

CHAPTER 2

Even before I heard the door slam behind me I knew I shouldn't have agreed to leave Hugo alone with her, although for the life of me I couldn't figure out why. I just had a funny feeling that something wasn't right.

It was too late to do anything about that now. I should have stood my ground but of course I couldn't risk annoying her, not when she had the power to destroy any chance of me ever getting a college education. I'd heard all about her from another student who'd been the target of her vicious temper once, so there was no doubt in my mind she was vindictive enough to interfere with my future plans if she suddenly decided she didn't like me.

I tried the door anyway, but she had already used the slide bolt to secure it from the inside so my key was useless now. Maybe I was just getting a little paranoid. I mean, how could the professor, who couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds soaking wet, hurt a huge elephant like Hugo? How stupid would I look if I started banging on the door in order to inform her that I had some kind of premonition that Hugo was in danger? No, there was nothing I could do anyway, so better not to get involved.

I'd bought a bottle of pills for my mother on the way to work because she'd been in the middle of a splitting headache when I left home. At least now I'd be getting them to her a little sooner in case she couldn't get to sleep because of the pain. I tucked my right pant leg into my sock even though it made me look like a dork, and was about to point my bike in the direction of our house when I heard Hugo start screaming. I dropped the bike and immediately began kicking and beating on the door. The sounds coming from inside the warehouse were muffled, but loud enough that Professor Blenheim probably couldn't hear me trying to get her attention. Aside from Hugo's heart-wrenching screams, which continued non-stop now, there was also a cacophony of nightmarish background noise that sounded like something out of a horror show.

From where I stood I could see the second-floor office light was on, but there weren't any stairs on the outside of the building. There was, however, a thick drain pipe that ran beside the window and I immediately started shinnying my way up it, even though my entire body was shaking with fear. I do not like heights at all, which may be the reason I blacked out. When I suddenly found myself inside the office I had no memory of finishing the climb and making my way through the window. I froze as I opened the office door, stepped out onto the landing and looked down into the enclosure.

Hugo was still screaming as he ran around his cage maniacally, emitting the most horrendous moans and roars and swinging his head from side to side. The professor stood in front of the gate with her hands folded behind her, gazing intently at Hugo as if he was a lab rat she was studying through the steel bars. She had a satisfied smile on her face.

The entire warehouse reverberated with the recorded sounds of animals suffering, punctuated by gunshots and painfully loud rock music.

Hugo stopped in front of the professor, stomped the ground several times as he stared at her and then raised his trunk and roared in her direction. There were tears streaming from his eyes, something I had heard of but never expected to witness. Moments later the elephant started running around the enclosure again. He was still screaming and moaning.

I could feel the air around me vibrating. The light show created by all the different noises emanating from the elephant was chaotic and kaleidoscopic, unlike anything I had ever seen before, and the impact of Hugo's inconsolable despair instantly overwhelmed me. I rushed inside the office and began randomly flipping switches on the audio equipment until finally the recorded noise stopped. Hugo stopped screaming but he was still moaning loudly as if he was in pain.

The professor ran upstairs and joined me in the office.

"How the hell did you get back in here? Do you have any idea what you just did?" she said as she grabbed my arm.

She didn't wait for an answer. "I don't believe this! Your stupid animal was finally generating the kind of data I need! I haven't even had a chance to verify that my equipment is picking this up so you might have just destroyed all the hard work I've done so far because of your ignorance."

She started to pull me away from the office door but I refused to budge this time. "Why would you do that to Hugo? That's torture! Torture!"

"The hell it is! I'm a scientist," she shouted. "I would never do anything that would cause him permanent damage."

I tried to keep the anger out of my voice. "Look, professor, Hugo is old and frail. He can't tolerate this kind of stress. It's killing him!"

"Killing him? Right, suddenly you're the expert here, telling me how to do my job." She paused, then clenched her fists and yelled in my face. "You're an idiot. Get the hell out of my way while I check the data."

I stepped to one side as she barged past me into the office.

"You'd better hope nothing happened to my equipment when you broke into this office and started messing around with it," she said as she sat down in front of the computer screen. "Who the hell do you think you are? You aren't one of those stupid animal rights activists working undercover, are you?"

I shook my head from side to side as I glanced in Hugo's direction to see if he was okay. "No, I'm not an activist."

