

Chapter One

A crowd stood around the edge of the tiger enclosure at the Minnesota Zoo. They gasped and applauded as Toby, a four-year-old Bengal male, shimmied up a bare tree stump, retrieved a piece of meat, and dropped back to the ground. Then everyone laughed as he scurried away with his tail between his legs.

One of the older tigers had climbed from its favourite perch and was heading towards him.

‘And this is Rajah. As you’ve probably realised, he is the dominant male. He is twelve-years-old and weighs in at 250 kilos,’ Dr Beth Smith said, speaking into a microphone among the crowd.

‘Is he a maneater?’ a young boy asked.

‘In India the Bengal tiger has been known to eat man, yes. In the wild, the tiger is a solitary animal, a predator. One tiger’s territory can stretch 160 kilometres, depending on the amount of prey available but the forests are being destroyed at such a rate that he is forced to venture closer to civilisation in search of food. In desperation he would kill and eat a human.’

‘Is it true that people eat tigers?’ a little girl, seated on her father’s shoulders, asked.

‘Yes, that is also true. Some people believe that if they eat certain animals the strength of that animal will pass into them.’

‘And does it?’

‘No! There is no scientific proof to confirm this.’

Rajah stood at the edge of the enclosure peering back at the crowd across the moat. He lifted his chin and sniffed the air. The crowd gasped again as he opened his enormous mouth and yawned.

‘Well, ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, that brings us to the end of our presentation. If you are interested in the plight of the tiger and would like to learn more you can check out the information and books in our bookstore or visit our website. I’m Dr Elizabeth Smith. Thank you and enjoy the rest of your day.’

The crowd slowly dispersed except for a few children who stood by the fence chatting, giggling, and eating ice cream.

Beth unplugged the microphone and smiled at Rajah. ‘You big show-off!’

Rajah groaned.

Beth realised he had caught the scent of the ice cream. She reached into the cooler box by her feet, pulled out a frozen milk cube, and threw it to the tiger.

The children laughed as the large cube unintentionally hit the unsuspecting tiger on the side of the head, startling him into a half-roar and half-whimper.

Beth packed the equipment and headed back to the zoo admin centre.

Andrew Conan of The American Zoo and Aquarium Association sat in his office reading an email attachment sent by his superior.

Dr Elizabeth Smith from LA holds a degree in veterinary medicine and reproductive physiology from the University of California, Davis.

During her time at Davis she worked as a volunteer at the Sacramento Zoo with the Sumatran tigers and became interested in the tiger species. Focusing her studies and energies on the tiger's plight, she soon became a dedicated activist.

She is a member of The Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG). She regularly attends meetings and mixes easily with experts whom she impresses with her knowledge and passion.

While still in her early-twenties she was chosen by the CBSG to visit zoos around the country to evaluate the health and individual requirements of the captive tigers. She then compiled a dossier including her professional opinions and recommendations to enhance the needs of the captive animals.

'Hmm...' Andrew Conan said closing the attachment. 'Sounds like we've got our girl.' He pressed his intercom. 'Tanya, could you get me the number of Dr Elizabeth Smith at the Minnesota Zoo please.'

Beth returned home from a sixteen-hour day. All she wanted to do was have a hot bath, a glass of wine, and relax to her favourite music. When she entered her dull, one-bedroom apartment she immediately felt depressed. Tom, her ginger cat, greeted her as usual rubbing his body along her legs and purring loudly until she picked him up. But even the genuine affection of her only friend couldn't quell the pangs of loneliness.

Later, as she lay in the hot bubble bath, she looked up at the dingy, damp ceiling and felt quite depressed. She sipped her wine and then realised she hadn't eaten for over eight hours—at least the wine tasted good. She took another sip then wondered, as she often did, what it would be like to be in a relationship. Before she knew it, the self-pity had taken hold. It was just the wine she would tell herself later.

The next morning, Beth awoke to the sound of the phone ringing. She emerged, reluctantly, from beneath the bed sheets and fumbled for the receiver. 'Hello.'

'Hello, Dr Smith?'

'Yes.'

'Good morning, Dr Smith, I do hope I didn't wake you.'

'You did.'

'Oh...so sorry. Dr Smith, my name is Andrew Conan. I work for The American Zoo and Aquarium Association.' He cleared his throat but didn't wait for a response. 'You are probably aware that The World Conservation Unions held meetings over the last two weeks in Hong Kong with The Southeast Asia Zoo Association.'

'Uh, huh.'

'The meetings went very well, but the most exciting and important outcome is that China has asked the United States to assist them in developing a Species Survival Plan for the South China tiger. The South China tiger is, as I'm sure you know, the antecedent of all the tiger subspecies and the closest to extinction. Well, Dr Smith, I'll come straight to the point. We want to offer you a post in China. If you accept, you will leave in two weeks.'

