

## Prologue

Had it not been for the torrential rains, the events of that night and beyond might have turned out very differently. But because the visibility was barely fifty meters, and because the wipers of his Mercedes were too taxed to clear the windshield properly, Dr. Ovidio Salazar was traveling only forty mph on a highway designated for seventy-five.

A giant shape suddenly appeared in Salazar's headlights and he swerved instinctively, which sent his car into a tailspin, which he corrected—wrongly—by braking and turning away from the spin, which magnified the result into a sliding, full-on 360. When the car finally came to rest—without slamming into the median barrier or the creature, thankfully—Salazar looked out to see what the hell the beast had been.

And there, standing not twenty feet from his windshield, was the biggest elephant he had ever seen. It was staring in at him through the wipers with what Salazar would later tell his family was concern, he was sure of it. Their eyes locked for a good five seconds, and then the elephant turned and easily stepped over the median barrier, quickly disappearing under the curtain of rain. Had there been any other traffic, the elephant would have created more havoc, or even been struck, but as it was well before dawn, only people like the doctor, who had to be in a surgical O.R. in Lusaka in an hour, were on the road.

What was an elephant doing on a highway in the first place? Salazar asked himself as he pulled to the side of the highway to let his heart slow enough to drive again. There weren't any national parks for hundreds of miles, there was no "trail" leading through the suburban developments and townships that spanned north from Lusaka, so this creature was either a

runaway from a zoo—highly unlikely, since Salazar didn't know of any—or he was an escapee from a national park and had somehow traversed the outskirts of civilization for hundreds of miles without being noticed.

Until now.

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*I know that I am coming to the end of my days. The pain in my body slows me, the hunger for a good meal taunts me, and my eyes grow cloudier and dimmer by the day. I've seen this before many times, and I know what the end will bring. So my journey back to the place where I was born, to the ones who cared for me, if they are still there, is all that is left for me. The distance and the exact direction are unknown to me, but I have no doubt that my senses will tell me where to go. I just hope to get there in time.*

*I remember every sight, every sound, every smell from the moment of my birth to the moment we are in now. I have no dates to mark the time by, and no knowledge of the two-leggers' boundaries, but I know I've been far from my home, taken to distant lands and climates, across endless waters to towering nests filled with noise and unbearably bright lights where countless of them hurtle about in their false beasts.*

*My world is out under the open sky, where the stars are so close you can see them moving across the night. Where the only thing you hear is the thrum of insects, the roar of predators carried on the breeze, or the screeching of the tree dwellers—and the dread silence of those who have to sleep on the ground.*

*It is under that sky that I hope to end my journey, among the two-legged friends who raised me, and the friends from my long ago adopted herd, the wonderful aunts and cousins who took me in as if they were all my mothers.*

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Trevor Blackmon, the 53-year old assistant game warden for Zambia's national parks, hung up the phone and scowled. This was going to be a headache. If the sighting was bona fide—and the witness was a surgeon, so he was probably reliable—how had such a large animal been able to avoid detection in a fairly populated area for the several days it would have taken it to travel from the nearest national park?

Now Blackmon was going to have to locate the elephant, probably from the air, and dispatch it before it caused any major problems—like trampling some innocent family in their back yard—and before the beast came to the attention of the animal activists. They would demand that it be tranquilized and transported back to a park, which, with a fifteen-thousand pound bull—and this surely had to be a bull, females rarely traveled alone—would be the biggest headache of all. It would be far easier and more convenient to wait until it was in a tribal area, far from prying eyes, dispatch it and let nature take its course with the corpse. There were 25,000 elephants in Zambia, after all, one less bull wasn't going to be a concern.

First, Blackmon would check the satellite tracking office for any GPS devices that might be transmitting, and if he was lucky and the bull had been fitted with a collar, or had had a chip implanted, it would make locating him a snap. Blackmon knew this was a long shot, since no alarms had gone off yet, but that might be explained by the budget cuts that had gutted the staff whose duties included monitoring the devices. But it was worth a shot, so he picked up the phone again and stared out at the downpour as he waited for the call to go through.

