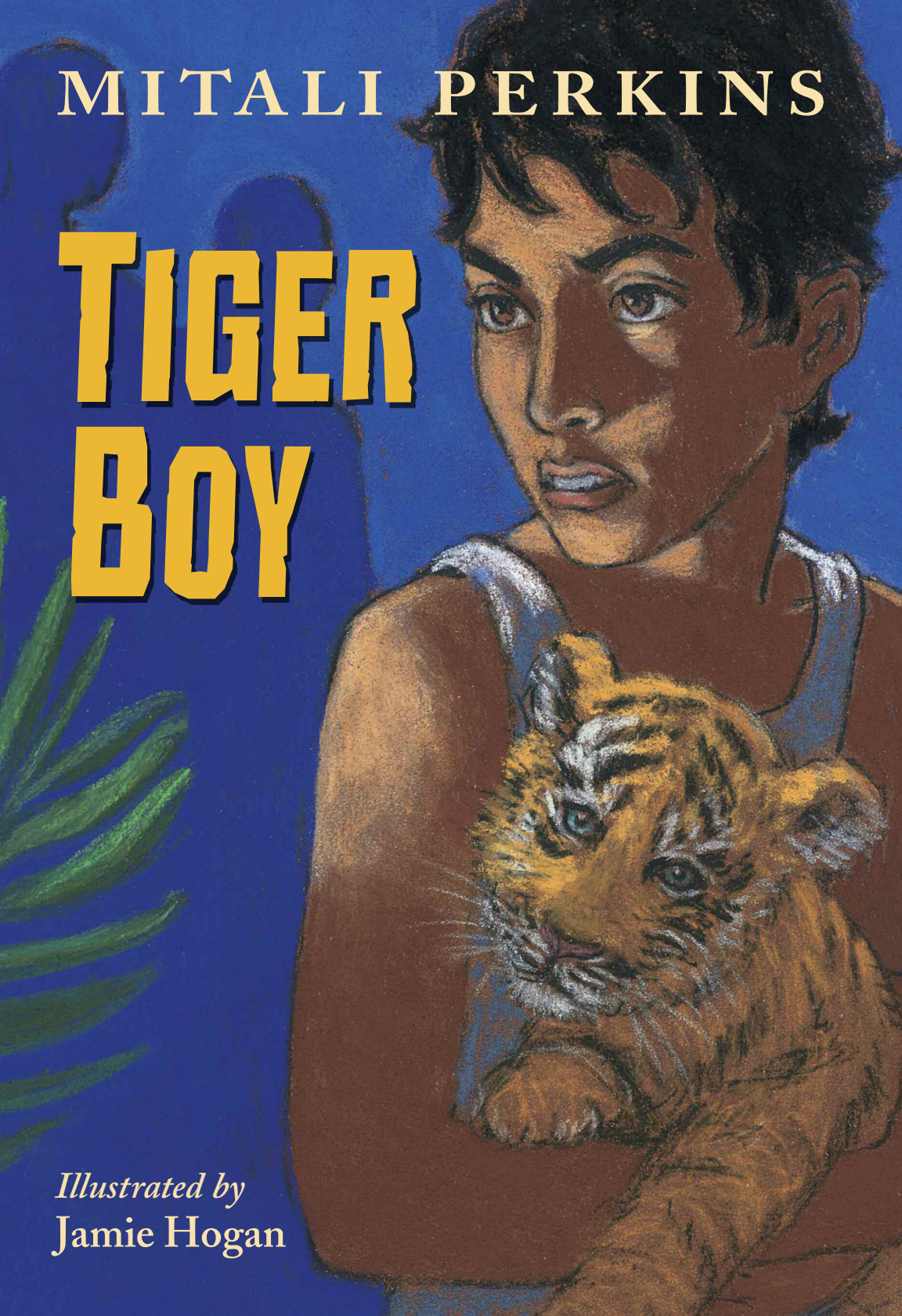


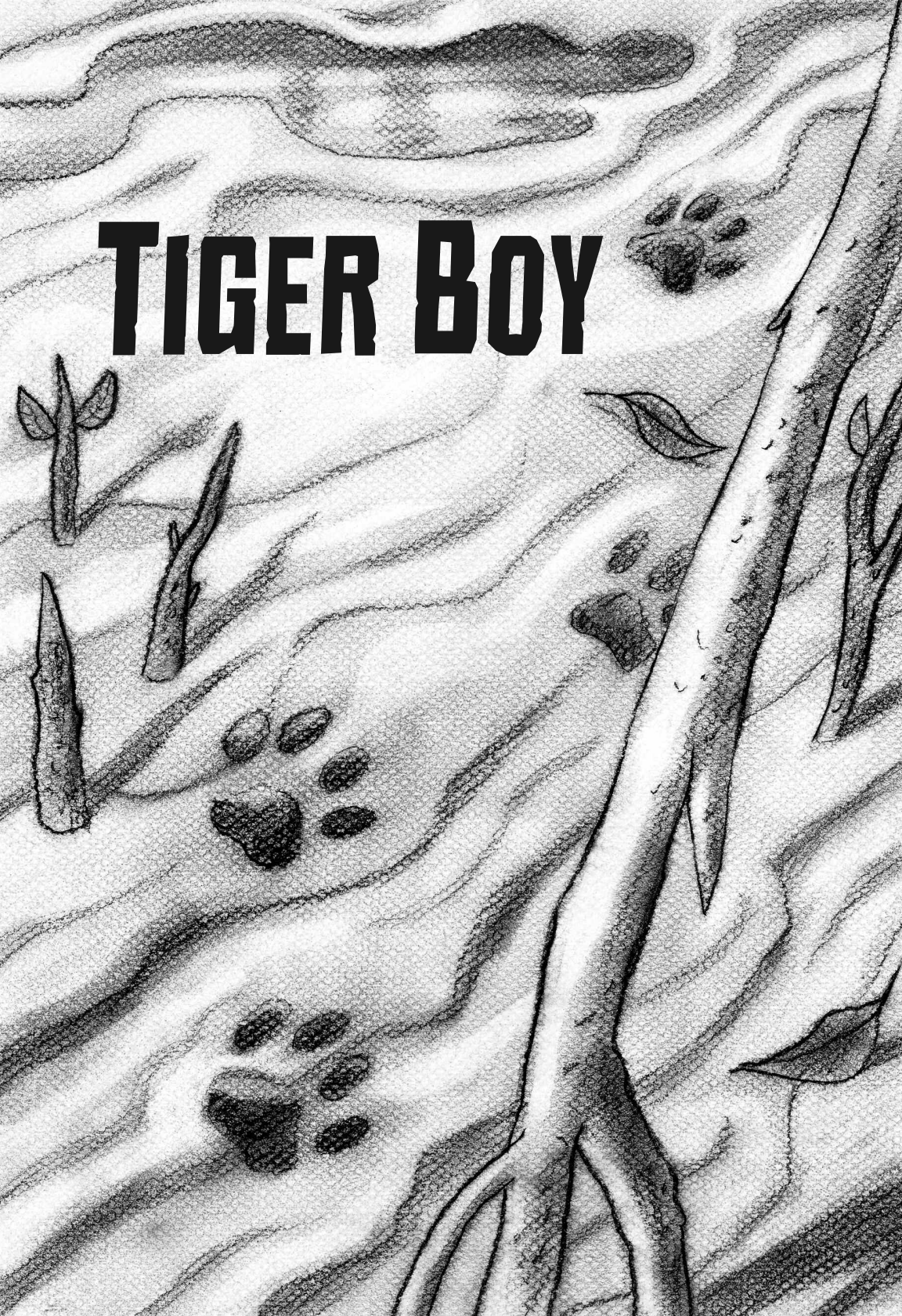
MITALI PERKINS

TIGER BOY

Illustrated by
Jamie Hogan



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 Charlesbridge

For Nikhil and Ranju
—M. P.

To Varun
—J. H.