Beth sat up in bed. 'Wow! This is a bit of a shock.'

'I'll bet.'

'What would my duties be?'

'Basically you'll be in charge of setting up the program,

examining the captive tigers and the facilities, and paving the way for future visits by our team.'

'Mr Conan, I'm deeply honoured that you thought of me but I'll need some time to think about this.'

'Yes of course. I don't expect a decision right away. I'll send you down more information. Talk it over with your husband and your family and let me know in a few days.'

'Thank you, I will.' She replaced the receiver, dropped back into bed and lay thinking. Husband indeed. But her mind was abuzz with the thoughts of China and the South China tiger. What an opportunity. Then the negatives began to seep through. What about my work here? My family and friends?

She got up, fixed a bowl of cereals and automatically switched on the TV. She sat at her small dining table eating her breakfast. She needed to think. Her parents would understand. She only saw them at holidays anyway. In fact, they would insist she went. As for friends? The only friend she had, apart from her work associates, was Tom and her parents would look after him until her return. She decided to talk to her boss as soon as she got to the zoo. If it was okay with him, then she would consider it.

'Next up we have a disturbing report from China...'

Beth frowned at the TV.

'I'm talking to Dr Li Pang at the Chonging Zoo. Dr is it true that poachers may have killed the last wild South China tiger?' the ABC foreign correspondent asked.

Dr Pang waited for his interpreter to translate the question then shook his head dismissively.

'But the recent census, Dr, reported no findings of tigers in the wild. So where did this one come from?'

Dr Pang didn't wait for the translation; he pushed past the reporter and disappeared off camera.

Two weeks later Beth flew to LA to spend the weekend with her parents and drop off Tom.

‘Of course you must go, Beth,’ her boss had said. Her parents were sad and happy simultaneously, as only parents can be.

Tom curled up on the comfortable couch of his new LA pad, and went to sleep.

Beth flew out of LAX on Monday morning, heading for China.

Chapter Two

Beth had decided to start a blog covering her time in China. Her first post would be an introduction to her work, which she'd just finished on her laptop during the first leg of her journey. She would post it to her site when she arrived in China and hopefully create some interest in the South China tiger. As the plane approached Hanoi for refuelling, She read silently through her words:

There are four living tiger subspecies found in China: the Siberian tiger (*Panthera tigris altaica*), found in the far northeast, the Indochinese tiger (*Panthera tigris corbetti*) found in the far southeast, bordering Vietnam and Lao PDR, the Bengal (*Panthera tigris tigris*) on the Nepal border, and the Southeast China tiger (*Panthera tigris amoyensis*) which is believed to be the evolutionary antecedent of all tigers and found in the southern parts of China.

Although the situations with other endangered species—the giant pandas, the African rhinos, and elephants—are at a critical levels, increased media focus has helped lift their profiles securing funding and placing pressure on the governments involved to ban hunting and the use of body parts for traditional Chinese medicines and trophies.

Unfortunately, the South China tiger has received no such attention. Unbelievably, at this time, there are only around sixty left in captivity. All in Chinese zoos. None has been spotted in the wild for over twenty years.

Prior to the 1950s there were reputed to be more than four thousand South China tigers roaming the mountainous ranges and dense forests of the Hunan, Guangdong, and Fujian provinces. Ironically in 1959 when the Siberian tiger was declared a protected species the South China tiger was declared a pest and hunted mercilessly after the Chinese government placed a bounty on its head. Since the 1960s over three thousand pelts have been counted.

In 1981 the Chinese government became a member of The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and introduced new laws and legislation banning the trade of tiger parts. They also set out to develop a program to preserve tiger habitat. Today tigers are protected by The Wildlife Protection Law of 1989.

The laws have proved ineffective and the trade, although now illegal, has flourished. The prices on the black market have rapidly increased offering great incentives to poachers who can earn as much as ten years' income for one kill. Add to this the growing population and the fact that 99 percent of China's original forest has been destroyed, the future for the tiger looks bleak.

The remaining captive South China tigers have descended from only six founders because no wild animals have been captured for such a long time. Ideally, 120 tigers descended from thirty would ensure genetic diversity. Serious problems from years of uncontrolled inbreeding, the occurrence of ill health, and low fertility rates due to malnutrition and inadequate enclosures have taken their toll. Hence a future master plan is desperately needed. It is estimated that if the current trend is allowed to continue there is a 50 percent chance of the species becoming extinct in as little as five years' time.

Beth closed her laptop and wiped a tear from her cheek. The captain announced they would be landing at Hanoi in approximately ten minutes.

