

Tania Gets Lost



By Kanika G

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An Interesting Discovery

"Tania, don't you want to take a nap?" Mama called out.

"No Mama. I'm not sleepy. You know, I don't usually sleep in the afternoon." Tania replied.

"Yes, but I thought this morning's trek would have worn you out. See, Sonia is fast asleep." Mama said pointing to baby Sonia on her bed.

"Tanisha and I are not at all sleepy Mama. This place is so exciting. We want to do some exploring. Can we do that now, Mama?"

"I have no idea how you have so much energy, but if you feel up to it, I don't see why not. Have fun. Papa and I are off to bed. I'm sure Tanisha's parents will want some rest too." Mama yawned and headed for her bedroom.

Tania went to find Tanisha. Their families were vacationing together in a cottage in Gethia, a small town near Nainital. Their parents had rented out a quaint, three-bedroom, hill top cottage with a yard for a week in the middle of May.

Tania's parents occupied the bedroom on the top floor of the cottage and baby Sonia slept with them. The room opened out to a large terrace, where Sonia enjoyed running around and playing with her cars and blocks. Tanisha's parents had the bedroom on the floor below to themselves. The balcony there had a gorgeous view of the lush green hills.

Tanisha's sister Trisha had not joined them on the holiday, because she was busy studying for an entrance exam. So, Tania and Tanisha got to share the third bedroom on the lowest floor. It was connected to a small game room with cupboards full of toys, boardgames and books. The game room had a door that opened out directly to the backyard. The girls were thrilled with the arrangement.

The two families had arrived at the cottage a few days earlier. They had been boating at Nainital lake, an eighteen kilometer drive from the cottage.

This morning, they had followed a winding mud path, that led to a fairly high peak with a panoramic view. On one was the town of Nainital. A collage of quaint houses, temples and building complexes interspersed by patches of green forest clothed the slopes of the undulating hills. On the other side, raw nature prevailed, offering an enthralling view of steep slopes adorned by tall sturdy evergreens, the timeless guardians of the mountainside.

Sonia had not been able to manage the entire walk on her own, in spite of being quite eager. She was too little. "In another year perhaps." Mama had said.

"Yes, when she is four and a half." Papa had added. "Tania had done her first difficult trek on her own at that age." He had recalled.

So the grownups had taken turns at carrying Sonia. Tanisha's mother in particular was thrilled. "With Trisha all grown up, and Tanisha already eight, I miss carrying a baby." She had admitted.

That's probably why the grownups are so tired today, Tania thought, as she went downstairs to her room. Tania looked around the room, but Tanisha wasn't in, so she peeked in to the game room. There, she noticed that the door to the backyard was open. At once, Tania knew where Tanisha was. She must be playing with Cleo.

Tania stepped out in to the yard, and sure enough, Cleo and Tanisha were running up and down the yard together. Tania laughed at the sight.

Cleo, short for Cleopatra, was an eight month old brown, furry puppy who lived on the property and belonged to the caretaker of the cottage. As soon as Cleo noticed Tania, she dashed towards her. She jumped up and hugged Tania with her front paws, while Tania held Cleo's head in her hands and petted her. "I can't believe you were scared of this adorable puppy." Tania said to Tanisha.

"I had never played with a dog before, and she just jumped on me." Tanisha protested. "I was startled. But she is too nice. Even Sonia lets Cleo climb all over her and isn't a bit scared any more. I hope my parents let me get a dog when we are back in Mumbai."

The girls played with Cleo for some time, and then Tania remembered why she was looking for Tanisha. "Hey my parents are taking a nap with Sonia. They are exhausted from the walk this morning."

"So are mine. Sonia is getting quite heavy, isn't she?" Tanisha observed.

Tania nodded. "Yeah. It's difficult for me to carry her now. Anyway, would you like to do some exploring?"

"Sure. But why don't we begin inside? I found a chest of drawers in the game room. It has all kinds of weird stuff in it." Tanisha said leading Tania to the drawers.

"Really? What kind of stuff?" Tania asked opening one of the drawers. It was filled with batteries, wires, plugs, a roll of string and some office supplies. "Looks like Arthur Weasley's treasure chest." She laughed. Tania had recently read a few of the *Harry Potter* books.

Tanisha opened a drawer full of papers and was examining them. "Hey! Look at this!" She exclaimed.

"What?" Tania asked, curious to know why Tanisha was so excited.

Tanisha showed Tania a sketchy map of the property with a few paths veering off the ends. "Oh cool. Not as awesome as the *Marauder's Map*," Tania remarked unable to resist yet another Harry Potter reference, "but see that path goes to the small inn next door. So we can use it to fetch our Frisbee." Tania's eyes gleamed.

"Super! The guard at the gate was such a grouch. He wouldn't even let us in. I bet he doesn't know about this path, and if I estimate correctly, our Frisbee has fallen a few meters away from where this path joins up with the inn's grounds." Tanisha said tapping a spot on the map.

"Oh. In that case, why didn't we see it yesterday?" Tania was puzzled. "Let's go take a look at it." She suggested.

As suggested by the map, the girls went to the north end of the yard to look for the path. But they couldn't see it. Suddenly, Cleo came charging out of nowhere and pounced on Tania, wagging her tail gleefully.

Taken by surprise, Tania lost her balance and fell down. "Cleo, you're like a tidal wave." Tania complained, sitting on the ground checking for bruises. Cleo did not understand a word Tania said, but tried to lick the spots Tania was examining.

"All right Cleo. I can't really be angry with you. You're just too cute. No wonder they call it a puppy face. Sonia is an expert at using it too."

"Are you hurt, Tania?" Tanisha asked, sitting down in front of her.

"No. I'm fine." Tania said looking at Tanisha. "Oh wait!"

"What happened? Are you bleeding?" Tanisha was alarmed by Tania's sudden change in tone and expression.

"No, but I think I found our path." Tania was looking through a gap in the thick bushes just over Tanisha's shoulder.

The trees and bushes were so thick, that the path was barely visible, but being small, the girls could access it. They pushed the branches apart, slipped through and returned with the Frisbee. "Ha! Mr. Grumpy McGee. We got our Frisbee, in spite of you!" Tanisha did a little jig.

"So, do you want to check out the other paths on the map?" Tania asked, hoping to see something more exciting there. Visions of discovering secret passages and underground tunnels danced before her eyes. The cottage looked so much like something out of an Enid Blyton book, the idea grew on her.

"Yes, let's do that." Tanisha replied, feeling equally excited.

The girls opened up the map and it wasn't long before Tania spotted something peculiar. It showed a path with a tiny label, *3Km to Nainital lake*.

"Gosh, can you believe that?" Tania eyes widened, as she pointed at it.

"That's impossible!" Tanisha exclaimed bending her head to look more closely at the map. "We had to drive eighteen kilometers to get there yesterday . It took us almost an hour." The girls looked at each other, puzzled.

"We can explore the path and check it out." Tania suggested.

"You mean show it to our parents, and try it for our morning walk tomorrow?" Tanisha asked.

"No. I mean explore it on our own." Tania clarified. "Won't it be an awesome discovery? With some practice, we can walk to Nainital lake in a little more than an hour! If we tried hard, I guess we could even race a car."

"You want to leave the property alone? I don't think we are allowed to do that." Tanisha objected.