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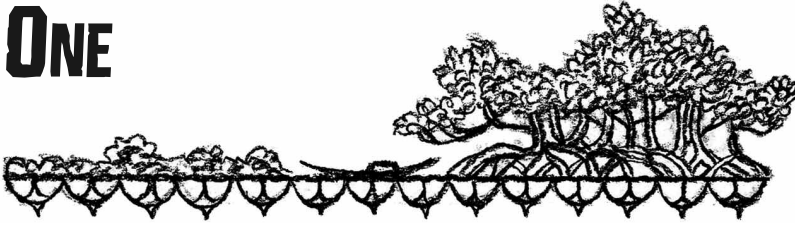
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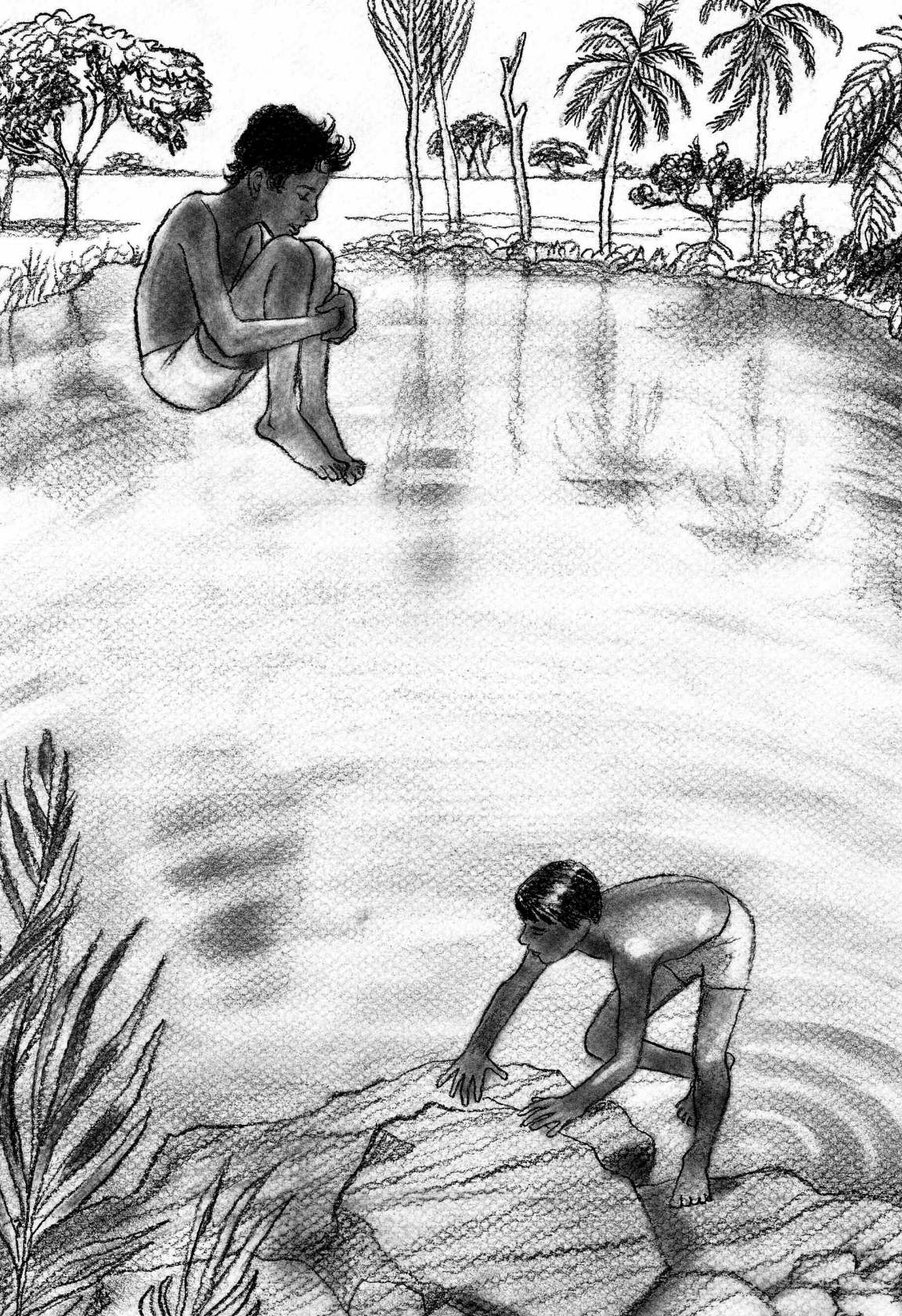


SPLASH! SPLASH! The two boys stripped off their school uniforms and jumped into the pond. Their heads bobbed as they wrestled and dunked each other.

“Race you!” called Ajay.

Neel swam behind his lanky friend, feeling as sleek and fast as a river dolphin, even though he was sure to lose. It had been much warmer than usual for January, and it was three o’clock, the hottest part of the day. *I should be home studying*, he thought. Teacher was concerned about how behind Neel was in his preparation. The big exam was in April, and Neel’s math skills weren’t getting better.