Hugo was leaning against one of the containers and was still moaning plaintively as he moved his head continuously from side to side. I didn't dare approach the elephant to try to comfort him because I was afraid the professor would start playing that horrible recording again if I left her alone in the office.

She started fiddling with her equipment but stopped momentarily to point a shaking finger in my direction. "Andy, you realize I could call the police and have you arrested right now for breaking into my office?"

Now that hadn't occurred to me. I dropped into a nearby chair with my head in my hands and stared dejectedly at the CD player she had just switched back on. She ejected a disc, inserted it into a jewel case that had been on the table nearby and dropped it into her open purse. She then

seemed to relax just a little, and I realized it was probably because she was now in possession of the only concrete evidence of what she'd just done to Hugo. I should have grabbed it when I had a chance but it was too late now. It would be my word against hers and nobody would believe me. Coulda, woulda, shoulda.

"Look Andy, let me explain what just happened here so you don't get yourself into any more trouble by doing something you'll regret later. As you know from our conversations over the last little while, I haven't been able to monitor Hugo's ability to create unusual sounds because he simply hasn't been communicating appropriately. I had to find a way to make him attempt to convey a warning to his friends back at the zoo."

"So you played a recording of elephants being slaughtered? Didn't it occur to you that he might be traumatized by that? That's disgusting!"

"Yes, I'll admit it all must have sounded very real and frightening to Hugo. So real, in fact, that he was trying desperately to warn everyone within hearing distance that somebody was killing elephants nearby. It's exactly what I suspected he would do to alert the rest of his herd about a dangerous situation. I just had to accelerate the process of getting him to communicate and it obviously worked. Finally."

She pointed to the monitor. "Here are the infrasonic vibrations we expected to see, transmitted acoustically and seismically, but that's nothing compared to some of the other complex sounds he emitted now that I finally got him motivated. Some of it seems to be in the ultrasonic range, which is totally unexpected, and some of it I can't even begin to understand. These are truly magnificent results, unlike anything I've ever seen before. I've really done it this time!"

I'd read an article after I started working with Hugo that described how baby elephants that survived the slaughter of their herds by hunters would sometimes wake up screaming from nightmares years later. That part of Hugo's history had been well documented by the zookeepers prior to his arrival at their special facility for troubled elephants. In fact, he had been the sole survivor of one of those massacres shortly after he was born, saved by his captors only to end up working in a circus for most of his adult life, right up until the incident where he'd allegedly killed someone. He would have seen and heard his mother and all their relatives being gunned down right in front of him as a baby, and that was something he would never have forgotten according to the experts.

I couldn't get the image of Hugo screaming in pain out of my head, and I guess it was affecting me far more than I realized because I was almost as surprised as the professor was when I reached over and grabbed the disc out of her open purse.

"Andy, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I can't let you torture him anymore."

She couldn't take her eyes off the CD in my hand and I could see she was contemplating making a grab for it herself so I moved it out of her reach. Her voice was dripping with hatred now. "What do you intend to do with that?"

"At this point I'm not really sure."

Actually I was thinking of taking it to the local newspaper. She seemed to read my mind.

"If you're thinking you can get me into trouble with that CD, you couldn't be more wrong. I can justify everything I did here tonight as part of a legitimate, ethical scientific procedure and the only one who'll get in trouble over this will be you. Trust me, by the time I'm done with you no university in the world will consider your application."

"The FBI played tapes of screaming rabbits being slaughtered back when they were trying to force the Branch Davidians to leave their hideout. Remember what people said about that afterwards? You still consider this ethical science?"

"I am not doing anything wrong here, Andy," she said as she turned her attention back to the main computer. I watched as she downloaded all her data to the university over an Internet connection.

"So why not leave him alone now? You've already got the results you wanted."

"That's why I didn't want you here with me for this part of the experiment. You've obviously fallen victim to a kind of Stockholm syndrome with regard to how you feel about Hugo. People in our line of work can't afford to get too attached to our specimens."

She stared at me intently. "You want to go to university or not?"

"Of course I do, but this business with Hugo stops now or..."

"Or what? Are you threatening me? Don't forget, if it wasn't for me your friend over there would already be euthanized and dumped in a landfill. Face it, nobody else wants him."