The sweltering humidity seemed to grab Beth as she stepped down from the plane and headed for the transit lounge. She was glad she'd left her hand luggage on board. She strolled freely through the crowd with her hands in her pockets, tightly holding some small change in her hand.

It was late afternoon. The airport was busy. Three flights had arrived simultaneously. Drove of tired travellers strolled round the small area stretching their legs. There were shops situated around the outer walls of the concourse with uncomfortable looking seats arranged in geometric rows in the centre.

Beth wandered into the airport bookstore, picked up a book and flicked through the pages but she had far too much on her mind. She replaced the book and moved to the next shop, which sold duty free goods. Instead of entering she

peered through the window at the cameras and watches that adorned the glass shelves and she watched as people stuffed large bottles of whiskey and cigarette cartons into their bags.

She felt tired. She spotted a coffee bar on the opposite side of the hall so she slowly made her way around the perimeter, stopping every now and again to look in the shop windows. Then she noticed a temporary looking store, which was attracting a large crowd. She pushed her way through the entrance but could see very little. There seemed to be a commotion at the back of the shop. She found herself edging her way through the crowd.

A short, fat, Vietnamese man wearing a fez stood on a wooden box behind a large glass counter. He held up jars and bottles while shouting in his native tongue.

The crowd seemed to grow excited by his words and waved money in the air.

Beth assumed it was some kind of auction but as she didn't speak a word of Vietnamese, she couldn't understand the excitement. She slowly worked her way through the pulsating crowd. When she finally reached the counter the salesman caught her eye.

'Lookie, lookie, Amelican lady come to buy medicine.'

Everyone turned to look at Beth.

'Wot you like today, lady? Cure for headache? Toothache? Leplosy? Or lheimatism perhaps? Maybe would like aphlodisiac? Make vely happy lady.'

The crowd laughed as the salesman thrust his hips backwards and forwards.

As Beth looked away in disgust her eyes fell on the labelled jars on the counter. 'Oh, my God!' She lifted her hands to her mouth as she read the tiny English translation at the bottom of the label—Ground Tiger Bone Tonic. She quickly looked at the rest of the labels and felt an uncontrollable sense of

panic and anger. Tiger penis soup, bottles of tiger wine, ground bone, claws, teeth, whiskers and even eyeballs. There was almost every part of the tiger's anatomy ground or dried and sealed in different jars and bottles. Beth almost lost her balance as the crowd pushed and shoved.

The salesman's attention returned to his excited customers who were stuffing money into his hands and pointing at the jars they required.

If she had listened to her immediate impulse, Beth would have gone berserk and smashed every jar before scratching out the fat man's eyes and throwing them to the crowd but she remained calm. Instead, she picked up a small jar of tiger bone and asked, 'How much for this?'

The salesman looked at her and grinned. 'One-fifty American dolla.'

A tiny piece of spit landed on Beth's cheek. She wiped her hand across her face then reached into her back pocket for her wallet. Keeping the wallet close to her chest, she counted out 150 dollars, and handed it to the man.

He took the money, gave her the jar, and rubbed his fingers along her hand. 'Ony one-seveny dolla for tiga soup aphlodisiac.' He grabbed Beth's hand and tried to pull her towards him.

Beth pushed him off the crate. He hit the back wall and his fez slipped down his forehead.

The crowd laughed and jeered.

Beth pushed her way towards the exit while the salesman jumped onto the crate and shouted obscenities after her.

Beth would take the bone to Shanghai and conduct tests to try and determine why it was so important to traditional Chinese medicines. Perhaps she could discover a possible alternative.

For the rest of the flight she tried to snooze but the images of the frenzied buying of medicines occupied her mind. She wondered about the people who actually believed these remedies worked. Then she reminded herself that it wasn't just the Chinese that participated in this belief. Many countries, including the western ones, did also. She continued to write in her blog:

As history has shown, the American buffalo was wiped out because its tongue was regarded as a delicacy. Many other species have suffered a similar fate. There are animals on the verge of extinction such as the English pine marten, and the Australian cassowary who have fallen prey to hunting, poaching and the destruction of their natural habitats. In all cases there is only one reason for their decline—man!

Beth wished there was more she could do. She thought of writing a book or making a documentary one day. But all that was a long way off. There was work to do first. She wondered what awaited her in China.

Chapter Three

The cool evening breeze, blowing in from the East China Sea, was a welcome relief after the humidity of Hanoi.

The director of the Shanghai Zoo, Dr Chan Jiang, checked his watch for the fifth time as he waited in the arrivals lounge. At his side was Yu Quan, an interpreter assigned by The American Embassy to accompany Beth during her stay in China.

Beth finally came through customs.

Yu Quan rushed to meet her, smiling and bowing. ‘Welcome to China, Dr Smith.’

