

# TIGER SKIN RUG

JOAN HAIG

pokey  
hat 

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FOR ANDREW AND ADRIAN  
AND 'THE COUSINS'

IN MEMORY OF AUNTIE LILIAN, WHOSE  
UNTOLD STORY SPARKED THIS ONE.



**THE TIGER SKIN RUG IS SUCH A CHARMING  
STORY, FULL OF MAGIC, HOPE AND  
FRIENDSHIP. IT WILL FLY (LIKE A TIGER)  
OFF THE SHELVES!**

**MELVIN BURGESS**



**'A VIVID AND WARM-HEARTED TALE WHERE  
THE FAMILIAR MEETS THE MAGICAL.  
FROM A SCOTTISH VILLAGE TO AN INDIAN  
MOUNTAIN, FROM THE BACK STREETS OF  
LONDON TO THE PALACES AND SEWERS OF  
MUMBAI, JOAN HAIG EXPLORES THE POWER  
OF LEGENDS AND STORIES, FAMILIES AND  
FORGIVENESS. A NEW VOICE YOU WILL  
WANT TO HEAR MORE OF!'**

**JOAN LENNON**



**'BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN; SHIMMERS WITH  
MAGIC. BE TRANSPORTED ON A THRILLING  
ADVENTURE TO THE VIVIDLY EVOKED  
BACKSTREETS AND PALACES OF INDIA.'**

**LINDSAY LITTLESON**



**'A BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN TALE OF  
MAGIC AND ADVENTURE, WITH HIGHLY  
RELATABLE CHARACTERS WHOSE  
DIVERSE CULTURES ARE SKILFULLY  
WOVEN TOGETHER IN A WONDERFULLY  
IMAGINATIVE PLOT.'**

**VICTORIA WILLIAMSON**



**'SPELLBINDING. THRILLING.  
HEARTWARMING.  
I DEVoured IT IN ONE GULP.'**

**JENNI SPANGLER**





## A NEW HOUSE

My cricket coach said I was tall for my age, but the first time I stood in front of our new house, I felt as small as a wicket stump. If I'd known then what was inside the house, I would have felt even smaller. As it was, a wicket stump was miserable enough.

We'd just arrived in Scotland, tumbling out of the big red car after sixteen sweaty hours on aeroplanes all the way from India. Me—Lal Patel—my little brother Dilip, Mum and my grandmother, Naniji.

My father had picked us up from the airport. He looked paler than normal, but he was the same burly Baba, bouncing like a rubber ball. He'd gone ahead of us to sort things out, like buying a big red car and finding a house to live in.

"I've found the perfect place," he announced as he buckled his seatbelt. "First class."

I was sure it would be one of the slick city apartments

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that Mum had spent hours and hours admiring on property websites. But as we drove from the airport, roads getting narrower and quieter, Baba broke the news. The house wasn't an apartment, and it wasn't in the city. "Don't worry," he said, "you'll love it—it's a bungalow in a nice, little town."

Nobody spoke. Not an apartment? Not in the city? Naniji rolled her eyes. It was no secret that in Naniji's opinion, Baba was a buffoon. The marriage wasn't a good match, she always complained; Mum was better than him in every way. I cringed—Naniji didn't think Baba could be trusted to choose which movie to watch on a Friday night and now he'd chosen the wrong place to live.

"And guess what?" he blundered on. "There's a whole acre of garden, and the house comes fully furnished."

"An acre?" shrieked Mum, whose idea of gardening was growing cress in cotton wool. "Fully furnished?"

"Yes!" Baba punched the steering wheel. "The house belonged to an elderly spinster who died without anyone to give things to. So, everything inside was included in the sale. It's a bargain!"

Naniji groaned. Undeterred, Baba grinned round to me and Dilip.

"And there are some superior items in the house, my boys, very superior indeed. It's like a museum."

I smiled weakly as if agreeing that, on some planet,



a museum was the perfect place to live in. Leaning my forehead on the cold car window, I watched raindrops form deltas on the glass. Outside, hundreds of Christmas trees tapered off to bare, purple hills. A church steeple appeared up ahead and soon we were chugging through the main street of the town. Baba steered us from its old-fashioned shops and touristy tearooms and turned into a leafy avenue. And there it was, the ‘perfect place’. The big red car crunched up the drive to where I now stood, small as a wicket stump.