The pond was a short detour from the path around



the island, about halfway between school and home. How good it felt to drop his heavy satchel, unbutton the starched white shirt, tear off those stiff school shorts, and jump into the refreshing water!

This pond was freshwater, but most of the creeks and rivers in the Sunderbans were salty and muddy. Neel didn't mind—he loved the tang of salt on his tongue and the squish of mud between his toes. Home for him was the hiss of his father's boat as it slipped through the deltas, *golpata* branches swaying in the monsoon rains, and the evening smell of jasmine flowers near his house mingling with green chilies and fresh *ilish* fish simmering in mustard-seed oil. Neel had climbed all the tall palm trees, waded in the creeks, and foraged for wild guavas in every corner of the mangrove forest.

Ajay was already stretched out on the muddy bank at the far side of the pond, pretending to be asleep. He lifted his head and smirked at Neel.

Neel's feet touched bottom again and he waded to the bank. He didn't really mind losing to his friend. Ajay had always been fast and agile in ponds and on the cricket field, but that didn't seem to matter much in their village. Boys were supposed to do well in

school, not on the sports field. Ajay's father taught Class Two, despairing that his own son was one of the slowest to learn inside a classroom.

"I miss Viju," Neel said, plopping down beside Ajay. "I beat him once, remember?"

"When we were four years old," said Ajay. He dodged to avoid the scoop of mud Neel flipped his way.

"I thought he might start going to school again now that his father's back from Chennai."

"Me, too. Maybe they're fishing together."

Neel sighed—fishing all day sounded like bliss compared to wearing a hot, scratchy uniform and struggling with math problems. "I'm sure he's getting good at it. Do you think he's inside the reserve?"

"No chance. It's too dangerous for someone our age to go behind the fence."

"I think he is," Neel said. "There's not enough fish left anywhere else, that's for sure. Not since the cyclone hit. When Baba takes his boat into the reserve, he comes back with plenty. And honey, too."

"But the tigers are hungrier now," said Ajay. He was right. Villagers like Baba ventured behind the nylon-mesh fence into the reserve at their own risk. If a man—or boy—was seized by a tiger, he would be

dragged off into the forest and eaten. Tigers had already claimed five victims from their island this year.

“I don’t see why Viju’s father needs to fish anyway,” Neel said. “He’s making all that money working for greedy Gupta.”

Gupta was a newcomer to the Sunderbans, but he acted like he owned the entire island. The bad news was that these days he almost did. After the cyclone hit, many of the men and older boys, and even some of the girls, had left to find work in faraway cities. Viju’s father had come back, but others had never returned. Sometimes their families didn’t hear from them again and were forced to sell parcels of land to Gupta.

Ajay stood up. “One more race? I like beating the smartest kid in school at something.”

“Pretend a crocodile’s chasing you,” Neel said. “I’m in no rush.”

He pushed away the thought of the math assignments in his satchel, floated on his back, and watched wispy white clouds chase each other across the wide blue sky. “We named you after my favorite color, Neel,” Ma often said, pointing at the horizon where the blue of the sky met the blue of the water. Humming one of his mother’s favorite songs, Neel imagined what it

would be like to venture deep into the reserve to hunt for honey, or to pole a boat into an inlet where tiger tracks lined the muddy banks. Baba had never taken Neel to the reserve. “Too dangerous, Son,” he answered whenever Neel asked. “We have to protect that smart brain of yours from claws and teeth.”

“Well, what about your brains, Baba?” Neel always responded.

“Mine isn’t as good as the one in here,” Baba would say, gently rapping Neel’s skull with his knuckles.

Suddenly a familiar shout came from the *golpata* trees. Lickety-split, a boy hurtled to the pond, stripped to his underwear, and leaped into the water. It was Viju! Immediately Neel and Ajay pounced and pushed him under.

After a minute or two, Viju pulled away from the scuffle. “Let’s dry off. I’ve got some big news.”

“Huge catch of fish, maybe?” Ajay asked.

Neel felt a twinge of jealousy. “I bet you saw a tiger!”

“I’ll tell you everything—don’t worry. I need your help, in fact.”

The boys swam to the stone ledge where they’d left their clothes, climbed out of the water, and squatted in the sunshine.

“Well?” asked Neel.

“Actually I did see a tiger, but that’s not my news,” Viju said.

“You *did*?”

“Where? When?”

“In the reserve. It was just a flash of orange and black through the trees. I was alone; my *baba* hadn’t come back yet.”