I could tell by the color of her words that she was telling the truth, at least about this. "Look, I just want to make sure Hugo doesn't get hurt. That's all. Don't make me go to the media. Or your dean."

"I knew that was coming. Trust me on this – the dean will back me up all the way, so you can forget about running to him with your complaints."

"Look, Kate..."

"It's Professor Blenheim, and don't you forget it."

She glanced over my shoulder in Hugo's direction for a moment and then grabbed the CD out of my hand when I turned to see what she was looking at. I didn't contest her possession of the evidence, sensing that it was now a lost cause. Besides, I felt guilty for snatching it in the first place. It was so unlike me to do anything that outrageous and I knew it would upset my mother when I told her what I'd done. I'd been taught by her to turn the other cheek when confronted by bullies, and that had always kept me out of trouble, at least until now.

"Consider your options and I'll talk to you tomorrow," she said, the tight-lipped smile on her face betraying her smugness.

She was in the driver's seat now. "Meanwhile, you might want to remember that I can handle Hugo's role in this project just fine without your assistance now that everything's set up. You can easily be replaced if I decide you're redundant around here."

"You can't do that."

"I can, and I will, if I feel it's necessary," she said as she made a beeline for the warehouse door. "And by the way, don't even think about interfering with my equipment after I leave. Understood?" She didn't wait for an answer.

I heard Hugo suddenly moan in agony. His front legs were folded beneath him, almost as if he was kneeling in prayer. There was an ominous dark mist gathering around the elephant, a darkness I'd seen only once before when my high school vice-principal had collapsed and died in the middle of a school assembly.

"Hugo!"

I began to run toward the elephant and then stopped. Out of the corner of my eye I watched the warehouse door close behind the professor. She'd been in such a hurry that she'd forgotten to lock the office door. I had to call for help, but who to call? There wasn't a 911 for animals this size. Call a vet's office? They wouldn't know where to begin. Think! I had to force myself to calm down and stop panicking if I was to be of any use to him. The answer, when it came to me, was simple. The zookeeper who had trained me for this temporary job of babysitting Hugo would know what, if anything, I could do to help him through this crisis.

The local zoo, about a mile away, currently had several other elephants in captivity, and this zookeeper was their resident expert. Hugo had boarded there for over a year while the project was being set up so the staff knew him well, especially since Hugo had befriended a young elephant they'd been having some trouble with. According to the zookeeper, Hugo had successfully acted as mentor and disciplinarian to the juvenile delinquent, which was ironic given his own notorious reputation as a man-killer.

It would have been the perfect time to own a cell phone but I couldn't afford one, so I ran back into the office and grabbed the phone on the desk. I had to dig through my wallet to find his phone number. As I dialed I remembered him telling me of his plans for a working vacation to Thailand to learn more about their elephants. Had he returned yet? Please let him be home!

I glanced over my shoulder through the door at Hugo and could see that his condition was worsening. After three rings an answering service responded with a message in the zookeeper's voice that he wasn't home. He must still be away on vacation because he always answered his phone at night when he was home in case there was a problem with his elephants. At this late hour there would only be cleaning staff and security guards at the zoo and they probably wouldn't be of much assistance. There was nobody who could help Hugo now but me.

I dropped the phone and ran down the stairs to the enclosure. I crawled through the little access hatch and walked cautiously to Hugo's side. The elephant was moaning softly and there were still tears running down his face. As I knelt beside him, Hugo moved his trunk so that the end was cuddled up into my right armpit. I cradled it as best I could with my right hand. It was almost dead weight so I had to support my hand against my stomach to keep his trunk from falling to the ground. The cloud gathering

around the elephant was growing noticeably denser and darker, and almost seemed to be suffocating the life out of Hugo. He was dying.

How could this be happening to him? The zookeeper's last checkup had given the elephant a clean bill of health, despite his advanced age. I realized that I, too, was crying, and I used my free left hand to wipe away first my own tears, then Hugo's. "Don't do this to me, buddy."

As I waited helplessly for Hugo to die, the familiar sound of my earworm greeted me as it did every time I was troubled or depressed or lonely. I call it an earworm because it's a term I've heard used to describe those song fragments and jingles that keep playing over and over again inside your head until they drive you to distraction. Most people hate them since the songs that invade their subconscious are invariably tunes they would never have chosen to listen to in the first place. My earworm, however, is intensely comfortable and reassuring.

