

CHAPTER 13

Hanna and her father dropped me off at the house so I could get a few hours of sleep before I had to show up for work. I slept fitfully, waking up several times during my nap to check the time on my alarm clock before I finally gave up and sat in front of the TV. I had just put my work clothes on when the phone rang. It was one of the night shift security guards from the university, and he sounded very excited.

"Andy Hastings?"

"Yes?"

"There's a problem with that elephant in the warehouse. Are you the guy who looks after him?"

"Yeah, what's going on?"

"Can you get yourself down here to the facility immediately? The police are asking for you. It's important."

"I'm on my way. Can you tell me what's going on?"

"There's a woman who got herself trampled inside the compound and the elephant won't let anybody get near her. The cops are here, and they asked for you by name."

"That's got to be a mistake. There wasn't supposed to be anybody at the facility this evening, and certainly nobody should have been inside the enclosure with him. Hang on, that wouldn't be Professor Blenheim we're talking about, would it?"

"Sorry, but I don't know any more than what I just told you. The cops are waiting for you, and there's an ambulance on the way, so you'd better hurry."

"I'll be right there."

I ran out of the house, tossed the theremin inside the front cargo basket of my bike and began pedaling madly toward the research facility. I was scared of what I was going to find when I got there but that didn't slow me down because I knew I'd have to act as Hugo's advocate if he'd actually hurt somebody. The scientists were generally great people to work for, with the exception of Professor Blenheim, but some of them seemed to regard the research animals solely as subjects for their experiments rather than living creatures with individual personalities. Many of them were the kind of people who wouldn't consider having a pet, for instance. Although they would never dream of deliberately allowing any harm to come to the animals, their first priority would always be their research, so somebody had to lobby for Hugo's rights and presumably that was now up to me.

I could hear a siren approaching the warehouse as I dropped my bike on the ground and ran inside, remembering at the last second to grab the theremin so it didn't get stolen. The policeman who met me in the doorway was Adam Daniels again. That was good news because at least I knew him personally, and if I was lucky he could be counted on as a potential ally. On the other hand, he had a hunting rifle with a wooden stock and a scope hanging from his right shoulder so there was no question about how serious

this crisis was.

He pointed to the center of the enclosure. "Hello again, Andy. I'm quickly running out of options here, so I need you to suggest a way I can get her out of the cage without anybody else getting hurt."

I looked over at the enclosure and saw a woman lying on the sawdust in front of Hugo, who loudly trumpeted his standard greeting to me. He seemed oblivious to the potential consequences of his actions as he began nervously pacing around the victim, never straying more than a couple of feet from her. I took a closer look with my head wedged between two bars and confirmed my original hunch – the injured person was definitely Professor Blenheim and she was motionless and quiet. There was an open cell phone on the ground beside her.

I grabbed the bars with all my strength and forced myself not to panic or say anything stupid. "I know I can get her out of there alive, if you give me a chance. Do you have any idea how it happened?"

"Not really. We got an incomplete 911 call a few minutes ago from the professor. All she was able to give us before she passed out was a garbled description of her location. Apparently the com-op who got the call did some excellent work putting the clues together or we wouldn't have known where she was until somebody found her. The security guard over there arrived just before we did and let us in."

The guard was standing near the entrance to the warehouse with several police officers. Hugo was becoming more and more vocal as we talked and I sensed that it might be better to act as soon as possible before the elephant got even more upset.

"I can take care of this right now," I said as I opened the hatch and began to climb into the compound through the fence, but Officer Daniels grabbed my shoulder and yanked me backwards.

"Not a chance, pal. We don't need another victim. At the moment I'm keeping this call as low profile as possible, which is only possible because I'm a SWAT sniper and I've told my supervisor over there that I can handle the situation myself. If we don't get her out of there in the next few minutes this will escalate and they'll do a full SWAT callout. That means more bosses will arrive here to take charge, which in turn means the two of us won't have any say in what happens to your elephant. I guess you know what will happen then," the police officer said as both of us glanced at his rifle.