“Behind the fence? Weren’t you scared?” Ajay shook his head so that drops of water flew everywhere. “I’d have fainted dead of fright, right then and there. One quick tiger snack—that’s me.”

“What did you do?” Neel asked, trying to imagine himself in Viju’s place.

“Dropped my net, jumped into the boat, and rowed out as fast as I could. I’m glad I don’t have to try that again now that my *baba*’s back. I’m helping him these days—he’s making real money.”

Dirty money, you mean, thought Neel, but he didn’t say it aloud. Gupta paid his workers stacks of rupees to threaten tenants who fell behind on their rent. He hired others to cut down rare *sundari* trees that grew on the uninhabited islands of the reserve. Sadly, these days even Neel’s father needed the extra income. After

fishing and foraging in the mornings for the family, Baba was doing carpentry for Gupta in the afternoons. Neel was sure, though, that his father would never do anything like demand money from widows who used to own their land.

“Want to hear my *big* news?” Viju asked, lowering his voice and glancing around as if he were afraid someone might be listening.

“Well, what is it?” Ajay asked.

Viju hesitated. “You have to keep it a secret. Do you promise, Ajay?”

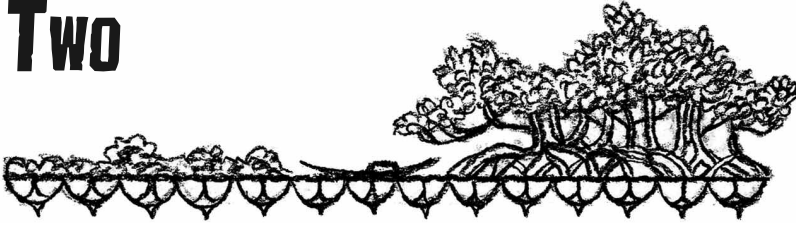
“Fine.”

“Neel?” Viju asked.

“Yes, yes. Hurry up and tell us.”

“One of the new tiger cubs has escaped!”

Two



BOTH AJAY AND NEEL GASPED. This *was* big news. The reserve's hungry, thin female tigers gave birth so rarely nowadays. When three cubs were born ten weeks ago, rangers visited all fifty or so of the inhabited islands to share the good news. Grateful villagers offered extra sweets and flowers to their statues of Bon Bibi, protector of the Sunderbans. When word came that one of the babies had died, the whole island mourned. Now only two were left.

Neel leaned forward in excitement. "How did it get out? Was it the boy or girl cub? Where do they think it is now?" Imagine seeing a tiger cub with his own eyes!

"One question at a time!" Viju said. "It clawed a small hole in the fence. Don't worry—they fixed it.

And I have no idea if it's the girl or boy. And as for where it is? Get this—they say it's *on our island*. They don't know exactly where."

"*Here?*" Ajay jumped to his feet as if an enormous man-eater were about to pounce.

"Relax," Viju said. "It's still tiny. Ten weeks old. Not much bigger than a small cat."

"But how do they know it's here?" Neel asked. He could hardly believe it. A tiger cub, on their island!

"Fishermen spotted small pugmarks on the shore, leading across the path into the mangrove forest."

Ajay grabbed his clothes. "Pugmarks? You know what they say—big paw prints follow small ones. That mother tiger's going to escape, and then she'll swim right over here to find her cub."

"That's why *we* have to find it first," said Viju, ignoring Ajay and edging a little closer to Neel. "And anyway, here's the secret part. My father and I need your help, Neel. Nobody knows the hiding places on this island better than you. Gupta's offered a big reward to anyone who finds the cub. No questions asked, no tales told."

"Not a chance!" cried Neel. "I'm not hunting a tiger cub for Gupta."

Viju put a hand on his arm. “Shhh, Neel! Keep your voice down!”

Neel yanked his arm away and stood up. “I don’t care who hears me. That man will make a fortune selling that poor cub’s skin on the black market. And its body parts for medicine. Who wants to fill a greedy man’s pockets with more cash?”

“Not me,” said Ajay. “That Gupta’s more dangerous than a tiger.”

“I’m going right now to tell the rangers,” Neel said, pulling on his shorts.

“You can’t!” Viju leaped to his feet, eyes widening in alarm. “Gupta’s men will beat me up. And you, too, probably. Besides, my father will lose his job—he’s getting paid to search for the cub. You can’t say anything! Promise me you won’t. Not even to your families.”

