of the most exciting part of it all?"

Her mother ruffled her hair. "These man are ruffians, child, and they have guns. How can we expose you children to danger?"

Vasant saw her point and the younger two were soon pacified.

Meanwhile, Surinder Singh had his foot pressed hard on the accelerator and the truck rumbled on at a steady speed. There was virtually no traffic on the road and if luck was on their side, they ought to reach the stranded jeep in a few minutes. When Natty had swung his jeep around to return to Lakanpur, the children had seen the forest guard shoot at and deflate two tyres. What they did not know was that the guard had been wounded shortly after that. In fact they had wondered more than once what could have happened to him. Had he made his escape?

"This is approximately where their tyres were shot at," said Natty frowning. "It could be a little further on, but not much. If we don’t come across them after another kilometre or so, I am afraid it means they changed their tyres and have driven off."

"They couldn’t have had more than a few kilometres start over us anyway," Sumant Varma said confidently. "At the rate our friend is driving, we should catch up with them very soon."

The kilometres rolled by but there was no sign of the jeep. Could the men really have changed two tyres that quickly? It had not been much more than twenty minutes since Natty had spun his jeep around and made for the police station. The truck’s powerful headlights shone a good way down the road, but they could make out nothing. Nothing at all.

The men in the truck were confused and dismayed. Sumant Varma spoke to the ranger, "Is there a kutch track or something that we have overlooked?"

"Yes, now that you mention it," the ranger’s voice sounded hopeful, "I believe we did pass a little track leading off to the left. It is not far back. We must turn back at once."

Surinder Singh obligingly halted his truck and turned it around. They sped back the way they had come and in a few moments were able to see the narrow dirt track, now to their right. The headlights picked out the unmistakable marks of tyres in the mud.

"They must have come this way. What a stroke of luck you happened to think of it, sir," said Natty, his youthful face glowing with excitement. He would have a great deal of explaining to do to his Commanding Officer when he got back, but Natty was loving every minute of this, and his C.O. was an understanding man.

The track led into the forest and was just wide enough to take the truck. It had, in fact, been made for trucks to wind their way into the forest on their bhag har-collecting missions. Bhabhar grass used by the paper mills grew in abundance further on. Surinder Singh remembered having been this way before.

They drove down as fast as they could go on the rough, narrow track. They had lost precious moments by overshooting it. Not very much later, they were rewarded
by the sight of a cloud of dust evidently raised by a
vehicle in front. They strained their eyes and in a few
minutes, the blurred outline of a jeep could be seen
through it.

“We have got them!” the ranger brought his fist down
on the palm of his hand excitedly.

“Yes,” said Mr. Varma wryly, “but we will have to
stay behind them. There is no way we can overtake
them.”

“We will have to do something fast,” Natty said.
“Once they realise they are being followed, they will do
something desperate. They may even do what the guard
did, and shoot at our tyres.”

Surinder Singh spoke unexpectedly. “They won’t
know they are being followed. Trucks do come down
this way to collect their load of grass. They are not
expecting a truck to follow them, so they will think this
truck is on its way to pick up a load of bhabhar.”

“So late in the evening?” Sumant Varma asked
doubtfully.

Surinder Singh nodded. “Sometimes, yes.”

“You said you have been this way before,” the ranger
said slowly. “Where does this path lead to?”

“It ends in a little clearing two or three kilometres
further on. The grass-cutters load their bundles of
bhabhar onto the trucks, which turn around and come
back the same way.”

Sumant Varma and the ranger shook hands like two
excited schoolboys. “They can’t escape now. We will get
them in the clearing!” And they did.

18

It was well past eleven o’clock on that cold, late
December night. A pile of logs lay near the fireplace and
the fire blazed with a cheerful warmth. Four very excited
youngsters sat on a rug in front of it, the puppy sleeping
peacefully near them. The grown-ups had pulled up their
chairs as close to the fire as they could. The remains
of a hearty meal lay stacked on the kitchen table.
Everyone now held a steaming mug of coffee and the
aroma filled the room.

“That was a delicious meal, Mr. Bakshi. How kind of
you to have sent your men into town to get it,” Sumant
Varma said.

The ranger smiled. “I was as hungry as you were.” In
the excitement of the day’s events, they had forgotten
that neither they nor the two shikaris had had a bite to
eat the whole day. Nina Varma had been most apologetic.

“I rushed out as soon as I heard about your pick-up,”
she said. “I had been taking it easy till then. I had planned
to cook in the evening, once Gopal returned to give me
a hand.”

“Well, my dear, if you had stayed home to cook, the
crooks would have made a clean escape. Your appearing
on the spot with Surinder Singh’s truck was nothing
short of a miracle.”

The ranger nodded. “It was also very brave of you,
Mrs. Varma, besides being resourceful.”