—Zambia, Present Day (The Long Rains of 2012)

## Chapter One

### First Memories—Kenya, 1962

*Unlike you, we remember our first hours. I believe you have little memory of your lives until you are able to walk. Not us. We walk on our very first day or risk being eaten by predators. I hovered under the massive shadow of my mother, tripping and stumbling blindly, stuffing my face up into her belly to suck the sweet milk dripping from her breasts.*

*Sounds and smells overwhelmed me: the grasses and the soil under foot, the boom of thunder and the loud patter of the afternoon rain, the fat brown river and its slippery banks, the strange horned animals drinking at the watering hole with us, the pungent smell of the herd's urine and dung. There were too many members in my clan for me to count, but I recall my sisters and brothers and aunts welcoming me in those first days with a profusion of trunks, stroking and encouraging me, letting me know each of them by their scent.*

*My mother's patient wisdom guided me through learning the rules of survival, her shape and scent always close by, never leaving me behind when I dawdled or grew tired. The hours stolen with my playmates—there were six of us calves—were the antidote to the many worries. I'd fall asleep, aching with wonderful pains, and then be up with the sun to do it all over again.*

*Other than my herd mates, my best friend was a young buck of the Shaggy Beard variety. They have the strange habit of suddenly leaping and spinning in the air and pounding their*

*heads against imaginary trees. My mother finally told me why; they are born with maggots in their heads, and when they grow older the maggots hatch and try to find a way out, which drives the poor beasts crazy.*

*Though it is not common for elephants to fraternize with other species, my mother allowed us to play every day while our two herds spent a rainy season at a sprawling river complex. My friend wouldn't listen to his mother, who tried in vain to keep him from joining us, but then she'd leave him, understanding that our herd would watch over him if he was with me. We would wander off and explore for hours, butting and smelling everything, from animal holes to dung to insects, until one of us would get hungry and we'd go nurse from our mothers.*

*It eventually dawned on me that everything we did was watched over by my herd's adult females, and then I was confronted with the horrible reason why. We are always a moment away from some terrible, blood-freezing danger, no matter our size or age. The best defense we have is numbers: stay with the herd, and the chances of being taken are slim. Walk alone, and your days are numbered. But even numbers can sometimes let you down.*

*My Shaggy Beard friend was drinking at the riverbank with the rest of his herd when a flash of motion leapt from the water and grabbed him. It was a Big Snapper, and she dragged him under until all we could see were his legs kicking desperately above the surface. I screamed to his herd to do something, but none of them would move. They just stared, paralyzed, and I heard their minds as clear as if they could speak (which they can't): They were glad it was him and not them.*

*They trotted away when several other Big Snappers joined in, and the river burst with their violent tails and the water turned red. The sounds of my friend's last helpless grunts still haunt me. It was a shock to my heart, and to this day I have never been that carefree again.*

*Our first rule was to always be aware of the big cats and the sloped dogs lurking in the grass, their cold eyes watching everything. But the most terrifying creatures of all were you, you two-leggers. Not those who would appear in their foul-smelling false beasts and watch us from a distance, shiny little objects clutched to their faces, clicking and whirring. Nor the tribes-people we passed on our travels who lived in nests of dried mud and sticks, who tolerated us as long as we stayed away from their fenced crops.*

*No, the two-leggers who scared us most were the ones who would steal downwind of us to get as close as possible without us scenting them. The tall, black-skinned fast runners who would surprise us with their sharp sticks. If you were pricked, it would mean a slow, painful death over hours or even days. The young hunters were the worst of them; they seemed to take pleasure in causing a needless death.*

*But the most dangerous of all were the white-skinned hunters, because they could kill from a great distance. Their false beast's noise would fall silent somewhere far off, and we would raise our trunks and try to scent where they might be. Soon the birds would fall silent and dread would fill the air. Then would come the echo of one of their boom sticks and one of our adults would stagger. We would thunder away as soon as we saw them, but it was already too late. You could see the stunned look in the victim's eyes, and then he would crash to the ground in a cloud of death. Hours later we would return to find the ravaged corpse. They would hack off the tusks and trunk and leave the body bleeding and faceless, and we would cry and call to our departed friend far into the night.*

*Every season we would return to the places where our friends had fallen and visit their bones, turning them over and over, remembering their owner, and hoping to find a life force in there somewhere. But it was always gone.*

\* \* \*

*My mother, called Moon Mother by our clan, became the leader of the herd during the rainy season of my second year. Red Eye, our beloved matriarch, could barely eat because her teeth were gone, and her voice hardly registered. I say “voice” knowing you do not understand our language, nor can you even hear it; it is far too low for your ears. But we have conversations just as you do, sometimes over long distances, like our brethren in the sea. Their sounds carry through water, ours through the air or the earth. At night we can address relatives many horizons away; if we stand three-legged on hard ground, we can hear other families sending messages from half a day’s walk away—through our feet.*