"Come on, Tanisha." Tania urged. "It will be a fun adventure. I am sure we will be safe if we take a mountain path. There are no cars on it to get run over or anything." Tania had been reading about kids having adventures since she was five. Now that she saw the possibility of her own adventure, she simply could not resist.

"Should we leave now?" Tanisha asked getting swept away by Tania's enthusiasm.

Tania thought about it for a moment. "No, not today. I think I hear Sonia waking up. So our parents will be up soon."

"I heard our parents planning a trip to Sat Tal tomorrow." Tanisha recalled. "They are seven interconnected lakes. We'll be walking there

from lake to lake and doing pedal boating too. So, I bet our parents and Sonia will sleep a good long time in the afternoon. We can go for our adventure then."

"Perfect!" Tania agreed. "We'll plan it properly tonight and take some snacks with us too. We'll have an adventure just like the kids in the *Barney Mystery Series* I am reading right now." She added in a whisper, as she heard her mother approaching.

Late Night Whispers

"It's almost tea-time girls." Mama announced, entering the room. "So what have you two been up to this afternoon? Did you find anything exciting? Secret passages, perhaps?" Mama wagged her eyebrows and smiled.

Tania was startled for a moment. Could Mama read her mind? Then she remembered telling Mama, she was planning to explore the cottage in the afternoon.

"Oh, we found a secret path alright!" Tania said. Tanisha stared at her in horror. Was Tania giving their secret away?

"Oh, really?" Mama crossed her arms and raised one eyebrow, waiting for Tania to continue. Tanisha waited with bated breath to see where this was going.

Tania dived behind the bed and picked up something from the floor. She held it up in front of Mama's face. "Ta-da!" She sang, flourishing it around.

"Nice. I see you talked Grumpy McGee in to letting you get your Frisbee back." Mama smiled.

"Nope!" Tanisha chimed in, excited. She realized what Tania was up to. She was the telling Mama bits of their afternoon discoveries, that had nothing to do with their plans for the next day. But, in her excitement, Tanisha forgot to be careful. "We found a secret path to the inn," she blurted out, "and retrieved our Frisbee. Grumpy McGee doesn't know a thing." Tanisha clapped her hands in glee.

"But how did you find this secret path?" Mama asked, and Tanisha bit her lip.

Before she could stammer out a reply, Tania jumped in. "It was all

thanks to Cleo." She said beaming at the puppy who had just wandered in with a pine cone in her mouth, and triggered an idea that Tania hoped would save the day.

"Cleo?" Mama asked. "Did she show you the path?"

"Not quite. You see, when Cleo saw me in the yard, she jumped on to me. I was so startled, I fell down. That's when I saw a path through a low hole in the bushes. It's not really visible unless you look through the hole at just the right angle from the right place. We were lucky to find it." Tania explained. "Good girl Cleo." She added petting the puppy.

Tanisha marveled at Tania for being completely truthful with her mother, and yet deftly rescuing their secret, after she herself had almost ruined it. She needed to learn this particular skill from Tania.

"Are those hot *samosas* I smell?" Tania asked, wriggling her nose as she sniffed at the air.

"Yes. That's what I came to get you for. The caretaker has made us hot *samosas* and *jalebis* for tea." Mama barely finished her sentence before the girls dashed off to the coffee table to attack the food. By the time Mama got there, the girls had already finished half their first *samosa*. Their sticky fingers indicated they had downed a few *jalebis* too.

Sonia ignored the *samosas*. She loaded her plate with a mountain of *jalebis* and scampered off to a corner to enjoy them undisturbed. A few minutes later, Cleo arrived sniffing around for some treats. Sonia had just licked her fingers clean of the delicious sweet syrup. She stuck her tongue out at Cleo, and everyone burst out laughing. Tania felt sorry for Cleo and gave her a bite of her last *jalebi*.

After tea, everyone got together in the living room to play *Pictionary*. Sonia wandered off to play with Cleo.

When Tania, Tanisha and their parents finished with *Pictionary*, they moved on to charades. Tanisha's deliberately exaggerated gestures,

when she acted out her clues, were amusing and had every one in splits. "I think you've found your calling as a comic, dear." Her mother said between gasps of laughter.

It was perhaps because they were all laughing so hard, that they did not notice the noise coming from one of the upstairs rooms. Tanisha's father was the first to notice that something was wrong, when he saw a brown blur dash across the room. Then everyone saw Sonia running after it, waving her fists and shouting, "Come back with it Cleo. That's mine."

Mama and Papa dashed after Sonia to find out what she was so upset about. Everyone else followed. Mama finally caught up with Sonia and Cleo in the yard, where Cleo was trying to chew up something shiny. Mama realized what it was. She told Papa, and he held Cleo gently, but firmly. Then, Mama managed to force the shiny object out of Cleo's mouth. Cleo barked angrily, but Papa was able to gradually calm her down.

When Tania saw what Mama was holding, she gasped. "Oh my goodness! It's a chocolate bar. Isn't that bad for dogs?"

Mama nodded grimly. "Fortunately, the shiny wrapping wrapper was tough and Cleo got very little out of it. Sonia you shouldn't give Cleo chocolates. They are bad for her. They will make her very sick."

"I did not give Cleo chocolate." Sonia cried, outraged. "I gave her other things. She took the chocolate."

"What do you mean you gave her other things?" Papa asked, alarmed.

Mama and Papa took Sonia and went up to their room. Tania followed them, and Tanisha and her family returned to the living room.

When Tania reached her parents room, she had to suppress a laugh. A hair brush, a shaving brush, a small container of Vaseline, a medicine bottle, a scrunchie, and a tennis ball, all lay chewed up on the floor, full of doggy drool. Mama and Papa stared at the sight in dismay.

"I gave her other things to play with." Sonia complained. "But she took my chocolate. I want my chocolate back." Sonia cried.

"Sonia, you took our things without asking us, and let Cleo mess them up." Mama's eyes flashed. "Cleo saw you give her other things from the dressing table and thought she could take anything from there. It serves you right she took your chocolate without your permission. Perhaps, now you can understand how we feel about you giving our stuff to Cleo to mess with, without our permission."

"Sorry Mama, Papa and Tania." Sonia said, looking around at the mess. "I was just having fun with Cleo. I did not think about your things being spoiled."

"Make sure you don't give Cleo any chocolate." Papa added. "It's really bad for her."

"Now help us clean this up." Mama said, her tone softening.

"Yes Mama." Sonia nodded.

Cleo had punctured a hole in the Vaseline container and some drool had got inside. It was beyond rescue, and Mama had to throw it away. Tania's scrunchie was too nibbled up to be of any use, but Tania put it away on the bathroom window sill. She decided to let Cleo have it.

Mama washed her hair brush, and Papa cleaned out his shaving brush.

Fortunately, the medicine bottle was made of glass so Cleo couldn't poke holes in to it. The label was destroyed, and Tania volunteered to make a neat new label for it and stick it on. She washed and dried the bottle before doing that. Sonia washed out the tennis ball and left it to dry on the terrace.

When everything was cleaned and put away, Sonia looked miserable. Tania felt sorry for her and gave her a hug. "If you want to give Cleo something to play with, you can give her pine cones." Tania suggested. "There are loads of them lying around on the yard. I bet she'll love

them."

Sonia brightened up and looked at Mama and Papa. "Can I do that?" She asked.