Neel caught Ajay’s eye, and Ajay shrugged. The three of them had been friends since they were small. When Viju’s father was in Chennai, Neel could remember watching their friend’s hair become straw-colored from hunger. Both he and Ajay had shared food with Viju during that time. “OK,” Neel said reluctantly. “But if I find the cub first, I’m taking it straight to the rangers.”

“Me, too,” said Ajay.

The boys were silent as they finished getting dressed. Neel's stomach was churning. *Gupta's taken over our island, and now he wants our tigers, too? Someone has to stop him!* If only Neel could tell Baba about this . . . but Viju seemed so desperate.

Just as Neel was buttoning the last button on his shirt, the *golpata* trees rustled behind them.

“What?! Can I believe my eyes?”

Neel jumped. Turning, he saw the worst possible person to catch him swimming after school: Headmaster, shaking a fist in their direction. Why was *he* taking a detour on this edge of the island, so far from school?

Headmaster stalked over and grabbed Neel's shoulder with an iron grip, ignoring the two other boys. Viju and Ajay seized the chance and bolted, and Neel couldn't blame them. Viju was already in trouble for dropping out of school. And Headmaster would probably heap the blame for any of Ajay's misdeeds on Ajay's father's head.

Headmaster gave Neel a shake. “Playing? Wait until your father hears about this. I was on my way to tell him about your disgusting lack of effort, and this escapade of yours will prove my case. I assume he's at home?”

“N—no, sir,” stammered Neel.

“Well, where is he, then?” Headmaster asked. The metal fingers didn’t budge.

“He’s working on a new building, sir.”

Headmaster raised his eyebrows. “A new building? On this side of the island? Who’s the owner?”

“Mr. Gupta, sir.”

“Rich man? New around here?”

“That—that’s him, sir.”

“Another person I want to see. Will he be at the building site?”

“I think so—I mean I think so, *sir*.”

“Let’s go, then. Take me there. How do you say it in English? I’ll . . . er . . . ‘murder two birds with the same rock.’” Thanks to his studies in London, Headmaster often shifted back and forth between Bangla and English, but he always seemed to mangle English proverbs and expressions.

Neel’s heart was still hammering from the shock of Headmaster’s appearance, but he corrected the mistake in his head: *Kill two birds with one stone*. New words and phrases in any language sank deeply into Neel’s mind and stayed there. Often, during recess, while the other boys played outside, Neel devoured Bangla poetry and English novels that he found in the school’s small

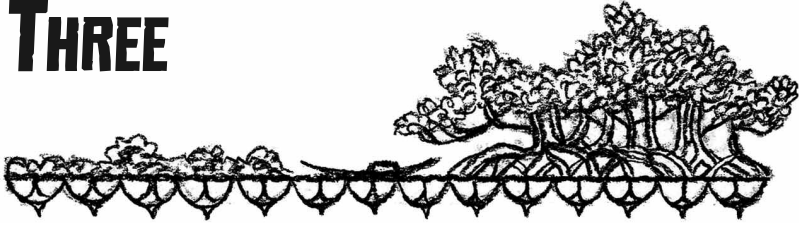
library. He had started reading almost as soon as he entered school, struggling at first through the English books by looking up words and phrases in the big dictionary. Now that he was in Class Five, English came to him almost as readily as Bangla. He'd read all the books at the school, but every week a new stack of unread magazines, books, and newspapers appeared in the library as though they were waiting for him. It was like magic. He didn't know where they came from, but he read them from cover to cover and eagerly waited for the next batch.

Headmaster pushed Neel back through the low-hanging branches that bordered the narrow path to the pond. They crossed a small bamboo bridge spanning one of the many creeks that curved in through the muddy banks of the island. When they reached the wide, raised path that circled the whole outer rim of the island, Headmaster stopped to catch his breath.

Neel strained to hear the sound of a soft mew of a cub, but the chatter of the rhesus monkeys and Headmaster's loud panting made it impossible to hear anything else. Where could the cub be? Maybe Gupta's men had already captured it, or it had been discovered by a crocodile. Anything could happen to a young creature far from home.



THREE



COMING AROUND A BEND, they heard voices approaching on the path, and three rangers carrying rifles came into sight. Dressed in forest green, they were wearing helmets designed to fend off tiger attacks—metal shields covered the backs of their necks. Neel studied them closely; it wasn't often that rangers came to their island. The last time had been to make the announcement about the cubs' birth ten weeks ago.

