Chapter One

The stillness of the dark jungle seemed unbearable to Ya. For three hours Ya and his men had been waiting to ambush a particular tigress. They could hear the rustle of the dry leaves on the forest floor caused by the movements of the two cubs. The tigress was off hunting. It became a symbol of death to Ya's men. During the last few months, Ya lost five of his men to this prowling death while felling the Sundari trees. In each case, the tigress picked the most delicate moment to strike. It was usually when the poachers did not have their weapons in their hands while responding to the call of nature, thus catching the poachers off guard. In five to ten seconds, the apex predator of the forest snatched and dragged the prey to the adjacent canal connected to the River Mongla, only a few miles to the west. By the time the incident drew the attention of the associates of the unfortunate victim, the tigress would disappear with its prey. Ya's men were not sure why the tigress chose to hunt them instead of its usual prey which were in abundance in that particular region of the forest.

The closest village was roughly thirty miles from the spot. The villagers were mostly illegal loggers, poachers and honey collectors, albeit a few of them were farmers. A transit point for these clandestine traders and the honey collectors, the Shoronkhola Bazaar stood on the banks of the River Bhola. The poachers would store their bloody collections in the flimsy wooden hovels of the bazaar before transporting them to the urban markets across the country. Often, these men remained in the jungle for weeks or months at a time. They wouldn't return until the collection had reached the target set before getting into the deadly forest.

This season, Ya's gang boasted well over fifteen men. Usually, it hardly ever exceeded ten. With extra hands, Ya was determined to take care of the threat which had been hampering the gang's clandestine activities for the last few months. They set a trap to capture or kill the tigress. As bait, Ya's men left the carcass of a goat on a net hidden underneath a layer of dry leaves to lure the tigress to the spot. The stench could be detected from quite a distance. At any moment the hunter, which had by then become the hunted, would arrive at the scene. Ya checked the time on his android mobile. It was already quarter to five. They had been waiting since two in the morning.

"Most probably she isn't around," Mintu, Ya's trusted lieutenant, whispered impatiently. "If she had been around, couldn't have missed the stench of the bait," he added.

"We still have more than an hour before dawn," Ya remarked.

"Usually, tigresses don't eat their prey too close to their cubs. They know the danger of it. Perhaps we should relocate the trap away from the canal," Mintu suggested.

Ya remained silent for a while, and then said, "Alright, let's reset the trap deep inside the jungle." Upon saying this, he turned on the built-in torch and gestured to his men who were on the ground, waiting for the signal to pull the rope. Ya and Mintu were on a thick bough of a Sundari tree. Among his men, Mamun stepped forward to remove the carcass, and just then, like