Mama and Papa smiled. "Yes, of course you can. Tania that's a really good idea." Mama said, and Papa patted Tania on the back.

"Thank you Tania. Thank you for the idea." Sonia was thrilled. "I'll go get some pine cones." She added and dashed off to the yard.

Tania and her parents returned to the living room. "Is everything alright?" Tanisha's mother asked, concerned.

"Yes." Mama sighed. "We need to buy some Vaseline tomorrow, but everything else is fine."

"Why? What happened to your Vaseline?" Tanisha's father asked, mystified.

Mama told everyone what had happened upstairs, and Tanisha and her mother burst in to a fit of giggles. "I'm so glad Sonia is outside and can't hear us. It would never do to laugh in front of her, but it's just so funny." Tanisha's mother said, wiping tears of laughter. Her giggles were infectious, and everyone else joined in. Tania was relieved because she too had been dying to laugh for a while.

"Dinner is ready." The caretaker called out loudly, trying to get their attention.

"Oh my goodness! Is that the time?" Tanisha's father exclaimed, sobering up right away.

Just then Sonia arrived with her arms full of pine cones, looking very pleased. She put away her treasure and joined everyone at the dining table. They enjoyed a scrumptious dinner of slow cooked mutton curry and mixed vegetables with a strong gingery flavor, accompanied by hot *rotis* and steaming rice.

Cleo arrived just as they were finishing up, and Papa handed her some mutton bones. She chomped them up in a jiffy, and then licked Papa's hand enthusiastically.

"Papa is it okay to give Cleo mutton bones?" Sonia asked, looking at Papa, her eyes wide as saucers. "Won't they make her sick?"

"No, mutton bones are good for Cleo." Papa explained.

"Chocolate makes her sick, but bones are good for her! These dogs are crazy!" Sonia mumbled finishing off the last of her own mutton.

"Should I try eating the bones too Papa?" She asked.

"No. That's not a good idea." Mama said, and Tania burst out laughing.

After everyone had finished dinner, the caretaker brought out dessert. It was rice pudding with loads of dry fruits in it. Sonia loved the dessert, but she was so tired, she fell asleep, with her head resting on the table, next to her half eaten dessert. Mama picked her up and took her bed and soon everyone retired to their rooms.

Tania and Tanisha had some very important things to discuss, and this was the perfect time. Sonia's little shenanigans had been funny, but they had been longing to find some time alone. Until now, it had been impossible.

As soon as they were in their room together, Tania locked the door, and Tanisha went to fetch the map. The girls had thoroughly enjoyed playing *Pictionary* and charades, but they had been dying to get some time alone, so they could discuss their plans for the next day. Just as they were about to start, there was a knock on the door. Tania went to unlock it, while Tanisha hid the map away.

Mama and Tanisha's mother were at the door. "Why have you locked the door?" Mama asked, surprised.

"Are you planning something secret?" Tanisha's mother added, winking at them.

"Mom!" Tanisha protested, glaring at her mother.

Mama smiled. "We came to tell you, that we are leaving early for Sat Tal tomorrow, so that it doesn't get too hot for boating after the walk. So you girls should go to bed now. Have you brushed your teeth, Tania?"

"You too, Tanisha." Her mother said. "We'll come and check on you girls in five minutes. You'd better be in bed under the covers with the lights off."

The girls were disappointed, but they did as they were told. Soon they were snuggled under the covers, and it did feel comfortable. Their parents came to kiss them goodnight.

After they left, Tania had an idea. "Psst Tanisha, are you awake?" She whispered.

"Yes." Tanisha replied. "Why? What's up?"

"You know our moms only said that we had to switch off the lights and stay in bed under the covers. But they did not say anything about having to go to sleep."

"Huh? What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean, we can sit up in bed, make a tent with the cover, and make our plans."

"But we can't look at the map in the dark, silly."

"So, we'll switch on the flash light. That wasn't one of the lights your mom was referring to."

"Has anyone ever told you that you have a great future as a defense lawyer?" Tanisha asked, impressed by Tania's ability to find loopholes in rules. "It's amazing how you told your mom only truths, and yet managed to keep our secret safe."

"Come on. Let's take a look at that map." Tania said, feeling chuffed. She was pleased that Tanisha had left the map in the drawer under the bedside table, so she could retrieve it without getting out of bed.

The girls studied the map for a few minutes trying to figure out where the path began. "I don't think I have been to this part of the grounds." Tania said, looking at the map from different angles.

"Hey wait, look it says *CC* right here. I think that means the caretaker's cottage." Tanisha pointed at the tiny label on a block in the map. "And I think the door we have seen him enter through is on this side." She continued, pointing at one end of a rectangle.

"I think you are right Tanisha. That's brilliant." Tania congratulated her, and she beamed.

"And see, the path starts off just from the other side of the entrance, which is probably the back of the caretaker's cottage. May be he has a backdoor, but we have never been near it. He probably uses the path to get to Nainital market and bring back supplies." Tanisha continued.

"Wow! Tanisha. You could be a detective when you grow up. But be sure to use my legal services when you catch criminals." Tania winked.

"If you are going to be a defense lawyer, then we will be on opposite sides." Tanisha pointed out.

"I wouldn't want to be opposite you. I'm sure finding loopholes helps everyone, even the good guys. Anyway, getting back to this map, I recall seeing a narrow gap between the fence and the caretaker's cottage, when I was chasing Cleo and she ran off to his cottage. We can use that to go around his cottage to the other side, where the path starts." Tania concluded, folding up the map.

"Super." Tanisha nodded, putting away the map in the drawer and pulling out a paper and pencil. "Now for the snacks. I have some chocolates, and we can take a few biscuits, cashews and raisins for snacks." She listed the items on the paper.

"And we should pack a juice box for each us and a bottle of water." Tania suggested, and Tanisha added those to her list.

"Perfect. I think we are done." Tanisha said, putting away the list and pencil back in the drawer, while Tania switched off the flash light. "But we had better go to sleep now, or we too will sleep through the afternoon tomorrow, and that will be a real shame." She yawned.

Soon both girls were fast asleep dreaming of maps, adventures, and their future professions.

The Adventure Begins

The next morning, both girls were up bright and early. They were eager to get on with their adventure. The girls got out of bed, showered, brushed their teeth, had a light breakfast, and got dressed.

"Begin phase one of *Operation Nainital*." Tania whispered to Tanisha, while they were putting on their shoes.

"Cool. That sounds so official!" Tanisha felt the thrill of anticipation. "But wait, what exactly is phase one?" She asked, confused.

"Oh, you know, just making sure the grownups get very tired and sleepy, so they take a long afternoon nap. I thought it would be fun to call it phase one." Tania winked. "I heard the term on a TV show."

"Got it." Tanisha gave her a thumbs up.

Soon everyone was in the car, and they drove for about half an hour, until they got to the vicinity of Sat Tal. Then they all kept their eyes peeled for a good walking path. Tanisha's father was using a pair of binoculars, and was the first to spot one.

During their walk, the girls saw so many unusual and fascinating birds and flowers, that they forgot all about phase one. Tanisha's mother was passionate about botany and studied it as a hobby. She told them the names of various plants and flowers, including one that had sharp thorns on its soft leaves.

