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Chapter Three

No Leaves, Oona, I can't eat leaves

I was being rocked so violently from side to side up in my howdah that it was all I could do to avoid being thrown out. I learned fast that I had to keep my head down, that whenever I looked up, there'd be some overhanging branch just ahead of me, waiting to slash and whip and claw at me, or even to knock me off altogether. So I flattened myself face down into the cushion, closed my eyes, and with all my strength, just hung on, riding the pitch and toss as the elephant blundered through the trees, trumpeting in her terror.

It was the trumpeting I could not stand. It was so loud, so excruciatingly shrill, that it filled my whole head, and the whole forest around me too. I longed to put my hands over my ears, but I could not let go of the rail. The elephant's terror became my terror, and I found myself

screaming into the cushion, then biting deep into it, because it was the only way to silence my screams. I'd been to the funfair with Dad, done the Big Dipper and the Waltzer, but that had all been make-believe terror, terror I could laugh at, terror I had to laugh at because Dad was, because everyone was, even though I was frightened out of my wits. But this, this was the real thing, this was life or death – I knew it because Oona was trumpeting it. I had no idea then what she was running from, only that whatever it was must be close behind us and coming after us, and would kill us if it caught up with us.

It wasn't until I felt the sun hot on the back of my neck that I realised we must be out of the dark of the forest. I dared now to lift my head at last and look about me. Oona was charging on through a clearing with high grass and scrubby trees all around, and then into a swamp. It occurred to me at once that if I threw myself off here, then at least I would have a soft landing. But then, the more I thought about it, the more I knew I could never bring myself to do it. It was so far to fall, too far, and Oona was running on now even faster than before. I was still being tossed about in the howdah. I was having to hang on with all my strength so as not to be thrown out. But at least I had discovered a

technique for staying in there by this time. Splaying my legs wide behind me, I found I could brace my feet against the rails, and steady myself better. I was beginning to feel a little more secure. I even dared to raise myself up a little, and twist round just for a moment to look behind me to see if the *mahout* had been following us. I'd been hoping against hope all along that he wouldn't be too far behind, that Oona would slow down, and he would catch up, that somehow, some way, he would be able to bring the runaway elephant to a halt. But Oona was showing no sign of slowing down, and the young man was nowhere to be seen.

All this time I was trying to take it all in, to make some sense of it. Everything had happened so fast, and was still happening. All I could be sure of now was that I had no one to turn to, that I was quite on my own. I was being carried off into the forest by a rampaging elephant, who had been spooked by something or someone unknown. Whatever it was had transformed her from a ponderous creature of supreme gentleness and serenity, into a wild raging beast, maddened by terror, who seemingly had only one idea in her head, to get as far from the sea as possible, as fast as possible.

Ahead of us, beyond a clearing, I saw there was a wide rock-strewn stream. I was sure that Oona must have to slow down to cross it – I hoped she might even stop altogether. She did neither. She ran straight down into it, launching herself into the river, so that the water exploded all around us, soaking me to the skin. Once through it and out the other side I saw that there was a long open hill ahead of us before we could reach the tree line again. Only once she was climbing the hill, did Oona at long last slow to a hurried scuttling walk, her head nodding vigorously with the effort of it, her great ears flapping. I found the ride was suddenly easier, so I got up on my knees now, still holding on, to see better where we were going, where we had come from. I swivelled round so that I could look behind us, back over the canopy of the forest, back the way we had come, down towards the blue of the ocean beyond.

Only now did I understand what it was that had spooked the elephant, and why she had kept running all this time. Everything I was seeing filled me with horror. A warm shiver of fear crept up my spine and into the back of my neck. The sea was rearing itself up into a towering wall of green water that was rushing in towards the beach, towards the hotel, towards where I knew Mum was swimming. I

could hear it now too, a distant thunderous roaring. People were running for their lives up the beach. I couldn't hear their screams, they were all too far away. But in my head I heard their terror. I saw boats being picked up like toys, only to disappear moments later, simply swallowed by the sea.

The great wave didn't curl over and crash along the beach as I was expecting, but just kept coming, on and on, so fast and so high that it was unreal. It seemed to me like a virtual wave, an impossible wave. There was no beach to be seen any more now, and as I watched I saw that the hotel itself was surrounded entirely by seawater, the first floor already overwhelmed. Everywhere, the water was full of swirling debris, cars, trees, telegraph poles. Entire roofs of houses were being swept along in the torrent like paper hats. I could see there were people caught up in it too, clinging on wherever they could. Any moment now I expected to see the wave crashing through the forest below us, and come rushing up the hill after us. All I knew was that I had to get away, I had to go higher. It was my only chance.

I leaned forward and slapped Oona on the neck, again and again, screaming at her to get going, to go faster.

Whether or not she understood I did not know, but to my great relief, I felt her gathering her strength underneath me and then breaking into a lumbering shuffle up the hill and into the forest. All the while I was trying to come to terms with what I'd seen. I was sure by now that it had to be a tidal wave, a tsunami. I'd seen one in a natural history programme I'd watched back home, a virtual one that had been set off after the volcanic eruption on Krakatoa. But this one was for real, and this was now. I had witnessed the terrible power of it with my own eyes.

