

As it gets dark, Dad places the kindling in the fireplace with the bigger logs on the top.

'See if you can find some matches in the kitchen,' he says.

I open drawers and spot a rusty tin, which rattles when I pick it up. There's a pattern engraved on the outside which I trace with my finger. I lift the lid off. Inside is a pile of what look like teeth.

'Dad!' I shout, dropping the tin. Some of the teeth scatter on to the floor. They're curved and pointed.

Not teeth, but claws.

There must be at least fifty of them.

Dad rushes in as I'm peering at them more closely.

'Look at this,' I say. 'What kind of claws are they?'

'I don't know. They look like they've been there for a hundred years,' he says, gathering them up with his hands and dropping them back into the tin. 'Where were they?'

I point to the drawer.

'Come on,' he says, putting them back and firmly shutting the drawer, 'I found some matches on the mantelpiece.'

As I turn something catches my eye outside.

'Look,' I say, tugging Dad's arm.

A green-tinted light shines through the trees in the distance. It bobs up and down, as if it's moving by itself.

Dad checks the front door and bolts it tightly shut. 'It's just a shepherd,' he says.

But there's something about the way the light moves that gives me the creeps. A bird makes a call that sounds like 'toot toot' in the distance. It echoes off the hills around us.

Back in the living room Dad trickles kerosene on the logs and drops a lit match. The fire burns bright for a few seconds before calming down.

We pull our chairs close and soak up the heat. Polly lies on my feet, Joey in my arms.

'We'll sleep in here tonight,' says Dad.

Shadows dance against the stone mantelpiece.

That's when I notice something crawling over the fireplace.

Thick black bodies with curled tails and stingers on the ends. They appear from the cracks in the stones and are lit up by the light of the flames. Scorpions. Heading away from the fire. In seconds they're all over the place. On the wall, the bottom of the fireplace and around sleeping Polly's head on the floor.

I jump on top of the chair with Joey in my arms while Dad runs into the kitchen and returns with a brush and pan. Dad sweeps the scorpions up and drops them out the back door. Some are as long as my palm.

'They're not deadly or anything,' says Grandma, who has come to see what the commotion is about. 'But they'll give you a nice sting if they feel threatened.' She takes a pair of tweezers from her bag and gently picks up the scorpions around Polly one by one, lifting them by their stingers. 'Coming through,' she says as she dangles one in the air on her way out.

I lay a twig beside a smallish scorpion, hoping it will crawl on to the bark, so I can move it to the veranda, but it freezes and raises its stinger at the stick. I look around; most of the scorpions have already hidden. I imagine them lurking under my pillow and shiver.

'Well,' says Dad, checking his chair before sitting back down. 'Maybe we should sleep in the other room after all.'

'There are flies everywhere, and the other rooms smell like mould,' I reply. 'I'd rather sleep outside.'

'No way,' says Dad, crossing his arms. 'There are bears out there.'

'Get stung by scorpions or eaten by bears. Great choice. Thanks, Dad.'

His face crumples for a moment and I feel a twinge of guilt. But only for a second. It was his stupid choice to bring us here.

'I wish I had my tent,' I say.

'You do,' says Dad. 'I packed it for you.'

I stand and rummage through our luggage for my tent. I remember when Mum bought it for me two years ago for my birthday, after I told her I wanted to be a wildlife photographer when I grew up.

'Are you sure?' she had asked. 'You'll have to sit in a hide for days on end, waiting for an animal to appear.'

I finally find it and set it up at the back of the room, away from the fireplace. 'I'm sleeping in here from now on.'

'Do you need anything else, love?' asks Grandma, passing me Mum's quilt.

I shake my head; I don't feel like being around either her or Dad right now.

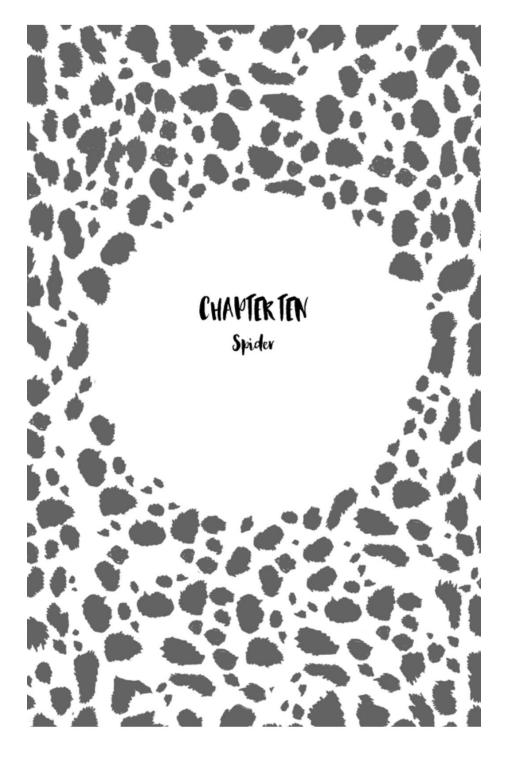
I crawl inside with a torch and curl up with Polly. Making sure there are no bugs inside, I zip the tent up, cutting myself off from it all and praying a scorpion doesn't crawl underneath and sting me through the sleeping mat.