Hugo, who had been quietly standing near the professor for the last few seconds, suddenly seemed to notice our interest in him. He took one look at the cop and began a series of short charges in our direction with his head high and his ears spread. At one point he stopped just short of the bars, unfurled his trunk like a party noisemaker and trumpeted his obvious displeasure in our direction. Hugo was more than a little intimidating when he wanted to make an impression and I knew I had to convince the police officer not to open fire, at least until I had a chance to resolve this impasse peacefully. If I could.

"If you just let me go inside the enclosure, I know Hugo won't hurt me. I've been in there with him before, although the university doesn't know that."

The officer listened quietly as I tried to make my case, all the time staring intently at Hugo. "How can you be so sure that he won't hurt you? Is he in heat, or has he just gone berserk, or what?" he asked. "I need to know where we stand before I decide how we go in there after the victim."

"He isn't in heat," I said. "With elephants that's called 'musth' and Hugo's definitely not in that state."

"How do you know?" he said skeptically.

"For one thing, you'd be seeing a noticeable flow of goop coming out of his temporal glands, just behind his eyes. There's no sign of that at the moment. More importantly, we'd be able to see definite indications between his hind legs, which believe me you couldn't possibly miss. I'm pretty sure Hugo hasn't gone berserk either, although he's obviously upset about something. No, I think he's just got his knickers in a knot for some reason, and the professor ended up being in the wrong place at the wrong time. If you'll let me, I can get in there and pull her out."

"So tell me why he just came running in our direction, looking like he wanted to kill us, if you're such good friends?"

"It's the rifle," I said as Hugo finally backed away and resumed his position standing astride the professor. "Hugo was just a baby when poachers slaughtered his mother and the rest of the herd for their tusks. I did some research on his background while he was being recruited for our project. Elephants are incredibly intelligent, and they do have long memories, just like the cliché says. It's not uncommon for young elephants that've been through the kind of trauma he has to have nightmares where they wake up in the middle of the night screaming. You can't blame him for getting a little paranoid when he sees you holding a rifle, given what he's been through. He's normally very tame and friendly. Honest."

"An elephant never forgets, huh? Well, we have to get our victim away from him before it's too late. She obviously needs medical treatment for her injuries. Do you know if your employers have access to some kind of a dart that would hold enough drugs to put him to sleep? I'm pretty sure the animal control folks only have equipment designed for much smaller animals, like bears."

"I know for a fact that they don't, and neither do the folks over at the zoo," I said. "Hugo stayed at their facility before he arrived here, and I talk to their staff regularly about his care and feeding. The trainer once mentioned that they were researching non-lethal methods of subduing rogue elephants in case they were ever called to an incident like the ones you see on TV from time to time where elephants from traveling circuses suddenly decide to attack spectators. Their request for funding for suitable tranquilizer darts was never approved. Unfortunately, that doesn't leave you guys many options when you have to act immediately. Not that this is one of those situations, by the way. Believe me, Hugo isn't as dangerous as he looks." I decided it would be best not to mention that the elephant had previously killed one of his trainers.

"Well, I hope we won't have to use lethal force to end this standoff but you have to understand that the victim's life is our first priority, even though she may well have done something stupid that got her into this situation in

the first place. I promise you I'll do my best to keep both of them alive. Meanwhile, will you give me your word you won't do anything stupid, like go inside that enclosure, unless I give you permission?"

I nodded, and the officer walked away to talk to the paramedics who had just arrived. They were standing nervously near the doorway beside their stretcher. I leaned against the fence and watched Hugo intently, hoping for some sign that the elephant was going to back away from the unconscious victim.

Hugo leaned forward with one leg raised and stayed frozen in that position for over a minute with his huge ears spread wide. He lifted his head and opened his mouth, which probably meant that he was communicating with another elephant somewhere nearby, even though we humans couldn't hear it. However, I could feel the air between us throbbing, much like the sensation you get standing in front of a monster-sized speaker at a concert.