After an hour of walking, Sonia was very tired. So everyone sat down to rest. Tania noticed several interesting trees, a little off to the side of the path. They were laden with tiny, bright red, fruits. "What are those Aunty?" She asked Tanisha's mother.

Tanisha's mother looked up in the direction Tania was pointing. "Ah yes, that tree is near our cottage too. I asked the caretaker about it. He

said the fruit is available at the market, and the locals call it *kafal*. I looked it up on Wikipedia, where I learned that its scientific name is *myrica esculenta*."

"How come the tree near the cottage doesn't have so many fruits on it?" Tanisha asked her mother. "I'm sure I'd have noticed it, if it was so full of bright red fruit."

"Actually, it does produce a lot of fruit. You never see much, because the monkeys who prowl the neighborhood eat most of them." Tanisha's mother grinned.

"I'm going to get some." Tania declared, and sprinted off towards the trees before anyone could stop her. But she had to slow down to wade through the dense, dry bushes. A couple of minutes later, Tania looked up. The tree was still a few feet away. It had seemed so much closer from the resting point, but Tania had to take a meandering path around thorny bushes and dense shrubs whilst pushing away branches that threatened to scratch her face.

Finally, when Tania reached the closest tree, the fruit was out of her reach. Tania climbed up to the sturdy lowest branch, and from there she could reach the upper branches. She broke off a thin branch, that had loads of ripe fruit on it.

Thrilled with her success, she was ready to descend, when she heard something strange. It was a rustling sound. *Is it a squirrel scampering about?* Tania wondered. She looked down, and got the shock of her life!

She saw a huge, gray-brown snake slithering away in to the thicket of bushes a few feet away. Tania froze on the tree, too scared to do anything. Was the snake lurking around there camouflaged all the time, while she had walked to the tree? The thought made her shiver.

Tania tried to calm herself down. She carefully scanned the base of the tree. There were no signs of any snake there. She climbed down slowly, and noiselessly, keeping a sharp lookout for any movement or sound.

Then she walked back as quietly as she could manage, clutching on to the branch of fruits.

"What happened Tania?" Papa asked when Tania returned. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost, but I saw a huge snake." Tania said wiping her sweaty palms with a handkerchief.

"A snake?" Tanisha screamed freaking out. "Let's get out of here."

"Relax." Her mother said giving her a sideways hug. "Most snakes are not poisonous."

Sonia too looked terrified, but Mama cuddled her and told her there was nothing to worry about. "It's not any more keen to meet us, than we are to meet it. It will have gone away. Tania only saw it because she went off the main path. It must have been just as scared and surprised to see her."

"Tania, the fruits look delicious. Sonia, do you want to try some?" Papa asked, and Sonia nodded happily, forgetting all about the snake. Papa plucked out a few of the fruits and washed them in some drinking water from his bottle. Everyone tasted one. They were a delightful combination of tangy and sweet.

"We are running low on water." Tanisha's father observed, when he pulled out the water bottle to wash some more fruits. "Tania, I think you should leave the rest of the fruits on the branch, and we can wash and eat them when we have access to more water."

Everyone agreed, and they all continued on their walk, Tania holding the branch up like a flag. Sonia was too tired to walk any more, so Papa put her on his shoulders. Papa was tall and strong. Sonia loved riding on his shoulders. She enjoyed the view from up there. It was a cloudy day with a cool breeze, so the walk was very pleasant.

A few minutes later, Tanisha spotted a family of monkeys a few feet

away and pointed them out to everyone. "Oh how cute. Look at that baby monkey hanging from her mother. It's so tiny and cuddly." Tania gushed. She took a step forward to get a closer look at the baby monkey, when she felt a tug. Before she knew it, another monkey had jumped down from one of the trees above and snatched away her branch full of fruits.

Tania waved her fist in anger at the monkey, but it just chattered and ran away. Sonia laughed.

"They really are your kin, aren't they, you little monkey?" Tania said, turning to Sonia and narrowing her eyes. Sonia stuck her tongue out and made monkey faces.

"I rest my case." Tania said, and everyone laughed.

"I see you are boning up on legal jargon." Tanisha whispered to Tania, once they were all walking again, and Tania smiled. The idea of becoming a lawyer was growing on her.

The next couple of hours passed pleasantly, uninterrupted by scary encounters with wild life. They walked, took breaks to drink water, munch on dry fruits and eat oranges. Sonia was passed from one grown up to another. She entertained them by singing ridiculous made up songs. At one of the lakes, called *Garud Tal*, Tania spotted a very large school of tiny black fish. It was interesting to watch them swimming around together.

Sonia was thrilled when it was Papa's turn to carry her again. From her vantage point atop Papa's shoulders, she was the first to spot a large lake with boats on it. "Boats, boats!" She chanted, bouncing up and down, making Papa uncomfortable.

"Sonia, singing is great, but dancing up there is a little much, don't you think?" Papa complained.

"Sorry, Papa. Look there are boats on a lake." She clarified.

"Oh yes! Now, I can see them too!" Tania exclaimed.

"Yay, we can go pedal boating." Tania and Tanisha sang out.

Mama looked around and spotted a path that led to the lake. "It's a steep path and covered with soft dry pine needles, so it will be slippery. It will be difficult, if we have to carry Sonia." She observed.

"I can walk again." Sonia said. "I want to go to the boats." She was determined. Papa heaved a sigh of relief. It did not feel safe, going down that path while carrying Sonia.

Sonia had recovered and was feeling energetic again. She sat down at the top of the path and pushed herself with her legs. Wheee, down she went, as if she was on a slide. Mama screamed, but Sonia seemed perfectly fine and eager for more.

The rest of them caught up with Sonia and once again she slid down the path. She made it look easy. Tania decided to give it a try and went sliding down behind Sonia.

"It's so much faster this way." She called out, and Tanisha followed suit. The grownups took the dignified way down and reached a few minutes after them.

"That's sure to tire them out nicely." Tania told Tanisha. "I don't understand why grownups are too dignified to do things the fun way. But it's good for phase one." She winked.

"Oh speaking of phase one, lets not do any pedaling today and leave it to the grownups." Tanisha suggested.

"Why, don't you like pedaling? I love it!" Tania couldn't believe what she was hearing. Normally, Tanisha fought to have a longer chance at pedaling

"Of course I love pedaling. But remember phase one?" Tanisha looked at Tania with raised eyebrows.

"Oh yeah. Darn it! I love pedaling, but you're right."

The grownups were astonished that Tania and Tanisha showed no interest in pedaling. "Are you feeling okay?" Mama asked Tania. "I thought you love pedaling."

"Yeah, something is going on." Tanisha's mother smelled a rat.

"It's phase one, it's phase one." Sonia sang out.

"Phase one? What's that Sonia?" Papa asked, bemused.

Tania and Tanisha froze. They hadn't realized that Sonia had been listening to their conversation. Fortunately for them, Sonia wasn't keen on answering any questions. She only wanted to sing *it's phase one* over and over again.

"I think, I heard that on some TV show." Tania said truthfully, and again Tanisha marveled at her.

On the bright side, Sonia now had the grownups focused on getting her to sing something else, because *it's phase one* was a boring song with an annoying tune. So no one asked any more questions about why Tania and Tanisha were not pedaling

After boating, they stopped at a restaurant for lunch. Tania scoured the menu for rice dishes that would make the grownups sleepy. "Mama look they have your favorite *Rajmah chawal!*" She pointed out, and Mama obviously ordered it.