“Good afternoon, sir,” said the man in front. He elbowed the two men on either side of him, and they, too, saluted Headmaster.

Headmaster nodded. “Why are you out and about on our island, Kushal?”

“A tiger cub escaped, sir. We think she may be hiding here, and we’re asking the islanders to help us find her.”

So it’s the girl, Neel thought.

“And how did you let that happen?”

“Er . . . er . . . it was a poor mending job on the fence, sir. Don’t worry—I’ve sacked that worker already.”

Headmaster scowled. “I hope you, as the leader, took full responsibility for the mistake. Isn’t that what we tried to teach you in school?”

“Yes, sir. I did—I will.”

Neel felt a bit better about his own difficulties with Headmaster. This grown man, carrying a rifle and obviously in charge of the others, was squirming like a Class Two student.

“You used to be somewhat intelligent, Kushal.” Headmaster pulled Neel forward. “Not quite as bright as this one here, and not half as good at learning English, but a much harder worker. I hear we have only two hundred or so tigers left in the reserve. And now you’ve lost a cub? Who is guarding the others?”

“We have one man on base, sir.” The head ranger turned to Neel. “If a full-grown tiger came to your island, we’d have to hunt her down and tranquilize her. But this is a baby, so we’re counting on you islanders

to find her. She's not dangerous. She'll come to you after a while if you offer her some food, and once she does, she's easy to carry. Still has her baby teeth, and her claws won't hurt you. Bring her straight to our headquarters. Spread the word, will you?"

Bring all your men! You have to find her now! Gupta's going to sell her on the black market! But he had promised Viju. Neel clamped his lips shut and nodded. Somehow he'd have to find that cub on his own.

"Keep a sharp eye out for pugmarks, small and big," another ranger added. "In the meantime we'll do our best to keep the mother inside the reserve, but she's frantic to find her missing baby."

"I'm sure you have learned from your error," said Headmaster. He turned to Kushal. "You won't let another tiger escape, will you, Son?"

The head ranger shook his head vehemently. "It will never happen again, sir. But we have to get back and make sure there aren't more tears in the fence. It's been a pleasure to see you. I'll never forget all you did—"

Headmaster held up his hand, palm out. "That's enough, Kushal. There's a missing cub out there. Go and spread the news about how to find her. And keep the other tigers safe, will you? We need even more tigers to

lure tourists—and their rupees—to the Sunderbans.”

“Yes, sir!” With one last salute to Headmaster, the rangers hurried down the path.

“Let’s go, boy. As they say in England, ‘A moving pebble doesn’t get covered with dirt.’”

A rolling stone gathers no moss. Neel never said the corrections out loud. Correcting him was unthinkable.

What was Headmaster planning to say to Baba? Neel had seen the delight and pride on his parents’ faces when he’d read them the letter:

I have selected your son to compete against students from all the other schools in the region for the prestigious Sunderbans Scholarship. The scholarship pays for the top-scoring student in the region to study at a private boarding school in Kolkata. Our school has not had a winner of this competition in recent years, but your son, Neel, is the brightest student I have seen in my tenure here. His grasp of English and Bangla is superior. We will work with him in mathematics to increase his understanding of that subject. It is our earnest expectation that you will do all you can to help your son seize this opportunity.

Yours truly,

Headmaster Arjun Sen

Neel's voice had dwindled almost to a mumble as he'd read the letter aloud. He had no desire to study in the big city of Kolkata. Why would he want to live anywhere but the island? He could never leave Ma and her delicious cooking; his sister, Rupa, who coddled and teased him; and Baba, who protected and provided for all of them. The sights, sounds, and smells of the Sunderbans were as much a part of him as his dark skin and curly black hair.

But Headmaster ruled the school like the prime minister ruled India—nobody said no to his decisions. The exam was in twelve weeks, and Neel lugged home piles of extra geometry problems that made his tired brain feel as thick and sticky as mud. Not that he worked too hard. He went through the motions, but he certainly didn't intend to win that scholarship. He'd have to take the exam, of course, but then he planned to start secondary school right here in the Sunderbans, on a neighboring island that was just a quick ferry ride away.