‘Thank you!’ Beth said, shaking the young woman’s hand.

Dr Jiang bowed, shook Beth by the hand and, unceremoniously, led them out to his car.

Beth and Yu Quan spent the next few weeks travelling to the zoos which housed purebred South China tigers. First they went to the Suzhou Zoo, which was the closest to Shanghai. Then they travelled to the Chongqing Zoo in the Sichuan province where Beth could inspect and possibly make new entries in *The South China Tiger Studbook*, which was kept there. Her plan was to use Chongqing as a base—from there she could travel out to the surrounding reserves. Chongqing was the closest to the forests where the last tiger habitat was believed to be, and where the last sightings and capture took place.

Beth worked closely with the staff at each zoo, teaching them new techniques in reproductive management, dietary requirements, and correct animal husbandry. The most important part of her studies was to gather genetic data and DNA samples from each animal to eventually develop a genome resource bank to help improve genetic diversity. Each tiger was tattooed then fitted with a transponder under its skin between its shoulder blades. This would allow a barcode gun to scan the animal's identification as far away as three metres.

Beth's Chinese assignment lasted three months, which had passed far too quickly for there was still much work to be done. Her working visa was for twelve months so she applied for an extension from AZA.

After pressure from herself, the Chinese authorities, and the American consulate—who claimed this kind of program was invaluable in terms of American and Chinese relations—her superiors finally agreed to another three months. But she was placed on a strict budget. There would be no more flying around the country. They thought it better she stayed in Chongqing.

Beth was grateful for the extra time but didn't think it was nearly enough. She would press the issue again during the next three months.

Dr Li Pang, whom Beth had seen on the news bulletin, was the leading authority on South China tigers at the Chongqing Zoo. Beth and Li got on well. They shared a passion for the welfare of the South China tiger. Although he didn't speak English, Li was a great storyteller, so Beth was grateful for Yu Quan's translations.

As they worked, Li spoke of his family. 'My father was from a long line of hunters. During the 1950s he became a

wealthy man when the government declared the tiger a pest and placed a bounty on its head. Ironically it was this wealth that put me through veterinarian school.'

'And now you're helping the animal your father almost destroyed,' Beth said.

Li waited for Yu's translation, nodded then went on to explain how as a teenager he'd grown to resent his father and the Chinese culture. He was sickened whenever he saw the hides and body parts his father used for trading, so he'd decided to learn as much as he could about traditional Chinese medicines in the hope that one day he could prove they were just placebos, peddled by unscrupulous profiteers.

Beth enjoyed listening to Li's stories of the old days, how the forest people lived in harmony with their surroundings, worshipping the much-revered tiger, which they looked upon as their guardian. He told her of the first European missionaries who had entered the provinces at the beginning of the last century, bullying the petrified villagers with their new religion and guns. 'The missionaries would shoot tigers and hang them in the centre of the village to ridicule the ancient beliefs and prove how powerful their god was.'

'Are there any tigers left in the wild, Li?' Beth asked.

'Probably not. The demand for tiger derivatives in the USA, Canada, and Europe, is as great as Asia is now. There is a major export/import trade happening. Recently twenty sacks of tiger bones were confiscated at the Nepal-Tibet border on route to China. Between 1985 and 1990, Traffic Japan reported that 1,700 kilograms of tiger bones were imported into South Korea, representing the deaths of over fifty tigers. In the early 80s, Traffic International reported that a single brewery in Taiwan imported 2,000 kilograms of bone a year to produce 100,000 bottles of tiger wine.'

'But what about now?'

‘Still happening, just underground and more organised.’

Beth found it hard to accept this kind of thing still took place. ‘But where are the bones coming from?’ Then she remembered the powder from Hanoi. The tests in Shanghai had proved it was bone but as it is almost impossible to differentiate between species it was unlikely to be from a tiger, more likely from a dog or a pig. ‘So the real contraband is imported and sold to the wealthy.’

Li nodded. ‘And the products purchased from herbal stores and the black market are fake.’

‘But how can anyone be sure the genuine product is genuine if it’s ground into powder?’

‘Nobody can.’

‘So the merchants are ripping off everyone—’

‘And the tigers are still dying.’

Chapter Four

Beth Smith, Dr Li Pang and their interpreter Yu Quan, stood at the edge of an extensive agricultural development at the threshold of a dense forest. Beyond this were the vast mountain ranges of the Simian Shan nature reserve on the border of the Sichuan and Guizhou provinces.

Li told Beth, while Yu translated, that no tigers had been spotted in this area for over thirty years and even wild pig and deer were now scarce. They agreed that this would not be a suitable place to reintroduce the South China tiger if the possibility ever occurred. 'However, the Fanjinshan reserve in the neighbouring province of Guizhou would be more suitable,' Li added.