I watched Hugo revert to his listening mode once again, and then was astonished to see tears start running down his face. I thought for just a second that it might be a sign of musth, but that couldn't be because there were no other symptoms. I know how dangerous it was to ascribe human emotions to an animal, but I couldn't help thinking that something Hugo was hearing must be upsetting him.

The fact that the elephant happened to be facing in the direction of the zoo during this conversation probably wasn't a coincidence. I yelled to the police officer that I had to make a call as I ran to the office and dialed the number for the security office at the zoo. I could hear the sound of loud music in the background as a very sleepy-sounding guard answered.

"David, it's Andy. I need to know if you've checked the elephants lately."

He sounded defensive. "I do my rounds, just like I'm supposed to. In fact, I'll be heading out again in a few minutes. What's wrong?"

"Look, I'm not saying you aren't doing your job. I just need you to check the elephants immediately and let me know if anything unusual is happening. It's an emergency."

"Sure, no problem." He was on some kind of portable phone because I could hear the sound of elephants screaming as soon as he opened his office door. The noise got progressively louder over the next few seconds.

"Okay, I'm outside their cage. Now what do I do? They're going nuts again."

"Before you do anything, tell me what you see," I said.

"They're all gathered around the new baby and they're screaming and making one heck of a fuss."

"Is that the one Hugo was friends with?"

"Yep."

"Is he trapped? Can you see if he's injured?"

"He's still on his feet, moving around, so he isn't trapped, and he isn't bleeding as far as I can tell. Hang on a second. Hmmm, I can see him better from here. He's acting real weird, staggering and shaking his head up and down like he's coughing."

"Maybe he can't breathe," I suggested. "He might be choking on

something.”

“You might be right about that. Oh man! It looks like he’s getting weaker. What should I do?”

“It’s up to you whether or not you go in there because it could be very dangerous. If you can get near him you’ll have to dislodge whatever he’s choking on, even if it means sticking your hand down his throat.”

“It’s against policy, you know,” the guard said. “Besides, what happens if they attack me?”

“Then you’re probably going to get hurt real bad. All I can say to you is that if I was there, I know I’d want to go in and give it a try. But hey, it’s your decision. I can’t tell you what to do.”

David paused for several seconds, and then I heard him put the phone down and open the gate. “This is so not a good idea,” he kept saying over and over again until his voice was lost in the background cacophony of elephant’s trumpeting.

I paced back and forth, limited by the length of the phone cord, waiting for a report from the zoo. The noise seemed to diminish suddenly and I could hear David talking loudly to the elephants. “That’s good. You just move out of the way and I’ll try to help this kid. Good. That’s right. Good elephant. Please don’t step on me.”

It seemed to take forever, but when I finally heard the guard’s voice again he was out of breath and excited. “You are not going to believe what happened. I just saved the life of that freaking baby elephant!”

“He’s okay now?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. I have a key so I unlocked the emergency access gate and jumped inside. Good thing I didn’t stop to think about it, because if I did, I never would have gone in there. I could see he was choking when I got close. He sounded like he was trying to clear his throat and he was definitely in bad shape.”

“The other elephants didn’t try to interfere with you?”

“Heck no! They all stepped aside when I asked them politely to get out of the way. I did what you said and put my hand down his throat. You won’t believe this but it was a plastic bag that was choking him. It’s windy and I guess it must have blown into their cage. I heard him cough once and then all of a sudden the other elephants quieted down and everything was okay again. It happened that quickly. None of them so much as noticed me as I walked out of the cage, they were so busy loving up that little baby.”

“You’d better call your bosses and let them know what just happened,” I said. “And great job, by the way. You’ve got guts.”

“Thanks. This is all going to be captured on the surveillance cameras, you know, so I might be able to sell the footage to some TV station if management will let me. I think I’m ready for my fifteen minutes of fame.”

I hung up the phone and started running back to Hugo. I wondered how long that baby elephant had been choking or how much longer it might have lasted without David’s intervention, but at least that part of the story had a happy ending. There was no doubt in my mind that Hugo must have been reacting to the panic and fear he heard in the frightened calls from his old friends back at the zoo. If Hugo was a person it might be possible to put

together a defense for whatever he'd done to Professor Blenheim, based on the fact that he was just reacting to the sound of other elephants calling for help in the only way he knew how.