It wouldn't be entirely accurate to call it a song. In fact, I've never quite been able to understand what it is because I can't sing it, hum it, or whistle it. I can't even tap my fingers to the rhythm because it doesn't seem to have one. There are no lyrics and I couldn't for the life of me identify which musical instruments could have been used to create it. I've experienced my earworm ever since I was old enough to remember it, and more than once it has saved my sanity during the torturous, perilous process of growing up. Now, as its bizarre melody flooded my consciousness, I could feel the fear and pain leaving me. Even though I still felt helpless, at least I wasn't panicking anymore.

If only I could reach out to Hugo, make him understand somehow that at least one person in the world cared whether he lived or died. Could that possibly make a difference? If only there was something, anything, I could do!

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that Hugo must be dying from a broken heart. Listening to the sounds of elephants being slaughtered must have triggered horrible memories from his infancy. It had been proven that people sometimes die from causes that can only be attributed to a desire not to live any more, and I knew from my brief experience with Hugo that when it came to emotions, elephants were amazingly similar to humans.

I began talking in a low voice to the elephant, reassuring him, stroking his ear and finally begging him quietly to reconsider his choice to die if that's what was killing him. What's the point of making a logical argument against death to an elephant that can't understand a word I'm saying anyway? But what else could I do? There's one thing in my life that always comforted me when I was in trouble, but there was no way I could recreate the sound of my earworm for Hugo. Even if he could hear it, there was no reason to believe he'd be as comforted by it as I am. Still, if there was a way...

As I continued reassuring Hugo, I closed my eyes and tried to envision my earworm as a colorful stream of fluid flowing between the two of us like a life-saving transfusion of blood. I willed it to make the leap somehow from my subconscious to his. The whole idea seemed preposterous to me but I

was desperate to do something to help him. Moments later I felt a mild jolt as if I'd received a static electric shock to my forehead.

I opened my eyes and watched as a river of wildly-colored objects left my body and traveled towards Hugo's head. I knew it was my earworm because I could actually hear its music moving away from me. What fascinated me the most was that even though there was no actual defined shape to it, the earworm almost seemed to be acting as if it was alive. I saw the colorful ebb and flow of the tune playfully surround Hugo like the waters of a bubbling mountain stream, hesitate momentarily and then gradually and gently envelop him until it disappeared inside his huge body.

The elephant reacted almost instantly, first with a puzzled look and then with curiosity and even interest. He stopped moaning and seemed to cheer up as the dark cloud around him gradually began to disperse.

I was getting through to him!

"Hugo, you magnificent mood ring of an elephant, your color is improving. Don't you ever do that to me again, okay?"

Ten minutes later Hugo was back on his feet, shaking off the torpor that had threatened to end his life and acting as if nothing had happened. He even searched my pockets for more apples. I laughed out loud and was rewarded by an answering trumpet call that echoed around the warehouse. He followed me like a puppy while I wandered aimlessly around the enclosure to contemplate what had just happened. I had to think this through in an attempt to make some sense of it, and walking was the best way to do that. At one point I noticed my earworm make its way almost sheepishly back to me but this time there was no surprise and no accompanying jolt to the forehead. I smiled and savored the thought that maybe, just maybe, I had actually saved Hugo's life tonight.

But did I really save him, or was this all some kind of hallucination? How could this be real?

After a little more walking and a lot more reflection I began to wonder if perhaps my perception that Hugo had been dying might have been just been the result of my imagination getting the best of me. Maybe I'd simply panicked when I saw my elephant friend in distress. Perhaps Hugo had just been sick, or depressed, or just very tired. Even if he had actually been close to dying from a broken heart, it might have been nothing more than the reassuring presence of a friend or the sound of a familiar voice that had brought him back from the precipice.

Had I really been watching a visual representation of my earworm bridging the gap between us and nudging Hugo away from his self-fulfilling death wish? After a while I stopped trying to understand what had transpired and pushed all thought of the night's events to one side, to be reconsidered later when I wasn't as tired and confused. It was an enigma and at the moment I couldn't wrap my mind around a set of circumstances that really didn't make sense.