'But what of the habitat of the existing tigers?' Beth asked.

'The Tao Yuan Dong reserve in the Jiangan Mountains on the Hunan eastern border is believed to hold an undocumented amount of wild tigers,' Li said. 'Unfortunately deforestation and illegal logging has taken its toll on all the provinces. The largest of the reserves now only cover 10,000 and 20,000 ha. This is inadequate to sustain a viable tiger population. But in the mountains, wild pig and sambar are plentiful, and good habitat exists for approximately 2000 km². I believe, if anywhere, this is where the tiger still roams.'

'We have to go there,' Beth whispered.

Li looked at Yu for a translation. He smiled as she told

him what Beth had said. 'I thought you might say that, sooner or later. But it would be a long journey and, in reality, we would only see forests and mountains just like the ones we have seen today.'

Beth was familiar with the recent census which had declared the South China tiger extinct in the wild but this only made her more determined to prove the so-called experts wrong. Although it was likely she would never see a wild tiger the mountains of the Hunan province seemed to be drawing her to them. Maybe there was a divine reason why she was in China. She wanted to go there as soon as possible.

Beth insisted on footing the cost of the trip. At first she couldn't understand Li's lack of enthusiasm when she instructed him to purchase three hard seats on the evening train from Chongqing. But when the train left Chengdu Station just after nine in the evening, she soon realised that *hard* seats meant exactly that. And squashed in with mainly backpackers and tourists she regretted her stinginess. She didn't sleep a wink but in the morning she was glad for the window seat. The landscape changed dramatically each hour from sprawling flat plains to heavily wooded mountain ranges, plateaus torn in half by winding-muddy rivers, giant lakes and steep gorges.

Beth took advantage of the time in the cramped train compartment to catch up with her journal while also listening to more of Li's anecdotes.

Li reminisced about his childhood in a small forest village nestled on one of the high plateaus overlooking the Ba Bao Shan reserve on the Guangdong and Hunan border. He was excited about going home.

Yu Quan also enjoyed talking about the local people and their traditions.

Beth found the stories fascinating.

When the train finally pulled into Guilin Station at 4.51pm—almost twenty hours after leaving Chongqing—the trio was tired and cranky. They decided to find a place to stay, have dinner and an early night. Beth would have liked to have seen the town in the evening but she was far too whacked.

Early the next morning they left their hotel to find the main street already busy. Swarms of workers on bicycles and mopeds, horse drawn carts laden with hay and market produce lumbering towards the market place, old trucks, with squeaky suspensions, spewing out diesel fumes.

The roads were divided into two—one side for bikes and carts, the other for trucks, buses and cars. The buses were crammed full of people spilling over onto the roofs and hanging on side rails.

Li hired a reasonably cheap four-wheel-drive.

The trio headed south towards the Guangdong border.

Of all the landscapes Beth had witnessed the giant limestone pinnacles jutting out of the earth at Guilin were among the most unusual. But even in this famous natural attraction every piece of flat land between the giant dragon's teeth, and the river slithering among them, was cleared for agriculture. A patchwork of different coloured crops appeared as a stalemate between civilisation and nature.

Li's village was 2000 metres above sea level and was the farthest southern township in the Hunan province.

Since tiger hunting was declared illegal, the villagers had reverted to an agricultural way of life. Logging had also been slowed and small hydroelectric plants were being built to relieve the pressure on the forests for fuel.

Li's immediate family no longer lived in the province they had moved to Shanghai some time ago to enjoy a wealthier capitalist lifestyle. Many of the villagers remembered Li though and welcomed him and his associates warmly.

They stayed at the home of Li's distant cousin, Lee Chong and his wife, who lived on the edge of the forest.

Lee Chong bowed his head impartially as he shook Beth's hand.

Beth noticed he didn't seem so pleased to see his cousin. She tried not to stare at the large scar on the side of his face.

Lee Chong's wife was humble and quiet but welcoming.

That evening after dinner they sat outside around a small fire, talking and sharing stories. Lee Chong and his wife used the traditional Hunan dialect. Fortunately Yu was able to translate.

The atmosphere changed when Beth asked Lee Chong, through Yu, 'Have you seen any tigers recently?'

Lee Chong's expression changed from indifference to anger. 'There are no more tigers,' he growled. 'You are wasting your time travelling all this way. Perhaps you should go farther north in search of the panda or maybe tell the zoos to release our tigers back into the wild.' He stormed into the hut, followed by his wife.

Li read Beth's puzzled expression. 'Don't worry, people are sensitive in these parts. They don't like the outside world interfering. He'll calm down in the morning.'