But of course Hugo wasn't human. Nevertheless, it would make an interesting case study for the scientists, but only if the recording equipment here at the facility had been switched on and was working properly. If the various elephant calls here and at the zoo could be placed in a timeline and examined together it would certainly establish whether or not they were actually communicating even though they were miles apart. The fact that Hugo was responding to a genuine crisis instead of a simulated one lent the experiment a certain degree of authenticity and I hoped that Professor Blenheim hadn't turned off the test equipment when she entered the enclosure. I could see that there was a wire poking out of Hugo's backpack and there was no doubt in my mind that she'd gone in there to fix the problem rather than wait for me to arrive. It would certainly be ironic if her own actions had sabotaged a golden opportunity to obtain the data she'd been hoping for.

I'd have our scientists talk to the zoo management later and make sure the security guard received appropriate recognition for what he had done, but first I had to make sure Hugo was okay. As I ran around the corner Hugo was pushing dirt on top of the professor with his huge feet. As I was taking that in I heard a disturbance behind me. It was Professor Blenheim's dean, the man in charge of our project, and he was visibly upset as he poked his finger into Officer Daniel's chest.

"Don't give me that crap! I demand that you rescue her immediately, even if it means shooting that damned elephant. Do your duty, Officer, or I'll have your badge."

"It's yours if you want it, sir. Exactly where on your person would you like me to put it?" Officer Daniels said quietly as there was a flurry of activity on his portable radio.

"You can't talk to me that way," the dean sputtered, pointing his finger at the policeman's chest again.

"I think I just did," the officer replied quietly. "Look, for the moment this situation is under control. If I open fire now your professor will be buried under several tons of elephant carcass as Hugo collapses. So, we wait till I talk to Andy about our options."

I heard the sound of more sirens approaching.

"Yes, that's the reinforcements coming," the cop said. "They'll be here in less than a minute. If you've got any bright ideas, you'd better tell me now."

"If we have to deal with a lawsuit from Professor Blenheim's next of kin because you couldn't be bothered to do your duty," the dean said, ignoring me as he continued to buttonhole the police officer, "I can guarantee that you'll be looking for a new job in the near future. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Hang on a minute, I think I figured out what's going on," I said as I stepped in between them. "Hugo was just responding to the elephants at the zoo calling for help. They were trying to keep an injured baby from choking

to death and he was probably frustrated because he couldn't do anything about it from here. If we give him a minute to get his act together he'll eventually realize that the crisis is over because his buddies aren't screaming anymore. That should calm him down enough to permit me to go in there and pull her out of the cage."

"What about him burying Professor Blenheim? Does that mean she's dead?" the dean asked.

"Not necessarily," I said. "Elephants often bury their dead under foliage and leaves as part of their mourning process. It's possible he may just be doing the same thing for her out of respect, but it's also possible she may still be alive."

I decided it might be wise to distract the two men before their argument could resume so I placed the theremin on a nearby chair and began playing it. I started out with what sounded to me to be a very peaceful love song, something I hoped would calm everyone down so there wouldn't be any more talk about gunplay. It seemed to be working because soon the dean and the police officer were completely engrossed in my music.

I stole a glance at Hugo and noticed that he had changed his posture and was now holding his head low with his ears pressed back. I altered my music so that it mimicked the sounds Hugo had made during happier times and began an attempt to communicate with him through the theremin. It felt like I was sending the elephant a message, almost carrying on a one-sided conversation with him, although it seemed more like I was singing a song to him. The air in front of me began to throb as the theremin seemed to resonate, sending my music, my thoughts, in the elephant's direction. Hugo responded by moving gradually away from the professor towards the other end of the enclosure. His subdued bellowing reassured me that he wasn't going to harm me.