*When Red Eye finally collapsed and could not rise again, the herd stayed with her for two days and nights, each of us reciting our fondest memories of our time with her. On the third day she stared at the rising sun with her beautiful eyes—she was known for her long lashes and her one red eye—and her sadness gave way to acceptance. Then, as we all wept, she left us.*

*We were lost until a new matriarch was anointed. Red Eye held the stored wisdom of sixty rainy seasons and knew, for instance, every watering hole and underground aquifer hidden among hundreds of miles of savanna and highland. In the dry season, that knowledge could be crucial to our survival.*

*I was too young to understand what happened next, but recognize now why the mood of the herd was so disturbed, and why I had such troubled, violent dreams: There was a war of succession going on between my mother and another older female, She Storms. You may not perceive different personalities in us, but we are each just as unique in our world as you are in yours. And just as you have your troubled among you, so do we.*

*She Storms was crazy, and had been since she'd been struck by lightning in her youth. But she had survived and had a large extended family, of which she was the eldest, and therefore their leader. Now she had started a subtle war with my mother, determined that she would become the new matriarch, even though most of the herd favored my mother.*

*Then She Storms did something unthinkable. She had been quietly threatening me for days—when my mother wasn't looking—and as we crossed a rain-swollen river, all the adults, my mother included, were concerned with a dangerous current that was swallowing the younger calves for several seconds before they could find their footing again and finish crossing. She Storms, who was bringing up the rear and had let all the other calves pass her but me, suddenly pinned me with her tusks and held me under in water deep enough that no one could see me. She was twenty times my size, and I couldn't do a thing; I was unable to even get my trunk above the surface. I screamed desperately with the last breath I had left, hoping that some relative would hear me. Then I started inhaling water.*

*Sensing something, my mother turned and looked for me, then realized what was happening. As she charged through the water, She Storms let go and I surfaced, gasping. I watched as my mother, enraged, gored She Storms so severely that she fell and was swept downriver before she could clamber onto the bank. She limped out of the water, screeching with pain, and then everyone saw that she was bleeding profusely.*

*"What have you done, Moon Mother?" screamed She Storms' sister as their clan gathered around her, all of them trumpeting and snorting and gaping at her wounds. "She could die of these!"*

*Our family surrounded me and my mother protectively, and then my mother finally spoke.*



*“She was trying to drown my little one, I saw her with my own eyes. Ask him, he will tell you.”*

*She Storms wailed, “Don’t listen to her! I did no such thing! She’s mad!”*

*“Let the little one speak,” bellowed Crackles, an older cow who was not from either of our families, so her opinion on this matter would be respected. “Speak up, Moon Mother’s son.” They all looked down at me. But I was so shaken, still retching up water, that I couldn’t find my voice.*

*A strange look came over my mother, and she spoke to the gathering in dawning comprehension. “She was thinking...that I would be so broken-hearted by my son’s death...that she would become our matriarch! She was plotting to take over our clan by drowning my baby, do you see?”*

*She Storms’ family let out a chorus of stomping and trumpeting, and She Storms kept on denying it.*

*“Oh no, oh no, she’s making this all up! I love that little calf like my own son!” That she treated her own son far from lovingly was not mentioned.*

*Crackles bent over me, inserted her trunk in my mouth and whispered, “You must tell them what you saw, little one, or this could be very bad for your mother. Tell the herd what happened.”*

*I have always been a sensitive male—even in later years as a grown bull—and it pained me to accuse her, even after what she had done. But now she had lied, and even though she could kill me with one blow from her feet, I had to speak up. I looked around, seeing clearly for the first time, and noticed that all the horned animals on the banks were watching us in silent awe.*

*My voice was weak and small. I recounted the events as best I could, saw the stunned looks in the herd's eyes, then finished by defending my mother's actions.*

*"So you see, she had no choice but to use her tusks." I lowered my head. "That is the truth. That is what happened."*

*Even as She Storms continued to protest, now calling me a liar, the rest of the herd looked at one another in consternation. She had gone too far this time. Crackles called for a meeting of the elder cows. As my mother and She Storms were kept apart, surrounded by their families, the elder cows somberly walked into a stand of trees and began to speak, their voices rumbling quietly.*

*Some of my sisters and aunts tried to patch things up between the two families, but too much damage had been done. Family is the key to survival in the wild, and even though her behavior had been deranged, She Storms was her family's leader, and they had to stand with her.*

*A few minutes later the elders returned. Crackles cleared her throat and addressed the herd solemnly.*

