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Chapter 1

Finley Memorial Zoo is a small zoo near Vancouver, Washington, and it should have been a quiet one this early in the morning. Damrey and Nakri, the two Asian elephant cows, should have been dozing in their stalls, not trumpeting loud enough for me to notice on the other side of the grounds. Slow-witted and gritty-eyed from lack of sleep, I walked on toward the Commissary, intending to clock in a little early after my night volunteer shift. That brought me closer to the elephant barn. The ruckus continued, and I stopped to puzzle it out. At seven in the morning, I was possibly the only human on the grounds. The night keeper went off duty at two in the morning. The night security guard was on his way home. Neither the day shift keepers nor any other staff had arrived yet, although they would soon.

I wasn't sure what I had to offer to elephants in a dither. I'm a bird keeper and an ex-feline keeper, not trained on elephants. Elephant handling requires special expertise, lots of it. But duty and curiosity called. I abandoned plans for coffee and a scone at the Penguinarium kitchen and jogged off, one hand stabilizing my six-months pregnant belly, to see what was up. At least I could phone Sam Bates, the senior elephant keeper, and tell him what to expect when he arrived.

Wide awake, I would have enjoyed a fine June morning after the dark Northwest winter. Leafed-out dogwoods and ornamental cherries lined the asphalt paths, beds of white and purple petunias contributed perfume, and passionate song sparrows hollered in the bushes. But the path was uneven, my balance and wind were not at their best, and I plowed forward without enjoying the journey.

Out of breath, I slowed to a walk as I passed the giraffe barn and entered the covered visitor area at the elephant exhibit. Through the viewing window I saw Damrey, the older cow, in the front stall. I had never worked this area and was secretly grateful for the pink blotch halfway down her trunk that instantly identified her. Nakri, the younger cow, was shut into the back stall, but the concrete door between the stalls was fixed open a little, leaving a vertical slit several inches wide. Nakri was waving her trunk through this gap, and I could see pink inside her mouth as she roared. What had got them so stirred up?

The elephant barn was a huge concrete box divided into the two stalls and an L shaped work area with hay storage at the rear. The front stall had a massive hay rack at the end to my left and to my right a sliding door, now closed, that gave the elephants access to the outside yard. Damrey circled by this door as though she wanted outside, ears out and flapping. She stopped

and leaned her head on the door, banging it in a rapid vibration. The concrete slab rang like the drum of doom. She stepped away, her trunk in constant motion—curling under her chin, searching ahead and alongside her, reaching down to the floor. As I scanned for the source of her troubles, she wheeled and strode toward the other end of the stall.

On the floor by the hay rack, in the stall with the elephant, a person in a brown jacket lay face down in blood-stained straw.

Damrey fumbled at the jacket with her trunk tip, then set a giant forefoot on the person's back and began rocking the body back and forth. I bolted for the staff door, fumbling to find the correct key. Inside, as close as I dared to the bars, I screamed at Damrey, "Get away! Get the hell off him!" She paced away from me, striding in a big circle around the stall, coming back to pluck at the body with her trunk and shove at it with a forefoot. Nakri roared again from the back stall and went down on her knees with her trunk outstretched through the gap in the door, reaching ineffectively for his arm.

A man. It looked like a man. Was he alive? Blood smeared the straw beneath and around him, with a dark, thick dribble on his head and down his face. I had to get him out of there before they killed him. If he weren't already dead.

Hyperventilating on air redolent with elephant and hay, I grabbed the radio bouncing at my belt and broadcast a human medical emergency at Elephants. I had no idea who might hear it, if anyone. I clawed my cell phone out of a pocket and searched for Sam's cell number, pressed the button to dial, and yelled at Damrey to leave him alone. Phone to my ear, I ran to the rack where the ankuses—elephant guides—were hanging. I grabbed one, a two-foot wooden handle with a metal tip that was both point and hook, and trotted back to the bars. I waved it at Damrey, yelling "Back off!" She strode away, huge and uncontrollable. Deadly.

She was behind a wall of bars, but I knew she could grab me through them if I got too close. Only the area near the hay rack and the body was safe. There, the bars were spaced too close for her to get more than the tip of her trunk through. I stood by the hay rack, the body a few feet from me, waving the ankus, and felt my heart pound. I couldn't reach him without moving to where Damrey could reach me. It made no sense to risk my own life, and I couldn't risk my internal passenger.

Sam answered after an eternity, and I gasped out the situation. He was wonderfully calm. "I'll be right there, Iris. Keep her away from him."

"I can't. She backed off when I got here, but now she's all over him. He's still alive—I saw him move. She's mauling him. I've got to get her shut away. You live too far."

"I'm at the gym. Fifteen minutes."

"Sam, that's not fast enough." I couldn't keep my voice from rising.

A pause. "Iris, here's what you do."

In the background, Sam's partner said, "Who is it? Tell them to call back later." Sam's voice, turned away from the phone, said, "Shut up, Brent." "Shut up" was something Sam would never say, last of all to Brent.

Sam told me what to do.

Phone clutched the way a diver in trouble clutches an air nozzle, I ran to the door to the keeper work room, through it, and toward the back of the barn. I found the set of levers that operated the hydraulic doors. The massive elephant-proof concrete slabs slid sideways to allow the animals to move between the two stalls and outside to the yard. Small safety windows in the concrete let me see what was happening.