I wrap the patchwork quilt around me. Mum hand stitched the pictures on to it when she was pregnant with me. She began with animals like elephants and tigers, but they turned out as grey rocks and orange dogs, so she moved on to moons, stars and clouds. Of the animals she tried stitching, only the snakes resembled themselves and even they looked a little bit like worms.

WHEN THE MOUNTAINS ROARED

I switch on the torch and the tent glows yellow. The last time I was in this tent I was camping in our garden, trying to capture photos of nocturnal animals like echidnas. I remember the rustling of the Australian bush and later Mum's humming coming from the porch. It was the song she would sing me before we went to sleep. She had a beautiful voice, soft but clean pitched. I poked my head out to tell her she was scaring the animals away, but then I saw that she and Dad were dancing. Their outlines silhouetted as she twirled. So I took a photo of them instead.

I wonder if I'll ever be able to camp by myself again. The last time I did was before Mum went. Before I was afraid of the dark.



'Knock, knock,' says Dad, outside the tent.

For a second I don't know where I am. I open my eyes. Polly is pawing and whining at the entrance. I unzip the tent.

'Any bites or stings?' Dad asks, kneeling in the tent porch.

I shake my head and stretch. I feel as if I've been asleep for days.

'I made you a bottle for this one.' He passes me Joey's pouch.

'Thanks,' I reply, taking the bottle and tilting it towards Joey's mouth. She latches on and slurps the milk.

'I've been into town and got all the supplies we need,' he says excitedly. 'I even got you a present.' He passes me a book. The title says *Flora and Fauna of the Himalayas*. 'Grandma's been cleaning your bedroom. You can move in.'

'How long was I asleep for?' I ask, surprised he's done so much.

'Thirteen hours.' He smiles. 'I woke up early. Probably the jetlag.'

Later, I drag the tent up the stairs and groan when I reach the bedroom. It doesn't look any more exciting in daylight. A makeshift bed sits in the middle of an empty room with peeling white paint on the walls. The cement floor is cold under my feet. I glance out the window. There's nothing but trees outside. No other houses. No people.

Polly cocks her head to the side and places her paw on my shin. She always knows when I'm feeling bad.

'It's all going to be okay,' says Dad, carrying a suitcase with Grandma behind him.

I feel a twinge of irritation. 'Why do you keep saying that?' I ask.

'Because I believe it.'

'You shouldn't,' I snap. I can't help it. All of my misery and frustration and tangled up feelings explode. My words are like arrows directed at Dad. 'You told me our home in Australia would be okay. You told me Mum would be okay. Why do you think this is going to be any different?'

There's a silence that follows. He looks at the floor and sighs. 'I want you to know that I'm trying my best,' he says, gently. 'I hope you can believe that.' He places the new book on the bed and leaves.

I throw myself down on the makeshift bed.

Grandma sits next to me and thinks for a while. 'What about your camera?' she asks.

'What about it?' I reply, turning to look at her deep eyes.

'Could you pretend you're on a research trip for now, as if you've been sent to photograph as many species here as you can? Like your mum did with snakes. After a while it might not feel like you're pretending any more.'

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I grunt back at her. She sighs, ruffles my hair, and leaves.

Grandma's right though. It's what Mum would do. She always made the best of things and I have to believe that even though I'm scared of things, I'm still a bit like her.

I sit up, and jump. On the wall beside me is a giant spider with furry legs. It's definitely a female. They're always bigger. I back away slowly. In Australia there were many venomous spiders. You have to be careful.

I reach for the book at the end of the bed. Flicking through the pages I stop on a picture that looks like the spider.

This house spider's bite isn't harmful to humans and they live for up to eight years. I hold the book up and double check it's the same one.

'You can stay in my room,' I say to her. 'Just keep off the tent.'

She scuttles slowly into the corner as if in response and I give her a sharp nod. We have an agreement.

'I'll call you Georgina,' I say and take a photograph of her.

I wonder if Praveen knows more about the spiders and wish he would come back and show me around. There's something about his smile and the way he cares for his goat kids that makes me want to see him again.