He did feel a twinge of guilt when he pictured his parents' disappointment. Would Baba be angry when Headmaster told him how little Neel had been trying? Baba had never lost his temper with Neel or his sister,

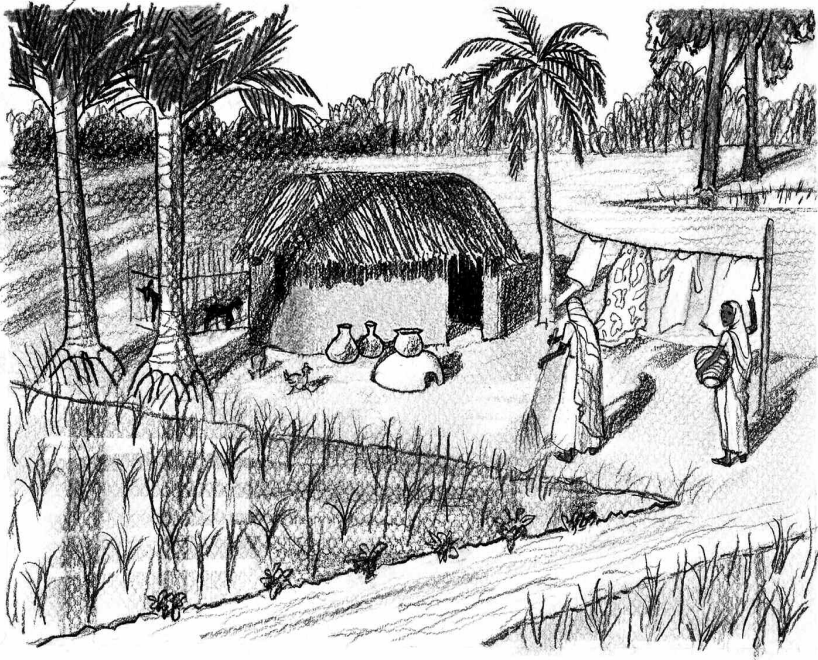
but there was a first for everything. Today, when Baba heard about Neel swimming with his friends instead of studying, would he give his son the kind of punishment Viju and Ajay often endured—no dinner, a slap or two, even a beating with a stick?

The raised dirt path that wound around the island was bolstered by bags of sand to prevent any more of the shore from disappearing into the water. Villagers had planted new mangrove plants to replace the bushes and trees torn away by the cyclone, and new roots were beginning to push through the salty soil. Dinghies, fishing boats, and other *nauka* passed in the water, and shrimp fishermen trawled blue nets along the shore. Boatmen and passengers alike called loud greetings to Headmaster, who lifted a hand in answer. On the far side of the waterway, the bright orange mesh fence barricaded the islands of the reserve. *I wonder where the cub broke through*, Neel thought. *It's a long swim for a baby, but she made it and landed on a bank somewhere along here.*

To the right they passed patches of mangrove forest and small parcels of land, rice paddies, and chili pepper fields. Neel kept his eyes open for any small pugmarks leading off the path, but Headmaster was

hurrying him along. Soon they were in view of Neel's house, where his mother and Rupa were outside in a sunny corner, hanging clothes on the line. Theirs was the only property for kilometers where a grove of tall *sundari* trees provided shade for the house and most of the yard. The trees were aptly named after beauty—their wood wasn't just supple and strong, it was a lovely, glowing red. Baba had planted the grove when Neel was a baby, and he guarded the family trees fiercely from woodcutters. As if in thanks, the sturdy trees had protected their house and fields from the brunt of the cyclone. Because the trees' strong roots had kept the soil in place, the paddies would produce rice this coming harvest. Most of the other farmers would have to wait for another planting cycle.

Neel could see Ma sweeping the area around the outdoor stove where she and Rupa cooked, near where the family gathered to eat. She was moving slowly; it had only been a few days since she'd been able to get up after being sick with dysentery. She didn't catch sight of Headmaster hurrying Neel along the path, but Rupa's head swiveled, her mouth fell open, and she dropped the towel she was wringing. Two black baby goats bleated at Neel from the pen attached to the



family's thatch-roofed clay hut, a rooster joined in with a loud crow, and the huddle of hens clucked their worry from the shade of the grove of *sundari* trees.

Headmaster stopped at a small shack that sold homemade goodies, this time to guzzle the juice of a coconut. "It's so blazing hot for January. I'll sweat to death, I'm sure. Our climate is changing due to the rest of the world, and we're the ones who suffer. How much farther?"

"We're close, sir. Just near that tall tree."