Papa was planning to order *parathas*, but Tania convinced him to order his favorite mutton curry with rice. Tanisha's parents preferred to eat rice for lunch anyway, so she did not have to do much, except encourage them to over eat.

With their stomachs so full, they were sure to sleep several long hours in the afternoon.

On the way back, Tania made sure she played peppy dance music in the car, so no one, not even Sonia felt like sleeping. But once they were back home, every one fell asleep almost at once. Tania and Tanisha were running high on adrenaline, and did not feel sleepy at all. "Phase one accomplished." Tanisha saluted, after she had checked that her parents were snoring.

Tania giggled. She had already told Tanisha about her parents and Sonia being fast asleep. The girls packed Tanisha's backpack with the items they had listed the previous night. "Should we take some money?" Tania asked.

"Yes." Tanisha nodded. "Let's take the pocket money we brought along for buying gifts for our school friends. We may find something interesting in the Tibetan market near Nainital lake. I also want to get an éclair we had from the bakery we visited last time we were there. I have been dreaming of them ever since."

Tania laughed. "Sure. Those éclairs were heavenly."

When Tania went to use the bathroom, before leaving on the adventure, she noticed the mangled scrunchie on the window sill. She had brought it down from her parent's bathroom in the morning, meaning to give it to Cleo, and then forgotten about it. She stuffed it in to her pocket, deciding to give it to Cleo the next time she saw her.

Little did she realize then, how soon that would be. Tania and Tanisha stepped out of the cottage, closing the backdoor as quietly as possible. So they were startled, when they were greeted with a loud cheerful bark from Cleo.

"Oh no. Not now Cleo." Tania pleaded, but Cleo was determined to hang out with the girls.

Tania had a sudden idea. She took out the mangled scrunchie from her pocket and threw it as far as she could. It landed in the property of the neighboring inn. Cleo went chasing after it. Tania and Tanisha scampered off to find the path. It took them a while to squeeze through

the narrow gap between the caretaker's cottage and the fence, but they were relieved that Cleo did not come looking for them again. "I guess she is busy chewing up what's left of the scrunchie." Tania remarked. "I'm glad I happened to have it with me."

Once they got to the other side of the caretaker's cottage, the girls noticed a narrow break in the barbed wire fence, right near the mouth of the path. "Seems like the caretaker does use this path." Tanisha noted, walking through carefully to make sure the back pack did not get caught in the fence. Once they had crossed the fence, the girls felt exhilarated. Their adventure had begun! Now what would happen next? They couldn't wait to find out.

Things Go Horribly Wrong

The narrow path, that had started from the cottage soon became broader. Clearly, it was a well trodden path. The girls walked on merrily, feeling excited. Could the path really lead to Nainital lake? They hoped it would.

After about fifteen minutes of uneventful walking, Tania spotted something interesting. "Hey look at this." She said tapping Tanisha's shoulder.

"It looks like a raspberry." Tanisha examined the fruit on a bush.

"Yeah, but it's orange. Isn't that weird? Do you want to taste it?"

"No way! We don't know what it is. What if it's poisonous?"

"Don't be such a scaredy-cat." Tania chided, biting in to a particularly ripe and juice berry. "It tastes a lot like a raspberry. Are you sure you don't want to try one?" Tania asked again, picking a handful of them.

Tanisha hesitated. The bright orange berries looked very tempting, and she loved raspberries. "Well, seeing as you haven't choked or fainted, I suppose I could try one."

Tania rolled her eyes. "You're such a drama queen." She teased, as Tanisha popped a berry in to her mouth.

"Oh wow! This is really good." Tanisha admitted and picked many more.

Tanisha had eaten about a dozen berries, when she saw Tania grinning. "What?" She asked puzzled. "Are my lips orange?" She fished out a tissue from her pocket.

"No, your lips are fine. I was just thinking, the berry could have a slow acting poison, or just give you an upset stomach. You shouldn't eat so

many."

Tanisha stared at Tania. "What? Why are you telling me this now? Why didn't you stop me earlier?"

"Relax." Tania smiled. "I'm just messing with you."

"Really not cool, Tania." Tanisha frowned, and the girls continued walking.

"No, but really, it's okay to try out wild berries, but it's better not to overdo it. I mean, you could just have an allergic reaction or something." Tania explained.

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of that. When I go on treks with my parents, we never taste wild fruit and berries."

"Why not? They're often delicious. My parents try them out all the time. I once ate tiny wild strawberries in Shimla."

Tania told Tanisha about various wild fruit she had eaten. They were enjoying chatting as they walked, when Tanisha noticed something. "Hey, look here. The ground is black. It looks like it has been burnt. I wonder what happened."

Tania looked around and ahead. The burnt land seemed to stretch ahead for quite a distance. It was littered with a few burnt tree stumps. Then Tania noticed something. "Hey look Tanisha, there's an electrical tower. Do you think this was caused by an electrical fire? It has been quite hot and dry. This morning was the first cloudy one we have had, since we arrived."

"May be. I could do with some clouds now though." Tanisha said, wiping the sweat off her forehead with a handkerchief. "It's very hot and sunny, and the climb is getting steep."

"Let's take a break and drink some water." Tania suggested. "And I'll carry the back pack for a while. That should help you cool down."

A little later, the girls came upon a village. "Oh! This makes sense. The path was made by the villagers walking to Nainital market." Tanisha deduced.

"Great, so we are on the right track. Let's keep going." Tania did not enjoy walking through the village. There were people and cows and wood fires. She preferred the quiet clean air of the forest. The village was small, and they were soon past it.

The steep ascent continued, and at some places the girls needed to get on their hands and knees to find their balance. Soon the winding mud path joined up to a stone path. "Left or right?" Tania asked.

The girls looked around wondering which way to go. That's when they saw an older girl in her teens approaching from the left. She was wearing a school uniform. "Let's ask her." Tanisha suggested.

The girl told them that they needed to go left and just follow the path. "About a kilometer away, this path connects to a very steep set of stone stairs. At the top of the stairs, is a park. Just take a left on the road in front of the park and follow it for a few minutes to reach the lake." She concluded.

Tania and Tanisha thanked her. She nodded, and then walked on towards the village.

"Hey look Tania, a Christmas tree!" Tanisha exclaimed pointing at the tree that stood next to the intersection of the mud and stone paths.

"Wow! That's huge. Wouldn't fit in a house, for sure!" Tania said feeling the smooth green needle shaped leaves.

From that point on the walk became more pleasant. The path was wide, more or less level, shaded by tall trees, and there was a slight cool breeze.

The girls merrily sprinted onward, until Tania spotted a family of monkeys crossing the path at a distance. These were gray with white

beards, unlike the brown monkeys she had seen before. "I want to let them pass." She told Tanisha. "I've had enough cheek from monkeys for one day."

Tanisha laughed remembering how the enterprising brown monkey had stolen the *kafal* branch from Tania. Tania glared at her.

In a little while, the girls reached the steep stone stairs. They liked climbing stairs and tried to race each other to the top, where they found the park the teenager had told them about. Remembering the girl's advice, they took a left and followed the road, and lo and behold, in about ten more minutes they were at the edge of the lake.

