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CHAPTER THREE

TIGERS

Amid the bristling teaks of a Madhya Pradesh forest, CLEMENTINE HAMBRO watches and waits for a sighting of her very own Shere Kahn. She is rewarded with a wildlife experience like no other

“Tiger, Madam,” the park warden whispers almost inaudibly. He doesn’t need to tell me. There are goose bumps on my arms and the hair is pricking on the back of my neck. The tigress blinks at us in the grey Indian dawn and then slowly, in a movement reminiscent of water, gets to her feet and begins to walk deeper into the forest. Her coat, a magnificence of sunlight and shadow, is rich and velvety and you want to touch her, rub your cheek against her, inhale her. Then suddenly she has gone, literally vanished as the stripes encode her back into the forest. A few minutes later I hear a tight, nasal roar that vibrates in the trees and know that she is back with the four cubs that have been waiting for her since nightfall.

I saw her twice more that day. Both times she was padding down a sandy road, unbothered by us following behind. Her body is a lethal powerhouse; the heavy thick-set shoulders are strong enough to bring down a one-ton bison and the highly sprung hindquarters make her quick enough to catch monkeys and deer at a sprint. Announcing her imminent arrival are urgent alarm-calls that reverberate through the trees, as animals as varied as langur monkeys and spotted deer catch sight of her. The very trees become tense; noises seem more pronounced, as if in her presence the forest is more alert, more alive. And yet. And yet, it is these qualities of vitality, vigour and potency that make the tiger’s life so tenuous and difficult.

There are communities in China that have ground so much tiger bone into their medicines that their own supply of animals, the South China tiger, has been rendered virtually extinct. They now pay outrageous sums for the bones of the Royal Bengal tiger of India. Tribesmen in Chinese-controlled Tibet still wear tiger skin with pride. The Dalai Lama said publicly that this

was not something he condoned in any way, but to little effect. The Bali, the Caspian and the Javan tiger have completely disappeared. Trade in illegal animal parts is now so lucrative that it is second only to the drugs trade. Park wardens cannot keep up with the poacher’s mafia-funded, state-of-the-art weapons, jeeps and tracking equipment, and regularly find their lives under threat. In 2004, for instance, poachers enjoyed an uninterrupted killing spree that left Sariska, a park near Ranthambore in Rajasthan, completely devoid of tigers.

The second threat to the survival of the tiger is the encroachment on—and degradation of—its forest habitat. An exploding Indian population with spiralling consumer demands is winning the struggle for space, something tigers need a lot of. Alternative solutions to the subsistence needs of the communities who live around the parks have to be found—solutions that promote local guardianship, backed by proper economic incentives. At the moment, the tiger is worth more to them dead than alive.

Survival is not a growing problem for tigers—it is an urgent and dire problem and so entrenched in politics, money and red tape that it is most likely going to be a fatal problem.

And so it is indeed a privilege to see a tiger in the wild. Madhya Pradesh, the central state of India, has the most tiger parks in the whole country. In 1992, Pench National Park in the southern part of the state joined the Project Tiger group of reserves started by Indira Gandhi in 1973 (all tiger parks are government owned and run). It was this park and its bristling teak trees that inspired Rudyard Kipling to write *The Jungle Book* and it was here that I saw my own Shere Khan.

The advantage of the less well-known parks is that there are far fewer visitors, and while your chances of multiple sightings are somewhat smaller (the animals are less habituated to human observers), when you do encounter a tiger it is an entirely more personal experience. The best camp near to the park is Bagh Van, which has recently undergone a massive revamp, thanks to the new joint partnership of Taj Hotels and CC Africa, who have pooled resources with the aim of upgrading both the lodges and the game drives. CC Africa is a leader in eco-travel and sustainable tourism in Africa, so it’s to be hoped that this will eventually have an important effect on how the state-run tiger parks are managed. The camp is now a proper, grown-up affair of 12 airy bungalows, with woven furniture, handmade Parsi tiles and huge ceiling fans. The kitchen is half open on to the dining room, there are shady decks for lounging between drives in the afternoon, and a swimming pool if it gets too hot.

The routine of tiger viewing is very agreeable. You get up early for a delicious breakfast—it is frosty cold at dawn so you will need to wear layers. You then set off in the open-top jeep under a travel blanket, laden with binoculars and gloves for the five-minute drive to the reserve for a few hours of game viewing, then back for lunch and siesta, and out again in the afternoon.

The morning is the most beautiful time of all. Sunlight licks the top of the trees, and the forest begins to rustle and stir. You are enveloped in layers of sound: the frantic rutting calls of sambur deer, the deep, primeval grunts of blue boar, the cries of the mahouts on their elephants as they search out tiger trails, screams from the plum-headed parrots that wheel above your head as you, and the forest, watch and wait... While you wait there is plenty more to see: Pench has outstanding numbers of leopard, wild dog, boars, bison, and birds. At some point, a tiger will reveal herself. She probably won’t be doing much except watching you with those brindled ochre eyes. But it will be one of the most viscerally exciting, spine-tinglingly thrilling, exquisitely powerful wildlife experiences you have known.

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