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To my special youngest godchildren,
Rufus, Kitty, Caspar, Pip, Emily, Barney & Arlo

'We are the Pilgrims, master, we shall go always
a little further:
It may be beyond that last blue mountain barred
with snow,
Across that angry or that glimmering sea . . .'



CHAPTER ONE

India!

The word fluttered through Mak's head and made his pulse quicken. He was going back and he couldn't be happier.

He'd only been home for eight months, during which he'd ticked off a birthday and sat several exams, but the smell of the lush forests and the caress of the tropical breeze hadn't been forgotten. Even in smelly old London.

His previous trip would be considered a disaster by most people, especially his parents.

As they were travelling upriver to track big cats as part of a conservation project, a river swell had overturned their boat and separated him from his mother and father. For many days, he had been forced to march through the jungle to find his way back to them – foraging for food, navigating dangerous terrain and surviving encounters

with lethal animals from leopards to hordes of bloodthirsty macaque monkeys.

It had been terrifying, brilliant and life changing!

While his parents might not agree with him, it had been the best learning experience a boy could have had. At first they had been overly protective of him, blaming themselves for what had happened. But little by little they'd noticed the change in Mak's attitude. Where he'd been shy, preferring to stay at home and avoid awkward social occasions, he now walked with a quiet confidence and seemed to have replaced fear with curiosity. So they allowed him to travel a little further, stay out a little longer.

His father would never admit it, but Mak could tell he was impressed by his son's new attitude. So, the moment his father had announced he must return to India for business, Mak had insisted that he go along.

As expected, his mother had been reluctant. She pointed out that Mak had shown he was confident enough to look after himself while they were away. Rather than argue, Mak had played along and told her he might throw a party at home while they were gone. That would get them to come round to his way of thinking!

He could see his parents' resolve slowly buckling. When he learned his father was going back to be

honoured for his company's pioneering work in using technology for conservation, Mak had used the opportunity to tell him how proud he was and that the whole family should be there to watch. The plan worked, and his parents had eventually agreed with each other that Mak should come.

Mak packed his final items of clothing in the case sprawled across his bed – just a few shorts and T-shirts. In a small airtight bag he placed a few waterproof matches bought in Camden Market and a first-aid kit. This showed just how much he'd changed in the last few months. His previous love of video games had taken a back seat as he now consumed countless adventure books, eager to learn the most obscure and disgusting survival facts he could.

Mak still loved his magic, although it was no longer an escape for him – now it was more of a fun series of party tricks that everyone always seemed to love.

The final item to go into the case was an old penknife. It had been the first thing his father had given him when they'd returned to England. It had belonged to Mak's great-grandfather, who had served in the Second World War, and it had been passed down with many tales about how the knife had saved his life. Mak traced his finger along the

notches in the wooden handle, and wondered what adventures his great-grandfather had been on. The blade was well oiled and as sharp as the day it had been forged.

Mak carefully placed it in a sock and closed the lid of his case.

'Makur!' came his mother's voice, summoning him downstairs.

This is it, he thought. *We're ready to go!*

He quickly zipped his case shut, snapped the locks in place and scrambled their combination codes. He tied up his sturdy hiking boots and raced downstairs, hauling the case as quickly as he could—

And slammed the corner of it into his sister's shin. Anula howled with pain.

'Mak, you idiot! Watch where you're going!'

Mak blinked in surprise. He thought Anula was still away at college, yet here she was, rubbing her shin and glaring at him with barely disguised anger.

'I'm going to have a massive bruise now!'

Their mother shook her head at him, but she knew better than to fuel an argument between the siblings.

'Anula, sorry. I didn't know you were back home.'

'Or what? You would have aimed for my head?' she snapped.

'I told you a dozen times, Makur,' his mother

said, 'but you've been in a world of your own ever since you knew we were going to India.'

Mak didn't recall any such conversation. He shrugged and turned to his sister. 'Are you house-sitting while we're away?' As he spoke, he noticed his father was moving three suitcases towards the front door.

Three more cases . . . His heart sank as the truth hit him.

'I wish,' snapped Anula. 'They're dragging me along . . . to keep an eye on you.'

If Anula didn't look pleased with the arrangement, then Mak's face showed that he felt even worse about it.

'Oh great.' The words caught in his throat. He coughed and forced a smile that made Anula's scowl deepen. 'But I don't need your help. I've shown that I can look after myself.' He poked her in the ribs. 'Maybe this time I'll be looking after *you*.'

He rolled his case to his father, ignoring the splutter of irritation from his sister.



CHAPTER TWO

'Little Wolf!'

Mak's head twisted as he tried to locate the speaker among the huge crowds at the arrival terminal. As the crowds receded, he saw a large card with the name 'MAKUR' scrawled on it in permanent marker. Underneath was the grinning face of Anil, the Indian who ran the conservation projects that his father's company used to field-test some of their technology. He had a wiry beard, and his dirt-stained clothes indicated that he'd just stepped out of the jungle.

Mak pushed closer and saw the grinning face of Anil's daughter, Diya, who was waving at him as she shouted again, 'Little Wolf!'

She wore a simple sari. He raised his hand to give her a fist-bump, but instead Diya yanked his forearm and pulled him closer. His breath was squeezed out of him in a crushing hug.