As the evening wore on Li told them about the legend of Huan Loh. 'The blue tiger visited the champion hunter in a dream. The spirit ordered him to throw down his weapon and become the guardian of the tiger and its habitat or perish. It is believed Huan Loh still lives in the forest protecting the animals. He would be one-hundred-and twenty-years-old now if this were true.'

Yu Quan had also heard the legend and told how the ancient peoples believed that a giant blue tiger roamed the mountains warding off evil spirits. 'They also believed that tigers had the power to turn into men and help their

ancestors in times of need.'

Beth was enchanted by the tales and couldn't wait to explore the forest the next day.

Chapter Five

The thick morning mist shrouded the valley below, making the air feel cold and damp. The trees echoed with a multitude of birdsong. The wilderness greeted the dawn with the clash of musk deer antlers, the screech of wild pigs, and the far off roar of a tiger—or was that Beth's imagination?

She scooped cold water from the tiny mountain stream with her hands, splashed it on her face, and felt refreshed as a cool breeze wafted up the mountainside. The images of blue tigers, missionaries and hunters had dominated her dreams the night before. She was awake when the dawn broke so had decided to go for a walk.

Li and Yu were also awake and having breakfast when she returned to the hut. Mrs Lee busied herself in the kitchen while her husband chopped wood outside. Beth wasn't hungry, but she had breakfast anyway and graciously accepted the packed lunch that Mrs Lee had prepared for them.

Lee Chong didn't enter the hut or even wish them well as they left; instead, he stayed out of sight tending to his chickens.

The four-wheel-drive easily handled the narrow tracks for the first few kilometres, but slowed considerably as the forest grew denser. Li drove with a fixed determination. Suddenly the vehicle bounced and veered to the left. Li fought to regain control of the wheel.

Beth's knuckles turned white grasping the overhead handle.

Every now and then they stopped and left the vehicle to view some significant landmark or to study the telltale signs of tiger prey. Wild pig and deer became more visible the farther they travelled.

They approached a large mountain range. Li stopped the four-wheel-drive when they came to a small clearing and turned off the engine.

Beth couldn't believe they'd been travelling almost five hours.

'Time for lunch,' Li said.

'Where are we actually going, Li?' Beth asked.

'You'll see,' he replied grinning.

After lunch, Li told them they would travel around the mountain for about another two hours, abandon the vehicle then journey the rest of the way on foot.

Beth frowned after Yu's translation. 'Abandon the vehicle?'

Li didn't reply. He started the engine and pulled away tentatively.

As they rounded the mountain and left it behind it became obvious that the vehicle was no longer of use. Before them lay dense forest that swept away into deep gullies and rose over hills. In the distance an enormous, rectangular, blue monolith stretched across the horizon like a giant wall.

Beth, unable to estimate its height, could only muster the word: 'Awesome!'

'*Lánlǎohǔ!*' Li cried, turning in his seat. '*Lánlǎohǔ!*'

'Blue Tiger,' Yu translated, grinning at Beth. 'Blue Tiger!'

Beth looked at her watch. The time was 2.00pm.

Li seemed to read her thoughts. 'Trust me, trust me,' he said as he climbed from the four-wheel-drive and took the backpacks and Beth's aluminium instrument case from the back. 'Come, come, there is still a long way to go before nightfall.'

'Nightfall?' Beth cried. 'I thought this was just a day excursion. You didn't say anything about staying overnight.'

Li giggled. 'Please. Just trust me. It will—'

'We're not going any farther, Dr Pang until you tell us where we're going,' Beth demanded not waiting for the translation.

'Okay, but we need to reach the *secret place* before nightfall and make camp there.'

Beth's ears pricked up. '*Secret place?*'

Li passed Beth a drink canteen. 'Don't you see, Dr Smith? This is why you are here.'

'No, I don't see. Tell him I *don't* see at all, Yu.'

'You will. Please, Beth, just trust me,' Li replied.

Ten minutes later they were on their way through the forest on foot.

Beth realised Li had purposely triggered her curiosity. Her thoughts soon blotted out her worries. She imagined an ancient lost city waiting for them, or a magical hidden valley that nobody had entered for thousands of years. The excitement renewed her strength and she walked with more haste.

Later, as dusk descended, the trio neared the blue cliff face. The air became still and a strange silence enveloped the forest. The trees stood motionless as if waiting for something to happen. Even the birdcalls and distant animal cries had fallen silent. The only sound was the harsh wind whistling across the plateau of the distant summit.

Beth marvelled at the steep jagged cliff which rose from the forest at a ninety-degree angle. Its surface was smooth except for deep vertical gouges which looked like tiger stripes. The summit was shrouded in a slowly churning mist.

'We must keep moving,' Li announced, marching ahead.