I walked around the enclosure with Hugo for almost an hour, talking to him as if he was human, sometimes cajoling him, sometimes whispering words that I hoped would comfort him. I wanted to stay with him until I was certain there wouldn't be any kind of relapse, even though that seemed

unlikely now because I could see that the color of the sounds Hugo made definitely indicated that he was happy once again. The elephant eventually bedded himself down on the sawdust-covered concrete floor. After I watched his snores echo off the walls in colorful tornado-like swirls for a few minutes to make sure he was sound asleep, I walked to the office and dialed the emergency number at the zoo. I immediately recognized the security guard's voice from previous conversations.

"David, it's Andy Hastings. When does your elephant specialist finish his vacation? I need to talk to him as soon as he gets back."

"Hey Andy, nice to know somebody else is up and around at this hour of the night. Elephant man won't be back for at least another week. He had more vacation time coming to him so he asked the boss for an extension. They gave him an extra week in Thailand to follow up on some of his research. I'm betting at least part of the time will be spent on a beach because I know that's where I'd be if I had the option."

"Guess he doesn't have a cell phone with him?"

"Nope. I'd have called him myself earlier tonight if he had."

"You had problems with your elephants?"

"Man, did I ever! A couple of hours ago I heard one heck of a disturbance coming from their enclosure. Most of them had been asleep only a few minutes earlier, except for one of the males standing guard. By the time I arrived it was like they'd all gone nuts, with the bigger elephants protecting the younger ones and everybody looking for a way to escape. It was like a jailhouse riot."

"What did you do?"

"Just watched. There wasn't anything I could do to calm them down, and nobody I could call to help me. Then a few minutes later they suddenly stopped all the weird behavior and everything returned to normal. Never seen anything like it."

"Interesting. Nobody got hurt?"

"Everybody's fine. Strange, eh?"

"No kidding. You ever run into trouble again, feel free to give me a call if you think I can help. I'm no expert, but..."

"Appreciate it. I've got your office number at the warehouse so I might just take you up on that."

I stole one more look at Hugo sleeping soundly as I locked the warehouse door behind me. David's news couldn't be a coincidence. Hugo's warnings must have traveled all the way to the zoo somehow. It was one more piece to the puzzle, and Professor Blenheim would certainly want to know about it because it would help her confirm the sophistication of the elephant's communications.

But what would happen to Hugo if the university fired me? I had no doubt that Professor Blenheim's threat to discard the elephant was sincere, and the moment she didn't need him any longer his life would be in jeopardy. If I wasn't working there any more it would be much easier for her to get away with that. In the morning I'd have to start looking into ways to make sure Hugo would be taken care of in his old age, regardless of what the professor's plans might be.

I knew I should have kept the CD that she had snatched back, but of course she was probably right that nobody would ever believe a student making allegations about a respected professor like her. Just another disgruntled former employee running to the press to get even, she'd say. I told myself that I'd done the best I could under the circumstances but I still felt like I'd betrayed my friend by not fighting hard enough to protect him. It was unfortunate that the only person in his corner happened to be a coward.

As I started pedaling home on my battered old 10-speed, my thoughts turned from worrying about Hugo's plight to contemplating my own future. I sensed that something momentous had occurred when I shared my earworm with Hugo, an extraordinary anomaly somehow triggered by my actions but with consequences beyond my comprehension. It had to have been real! It was as if I'd touched a bare wire to confirm that electricity wasn't just a theoretical concept, and in the process shorted out the power grid for an entire city.

Was I going insane? No, it had to have been more than my imagination running wild. Something incredible had indeed happened tonight, even if I didn't fully understand what it was.

Try as I might, I couldn't come up with any other explanation for Hugo's recovery. Something I'd done seemed to have brought the elephant back from the brink of death. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that there could be no other explanation. My unique capabilities, skills I'd explored over the years but never exploited, were more than just magician's illusions now. Suddenly they were very real to me. It was a sobering thought but what troubled me most was the vague feeling that someone had been spying on me as I reached this epiphany. I knew for a fact that there weren't any security cameras inside or outside the warehouse, so that couldn't account for my paranoia.

I suddenly felt like I was being stalked and I kept glancing over my shoulder in case I was actually being followed home. I wasn't, but a steadily escalating feeling of foreboding threatened to drag me deep into one of the horrible depressions that plagued me from time to time. I had to fight to regain my equilibrium. This time even the reassuring sound of my earworm wasn't able to cheer me up.

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