



VALLEY OF THE RATS

By

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Chapter 1

The night a rat bit my butt was my lucky night. I just didn't know it at the time.

Our GPS was busted, there had been no cellphone signal since we left camp, and we were lost. Dad, optimistic as ever, said we had to keep going till we reached a small town or village. I didn't want to remind him that he'd said that three hours ago. The hand sanitizer I kept in my pocket had fallen out someplace, but Dad didn't want to stop while I took out the backup from my camping gear. Desperate to get into a warm tent before I froze to death, I tried to keep up.

I'd tried the radio several times within the past hour, but it was spewing nothing except static. The forest of bamboos surrounding us must have been the reason. Thirty feet tall, they seemed to be natural barriers to any kind of radio or cell signal.

"Isn't this fantastic?" Dad said, striding on. "You, me, and the great outdoors."

With all this bamboo around me, it felt more like being trapped in a large cage.

We'd left the main campsite over a day ago. There were a gazillion germs on me, but I tried to get a grip on my panic and plodded on behind Dad. There were germs at home, and I'd survived. I would survive this too — if I kept my head and found the hand sanitizer as soon as we stopped.

"Dad, it's almost dark," I said, glancing at the luminous dial of my watch. "Let's stop for the nigh—AHHH!"

A shadow, close enough to touch, zipped through the dense bamboo.

"Who's that?" I squeaked.

Dad came crashing back. "Was it a person or an animal?"

I stared into the darkness till spots danced in front of my eyes. Nothing moved. "I'm not sure."

"Can you describe it?" said Dad, gripping my shoulders. "Close your eyes and think carefully."

We were hungry, lost, cold, and filthy. Dad was excited?

"Dad, it was a large shadow. I couldn't make out much."

“What if we looked around for a minute —” Dad started to say.

I cut him off. “Can we please find a campsite and stop for the night? I’m beat.” I tried not to sound whiny, but I knew I did. What had I been thinking, begging to go on an outdoor trip? A trip to the grocery store made me want to don a hazmat suit.

Dad sighed and started walking. He didn’t have to say it, but I knew he was disappointed and trying not to be too obvious about it. He had no idea I could pick up a tone, a gesture, a look, and interpret it accurately. Especially his. I’d had years of practice.

“Chin up, Krish. Things will be better in the morning. Let’s find a good spot to put up the tents. I’ll get a fire going, and we’ll have a hot meal. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I gazed at Dad’s broad back. I’d thought this trip would help us to understand each other, to bond. Instead, it had shown me just how different we were. Was there any point in even trying?

The forest was alive, and my neck hurt from constantly looking around. The wind howled overhead like someone in pain. A hoot punctuated the incessant scurrying and clicking. I started, my eyes scanning the impenetrable darkness. Did owls attack humans? Was that slithering sound a snake beside me?

Someone was watching us. It was a gut feel (GF) — sometimes a cold breeze on the back of my neck and sometimes a severe stomach ache. Right now, I had the pleasure of both.

I wished I could confide in Dad, but he believed in facts, not feelings. GFs had been the reason for countless arguments on this trip. I admit, sometimes my imagination soared.

Not this time. Someone was following us.

We hiked uphill through the tall bamboo. The temperature plummeted. I switched on the headlamp and followed the beam of light as I put one aching foot in front of the other. I focused on breathing deeply and promised myself that if I got out of this alive, I would think of some other way to bond with Dad. Maybe a National Geographic documentary would be more my style. He might enjoy it too.

“Need a breather, Dad!” I plopped down on a rock — and leaped right back up again. “Ow!” I said, twisting to look at the sharp rock I’d sat on.

I wished it had been a rock. It turned out to be a white rat with sharp teeth and a red snout, still hanging off my butt. Screaming, I swiped at it. It squeaked and zipped into the bushes. Panic ballooned, making it hard to breathe or talk.

“What happened?” said Dad, racing to me.

My hand shook as I pointed to the shadowy forest. “Rat bit me. I can feel the poison spreading, and I’ll be dead soon. Bye, Dad. Tell Mom I love her.”

Dad hugged me tight. “Shhh, Krish. Deep breaths. There’s no way such a small rat could chew through your thick pants in a second. Let me have a look.”