Clumping bamboo and thick bushes, strangulated by sharp twisting vines, hid the base of the cliff face. Li seemed to be looking for something, peering into the thicket as he increased his lead.

Beth was about to demand she rest when Li suddenly became excited.

‘This is it, this is it,’ Li shouted back to the girls.

Beth looked both ways along the length of impenetrable undergrowth. ‘This is what? I don’t see anything.’

Li paid no attention. He pushed his way through a thick clump of bamboo, and disappeared.

Beth and Yu caught up to the spot where Li had vanished. Beth gazed up at the rock. She wasn’t afraid of heights but she wasn’t prepared for rock climbing, she was exhausted. She threw down her bag, flopped to the ground and sat back against her instrument case.

Yu offered Beth a drink from her water canteen, and the two sat silently on the ground not knowing what to expect next.

Suddenly there was a loud, ‘HA HAH!’ followed by the *CLUNK, CLOMP* of bamboo stalks knocking together. Li appeared smiling widely. ‘Come, come,’ he shouted, as he excitedly pulled them to their feet and lifted their bags. ‘This way. Quickly.’

The girls followed Li through the bamboo. Thorn-covered vines tore at their skin.

Beth tripped and cursed as she struggled to lift her weary feet. All she could see beyond the bamboo was the cliff face that towered before them. She began to panic a little with the uncertainty of not knowing where they were going. She looked up at the rock and frowned—night was almost upon them and they were about to reach a dead end. She wondered about Li. What did she really know about him? Why had

she been so willing to trust him? Letting him bring her all this way? He'd led her to believe they were venturing into the reserve on a day trip. She realised she didn't know anything about him at all. Now here she was, hundreds of kilometres from civilisation with a total stranger.

'Yahhh hooooo!' Li jumped in the air then disappeared.

The fading light made it impossible for Beth and Yu to see clearly as they stood speechless and frightened at the base of the rock. Behind them the curtain of thorns had closed and it was too dark to head back. Before them was a wall of solid un-scaleable rock—it seemed worse than any nightmare.

Beth almost passed out with the tiredness and the adrenaline rush but she was jolted back into awareness when the darkness exploded into flickering light.

Li mysteriously reappeared jumping up and down with a flaming torch in his hand. The shadows danced on the rock face as Li darted from side-to-side. 'Come, quickly.'

Beth didn't need a translation; she knew exactly what he was saying. Forgetting her fear she clumsily scrambled towards him with Yu behind her

'Follow me,' Li yelled as he disappeared into a small opening in the ground.

Beth looked down into a chamber illuminated by the torch.

Li grinned up at Beth and Yu, beckoning with his free hand for them to follow.

Beth stood negotiating the opening then, after deciding there was only one way to enter, she jumped into the hole feet first.

Yu followed.

'What's going on, Li?' Beth demanded after steadying herself.

Li, ignoring Beth, handed Yu the torch then grabbed

a thick rope hanging from a large rock at the side of the entrance. He grunted as he pulled the rope. After much effort the rock slid across the opening and closed it off.

Yu didn't wait for Beth to speak. She launched into an attack in Mandarin aimed directly at Li.

Beth did the same in English.

Li absorbed the multilingual reprimand with sympathetic nods, grimaces and understanding head shakes in all the right places. When the girls finally calmed he told them they would sleep in the cave overnight and he promised everything would be explained in the morning.

Beth looked round the cave and noticed there was fresh straw placed around the edges. The air was dry and warm. The sound of the wind above and the flickering torch made her feel sleepy—she was too tired and angry to argue anymore. She dropped her bag and herself to the floor then crawled over to the nearest pile of straw.

She couldn't believe how stupid she'd been. After worrying about scaling the giant rock monolith all day she'd failed to notice the moving stairway rising from the trees towards the summit. She stepped aboard the stairway, leaned on the rail and rested her weary body. The stairway slowly carried her to the top of the mountain.

The paddy fields below reminded Beth of the patchwork quilt she had made as a child with her mother. Then she noticed an old lady who looked vaguely familiar gathering rice in one of the fields.

Beth stepped from the staircase at the top and found herself back in the forest. She saw the man who had sold her the tiger bone at Hanoi airport, standing beneath a tree. He wore a tiger skin on his back and a golden rhinoceros horn on his head. He smiled, and bowed his head. She hurried past.

But when the man raised his head his face had changed. Instead of the salesman the face of Li Pang now grinned at her. 'Don't worry, I'll look after you,' he said and laughed.

Beth looked away then ran along a deserted road toward a forest of yellow trees.

What sounded like a million cats meowing echoed through the trees. A brass band played 'The Star Spangled Banner' somewhere in the distance.

As she tried to focus her eyes Beth noticed a tall soldier with his back to her standing on the roof of an old station wagon.