"We made it, we made it." The girls sang out, holding each other and jumping. They had already seen the market, when they had come with their parents, but it was thrilling exploring it all on their own.

A paved road ran along the edge of the lake. The fishes in the lake were large, colorful, and numerous, and they clustered towards to edge of the lake to feed on algae, so they were easy to spot from the road. Every so often, a cycle rickshaw transporting wide eyed tourists would whizz past the girls. The other side of the road, was lined with small shops selling an assortment of clothes, jams, pickles, jewelry, toys, and a host of other trinkets.

The girls bought scarves and wooden toys for their friends in Mumbai. They had a gay time checking out the curious novelty items and toys. Tania tried out a hat, but it was too expensive for her to afford with the little pocket money she had left.

"Oh this feels just like the fairs, that those kids in the Enid Blyton books go to all on their own." Tanisha remarked, blissfully chomping a creamy eclair she had bought at the bakery.

Tania had already finished her own eclair, and packed up a few chocolate chip cookies for Sonia. She had been feeling bad, that they had to leave Sonia out, but Sonia was too young. As Tania waited for Tanisha to finish her eclair at the edge of the lake, she checked her

watch. "Oh my goodness. It's 4:30!" She exclaimed.

"What? That's impossible." Tanisha almost dropped the last bit of her éclair in panic. "We have to be home before 5:00. Every one will be up by then, Tania. We are going to be in so much trouble. What do we do?"

"Well, gosh, don't panic. That doesn't help at all. I guess we are in for quite a scolding, but on the bright side, the sun doesn't set for another two hours, so we should be able to make it back before it's dark. Thankfully, once we are on the mud path, it'll be downhill all the way, so we should be able to move quickly."

The girls made their way back through the crowded road with loads of tourists pouring in for evening boat rides. Cars kept speeding by, and Tania began to feel scared. "Let's keep to the absolute edge of the road," she said, "so we don't get run over."

Tanisha nodded. "Hold my hand. There are so many people and hawkers. I don't want us to get separated." Tania agreed and firmly caught on to Tanisha's hand.

The girls plodded on. When they reached the park, Tania heaved a sigh of relief. "At least there won't be any more cars." She pointed out.

"True." Tanisha conceded. "Let's walk fast though. Our parents are going to be so worried."

As hard as they tried, the girls couldn't walk fast. The exhaustion of the day's activities was catching up to them. Their legs started to feel like jelly. They had walked about six kilometers in the morning with their parents, and then three kilometers to Nainital. A lot of that journey had been a steep hike over the mountain, and then they had strolled around the markets of Nainital for over an hour. Unused to such rigorous exercise, their muscles were giving way.

Feeling miserable, the girls trudged on, thinking longingly of home and sleep. They barely said a word to each other, worrying about what their

parents would say when they found out what they had done.

Then Tania smelled smoke. She looked up and realized that a little ahead the air was thick with acrid smoke. "Can we even go that way through all that smoke?" Tanisha asked.

"We don't have a choice." Tania mumbled and plodded on with ferocious determination. Tanisha followed. As bad as the smoke seemed, she did not want to be left alone.

"Hey I found our Christmas tree. Look the muddy path is right next to it." Let's turn on to it. We'll be home soon. Or at least we will be at the village soon. Then may be we can call our parents from there, so they don't worry too much."

Tanisha cheered up, until she realized they would be walking in the direction where the smoke was getting thicker. "We can't go that way." She complained. "There may be a fire right ahead. It could be dangerous."

"Come on Tanisha, this is not the time to be a scaredy-cat." Tania felt impatient. "We need to get to the village, so we can call our parents, and then get home before sunset."

Tanisha paused to look at the Christmas tree and something did not seem right to her. Suddenly, she knew what it was. "I don't think this is the right Christmas tree Tania." She said. "That one was a little further away from the corner where the two paths met. Also, it was taller, wasn't it?"

"Don't be silly. A mud path meets the stone path and there is a Christmas tree at the corner. I think we've walked about the right amount of time too. See it's 5:00. Come one now." Tania was losing patience.

"There is no point taking the wrong path." Tanisha protested. "It will only make matters worse."

"It's not the wrong path. You're just worried because of the smoke. Come on now. Don't be a baby. Remember we saw those burnt patches of forest. The area must be on fire again. This must be the right route."

Tanisha sighed. She was no match for Tania's pigheadedness. She knew Tania felt responsible for getting them in to the mess and was determined to get them out quickly. So there was no convincing her that she may be making a mistake. Tania simply wouldn't hear of it.

Tanisha gave in and followed Tania. There was a possibility that Tania was right. Her memory could be playing tricks on her, or the smoke could be making things look different.

As they walked on, it was becoming harder to see anything. But Tania plodded on, until she saw something that was too scary for her, even in her state of single minded determination. A few hundred meters ahead, she saw a wall of fire spreading and growing. Terrified she screamed and began to cry. Then, she had a violent coughing fit from breathing in too much smoke.

Tanisha was scared too, but seeing Tania break down, oddly calmed her. She realized, that it was her turn to be brave and take charge. "Tania, there is a slight wind blowing the other way." She noted. "So don't worry. The fire wont come towards us. We just need to retreat. That's all. Come on now."

"It's all my fault. I did this. We should never have left the cottage sneakily. I am so sorry Tanisha." Tania cried.

"It's okay, Tania. Don't beat yourself up. I loved our adventure. We've just had a little bad luck. Come on now. Let's go. I know you can do it."

Tanisha led on and the girls retraced their steps. After a few minutes, with the smoke getting thick, and with the sun having gone behind a mountain, Tanisha could barely see. Her eyes watered from the stinging caused by the smoke. She lost track of their path. She had no idea where she was going, but she knew she had to stay strong for Tania.

She said nothing about being lost to Tania, and continued to march on confidently. She calmly lured Tania, as far away from the fire, as she could. Once they got far enough away, she urged Tania to sit down. She pulled out the juice boxes from the bag and gave one to Tania. For the next few minutes the girls sat quietly drinking juice.

"Aren't we going to continue?" Tania asked, feeling better. She put away the empty juice boxes in to the outer pocket of the backpack.

"No. Not yet." Tanisha replied looking around and mumbling something to herself.

"Why not?" Tania was bewildered. "We have to get back, Tanisha."

"I know," Tanisha agreed, "but I have no idea where back is. Let's climb up that tree and try to find our bearings. There's no point running around in circles. Let's figure this out."

Tania was amazed to see Tanisha so calm. Tanisha was scared of wild fruits, adventures, dogs and smoke. But now, in this crisis situation, all Tania could think was if she would ever manage to find her parents again, while Tanisha worked on a way to make it happen.

"Tanisha, I'm really sorry I was so pigheaded near the Christmas tree. I should have listened to you. I was being very stupid." Tania could barely meet Tanisha's eyes, but she forced herself to do it. Tanisha deserved a proper apology.

"Don't worry about it Tania. I should have stood up to you. But I didn't. You have a forceful personality. When you feel certain about something, you just go for it, and wild elephants can't stop you. I too must learn to hold my own, when I know I am right. We'll learn from each other in time. But now let's figure out what we are going to do next."

Tania looked at her watch. "We have around half an hour of daylight left, and perhaps another fifteen minutes of twilight. We need to at least find our way to the village by that time."