Naniji let out a cackle of unexpected glee. The bungalow wasn’t an ordinary bungalow. It was huge and looming, with a deep verandah wrapped around its side like old houses in India, and a towering front door. The name ‘Greystanes’ was etched onto a pillar and a date—1836—chiselled into the stone above. Baba brought out a ring of chunky keys, unlocked the door and waved us all inside.

Before anyone else had a chance, Mum raced in. She ran about the place, her arms flailing. The more she saw, the more she liked, and the more she liked, the more she shouted to Naniji.

*“Look at the size of this room!”*

*“Have you seen the roll-top bath?”*

Naniji went dashing after her, the scarf of her *salwaar kameez* flapping bright colours as she streaked from room to room. Baba traipsed in and out with suitcases,

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tripping over Dilip as he marched around pretending to be a storm-trooper.

My feet didn't march. They were stuck like gum to the hallway floor. I looked around me. A glass-domed ceiling threw dusty light onto fussy, flowery walls. Baba ruffled my hair.

"Come on in, my boy, welcome home!"

But it wasn't home.

Home was India, lush and green, in a modern housing compound with polished tiled floors and the top of a mango tree scratching the balcony. Home was my best friend, Ajay, and cricket fields and weekly trips to shiny shopping plazas. Home was NOT this big, old house in Scotland.

A brass plaque on a door to my right read, 'Drawing Room'. I imagined it stuffed with pencils and felt-tip pens. I wanted to find out what was inside, so I unstuck my feet, stepped closer and put my hand on the doorknob. *Click.*

Icy air licked up my shins. The room was dim, curtains drawn. Fumbling for a light switch, I heard the babble of everyone else coming up behind me.

"Lal!" they called, and, "Ooh, the 'Drawing Room'.." Mum said as they all bustled forwards and pushed me in. The babbling stopped. The room was cold and murky; a sour smell of old age and rotten flowers pinched our noses. And then I saw it, right in the middle of the room

and staring across the darkness—a tiger.

It was a dead tiger, of course. Its skin was flat on the floor, dull and covered in cracks and scabs of dust. Its hideous head was propped up on its chin, big jowls set in a snarl. Its clouded glass eyes looked wrong. The rug looked wrong. The whole house and town and country were wrong, wrong, wrong.

Naniji squeezed my shoulder.

“Let’s have some daylight,” she said, sidestepping around the rug to tug at the curtains. A flutter of silvery house moths caught a sunbeam. Naniji opened the tall glass door and Dilip budged past me, out into the green morning. I shrank back to the hallway.



I didn’t imagine I’d see anything creepier than a stuffed tiger head that day, but I was mistaken. That afternoon, Mum and Baba went out shopping. Dilip was playing around the place and Naniji was hanging things up—strings of lucky beads, a picture of the Hindu god *Ganesh*.

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I hauled a suitcase to the bedroom. The walls were sunflower yellow. Two singles were made up, side by side. I lifted my case onto one and the mattress sagged. I sat next to it; I didn't feel like unpacking. What was it Baba had said? *Some very superior items in the house, very superior indeed.* Yes, I thought darkly, like dead tigers.

I wondered what Ajay would be up to now. Kitting up for cricket, probably. This was the first year I wouldn't be round at his house to binge on televised test matches and big bowls of popcorn...

Suddenly, I felt horribly alone. I went to find the others. Dilip and Naniji were in the kitchen, emptying cupboards.

"Have you been exploring?" Naniji asked.

"Not really," I shrugged.

"You should explore. Get to know the place." Naniji held up a dish cloth. "Or would you rather help me clean crockery?"

I turned on my heel and left the kitchen. I ran my fingers along a velvet settee in the study, admired cobwebs in the bathroom, and peeked into an airy dining room. I ended up at the front of the house, in the big entrance hallway and back at the door to the Drawing Room. I didn't want to go in there, didn't want to see the ugly tiger rug again, but I couldn't help it. It felt like something was pulling me towards it and before I knew

what I was doing I'd pushed on the door and stepped in.

There was a clock on the mantelpiece, its broken hands hanging limp at the 'VI'. A stuffed ferret gawked down at me. I glared back and walked over to an upright piano in the corner of the room. The ivory keys were cold and rang an eerie discord that lingered even after I'd stopped pressing down. Two painted chests had been stacked against the back of a leather armchair. I ran my finger through the dust on top of one, but I didn't dare open it to see what was inside. Instead, I read the titles of books in a glass-fronted bookcase, faded novels arranged in alphabetical order: Kipling, Lofting, Nesb—  
BANG!