The soldier stood erect holding a machine gun. He suddenly fired a volley of shots, sweeping from side-to-side through the trees. *JAGA—JAGA—JAGA—JAGA—JAGA.*

Beth lifted her hands to her ears, and knelt as the deafening sound penetrated her head. 'Stop!' she cried. 'Stop!'

The ground shook as trees cracked and toppled, splinters of timber whistled overhead and a cloud of dust rose into the air.

The gunfire stopped.

Beth heard the gun fall to the ground. Then silence. She looked up.

The soldier turned to face her. His frowning face seemed so familiar.

'*GRRREARGH!*' A deafening roar exploded. A giant blue tiger stood among the devastation.

Two men were pinned under the front paws of the beast. They struggled and cursed in vain to break free.

An old Chinese man, holding a glowing tiger cub, sat on the blue tiger's back.

Somewhere a bell like an alarm clock rang.

Beth looked up at the soldier, but he was gone.

The old man's movement was that of a time lapsed

image. Every time Beth blinked he was closer. She didn't see him climb from the tiger's back; all she knew was one moment he was there, the next he was right in front of her.

The old man held up the tiger cub. 'Xiao Gong Zhu,' he whispered.

Beth reached out and took the cub. It glowed golden in her hands.

'GRRREARGH!' Another roar.

Beth blinked. The old man was seated on the blue tiger's back again.

The blue tiger moved off, releasing the men from its grip.

One of the men jumped to his feet, and demanded the blue tiger return and fight him.

The other man slowly crawled away whimpering.

Beth looked down at the frightened cub nestling passively in her hands.

The old man's voice whispered in the breeze. 'Xiao Gong Zhu...Xiao Gong Zhu...'

'Beth...Beth...'

Beth lay half-asleep listening as Yu slowly repeated her name. She groaned and opened her eyes as she was gently shaken.

The only light in the cave was from a small fire that Li had lit. Li was busy boiling rice for breakfast.

Beth sat up and touched Yu's arm. 'Yu...what does Xiao Gong Zhu mean?'

'Little Princess,' Yu replied.

'Little Princess?'

Li thrust a cup of green tea in her hand.

The wind howled high above as they sat on the ground eating the rice from small tin dishes, which Li had produced from his backpack.

Li sat quietly scooping rice into his mouth waiting for Beth to ask him what was going on. When she finally did, he nodded and quickly swallowed his food. He explained the reason he hadn't told them too much was for their own safety. 'There are still illegal hunters in these parts who wouldn't hesitate to kidnap and torture us to learn of our destination.' He sipped his tea. 'The route we are following is an ancient and secret one. Its whereabouts have been passed down to only a few chosen people. You will be the first westerner ever to lay eyes upon this place. You must protect its secrets always.'

Beth narrowed her eyes while Yu translated almost as quick as Li spoke. She still hadn't made up her mind whether to trust him yet, but she had to admit it all seemed very exciting. 'Where are we going, Li?'

'How about I show you?' Li said putting the breakfast dishes back in his bag.

Beth sighed and shrugged. 'Whatever.'

Li rearranged the straw and checked round the floor. When he was satisfied, he lit the torch, extinguished the fire, then led the girls towards the back of the cave.

The darkness peeled back along the walls as the light washed it away, illuminating the entrance to a tunnel.

Li led them, single file, into the passage.

Beth's calf muscles soon ached as the sandy ground began to incline.

The sound of the howling wind far above was almost hypnotic as they climbed higher into the rock.

Li's heavy breathing laboured loudly as it lost its rhythm and echoed off the walls.

After almost two hours, Beth needed to rest.

'We're almost there,' Li said hearing Beth's groans.

Beth listened to Yu's translation. 'Yeah, right,' she mumbled.

They reached what seemed to be another dead end. The wind had died down.

Beth and Yu fell against the wall and slipped to the ground, sucking in as much oxygen as they could.

After a few moments rest, Li handed the torch to Yu. He searched the tunnel's end running his fingers along the rock until he found a small recess. A strained grunt echoed down the passage as he jerked his head back and pulled using all his strength. The sand-covered floor quickly absorbed the large drops of sweat which fell from his forehead.

The rock moved slightly. Fingers of sunlight crept around the opening.

Li changed his grip on the rock and pulled harder.

The rock grated and groaned as it slowly opened into the tunnel like the door of a huge vault.

The morning sun cascaded into the entrance.

Beth covered her eyes with her hands until they adjusted to the light.

Li took the torch from Yu, extinguished it and placed it on a small rock alcove just inside the cave. Then he leapt through the exit, and took a deep breath of fresh air.

The girls cautiously followed.

When her eyes finally adjusted to the sunlight, Beth couldn't believe what she saw. Was she still dreaming?