*"We have come to a regrettable, but unavoidable, conclusion. After countless seasons together, after many lost relatives and friends, we will no longer be able to travel with She Storms. After what she did here today, to a helpless calf born of one of our most respected elders, we cannot trust her to be in our presence again. She is hereby banished from this clan. If they so wish, any members of her family can travel with us, but they are free to go with their matriarch. That is our ruling."*

*She Storms's family was probably not surprised, but there was a lot of upset over the ruling, and then they had to decide whether to stay with the herd or go with their family. In the*

*end, they all went with their matriarch, for good or ill, and a little while later they left us. As a lone bull I crossed paths with them over the years, but, sadly, it was never the same, even with my former calf friends.*

*Now my mother would lead the rest of us, making all the important decisions, like when to rest in the heat, when to climb into the highlands for dry season, when to seek safety, or attack, if danger approached. The females had all watched and learned from Red Eye, and now they would watch and learn from my mother. One never knew when they might be called upon to lead or to throw up their bodies as a protective wall. And the females ruled everything, from the raising of calves to the cold banishing, at adolescence, of all young bulls.*

*I may have boasted a bit about the accuracy of my memory, because there is a blank spot in my early years that I cannot account for. There is a Before—me with my wonderful mother, my doting brothers and sisters, and the rest of the herd all living in a lush valley during rainy season—and an After, when I awoke on a farm in the highlands among two-leggers I had never seen before.*

*They had stolen me away from my world and my family, and I was helpless to do anything. I am ashamed to say that all I did was cry and thrash about, but my heart was aching so badly that I had no other response. They were forcing a strange-smelling liquid down my throat as they held me. There were none of my kind to be found, though there were other plains-dwellers, all young like me. I was in a waking dream; my memory of that time is so foggy that I have no idea how long it was or what had happened to me.*

*And after that, everything in my life was changed forever.*

## Chapter Two

### Other Voices—Kenya, 1964

The poachers came on horseback at dawn, a method their leader had attempted by himself a week earlier to see if it would work. It had been so successful that he was riding among the herd as if he were invisible. The great beasts had thought his steed was just another creature of the plains. The rider was ignored for several minutes until his scent finally spooked them and they took off.

So now the herd they had tracked for a day was grazing peacefully in a lush meadow, most of them out in the open, not paying any attention to the riders as they dismounted, one by one, every twenty meters inside the far tree line and unslung their rifles. A morning mist was just lifting; the sounds of the elephants' trunks snapping branches off mopane trees echoed like gunshots.

The matriarch looked up, sensing something wrong, then picked up their scent before she saw them. She swung her mighty form head-on towards the far tree line and trumpeted a warning. The females quickly gathered in a semi-circle, shielding the calves and infants behind them.

Then the matriarch spotted the lead poacher as he stepped out from behind a tree, his skin as black as night, his eyes as impenetrable as a cobra's. She flared her great ears out and charged,

hoping to scare him. But he stood his ground, raised his .375 H&H rifle and calmly squeezed the trigger.

The bullet entered her skull directly above the trunk and mushroomed through her brain before it exited into her spinal cavity. She dropped head first, the earth shaking from the impact of her massive weight. Then the other rifles opened up and the herd wheeled in panic. They had never encountered this kind of killing before; they were too stunned to react, their leader was lying in a heap, this was way beyond anything they could comprehend.

There were thirty-two of them with tusks big enough to take. They called to each other in desperation as they fell, family to family, intoning final farewells over the rifles' constant firing. In less than two minutes they were all dead or dying, and the men moved out from the trees and walked among them, finishing off those who were dragging themselves to lay beside their loved ones, flailing their trunks and weeping, with shots into their ear canals.

The calves that were too small to shoot huddled a short distance away, bewildered. The infants—there were six of them, two years old at the most—stood by their mothers, puddles of urine at their feet, their eyes wide with terror.

The poachers pulled machetes or axes from their saddles and set about their business. The lives of these animals meant only one thing to these men, and that was money. They started hacking away at the elephants' faces, cutting deep into the flesh around the tusks so they could carve them out whole.

When the lead poacher reached the matriarch and began hacking away, he felt something poke at his back and whirled. The matriarch's calf was wheezing at him in distress with his tiny trunk. The poacher slashed his machete across the elephant's forehead, and the creature wailed in pain and trundled away a few yards, blood seeping down into his eyes.

The poacher finished hacking off the tusks and was about to toss them into the pile when the baby approached him again—but this time charged. The poacher dropped the tusks, gripped his machete with both hands, and thrust the blade deep into the calf's forehead. The little elephant made not a sound...and collapsed against his mother's carcass.