‘It’s so good to see you again, Little Wolf!’ she exclaimed.

Mak gasped for breath as he pulled himself away and caught his sister looking quizzically at him.

‘Little Wolf?’ said Anula, rolling her eyes. ‘Little Creep, more like.’

Mak met Diya’s eyes and jerked his thumb towards his sister. ‘This is my sister, Anula. Don’t worry about her.’

Mak had assumed they were heading for the hotel, so was surprised when he was told their first port of

call was Anil's latest conservation effort. They were heading straight for the jungle!

They rushed from the stale heat of the airport to a private heliport where they boarded a large helicopter to take them directly into the jungle, all paid for by the company his father had inherited from his uncle. While his parents were busily chatting with Anil, Mak was torn between gazing out of the large windows as the jungle rolled below them and chattering to Diya over the heavy headsets they wore to muffle the deep throb of the engine.

She had so much to tell him that it was a long time before he finally noticed his sister hadn't said a word. She looked pale as she stared at the jungle, her knuckles gripping her knees tightly. Mak couldn't resist a smile when she finally turned to him, her voice crackling over the intercom.

'You got lost in *that*?'

Mak nodded. 'Yeah, but in the really deep stuff. Not that little forest below.'

Anula's gaze turned back to the window and she shook her head. She'd heard the stories, but she'd never really asked Mak many questions about his adventure. He'd once overheard her comment that he'd probably made most of it up just to get sympathy.

Meanwhile, Mak had never seen the need to

argue with her, as he knew the truth. At least now he felt satisfied seeing the amazement on her face.

After two hours in the bone-shaking chopper, they landed in a small town, loaded their baggage into a pickup truck, and headed down a bumpy road through the fringes of the jungle.

Every so often huge lorries, laden with several wide logs strapped to their trailers, would thunder past in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes. Other than that, there was no traffic.

'All this used to be jungle once,' said Diya sadly.

All Mak could see were rows of rectangular rice fields tended by farmers and the occasional ox pulling a plough.

From the driver's seat, her father addressed them, glancing at them now and again in the rearview mirror.

'At first the loggers moved in, cutting down everything in their path. Then the people followed, using the land to grow food. This road was once nothing more than a narrow track.'

'Isn't logging illegal?' Mak asked, gazing at the fields.

'Not all of it,' said Anil with a sigh. 'In this area it is all official, although it doesn't stop some of the more unscrupulous loggers from delving deeper into

protected areas so they can reach rare hardwoods. But, legal or not, it scares the elephants away.'

Mak turned round sharply, and Diya smiled at the excitement in his eyes. 'I really want to see one. Are there elephants here?' he asked.

'Used to be,' said Anil. 'Asian elephants were very common in this area. Then people came and started capturing them to use as workers. Next came the loggers, destroying their habitat. We have over thirty thousand wild elephants in India, but here, in the central regions, no more than two and a half thousand, if we're lucky. And, with the logging, their numbers are decreasing.'

'Which is why we're out here,' said Mak's father with a smile. 'Our company has created a very special type of drone – and Anil is testing it for us.'

Anil nodded vigorously and glanced between Mak and Anula. 'You should be proud of your father. This project could revolutionize conservation as we know it!'

Mak had assumed they were returning to continue trials of the GPS tags that his father's company made. Anil had used them to track populations of big cats, and it had been one of these trackers that had eventually saved Mak's life. The idea of playing with drones was almost as exciting as meeting a real elephant.

After three hours of bouncing in the pickup, during which Anula had sat sulking with her earphones firmly in place, they reached the small logging town that Anil explained was going to be their base camp.

It looked just like any other small jungle town, with wooden shacks sporting rusting corrugated-iron roofs, electrical cables strung across the streets in gnarled clumps, and diesel-spewing trucks zipping across the street. Mak noticed a large group of tourists, laden down with cameras, filing into a local bar. Diya caught his gaze.

'The town is now attracting tourists who think they are "real" adventurers.' She giggled. 'Look at them, in their flip-flops, looking to "conquer" the jungle. All they do is walk a few metres to a waterfall –' she pointed to a muddy track as they passed – 'and then think they have seen it all.'

'That must be good for the local economy, bringing all that tourist money here,' Mak's father commented.

Anil shook his head. 'Sadly not. Their money attracts the wrong sort of people.' With a tilt of his head he indicated to their right-hand side as they passed a fenced-off area promising 'ELEPHANT RIDES'!

Mak craned his neck, trying to spot any elephants

beyond the fence, but instead only saw a sour-faced man, his pot belly hanging over his jeans, while his arms bulged with muscles under his shirt. The man's smile evaporated when he realized the pickup truck was not crammed with tourists.

Anil scowled. 'That's Buldeo. He caught a pair of elephants to use as entertainment, but took such poor care of them they died within months. Worked to death. He's a nasty piece of work, only interested in tourists brandishing a fistful of notes. With luck, he'll leave soon – especially now he knows we're here to keep an eye on him. My advice is for you to keep away from him.'

Mak twisted in his seat to watch Buldeo disappearing through a gate. As it swung closed, Mak swore he could see a large brown-grey *thing* in the paddock beyond, tufts of spiky hair poking from its head highlighted in the sun.

Then the gate closed, obscuring his view.