Tanisha had been scanning the landscape. "Hey what time did you say it was, when we were arguing at the Christmas tree?"

Tania frowned, trying hard to remember. "Oh yes, it was 5:00. I remember now, because it was the same amount of time it took us to reach Nainital lake after we met the girl who gave us directions. So it had to be the correct Christmas tree, right?" Tania asked puzzled. "Is it just that our way home is blocked by the fire?"

"No. I don't think so." Tanisha declared. "You see, when we were walking to Nainital, we were excited and far more energetic, so we walked faster and even ran through bits of the path. On the way back, we were tired and walking slowly. Also, we had to walk slower through the traffic, before we reached the park on our way back. So, if I estimate correctly, it would have been at least another 5 to 10 minutes before we reached the correct Christmas tree.

"I hadn't thought of it that way, but it makes sense." Tania agreed.

"Now, I see a few more Christmas trees further ahead of the one we turned at. Let's walk over and try to figure out which one we need to turn at." Tanisha suggested.

"Aye, Captain!" Tania saluted and let Tanisha take the lead. As Tania followed Tanisha down the tree they had climbed to get their bearings, she remembered the snake she had seen at the base of the *kafal* tree, earlier in the day. But she swallowed the urge to mention it. She did not want to rattle Tanisha. Tanisha had a few silly fears, Tania had learned in the last few days, but now that she had seen how calm and logical Tanisha could be under immense pressure, her respect for her best friend grew leaps and bounds.

The girls soon found that the landmark they had chosen was useless. There were muddy paths joining up to the stone path near several Christmas trees all standing a few meters apart from each other. "What now?" Tania asked.

"I think we should just sit at the side of this stone path and wait."

Tanisha suggested. "Many people take this road to and from Nainital. Remember that school girl we saw? I also noticed quite a few other people on our way up there. Hopefully, someone will show up, and we can ask for directions."

Tania hated waiting. She preferred action. As she waited horrible thoughts came to her mind. *What if the path was not used after dark, especially because of the smoke? Come to think of it, they had seen very few people on their way back. What if dangerous animals prowled here after dark? What if the person they asked for directions kidnapped them?*

Tanisha saw Tania's anxious face and gave her a hug. "There is nothing else we can do. So let's just sit and wait. How about we play a game to distract ourselves?"

Tania nodded. Yet again she marveled at Tanisha's composure. She took out a couple of sweets for them to suck on, and they began playing twenty questions, keeping an eye out for passersby.

The sun set and it started to get chilly. Yet no one showed up. Even Tanisha began to look worried. The girls kept playing, so as to not give in to panic. Suddenly, Tania spotted two tall, hefty men and another shorter, thin one at a distance. With the light fading, the girls couldn't see much, but in the dim twilight, their expressions seemed sinister to Tania. "Should we ask them?" Tania looked at Tanisha.

"No. I think we should hide, so they don't spot us." Tanisha replied, and Tania was relieved. They crouched behind some bushes, hoping the men would pass by without noticing them. They tried to calm their breathing, so as to not make a sound. They wished their hearts wouldn't pound so loudly and give away their hiding place. There was no telling what these men would do, if they found two helpless, lost girls on a dark, lonely path.

Look Who Saved The Day

At the cottage, tired from the morning outing, everyone slept soundly. No one knew that the girls had crept out. No one except Cleo. She knew the girls had gone down the path her master often took. People often left the cottage, especially visitors, and returned after a few hours. So Cleo contended herself with the scrunchie Tania had given her, and waited for her to return. She liked Tania very much.

Sonia was the first to wake up at 5:00 pm. She went looking for Tania and Tanisha, hoping to play Lego with them. But she couldn't find either of them anywhere. Puzzled, she went and woke Mama up. "I can't find Tania." She said.

Mama was feeling groggy and wasn't in the mood for silly games. "I don't want to play hide-and-seek now Sonia. Look for her some more. Have you looked in all her usual hiding places?"

"I didn't know Tania was playing hide-and-seek. Okay, I'll go look for her." Sonia ran off with a spring in her step. When she returned ten minutes later, Mama was awake. She was waking Papa up to tell him it was tea time.

"I can't find Tania or Tanisha." Sonia announced. "I've looked everywhere."

"How long have you been playing hide-and-seek?" Mama asked.

"I don't know Mama. I just woke up and couldn't find them. You told me they are playing hide-and-seek." Sonia was feeling quite muddled.

Mama laughed. "Oh sorry, Sonia. I was sleepy, and I thought you said you couldn't find Tania while playing hide-and-seek. Let's go look for her together."

They went to Tania and Tanisha's room, but the girls were not there, so

they went out in to the yard. "TANIA, TANISHA" Mama called out loudly. "It's tea-time." She shouted, hoping that would entice them to come out of whatever interesting nook or cranny they had discovered. But there was no response.

Tanisha's parents heard all the commotion and came down to the yard. "What's going on?" Tanisha's mother asked.

"I can't find the girls." Mama said, worried. Cleo came running up to Mama and tried to climb on to her. "Not now Cleo." Mama said. Cleo went away, sad to be rebuffed once again.

The grownups and Sonia searched everywhere around the house. But there was no sign of either Tania or Tanisha. Then Tanisha's mother noticed that her backpack was missing too. "The girls must have gone somewhere." She said, her lips pursed.

Everyone searched again to see if the girls had left a note, but there was nothing to be found. The caretaker noticed all the commotion and came to ask if everything was alright. Papa told him that the girls were missing. A crease of worry appeared on the caretaker's forehead. "It will be sunset soon. It's not good for them to be out there alone after sunset. They are so young."

With the grownups looking for Tania and Tanisha, Sonia went off to play with Cleo. Cleo was pleased to finally have a playmate. Why was everyone ignoring her today, she had wondered. Thrilled with the attention Sonia was giving her, Cleo bounded off to get the mangled scrunchie and gave it to Sonia, so she could play fetch. "Look Mama, Cleo has Tania's scrunchie." Sonia called out.

"Cleo, of course!" The caretaker exclaimed loudly, startling everyone. "She is very fond of the girls. She can track them. I have trained her to do some tracking. Just get me some clothes each of the girls recently wore." He said.

Mama and Tanisha's mother dashed off to get the pajamas the girls had worn the previous night. They also brought along some smelly socks

the girls had worn on the hike the previous day.

The caretaker gave Cleo some instructions and then had her sniff the clothes for some time. Then, he gave her some more instructions whilst pointing at Papa and Tanisha's father. Cleo listened with her ears pricked up. Everyone watched in amazement. It seemed like Cleo could understand everything the caretaker was telling her. But then she darted off, unexpectedly. Papa sighed. "I guess it was too much to hope for. I'll go call the police."

"Wait." The caretaker stopped Papa, and pointed at Cleo, who was coming back with something in her mouth. It was the last shredded bits of the scrunchie. Cleo gave it to Mama and then looked at Papa and Tanisha's father. "She wants you to follow her. I will come along too. I know the area well. Don't worry. We will find your naughty daughters." He winked.

Cleo sniffed around for a few minutes, and then confidently bounded off to the barbed wire fence behind the caretaker's cottage and the three men followed. She went through the break in the barbed wire.

"Wait, I think I know where the girls went!" The caretaker blurted out. "This is a shortcut to Nainital lake. The lake is only a three kilometer walk this way. But how they found this out, I can't imagine."

