

Cat's Paw  
(2015)

(An Excerpt from the second story in a detective series)

The rains came out of nowhere that January morning. The little tiger cub, used to sleeping snugly in his den deep in the forest woke up disoriented by the wet and looked around for his mother and sister. He was just old enough to walk about on his own, and not finding his mother anywhere, started out tentatively to search for her. He let out a mewling call, but she was nowhere near to hear it. He made his way through the thick foliage of the low bushes that grew all over the hills high above the city. Even as he gained a bit of confidence and pulled himself up straighter, moved faster, a sudden roaring sound had him cowering and skittering, diving under a bush. A burst of heavy rain pelted down, hitting the winter-dry earth with great force. Before the cub could get his bearing, the earth under his feet moved, and with a loud rumble, loosened and cascaded down the hill.

The mini landslide swept the cub over the edge and down the slope. He rolled and skid, finally landing at the bottom, loose earth and branches heaped all around him. He got to his feet shakily, and crept forward, making his way towards the dense bushes that stood in a row in front of him, to take cover and hide before he could make his way back home again.

Sitting in his living room with a cup of tea, Ganesh Bora thanked God he did not have to go out anywhere that day. He had been out every day the last two weeks, to work and then to the courts on pressing business. Everything was finally settled, and he had taken a day off today – the perfect day to stay warm at home, pitying everyone else who had to go out in the cold and the rain. He looked out the window with satisfaction. His beautiful house was built on the hillside just high enough above the city to keep it safe from floods, and just low enough and away from the upper range to protect it from landslides. His grandfather had built this house, years before the city had grown to what it was now, and this piece of land had been so far from the center, no one wanted to buy it. His father had continued to live on in the house even when Ganesh's uncle and aunts had moved away to be nearer to the center of things. By the time Ganesh had graduated college and started working, the city had spread and reached the hills, so he was one of the lucky ones living in what had become prime property.

Just as Ganesh raised his cup to his lips, he heard a loud roar somewhere behind his house, loud enough to be heard above the rain.

“Oh Lord, oh Lord! Please don’t let that be a landslide. I brought this on myself, feeling so proud of my house. Oh God, forgive me.” He muttered as he ran out of the back door. He looked around his backyard, and everything seemed the same as before. His kitchen garden lay on the right of the pathway in the back; a small grassy area with rose bushes lay on the left; and a long row of dense camellia bushes made the boundary at the edge of his property. He breathed a sigh of relief. But as he looked towards the hills, he noticed the scrapes along the slope where the red earth had eroded.

“So that’s what I heard,” he muttered, as he went to take a closer look. As Ganesh parted some of the branches of the hedge to push his way through, he felt himself step on something soft and flexible. Before he could look down to see what it was, a striped, yellow ball leaped at him. Ganesh jumped back in fright just as the tiger cub sank its claws into his forearm, slashing down.

Ganesh and the cub both leaped back, staring at each other in fright, one with his mouth working soundlessly, the other crouched back warily.

Then with a loud, scream of, “*Bagh! Bagh!*” Ganesh turned and ran back to the house.

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On this unseasonable rainy winter in the city of Guwahati, Additional Superintendent of Police Ramen Sharma made his way home after a long, dull January day at work. He had to drive carefully along one specific part of the road just to make sure his car didn’t get flooded. If he drove too close to the pavement, he would literally be in deep water. And if he drove too close to the median, he risked being hit head-on by other drivers doing the same thing he was. He cursed and swore in time with the bumps and swerves of the road, and the beat of the music playing on the radio. At least it was an exciting end to a dull day – trying to make it home alive.

Driving in the city was bad even without the rains. Guwahati could have been a beautiful city, and indeed, it had started out as one a century ago. Built in the valley between the river Brahmaputra and the Nilachal hills, it had been lush and green. Then, the city was dotted with houses built in the Assam style, single or double-storied with sloping roofs of corrugated iron sheets or heavy thatch. Sharma remembered the city in the 1960s and 70s, when he was a child, and every house had a front yard and a garden, and

wherever you walked, you would have a view of the hills somewhere. Walking along the river of an evening, watching the small ships and boats go by, was a common activity. Every season saw the flowering of different trees – Gulmohur, Bougainvillea, large Ixora, Poinsettia, and Hibiscus. When the rains came, the river rose high, but never really flooded over. By the end of the twentieth century, with the state capital having moved to nearby Dispur, and thousands of people settling in the city and building homes to the edges of their property, there was no pleasure left in walking out anywhere. The trees had been cut, the houses grew upwards to become hideous concrete boxes, and there was no space for the run-off when the rains came. Which was why even a day's mild winter rain flooded the roads.

Sharma finally turned into his street, and even before he reached them, the gates to his house swung open. As he drove through, he saw Dipu holding them open, grinning widely. He knew the boy had been waiting for him – perhaps in anxiety, but more in anticipation of being able to practice his own driving in Sharma's car. As he rounded the circular driveway, Dipu ran alongside, and reached in time to take Sharma's briefcase as he got out of the car.