His soft tone and warm hug made me want to bawl. I hadn’t realized how much I’d needed this. It had taken a near-death experience to get him to soften up. I focused on pulling air into my lungs while Dad examined my butt.

He turned me around and squatted. “Krish, there’s just the slightest tear in your pants. It didn’t reach skin. You’re safe from rabies or any other disease the rat might have had. You’ll outlive me, son.”

“You’re sure about that? No blood?”

“Nope,” said Dad.

“Okay.” I let out a shaky breath.

“Now, let’s find a sheltered place and set up the tent,” said Dad, patting my shoulder. “You’re handling this quite well, Krish. You’ll feel better after a couple of hot dogs and a good night’s sleep.”

“Okay,” I mumbled, ashamed of my panic. If you thought about it, a rat biting my butt was hilarious. It would make a great story. Except, I didn’t feel like laughing. “I wish I could be as comfortable as you are out here. But I’m not,” I said, staring at him. “I don’t think I’ll ever be.”

“Argue for your limitations and they’re yours,” said Dad.

“Consider this is an adventure story you’re living instead of reading. You took the first step in asking to go on this trip, and I’ll help you get through it. Okay?”

If I spoke now, I'd probably cry. *At least it's not raining*, I thought. Right on cue, lightning split the sky, followed by a loud clap of thunder. The deluge began.

Fantastic.

Aching all over, I trudged behind Dad, our headlamps cutting twin swathes of light through the darkness. The smell of wet earth and rotting leaves filled the air. I still couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching us. Friend, foe, or wild animal?

Four pinpricks of light glowed in the undergrowth. I trained my headlamp on the spot and shuddered. "Dad," I said, grabbing the back of his jacket.

"Krish?" he replied, wearily.

"Two rats are staring at me."

"We're in the wilderness. Did you expect puppies?"

The rats were large, black, and hairy. The white one, who'd tried to sample my butt, had disappeared. My brain, brimming with trivia, supplied an interesting one: rats were carnivores and cannibalistic.

Surprisingly, the rats didn't look scared of us. They watched us with their beady eyes, and I swear they spoke to each other in rat-chitter. I tried not to think of the germs swarming on them and went to my happy place: at my desk, in my clean room, reading a book while I munched on my fave snacks — chips and candies.

"Shoo!" I yelled as one of them approached us, its nose twitching.

"Krish, don't. No point yelling and alerting anyone else to our presence."

"You mean there's something dangerous out here?" I managed to choke out the words.

Dad shrugged. "I've heard some odd rumours about the Ladakh Range, but seeing is believing. Getting a picture is money in the bank." He chuckled.

Dad was a nature photographer, always chasing the exciting, the unknown. The more bizarre the subject or habitat, the keener he was to photograph it.

"How can you even think of a picture when our lives may be in danger?"

"We're safe, Krish, only lost. You can't get any of this from a book or computer. I want to give you a chance to see our amazing world for real."

“What’s wrong with books or the internet?” I asked, pressing my advantage. “You can learn so much. Ask me anything — go on.”

“Reading about lighting a fire and actually doing it are very different,” said Dad, walking on.

“That’s what a lighter or flints are for,” I said.

“What if you lose your flints and matches and have to rely on the forest? You remember that fun movie with Tom Hanks marooned on an island? What was it?” said Dad, snapping his fingers, trying to remember. “He’d named a football Mr. Wilson.”

“Castaway,” I said. That was a horror movie, not a fun adventure.

“Right,” said Dad. “Hanks had to make fire using his brains and what was available on the island. You have to make do with what you have and dig deep when things go south. It’s called survival.”

I got what Dad was trying to do, but how could I make him understand that I would never appreciate the real thing? Not when it scared me so much. This trip, so far, ranked highest on my to-avoid list, higher than touching the handle of a grocery cart or a bathroom doorknob. And yet, I’d made the effort. Could he not see how hard this was for me and at least give me some credit for trying?

The rats interrupted my black thoughts with squeaks and clicks. They disappeared into the undergrowth as soon as our headlamps shone on them.

“Hopefully they won’t come back,” said Dad, swiping the rain off his face. “Let’s camp here tonight and get our bearings in the morning. As soon as we get a signal, I’ll radio Adventure Camp and tell them to send a guide to lead us back. Okay, Krish? You’ll be back with your cousin Anjali before you know it.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I’d take Anjali over the rats. What Dad didn’t know was that getting away from Anjali was the reason I’d agreed to break from Adventure Camp to go on this sidetrip.