Natty leaned forward in his chair, his face looking
more boyish than ever. He had reported back at his camp
and had been given permission to stay out late. “I say,”
he said, “weren’t those cubs cute? It is the first time I
have seen live tiger cubs. They looked just like overgrown kittens. What a pity they were still asleep. I would have loved to see them awake, frolicking around."

“It is just as well those two used a good strong, tranquillizer. I shudder to think what would have happened if the tigress had awakened before we returned her cubs to her. She would have chewed us alive before we knew what had hit us!” Sumant Varma laughed.

“It must have taken tremendous nerve to venture into the forest so late. It was pitch dark by then. Weren’t you afraid?” Natty asked.

“One always has to be cautious while walking through the forest, even in the daytime. Of course, it is a little more dangerous at night, although I have done it many times before. We carry powerful torches and as you know, all animals stay away from a bright light. In addition, we make as much noise as we can. I daresay Nandu and Ramu between them are enough to frighten anyone or anything away.”

“Just imagine, the tigress and her cubs will wake up after a while and go their way, with no idea of the drama they have been involved in,” Vasant said.

Sandhya laughed. “Yes. They will just carry on with the meal that they were interrupted at as if nothing had happened. Papa, if the cubs wake up before their mother, they won’t wander away and get lost, will they?”

“No fear of that. They haven’t learnt to hunt for themselves yet, so they will stay close to the provider of their food. I placed them close and snug against her. No, they won’t wander away.”

“There is one thing I don’t understand,” Akshay turned to the ranger, puzzled. “Why wasn’t the other forest guard at the post where you had placed him? If he had been there, he would have told you which way the crooks went and that his companion had gone after them.”

“I saw him at the range office a little while ago, when I went to make arrangements to have Bishen Singh taken to hospital in Hardwar. By the way, you will be glad to know it was just a flesh wound. He lost a lot of blood, but two other forest guards have volunteered to give blood for him. They are with him now.

“Oh, yes, as I was telling you, this man was there waiting, till the elephants struck at your pick-up. He was only about a kilometre away and he could hear them clearly. Sounds travel far in the forest and it certainly wasn’t difficult for him to gauge what was happening. He fled. I can’t say I blame him. I would have done the same. He came back after some time and says he waited for about two hours. When nothing happened, and it had got quite dark, he returned to the range office.”

“Didn’t the other man—Bishen Singh did you say his name was—say something about hearing two shots fired while they waited, a little while before the jeep came back and picked up those three as they emerged from the forest with the cage carrying the cubs? What were those shots about?” Natty asked.

“We heard those shots, too,” Mr. Varma answered. “After they had slung the cage onto a pole and started walking away with it hoisted on their shoulders, we heard them fire those two shots, probably in the air. We had given up the idea of following them because of the ranger’s foot. Our guess is that they were signalling to the jeep to come and pick them up.”

“Oh, yes, the guards said that the jeep left them there and then drove away. It must have been waiting for them
somewhere and those shots were the signal for it to come back for them,” Akshay said.

“I wonder who drove it,” Sandhya said. “All three of them were there on the machan.”

“I suppose they must have hired someone from the village for that—one of Bhola Ram’s cronies, no doubt. I can see why they didn’t want it parked on the main road all along. It would have given away their whereabouts at once,” the ranger said.

“They must be cooling their heels in the police lock-up at this moment,” Vasant said, grinning. “I can’t say I feel the least bit sorry for them.”

“Neither do I,” said his father. “Those cubs belong in the forest and that, I am glad to say, is where they will now stay. There is no telling what damage the men would have done to our forest wealth in the future if they had gone free this time.”

“Well, this is a chapter in their lives which is closed forever,” the ranger remarked. “Mr. Varma, the forest department is extremely indebted to you and your family and to Captain Natarajan, and also to those brave and loyal men, Nandu and Ramu, Som Lal, Kallu and Surinder Singh. I would like to give all of you a special reward.”

Mr. Varma smiled. He got up to put another log on the fire and then leaned back in his chair to light his pipe. “Give the others a reward by all means. They surely deserve it. But for myself, I would be more than grateful if you would just help me get my pick-up back on the road again. It has been my companion on many a trip and I am dashed if I will let a couple of elephants write it off.”

The Twins’ Holiday Adventure

By Priti Banerjee
Illustrated by Debendra Nath Lahar

An innocuous exchange of bags,
a haunted house,
a quiet fishing weekend.

What could all these have in common, wonder twins Dinesh and Sujata, with the case of missing diamonds their Uncle Ranjit, an Inspector of Police, is investigating. The quiet, sprawling tea estates of the Nilgiris are witness to a quick series of action as the twins and their uncle shatter the crooks’ well-laid plans and retrieve the gems, with a little help from Champ, their Alsatian.