I turned to Officer Daniels. "Everything is okay now. He's not going to give us any trouble. If you'll let me go inside the enclosure I'll keep him out of the way while the ambulance guys put her on the stretcher."

I could hear the police cars pulling up outside the warehouse, so time was running out. The cop nodded his okay and put his hand up threateningly in front of the dean when he began to protest loudly.

"Go ahead, Andy. Just be careful."

The officer turned to the paramedics. "This guy is going in to distract the elephant. Scoop your patient and get out of there as quickly as you can. I'll cover you from here, just in case."

I ran inside the enclosure and coaxed Hugo into moving as far away from the professor as possible. The elephant was completely docile and cooperative now, and within seconds they had placed their victim on a stretcher and she was on her way out of the enclosure. I stroked Hugo's ear for a few moments and then made my way outside as well. As soon as the hatch clanked shut behind me, Officer Daniels handed his rifle to one of the police officers who had just arrived and joined the paramedics who surrounded the professor as they began the methodical process of investigating her injuries, starting at her head. I couldn't see any blood on her face or clothing but she had obviously suffered some kind of injury

because she was still drifting in and out of consciousness.

One of the paramedics smiled and turned to Officer Daniels. "She's still alive and I think she's going to make it."

"What's wrong with her?" the officer asked.

"She wasn't trampled, that's for sure. There's not a mark on her. As best I can tell she probably had a heart attack, but that's just a guess. We'll know more after we get her to the hospital."

The paramedics used straps to secure the professor to the stretcher and then started for the door. As she passed me her eyes opened and she gestured for the paramedics to stop for a second. "It was my fault," she said. "I thought Hugo was asleep and I just wanted to fix the equipment in his pack. I'm sorry."

With that she lapsed back into unconsciousness and was quickly wheeled out to the waiting ambulance. Officer Daniels surveyed the scene briefly, then turned to me and offered his hand.

"Thanks for the good advice," he said as we shook hands.

"Thank you for believing in me."

"I don't begin to understand what just happened between you and that elephant, or how it can hear what's going on several miles away, and I guess I never will. Still, it was an interesting call, and all's well that ends well, as they say. By the way, as far as I'm concerned you kept your cool tonight when things got exciting. Remember to keep me in mind if you're ever looking for a job recommendation."

The police officers all left as quickly as they'd arrived. Two of them were engrossed in a pretty intense discussion about what they'd witnessed and the rest of them were yawning and half asleep as they walked away. I approached Hugo's enclosure and began to play what I hoped would sound like a lullaby to a stressed-out elephant. I watched through the bars as Hugo stared in my direction. In a matter of minutes he dropped to the ground and nodded off to sleep.

"Andy, you can have the rest of the night off, if you like," the dean said as we walked toward the front door of the facility. He had stayed in the background as I negotiated the professor's release from the enclosure, and I assumed he had been hiding in the office so he could deny any responsibility for how the incident was handled in the event something went wrong.

"I'm too tired to talk right now," the dean said, "so I'm going home to get some sleep. You know, I have to find out more about that device you played a few minutes ago. I've never heard anything like it."

"I'd love to take the night off, sir," I said as I opened the door for him. "Unfortunately, I've got work to do."

I walked to a nearby closet and removed the tools of my trade, my shovel and rake and a rusty old wheelbarrow. Hugo didn't like waking up to a messy enclosure in the morning. The cleanup went quickly and I finished in less than an hour. After putting my tools away I walked over to the office and tried the door. It was still unlocked. The dean must have forgotten to lock up after himself. Professor Blenheim's keys were still sitting on the desk and I helped myself to the one I knew unlocked the office door. She wouldn't need it until she was released from hospital and I wanted to keep track of

what the other scientists might be up to while she was recuperating. I locked the warehouse door behind me, placed the theremin in the bike's front carrier and pedaled home. As I traveled slowly down the darkened streets it occurred to me that, for a change, I'd actually done everything right tonight. Just as I was beginning to think my luck had finally begun to improve, however, I began to feel like I was being stalked again. I checked repeatedly over my shoulder and there was nobody nearby, so it was a long trip home.

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