Knowing it and understanding it for what it was had a strange effect on me. I found myself suddenly calmer, more able to think things through. I now realised that Oona must have sensed the danger, must have felt it coming long before she saw it, and long before anyone else saw it too. I recalled then something the *mahout* had told me, how she'd been so nervous of swimming in the sea earlier that morning. Somehow, even then, hours before, she had felt that something was out there, was on its way. That must have been why she'd turned and run when she had, and that was the only reason we had got this far, the only reason I was still alive, that we were both still alive.

I could tell Oona was tiring now after all her efforts. Her

breathing was laboured, her steps faltering. I should have been ready for it, but I wasn't. When Oona stumbled and nearly fell, I was hurled to one side of the howdah, losing my grip almost entirely. I just managed to cling on to the rail with one hand as I was flung over the side. I found myself dangling there, barely able to hang on, as Oona barged and blundered her way through the undergrowth. All I knew was that if I let go, even if I survived the fall with no broken arms or legs, I would not stand a chance on my own without the elephant. I had to hang on. Somehow I swung myself round so that I could cling on with both hands, trying all I could to scrabble up the elephant's side, and haul myself up. But I hadn't the strength to do it. I knew that sooner rather than later, my grip must weaken and I would fall, or that maybe a branch would knock me off as Oona charged on.

I cried out to Oona then, begging her to slow down. Incredibly, she did. Even more miraculously, she came to a stop. Then I saw her trunk come curling round, felt it grasping me by the waist, lifting me up and depositing me in an ungainly heap back in the safety of the howdah, where I lay for some moments limp and breathless. Already Oona was on the move again, walking on slowly at first, as if

allowing me time to recover. I rolled over on to my front, and reached out for the handrail, bracing myself again with my feet, as Oona gathered speed. I closed my eyes, gritted my teeth, and determined there and then that nothing would ever make me let go again.

Only now, as I lay there exhausted in the *howdah* did I really begin to take in the dreadful meaning of everything I had just witnessed. If Mum had been in the sea, or on the beach, or anywhere nearby when the tidal wave swept in, then she must have drowned, along with anyone else caught in its path. No one caught on the beach or in the sea could possibly have survived the onslaught of such a gigantic wave. No one would have stood a chance. She had told me she was going for a swim. It was almost the last thing she'd said to me. I tried not to believe what this meant, but I had to. Choking back my tears, I kept telling myself that there was at least a possibility that Mum might already have left the beach by the time the tsunami struck, that maybe she'd been back in the hotel, and had reached the safety of our room, which was after all on the top floor. If so, she could still be alive. She could be. I so wanted to believe that.

But I only had to think again, and I would know in my heart of hearts, that in all probability she had to have been

in the water when the wave struck. I knew how much she loved her swimming, and her snorkelling, how for a whole week now she'd hardly ever been out of the water, how each morning we'd raced each other down the beach and into the water, and how she always swam like a seal, effortless and powerful.

That last thought gave me a sudden lift of hope, that maybe even if she had been caught by the wave she might, just possibly, because she was such a strong swimmer, have been able to swim her way to safety. But I realised that Mum's best chance of survival had to have been the hotel. I tried all I could to persuade myself that she might have gone back to the hotel, to email Grandpa and Grandma again maybe, that she had been up there in our room when the wave came in, that she was alive, that she was not dead and drowned, that she was right now thinking about me, that she'd be looking for me, coming to find me, as soon as she could.

I tried all I could to convince myself that this must be true, and that the worst had not happened. But the more I thought about it, the more I was afraid that it had. As a last resort, I began to pray for God to look after her, to save her, until I remembered that the last time I'd prayed like this, it

had been for Dad the night before he went away to the war. God hadn't been listening then, so why should he be listening now? In my despair, I lifted my head and cried out loud, not to God, but to Mum. "Don't die, Mum. Please, Mum. Swim, you've got to keep swimming, you've got to. Don't give up, please don't..."

I was interrupted by the sound of a strange throbbing, distant at first, but suddenly quite close and then right overhead. I could see what it was now, a helicopter, glinting in the sunlight up above the canopy of the trees. I was up on my feet at once, balancing as best I could in the howdah, waving my arms wildly and shouting at the top of my voice. But the helicopter was gone within seconds. Just that glimpse though was enough to give me hope again. I knew for sure that they must be looking for survivors, rescuing people, and that one of them could be my mother.

It was at that moment that I made up my mind. Whatever had happened I had to go back to try to find Mum. I yelled at Oona to stop. She didn't pay any attention. I pleaded with her, I shouted at her, I screamed at her, I slapped her neck. Then, when I could see that none of that was doing any good, I tried explaining. "She could be alive!" I told her. "I have to go back. I have to. Turn around, Oona. You must

turn around. We have to go back!" But Oona would not be stopped. If anything, she was going faster, blowing and puffing as she went, striding out more purposefully than ever, her trunk swinging, her great ears in full sail. She was going where she was going, and that was that.

I realised then that there was nothing whatsoever I could do to change her mind, and that I had to go where the elephant was going. I had no choice. Understanding this first, then simply accepting it, seemed to enable me to calm down enough to think straight. Hadn't this elephant already saved my life? Hadn't she known exactly what she was doing right from the start? If so, then she was refusing to stop because she knew that the only safety for us both lay ahead of us high in the hills, deeper into the jungle, and that the quicker we got there the better.