The door slammed shut, and I jumped.

"Just a draught," I said to myself, though it had given me a fright. The doors to the garden were still open from earlier, so I closed them. When I turned back round, a little TV caught my eye. It was plugged in not far from the fireplace and at the tail end of the tiger skin rug. I knelt in front of it and pushed the power button. Nothing happened. I reached over and fiddled with some of the wires. The wooden boards pressed hard against my knees like the wrong size of shin guards.

"Come on, switch on, old thing," I whispered. "Come to life." I pressed the button a second time and this time something began to flicker in the grainy screen. "Yes!" I leaned back to see.

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The image was hard to make out. There wasn't any sound, not even the hiss of static. Just shadowy lines, snake-like, moving from side to side. I switched the TV off and back on again. A little blue light twinkled and disappeared. Broken, I thought, and switched it off. But the picture in the screen didn't go away. The slithering thing was still there.

I squinted closer and froze.

The image wasn't coming from the television. It wasn't a broadcast. It was a reflection. Behind me, something was moving. Something on the floor behind me. And it kept on moving, getting closer—slithering, writhing, swelling. My shoulders pinched upwards, I took a deep breath, and I turned my head from the screen to see what was there.

Nothing. There was nothing there. That is, except the tiger skin rug, rigid and still. I darted my eyes back to the TV screen. Nothing there either, just a dusty reflection of myself.

This place was creepy. I got up and tiptoed to the nearest door—the one to the garden. I looked back at the space where something had moved—to where the rug lay. I got out and closed the door, making sure it was shut fast. And then I sprinted, faster than any home run I've ever made, running and running until I got to the other side of the house and could see, through the kitchen window, Dilip and Naniji hanging up garlands

of plastic flowers.

“Lal, you look like you’ve seen a ghost!” Naniji said when I flew in. I opened my mouth to reply but no words came out. I rushed to her, breathing in the scent of safety and her fruity new perfume from Duty Free. Just then, Mum clattered through the other door, arms full of curious packets and tins from the grocery store, and a takeaway meal.

“Help me with these, will you, Lal?”



“What do you think of the house, boys?” Baba asked later on as we sat at the kitchen table eating dinner.

“I like it,” said Dilip. “Except for the freaky tiger. Why did the old lady have that?”

I swallowed my mouthful of garlic bread and looked at Baba.

“Ah, yes,” Baba said. “Well, the old lady, Miss Will was her name—”

“It’s not to our taste,” Naniji cut in firmly in Hindi, “but some people enjoy that sort of thing. Like eating chicken,” and Naniji (a strict vegetarian) frowned pointedly at Baba who was now tucking merrily into a drumstick.



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That first night in Greystanes, I lay awake for ages. It wasn't jet-lag or the new-out-of-the-packet sheets, or even Dilip's snoring. It was the tiger skin rug.

At first, it had made me feel sort of sad, like that famous picture Ajay showed me once—a cartoon from the olden days of the Raj when India was part of the vast British empire. It was a cartoon of a 'British' lion attacking and defeating an Indian tiger. At first, the rug had made me feel like that: defeated. But now, other feelings had crept in and taken over. Naniji had been joking when she said I'd looked like I'd seen a ghost, but it wasn't funny.

In fact, it was deadly serious. Greystanes was a haunted house.





## A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

“Be careful!” I shouted at Dilip, who was teetering on a high wall. He always did crazy things like that. We were visiting a castle. Another one. The Patel family’s third full day in Scotland and our third castle visit.

“I can see the moat!” Dilip yelled. I picked my way up the mound, clutching rocks and tufts of grass. The wall was built into the slope and when I stepped out onto it, my knees went all giddy. Baba jogged over, offering a hand. I took it and, when I was steady, I straightened right up and peered over to the other side. A lawn slanted down to a turret and a brown crescent of water.

They all looked the same, castles. Every time we reached one in our big red car, Dilip complained it wasn’t like he’d imagined. It wasn’t like I imagined either. Not a king, queen or knight in sight. Most of the time, there was barely any castle in sight either—just broken-down walls, sometimes even rubble. Grey stones and grey

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skies—nothing like India’s rich greens and gleaming golds.