A bit of trivia popped into my head, and bizarre as it was, I knew it was the right thing to do. “Let’s follow the rats,” I said. One more night in the forest would kill me. I longed to

pop a candy into my mouth, but I'd wait till I'd fished my hand sanitizer out of my backpack.

"Are you okay?" Dad placed a grimy hand on my forehead, and I flinched. "You want to follow rats?"

"They're nocturnal creatures," I replied. "They hunt for food at night. Where there's food, there are people. And houses and a phone."

"I'm impressed," said Dad, hefting his backpack and camera case higher on his shoulders. "That's very useful information. Let's go."

My heart glowed, and the chill lessened. I didn't want to ruin this moment by gloating that I'd read that fact in a book.

We followed the rats further uphill. A couple of times, we lost them, but they squeaked, letting us know where they were. It was as if they wanted us to keep following them. I'd never read or heard of this type of rat behaviour, but I filed it away to research as soon as I got back.

Branches slapped my face. I muttered a choice f-word.

Frittata!

An owl hooted. Another answered. An almost-full moon peeped from behind a ragged cloud. It grew colder, and my breath fogged, but my pits dripped sweat. What if we were making a mistake following the rats? What if something happened to Dad, and I was left all alone? What if that mystery shadow attacked us? I tried to push the thoughts away and stared up at the sky through the bamboo. The darkness was pierced by millions of silver pinpoints.

A horrible smell hit my nose — a mix of rotting meat and poop. "What's that stink?"

"Dead animal," said Dad.

My skin sizzled as if electrocuted. More germs. I held out my hands in the rain till they seemed clean, sort of, and popped a candy into my mouth. I chewed slowly, deliberately.

As I counted backwards from a hundred, my heartbeat slowed.

“Do you see the rats?” Dad called out, peering into the bushes beside him. “They’re gone.”

We had been climbing uphill, and my legs ached. Nothing moved except silver slashes of rain. Those dirty rats had led us here and disappeared. Not a claw or tail in sight. Only a dense line of trees and the sound of the wind whooshing through empty space.

“No people and no food,” said Dad. “Guess that little fact didn’t work out, Krish.” He slid his large backpack off and groaned, massaging his shoulders.

I tried not to let my disappointment show. I had been so sure of my facts, but out here, I was as good as useless. And now Dad knew it too.

The tree cover was thin, and I felt every jab and bite of wind on my face. “Maybe we could try the radio up here?” I said. “See if we can get a signal.”

“If that makes you happy,” Dad said and fished out the radio. I couldn’t be sure if he was being sarcastic or concerned. I was too tired to care. I’d made a huge mistake, and I wanted this to be over.

“Kabir Roy to Adventure Camp. My son, Krish, and I are lost, and our GPS and cellphones aren’t working. We’re a day and a half trek from Leh, somewhere in the Ladakh Range. We need a guide to lead us back to camp. Over and out.”

Only the rain and wind spoke.

“May I try?” I said.

Dad handed me the radio. I tried once more, sweeping all the frequencies. On an impulse, I switched to the frequency that Anjali and I used when we’d go on family camping trips. She’d be in her tent with her mom and dad. I’d be in mine. We’d switch on our radios and chat late into the night — about everything and nothing.

“This is Krish! Can you hear me?” I stopped short of saying Anjali. If she was listening, she would know. But would she answer, after the way I’d let her down last summer?

Nothing. I clipped the radio on to my belt, making a mental note to check the battery as soon as we were out of the rain.

“We should have pitched a tent when we were lower down,” said Dad. “The wind is too strong here, and we’ll freeze. Let’s go back.”

His flat tone made me sick. I walked away, searching the thick tangle of roots for a glimpse of the rats. The stink was stronger here, and I took shallow breaths. Facts are facts. The rats had to be close by. My GF said they were. And not only rats. Something or someone else. Much bigger than the rats.

My pulse raced as I stared at a thick clump of bushes.

A shadowy figure squatted low to the ground. “Who’s there?” I whispered.

A gruff voice said, “Run!”