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Opening extract from

The Sultan's Tigers

Written by

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Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

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THE SULTAN'S TIGERS

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ANDERSEN PRESS • LONDON

First published in 2012 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 84939 454 3

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon CR0 4YY

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'Diamonds,' said Uncle Harvey.

'You wait,' I said.

'It gets better?'

'Much better.'

'Good.' He reached for the next letter in the pile, unfolded the crinkly browned paper and started reading.

I'd already told him about the tiger, but he wanted to read the whole story for himself.

I had told him about Marko too. Listening to my story of a thief breaking into the house and tying me to the chair, Uncle Harvey had smiled. I suppose he thought I was joking around, trying to make my life sound more interesting than it actually was, taking revenge for the fact that I'd missed out on lunch. His smile got wider when I told him about the two thousand Euros. Then I produced the book of letters and the smile was suddenly wiped from his face, replaced by an entirely different expression. I don't know what it was – greed? excitement? – but he glanced at the door to make sure it was closed, then told me to carry on.

Once I'd rattled through the rest of the story, he asked to read the letters. I said he could – on one condition. Whatever happened, whatever we made, two thousand or two million, we would split the proceeds fifty-fifty.

'We'll talk about money later,' my uncle said. 'Let me see the letters first.'

'You can only see them if you agree about the money.'

'I can't agree anything till I've seen the letters.'

'Fine,' I said and folded my arms. 'No deal.'

'Oh, come on, Tom. You trust me, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'So what's the problem?'

'There isn't a problem. I just want you to agree to a fifty-fifty split.'

'What about expenses?'

'We each pay our own.'

My uncle hesitated for a moment and then nodded. He had nothing to lose. He held out his hand for the letters.

As he raced through them, he kept glancing at me, his eyes gleaming, as if he really hadn't expected to be having this much fun today.

I paced restlessly up and down Grandpa's bedroom. I could have gone through the letters myself, pointing out the juicy details to my uncle and filling in the gaps in the story, but he wanted to see it for himself. If he was going to join me in this escapade – if he was going to put up the cash for us to go to India and track down

this tiger – then he had to be sure he wasn't wasting his time and money.

I couldn't have gone there by myself. I didn't have a credit card. I knew nothing about India. But with my uncle's help, I could get there and find the tiger.

And earn a million pounds.

I stared out of the window at the grey mountains and wondered why Grandpa hadn't gone to India himself. Was he too old? Or didn't he have enough money? Something must have stopped him. I would have loved to know what. I would have liked to know how he discovered the letters too. Had he always owned them, but never bothered reading them? Or had he suddenly uncovered them, searching through an old box of junk, and seen immediately what they were worth?

Somehow he must have discovered the value of these letters and made contact with Marko and arranged to sell them. I wondered what price they had actually agreed. Marko must have been lying about the two thousand Euros. He would have thought he could cheat me. Grandpa wouldn't have been so easy.

A voice came from the other side of the room: 'Tom, it's time to go.' Dad had opened the door quietly and was standing in the doorway, his arms folded.

'Go where?' I asked.

'The hotel,' replied my father. 'We'll have supper there, then go to bed and carry on here in the morning. Harvey, where are you staying?'

'I don't know,' said my uncle.

'I can ask at the hotel if they have another room.'

'Don't bother. I'll be fine. I'll just sleep here.'

Dad shrugged his shoulders. 'Whatever you like.' Then he turned to me. 'Come on, Tom.'

'I'd rather stay here too,' I said.

'We're coming back in the morning,' said Dad. 'You can chat to Harvey then.'

'He can stay if he wants to,' said Uncle Harvey.

'That's kind of you,' said my dad. 'But we don't want him running off to South America again.'

'I promise you, Dad, I am not going to run off to South America.'

'I know you're not. But even so, you can come and have supper with your mother and me.'

'Why can't I stay here? I don't want to have to share a room with Jack and Grace. He snores and she'll spend the whole night texting. They won't want to share with me, either. It would be better for everyone if I stayed here.'

'Where would you sleep?'

'On the sofa downstairs.'

'It won't be comfortable.'

'I don't mind. I can sleep anywhere.'

'I don't think it's a very good idea.'

By the way he said it, I knew he was wavering. With a bit more pressure, he might just crumble. He was probably still feeling guilty for banning me from Grandpa's funeral lunch. With any luck, I could play on that guilt and get what I wanted. I put on my best wheedling tone of voice. 'Oh, go on, Dad. You know it

makes sense. Jack and Grace will sleep much better. The room in the hotel won't be big enough for all three of us. Please, Dad.'

Dad looked at his brother. 'Will you look after him?'

'He's much more mature than me.'

'Sadly that's true,' said Dad. He thought for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. 'If Mum says yes, I don't see why not. Come and talk to her. You're probably right about the room. Grace has been complaining about it already. She'll be happy, anyway. Good night, Harvey. See you tomorrow.'

'Night, bro.'

I followed Dad downstairs and we talked to Mum. I could see she didn't like the idea of me staying with Uncle Harvey, but she couldn't find any reason to say no. I fetched my bag from the back of the car, said goodnight to Jack and Grace, promised Mum and Dad that, yes, I would behave myself, and, no, I wouldn't stay up too late, then said goodnight to them too and hurried back upstairs.