“Sir, are the roads very bad? The next-door Fiat had water all inside. They said it got stuck and some boys on the street helped to push it all the way to our road!”

“Aah! But we drive a Tavera, don't we? It's not going to get flooded that easily.” Sharma laughed, knowing what was coming. But Dipu surprised him. The boy's eyes were shining with suppressed excitement. “Sir, sir, there is a tiger in the city!”

“A tiger?”

“Yes. It was behind the houses along the hills, next to our neighborhood. It attacked someone in one of the houses.”

“A tiger came all the way down here?”

Dipu thought about that. “I know; it's strange. In our village near Bhojo, we heard of tigers and leopards in the jungles near the gardens. They sometimes attacked the cows and sheep if they went too far in. But they never attacked any of the people. Well, except if it was a man-eater. But I never saw one,” he finished regretfully.

Sharma smiled at the boy's tone. “Well, don't go out at night till we know what's happening.”

“Okay Sir; can I just practice driving inside the compound then?”

“Okay. Just around the driveway. Twenty minutes! Then put it in the garage and lock it up.”

“Okay, sir. I’ll do that.” Dipu replied, catching the key that Sharma threw him and eagerly getting in the car. Sharma watched Dipu start the car up and move forward smoothly with some satisfaction. Sharma thought back to the ‘not really murder’ case when he had first met Dipu. Dipu, only eleven then, had found the body. Sharma smiled; that was when he had met his wife, Anita, just out of medical school. It was on one of their trips back to her parents’ home that he had come across Dipu again, in Motiya’s teashop. Sharma had been transferred to this job in Guwahati, and Anita had found work at the medical college; they had gone to say their goodbyes before beginning their move downstate. And of course to give their two year-old some time with his grandparents.

For the first time since their marriage, both he and Anita would be working, and they had hired an *ayah* from her parents’ tea estate to look after their son. Anita had suggested that perhaps they should hire a local boy too, to stay in the house and run errands. Sharma immediately thought of Dipu. The boy was bright and curious, and Sharma felt he could have a brighter future than keep working as a teashop boy in Bhojo. And so they had settled into their new life in Guwahati – all of them far from home, but getting used to the rhythm of the city. Dipu had fit right in almost as if he had always been a city boy. It was Dipu, rather than the *Ayah*, who took little Sumeet out in his stroller early every morning, getting to know all the neighbors. Sumeet recognized more of their neighbors than either Sharma or Anita did. And Dipu had suggested to Sharma that perhaps he could learn to drive the car, and be their driver too when he finally got a license.

As Sharma entered the house, he realized Dipu was eighteen now, and nearly as tall as Sharma. In a few months he would be ready to take the test. Anita was not home yet; come to think of it, he hadn’t seen her car in the garage. Sharma changed and settled down with a glass of brandy and the newspaper, the TV on in the background. He had just about finished his drink, when Anita walked in, looking frazzled and excited.

“Guess what?” She began, without any preliminaries. “Ganesh Bora – you know, over near the hilltop – well, he was attacked by a tiger cub today!”

“Yes, Dipu said something about that. A cub?”

“He was brought in to emergency just as I was about to leave, so I took the case. Well, the way he went on, you would think a big tiger had mauled him.”

“How did you know it wasn’t?”

“From the scratch marks on his arm. The width of the paw was very small, and the scratches were not very deep, no real gouging. The weight of a full grown tiger’s paw would have mangled his flesh to bits.”

“Is he okay?”

“He needed several stitches, and then we kept him under observation for a few hours. Gave him antibiotics and a tetanus shot. He was fine once the pain medication took effect, and even laughing a bit. He was saying what a story he would have to tell – surviving a tiger attack!”

“So no hospitalization?”

“No. His uncle and cousin came to take him home.” She gazed a little abstractedly at him. “It was strange, but he didn’t seem pleased to see them at all. He insisted going in his car with his driver. I wonder what that was about?”

“Isn’t he married? That’s a big house he has there.”

“No, he isn’t. He’s only thirty-one. I saw on the hospital admission form. Hmm . . . I wonder if . . .”

“Oh no, I know what you’re thinking. You don’t have to match-make your patients.” Sharma smiled as he said this. Anita was very observant, and had a great eye for details, traits that he greatly admired and that were very useful to him too. But she had a habit of always trying to bring unmarried people together, something he didn’t understand at all.

“Not patients, a neighbor! Oh, well. I was just thinking out loud.” She huffed, as they started in towards the dining room. “I wonder what happened to the tiger cub?”

“Dipu said everyone was talking about it – tiger in the city!”

“I just hope no one does anything stupid.”

The next morning, it was all over the news channels. “Tiger kills man in the city!”