Sam walked me through it, his voice dead steady. With shaking hands, I pulled the left lever to let Damrey into the outside yard. The door creaked wide, admitting sun and cool air, and she strode out. But as I pushed the lever and the heavy door slowly closed, she thundered back in. I could feel her steps through my boots. We waited and hoped, but she didn't go out again. I glimpsed her pacing gray body through the little window, agile and swift, and heard gusty rumbles vibrate down her trunk.

"She knows what you're trying to do," Sam finally said, "and she doesn't like it. We'll try something else." A few seconds of silence. "We need to get her in with Nakri. We want both of them in the back stall." He continued calmly, as though it was high time I learned how to do this ordinary task.

I hastened back to the work room, set the phone on the counter, and ripped open cardboard boxes of apples and carrots and lettuce. I threw a random assortment into a five gallon bucket, grabbed up the little phone, and ran to the back side of Nakri's hay rack, near the door levers. Phone squeezed precariously between my ear and shoulder, I dumped the produce into the chute above the hay rack in the second stall.

"Here, girl," I said, my voice shaky, and Nakri hustled over and tossed the food around, ears flapping, not really eating.

"Now for the tricky part," Sam said. "Open the door between the two stalls."

"Sam, can't I try shutting Nakri in the outside yard first?"

"No, you can't. The door from the back stall to the yard quit working twenty years ago when the building settled. You have to open the door between the two stalls. Be calm. You have to be calm, or they can't be."

I wasn't an elephant keeper. I couldn't read their body language or their vocalizations. Hell, I couldn't even *hear* many of their vocalizations—they were at too low a frequency for human ears. I didn't know these animals, and they didn't know me. Only Sam could have gotten me to open that door, the door left partly open. I could see the front stall through the little safety window as the big door edged sideways. Damrey stood back and swayed and watched it. As soon as it moved far enough, Nakri abandoned breakfast and rushed through, straight to the body. I'd let a second elephant at him. She snuffled her trunk tip all over him, pulling at arms and legs. At Wallace. It had to be Wallace, the foreman. Our boss. Zoo jacket, receding dark hair, bulky. She dragged him a few inches this way and that.

"Iris, say, 'Breakfast, girls. Hurry it up!' Say it loud and give the door a little jolt."

I said it as commandingly as I could and gave the lever a tug. The door between the two stalls closed up a bit. The elephants swung their trunks at it. Nakri blew a long snort.

Flashing lights through the little window caught my eye. A police car pulled up to the visitor area. Someone *had* heard the code I'd radioed in. I was thankful they hadn't used the siren and agitated the elephants even more.

Where was Ian Sullivan, the junior elephant keeper? Or Dr. Reynolds, our new veterinarian? Instead, Hap Ricketts, the Commissary manager, arrived at a run. There was only one reason for Hap to come—as a member of the shooter team, trained for emergencies when human life was at risk. I held up a hand for him to give me a few seconds, but he couldn't see me from where I was, behind the feed room, deep in the barn. I knew what came next if I couldn't get the elephants shut away, and it had to do with the big rifle in a locked case in the kitchen. "Sam. They won't shift for me. Hap's getting the rifle, and they're both messing around with the body. *They won't shift.*"

"Well, *you're* perfectly safe, so just cool it."

He said it snarky, and in one seamless ripple of emotion I was shamed and then angry, and the anger drove out panic, and I realized this was Sam's exact intent.

Hap spoke briefly to the police officers and stepped into the barn. He moved swiftly through the door to the work room.

Sam said, "They will shift. Say it again and bang the ankus on the bars. Say it like you're amused that they're fooling around."

Deep breath. One hand holding the phone, the ankus in the other. Breathe. "Breakfast, girls! Come on now. Hurry it up. I haven't got all day." I banged on the bars.

"Good. Now start closing the door again."

I dropped the ankus. One hand clenched on the lever's round black knob, tendons white, I started the door, the other hand still gripping the cell phone lifeline. Nakri walked to the opening and put her head into her stall. She waited, halfway through, and I jolted it a little more closed. She rumbled and walked into her stall, turned and squeaked at Damrey. Damrey swayed and rumbled, swayed and rumbled, her trunk moving ceaselessly. Two police officers stood outside in the visitor viewing area with eyes riveted on us, one holding a radio to his mouth, the other with a hand resting on her holstered pistol, as if that little gun had any relevance.

Hap came out with the heavy rifle. Poor bastard, I thought with some remote corner of my mind. Damrey, purchased from a circus thirty years ago with pennies from local kids, featured in every zoo fundraising campaign, subject of this year's children's art contest, faced him and the rifle. She stood motionless except for her trunk tip reaching and bobbing, smelling for him. I could see the strain on Hap's face as he raised the rifle to his shoulder and braced for the recoil. "Wait," I called. "Wait a minute." Hap gave no sign of hearing me.

Nakri rumbled. Damrey turned and, in two strides, slipped into the second stall and draped her trunk over Nakri's neck, brushing it down her friend's broad face, the tips of the two trunks twining about each other. The door slowly, slowly grated shut, the lever slippery with my sweat.