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Fourteen-year old Kamau Matiba had spent the night in the crook of a baobab tree, and he had not slept well. He'd dabbed the ointment his mother had given him on the wounded site every few hours, but it still burned badly. He'd gritted his teeth and shown no reaction when they cut his foreskin off in the ancient rite of Kikuyu manhood, because that was expected. But now, alone out here in the dark miles from his village, it hurt something fierce.

He'd climbed back down at dawn after eating a strip of dried springbok, tied his robe tightly and hefted his spear. He would have to stay in the bush for three more days on his own, and when he returned he would officially be a man. Kamau was highly intelligent, so this struck him as a bit ridiculous, but he understood the culture of his elders, even if they harked back to another century and wanted to remain there. Kamau did not, and with Kenya's recently-won independence from the British, which he'd learned all about in his village's school, he had big plans for how he was going to leave village life behind soon enough. But for now, he had to play along.

He'd been walking for a while when, somewhere in the far distance, he heard the gunshots. Dozens of them, as if there was a war going on over the hills. After almost two minutes they stopped, and there was a deathly silence. He knew he should avoid going anywhere near that place.

Then, a while later, he saw the dark specks floating in the sky. Circling. He figured the distance to the site as three or four kilometers; there were no roads in this area of the park, so whoever had been firing probably came on foot. He jogged up the hill until he could see down to the next valley, just to be sure. He certainly didn't want to run into them.

Even if he'd had binoculars, whatever had been shot was not visible through the stands of riverine trees. He was about to head back down the hill when he felt the earth vibrating under his feet, and then felt the air move from the thudding of hooves. He turned and stared, trying to ascertain where the animals were coming from. It dawned on him that they were coming from the valley where the killings had occurred—and he ducked into a wall of brush just as the first horse galloped into view.

Kamau stole deeper into the cover and watched. He had a clear view as the riders galloped past not fifty meters away. There were six of them, all with rifles, and they had extra horses with heavy, bloodstained canvas packs bouncing against their flanks.

When they'd disappeared he stepped cautiously back into the open. He could see them down below now, heading west. They wore non-tribal garb—shorts, T-shirts, sandals or tennis shoes, floppy hats or ballcaps—so he couldn't tell what tribe they were from, but there were only a few possibilities. And they'd likely be from somewhere within a thirty to forty-kilometer radius, which narrowed the choices even more.

He turned back toward the killing field, his nerves on edge, but his curiosity stronger. He set off at a gentle lope.

Kamau came upon the meadow from the tree line and froze in his tracks. The ground was saturated with blood, urine and dung that had escaped the creatures in their death spasms. Their

lifeless eyes stared out as if the last image they had beheld was seared into their retinas. Kamau wasn't prepared for the level of atrocity he now faced, and he had to fight the urge to vomit.

He walked out and started chasing the vultures off, but they just hopped down a row and started ripping at flesh from another carved-up face. All the tusks had been hacked off the huge corpses except for five infant calves, shot in the head for no reason he could see but cruelty.

Kamau's insides were roiling, his throat could hardly swallow. He heard a weak whiffing issue from nearby; it wasn't the birds, it was something else. He stepped over a puddle of entrails, slapping at the vultures with his spear, and came upon the saddest sight of all. A sixth calf, lying next to its mother with a machete blade sticking out of its forehead, the handle broken off.

He knelt down and touched the poor creature—and then recoiled in surprise. It had opened its eyes and was staring at him. Kamau jumped to his feet.

“Little one, you are *alive*?!”

The little elephant tried to get to his feet. Kamau clicked soothingly and tried to hold him down so the machete wouldn't do more damage, but the young elephant calf weighed 500 pounds, so there wasn't much he could do. Once it was on its feet, Kamau stared into its eyes head-on and saw the dull, desperate look of shock and pain. Kamau couldn't contain himself, and tears pooled in his eyes. At that moment he was ashamed to be human.

The elephant stared at him, his breathing labored, his trunk hanging listlessly, for several seconds, understanding, on some level, that this gentle human was different than the cobra-eyed one who had hurt him. Then he looked down at his mother's body, slowly sank to his knees, and lay down beside her again.



Kamau whispered to him, “You stay here by your mother, little *tembo*. I’ll be back with someone who can help you, okay? I’ll be back as fast as I can.”

He whirled and chased after the encroaching vultures, yelling and waving angrily, scattering them momentarily. Then he took off at a run.