Papa and Tanisha's father followed, while Cleo and the caretaker led on. Papa was really worried. The sun would set soon. What if they did not find the girls? What had possessed them to go off like this, he wondered.

Back at home, Mama sat on chair clutching the mangled scrunchie, staring at the wall in front, hoping desperately that Cleo would find the girls soon. Next to her, Tanisha's mother sat fidgeting with a pine cone she had picked up from the coffee table. Neither of them felt like talking. Sonia too felt worried about Tania and Tanisha, so she quietly played with her Lego to pass the time.

The three men followed Cleo, until they reached the village. But there,

Cleo was confused. "There are too many smells around here. So she can't find the trail. But we can just follow the path until she can pick up the scent again." The caretaker explained.

Papa and Tanisha's father nodded. Once they were past the village, Cleo again seemed sure of where she was going. The three men followed her up the steep mountain path. Tanisha's father was shorter than the other two men, so he was having a hard time keeping up with their long strides. They stopped, so he could catch up. But just then, Cleo seemed distracted. She was sniffing at the air. Papa sniffed too, and he could smell smoke.

"Was there a fire nearby?" He asked the caretaker terrified that the girls might have been caught in it.

"We have brush fires all around the state in this season. There is nothing to worry about. The locals ignite the underbrush to create controlled fires. It is good for the forest. Don't worry, there won't be any on this path to Nainital, though. The fires are lit at quite some distance from these village paths."

Unfortunately, Cleo was distracted by the smoke and wouldn't track anymore. "I know the path to Nainital lake, so let's keep going. Cleo will follow, and when the smoke smell subsides, or she can smell the girls close by, she will resume tracking."

A few minutes later, the men reached the end of the mud path where it joined up with the stone path, next to the Christmas tree, which had proved to be a useless landmark for the girls.

Cleo had been trailing behind, but she caught up with them and walked behind them on the stone path. But suddenly, she became alert and started sniffing again. She growled softly and looked at the three men. Then she headed off the path towards the bushes. "What's going on?" Tanisha's father asked, confused by Cleo's sudden change of behavior.

"Come on, I think she has found your daughters." The caretaker explained, and urged the men to follow. Cleo was now running towards

a bush, yapping cheerfully. Suddenly, to everyone's great surprise, two frightened little girls emerged from behind the bush.

"Papa." Tania cried out and hugged him sobbing with relief. Tanisha too hugged her father. Then the girls both hugged Cleo, who was simply delighted with all the attention. They both thanked the caretaker for finding them.

"We have a lot to talk about," Papa said, "but first we need to get home as fast as we can. The sun has set, but at least we have a little twilight, so let's make the most of it."

"Also, your mothers want to see you as soon as possible." Tanisha's father added, as he finished a call informing the mothers, that they had finally found the girls.

Tania and Tanisha drank the last of their water, and then walked home with Papa, Tanisha's father and the caretaker, all following Cleo, as she led the way home. The girls dreaded the scolding they would get once they got home, but they felt safe and happy once again.

"Those Enid Blyton adventures are overrated. I don't think I want to have another one ever again. I mean, I love reading them, and that's the only way I'm going to enjoy them from now on." Tania whispered to Tanisha.

"You said it, sister." Tanisha agreed.

When the party led by Cleo reached the cottage, they found Mama and Tanisha's mother waiting at the door. Mama engulfed Tania in a rib-cracking hug. Tanisha's mother cried tears of relief and then simultaneously they shouted, "What were you thinking?"

Tania and Tanisha began with how they had found the map in a drawer. The adventure stories they had been reading, made them eager to have one of their own. When they got to the part about shopping by themselves in Nainital, both mothers were furious.

They launched into a long lecture about road safety, inexperience, naivety, etc. It would have continued for a long time, if it hadn't been interrupted by Sonia shouting, "Mama, Papa, Tania, Tanisha, Aunty, Uncle, come see this. Come see this! Look what's happening!"

Everyone rushed to the window where Sonia was standing and saw what she was pointing at. Large sections of the hillside were ablaze with flames shooting high in to the dark night sky. The sight was mesmerizing and frightening at the same time. They could see the nearest fire spreading, rapidly swallowing the forest indiscriminately. Smoke was billowing in to the air.

All of them watched the destruction in silence. Tania and Tanisha cried silent tears, as they thought of the fire they were almost caught in.

Finally, Tania spoke. "Thanks Papa and Uncle for coming and getting us. We aren't smart and brave like the kids in the books. We got completely lost. If it weren't for you, we may have died tonight." She said. Tanisha nodded, sniffing. Then, together, the girls told their parents how they had lost their way and almost walked in to a fire.

"Mom, you don't have to tell us about dangers. We faced so many today, we were wrecks. When Dad and Tania's Papa and the caretaker were coming up the hill, we did not recognize them. We had no idea who they were and what they might do to two helpless, little, lost girls. We hid behind the bushes hoping to escape their notice, and that's where Cleo found us. Running away from the fire, and hiding behind bushes, we had plenty of time to contemplate how stupid we had been." Tanisha added.

Mama and Tanisha's mother softened. The girls had been punished enough, and what could be a better teacher than experience. "I know we had been joking with you about secret passages and plans, and I love that you are adventurous and imaginative, but you need to learn a little about caution and safety in the real world." Mama explained.

"Every kid wants to have adventures." Tanisha's mother chimed in.

"But I hope this experience has taught you, that a lot of the dangers of the real world are glossed over in adventure stories." She winked and smiled.

The mothers were relieved and thankful that the girls were safe. The girls had obviously learned a lot of things the hard way, so they decided to say no more.

But not everyone was finished. "How could you leave me behind? Why didn't you take me along? I want an adventure too." Sonia looked accusingly at Tania and Tanisha.

"Sorry Sonia, but aren't you glad you didn't come?" Tanisha asked. "The fire was so scary."

"You ate eclairs and did not give me any." Sonia shouted, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Oh wait! I just remembered." Tania said, plunging her hand in to Tanisha's backpack and pulling out a package. "These are for you Sonia." She said handing Sonia the package.

Sonia calmed down and opened the package. "You got me cookies!" She squealed in delight. "Thank you Tania. I like cookies better than adventures."

She was just about to pop one in to her mouth, but Mama stopped her. "After dinner." She reminded Sonia, wagging her finger sternly and Sonia put the cookie back in the box after making a monkey face at Mama.

Then Tania and Tanisha went to thank the caretaker and Cleo for bringing them home safe. Their parents too thanked the caretaker profusely.

The girls helped the caretaker make dinner. It was much later than usual, because he had spent the time he was supposed to be cooking, out looking for the girls. After dinner, Tania and Tanisha took all their

chicken bones from their plate and gave them to Cleo. Cleo was delighted. The girls then helped the caretaker wash up the dishes.

Early next morning, Tania was woken up by the sound of rain drops pelting the tin roof of the cottage. She went to look out of the window. It was a beautiful sight. The rain had washed the fires away, and the air smelled sweet.

The outside world was beckoning her for a new adventure, but Tania knew better. "No." She whispered. "Not until I am older. I'm not ready for you, yet." *Perhaps, next year.* She hoped.

I hope so too. Because I love reading about her adventures, don't you?

Acknowledgment

A big thank you to my husband, usually known as Papa, for clicking the photos I used in the cover of this book.