It started to drizzle. It drizzled a lot that first week. Drizzle (which was *not* like tropical rain) was as annoying as a swarm of mosquitoes—or worse, Scottish midges. Dilip drizzled tears at bedtime—never a downpour, never for long. There was a pile of American comic books in our room. We’d prop up in bed on plump feather pillows and I would read aloud how cartoon heroes with superpowers fought off villains. We’d seen one or two of the movies and played some computer games, but the comics were different: the drawings were old-fashioned and the pages were soft like cloth. In the mornings, when I woke up, Dilip would be curled up at my feet. I tried to make him laugh. “Greystanes,” I’d say. “Like *grey stains*”.



“I’m going to make a fire in the Drawing Room on Saturdays,” Mum announced at the end of the week, “to keep out the damp.”

I hadn’t been in the Drawing Room since seeing the spooky reflection in the television—and I wasn’t about to start hanging out in there. So, on that first Saturday, as soon as the logs were crackling, I went back to bed. Mum and Naniji were playing cards, Baba was reading his newspaper and Dilip was curled up on the tiger skin

rug. From then on, if I couldn't find Dilip anywhere else, as sure as a cricket strike, he'd be sitting next to the tiger's head.

I was worried about him being in that room so much, but before I got a chance to warn him about the ghost, a second strange thing happened.



Mr. Stirling, the tall bald man from next door, had popped over with a box of eggs from his own chickens and Mum had invited him to stay for tea. She brewed up deep-tan *chai* and set a small cup in front of him, a filmy skin of milk floating on top.

I watched Mr. Stirling struggle to swallow it. And I watched Naniji nod and smile and form opinions, even though I knew she would barely catch a word of what was being said.

"Wonderful house," Mr. Stirling smiled. "Miss Will didn't invite folks in, not after she fell ill."

"Fell ill?" asked Mum.

"Yes," Mr. Stirling shook his head. "She lost her mind, I'm afraid. Poor woman."

Mr. Stirling and Mum chatted for ages. After a while, I slipped out to the bedroom and settled on my bed, balancing a stack of old stamp albums on my knees. Foreign drums, battleships, famous people's heads...

Suddenly, the door punched open and Dilip flew in.

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He looked a bit crazy—scared and excited at the same time.

“What? What is it, Dilip?”

“The tiger. The tiger, come and see, come and see the tiger!”

I swung round and heard the albums thud to the floor. I didn’t pick them up but chased after Dilip, who was already halfway down the corridor. I followed him through to the hallway and into the Drawing Room.

“Oh,” Dilip sounded flat. “It’s stopped.”

“What’s stopped? What happened?” But as Dilip crouched down, eyeballing the rug, I knew.

“Look!”

At first, I didn’t see anything at all. Then spokes of dusty light fell through the tall glass doors and streaked across the tiger skin, and I swear the stripes rippled slightly, that its limp limbs twitched. It was dim in the room, but there it was again, a muscular movement from inside the rug. The bands on the tiger’s tail began to slither, like the reflection on the old television, but real this time. Prickles came over my whole body. And then a rain cloud crossed the sun and the light raced away.

“Did you see it?” Dilip’s eyes were wide.

“It’s just a trick of the light,” I said. The prickles had gone but my heart was beating on the outside of my chest. “I’m getting out of here. Come on, Dilip, come with me.”

“No, Lal, wait, you won’t believe what happened. The tiger rug, it started to move—”

“I’ve seen it before; I saw it first! Play in a different room, it’s weird in here.”

“But Lal—”

“Stop it, Dilip! It’s creeping me out. Don’t play in the Drawing Room any more.”

From the hallway we heard a scuffle—Mr. Stirling was leaving. I put my finger up to my lips: the last thing I wanted was Mum asking questions. As soon as the front door clunked shut, I darted, my cheeks burning, back to the bedroom.

I sat back on the bed with the albums, but the stamps swam into a blurry puddle of colours on the page. What was in that room? Why had I blocked out what Dilip had been trying to say? Again, I knew the answer—Dilip had seen some sort of ghost, too. Maybe crazy old Miss Will was haunting the place, playing tricks with the old rug?

Suddenly, it was like a lightbulb pinged on over my head. I had the best idea. If Greystanes was already ‘occupied’, so to speak, then we couldn’t possibly live here. Mum would freak out and Naniji would curse her lucky beads (and probably curse Baba). We’d all have to pack up and go back to India. It was obvious that the place already had a ghostly tenant.

All I had to do was prove it.