

# Chapter 1

## Day 1 (Afternoon)

Raj had gotten used to it—the odd sensation when the whole body resonates with the vehicle’s shaking, traversing the bumpy gravel roads in and around the park. The SUV tunneled through a patch of elephant grass as it turned from green to a surreal orange, glistening in the afternoon sun. Tyres spluttered pebbles from the edges as he pressed the accelerator, leaving behind Village 8, a minuscule brown dot of *frustration* in a vast expanse of greenery.

Phew! He had never toiled so hard with his persuasive and diplomatic skills. Looking through the dusty windscreen at the narrow dark path ahead, hands steadying the steering wheel, tight fists absorbing the vibration, he reminisced the unproductive interactions with the stubborn settlers. The coolness of the steady breeze rasped against his face. The sun went down further on the horizon, now casting a halo of

melancholic redness on the grasses. He wanted to turn the car around and head straight to his quarters. It had been a long day of counselling a group filled with scepticism, ingrained or fuelled by outsiders—he was not sure.

The headlights shone fleetingly on the animals of twilight, the hares, civets and barking deer, all clamouring for cover. Days are short in January in India's northeast, the region receiving the morning sun's first rays when the rest of the country is still engulfed in hazy darkness.

Another day went by without achieving any new line of sight.

The SUV's body rattled following a sudden grinding sound, and before Raj could realise it, it stopped moving despite his frantic pressing of the accelerator. The shadowy grass swayed lazily on both sides of the road. His car had broken down many times before in his four years of posting at that place. It had often happened inside the national park's core area, in the wilderness. He always had someone, his driver or deputy or an armed guard or one of his anti-poaching crack force members. There the dwellers of the forest always behaved predictably for some reason, but in the fringe areas, near the park's boundary, the conflict zone of men and animals, he had seen both behave edgily. Trying the ignition again, he gave up as the vehicle showed no signs of starting. A sigh escaped his lips as he scanned the locality devoid of any human presence. The undulating grasses on his right merged with the protected woodland; the patch on his left gave way to a tea estate's manicured carpet of green.

*Should he try asking for help from the estate people?  
Where are they?*

He made another attempt at turning the key, only to hear just a persistent spluttering sound. Taking a deep breath, he crouched and got out of the car. No point trying to check the snag by lifting the bonnet; in the receding light, he would not be able to do anything. The fuel meter read full. He had filled the tank the night before and driven straight to the village. The whole day, he had talked with the villagers about the rehabilitation package. His SUV had stood under a banyan tree while the urchins circled it. Raj glanced at the time; it was still a couple of hours to the meeting. Cursing himself for agreeing to Vijay's suggestion of the venue, he locked the car and started walking as the last of the sun's crimson radiance went down on the western horizon. Wisps of fog over the leaf-carpeted path added unhealthy dampness to the chill. In the air filled with the ever-increasing sound of cicadas and calls of the night birds, he sensed a nameless dread floating as he walked the narrow lane. The blades of grass brushed the rough fabric of his half-vest jacket and cargo pants. The swaying grass seemed hungry, as if he was prey to be swallowed. Wrapping the muffler around his head to protect himself from the cold, he dug his hands deep into the pockets, missing the metallic coldness of his 9 mm pistol; he hastened his pace.

Vulture Hill's cliff appeared before him like a dark monster rising in the mist. From the base, an unpaved, winding path through the grassy slope led to a nondescript

anti-poaching patrolling camp—his rendezvous point with the informer, under the shadow of a silk-cotton tree with its branches reaching out like long arms. The road went straight ahead and then took a sharp right, skirting an expanse of the water body. The river breeze from the Brahmaputra flowing a few kilometres to the north, mixed with the dank stink of hyacinth-clogged wetland lying in front of him, touched his face.

A fork of branches loomed high over the camp, like the two extended arms of a witch, reminding him of the stories he had heard from his department colleagues of guards committing suicides and villagers practising weird and secretive rituals. Before they built the house, the spot under the tree had been a site of various shadowy activities and animal sacrifices by those believing in witchcraft and other superstitious practices. People reported finding many human remains, including decapitated bodies, near the hillock. The thoughts made him shiver as darkness engulfed the area. The evening light seeping through the branches played with his senses.

*Where are the guards?*

With two long hours left to go for the meeting, Raj hoped the informer had some worthwhile leads for him. His mobile did not show any signal bars. No way was he going up; let the men return, he decided. An eerie mist had gathered above the swamp in front of him, the park's deepest water body where the water level remained at least a dozen metres deep even during the dry winter months. The bulbous stocks with the

purple flowers stirred a slow refusal to give away their secrets. Hundreds of flying foxes out for the night's hunt blocked the strands of fading lights. Raj sat down on a flat white stone; it felt ice-cold, despite his trousers' thick fabric. Whining mosquitoes around his head formed a cloud as he turned his gaze to the rectangular concrete water tank behind the house. A dark-faced macaque sitting on the corrugated sheet covering the water tank mocked at him before vanishing into the thicket behind. Smoke billowed from the factory; at least some people were working nearby across the lush green carpet of the undulating tea garden behind him while the shadowy woods on his right hummed with uncanny noises.

Another long sigh escaped him as the day passed into tarry darkness. He walked up the hill to the tin-roofed camp, searching for the key in his pocket. A distant noise, more like a rumbling hubbub, drifted to him. An orange halo appeared on an otherwise pitch-dark night, a few kilometres away on the same road he had traversed.

*What is it? Is it a group looking for stray cattle? Is it a group of protesters demanding some compensation?*

Raj pushed the door open, his head still turned to the left, looking into the distance. From the number of flickering torches, he worked out that it was not a bunch of individuals; it had to be a hundred-plus crowd or an entire hamlet. They walked parallel to the park boundary. The mobile still did not show any signal bars.

Rushing inside and switching on the first room's light, he came across two unkempt beds that still had their mosquito

nets drawn. The familiar odour of damp bedding, unwashed clothes and *beedis* assailed his senses. A calendar with the picture of Lord Ganesha jostled for space with a Bollywood heroine's poster on the wall. He trod through the middle room with a single bed, the room doubled as a kitchen, taking care not to trip over the stacks of utensils kept on the floor, towards the last room with the walkie-talkie: his resting room ahead of the meeting.

A cold gust hit his face; the back door was ajar. Muttering curses at the guards, he groped for the switch. The room filled with light. She lay on the bed—an angelic face with high cheekbones, rosy cheeks, full cherry pink lips and kohl-lined eyes. The face emanated serenity, a silver ring on the slightly flat nose accentuating her sensual beauty. She wore a floral white T-shirt and a short blue skirt. Her long black hair was waist length. He noticed her ivory white hands with manicured nails. Her unsoiled feet seemed to have never touched the ground.

The camp's transceiver set was missing from the table. His phone had no signal. He shuddered taking stock of the surreal situation: the marching villagers with their hostile and inflammatory shouting, coming straight towards him at an even quicker pace than before; the missing guards; the out-of-range mobile network; a broken-down vehicle; and a dead girl.

