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## **The Emerald Eyes**

"If I die today, I will die a happy woman," I thought as I made the short walk from the animal pens to the house.

"Today was certainly special, wasn't it?" the wildlife caretaker, Deryl, called out as he watched my slim, aging figure walk up the steps and into my home.

"It was," I said to myself, too quiet for anyone else to hear. As I entered my small home, decorated in traditional Indian fabrics and furniture, I paused and lingered by the fireplace. There, on the dark mahogany mantle, sat a carved wooden elephant figure. I stroked a finger up and down the length of its back. Such beautiful, graceful creatures. I thought of his eyes – those innocent, green eyes – that were so peculiar and intriguing that I couldn't let go. Thankfully, many years later, I didn't have to.

I had only just entered 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when my mother and father, both doctors, decided to travel abroad to work in India. My parents were extremely passionate about saving the lives of people; however they felt little connection to the lives of animals. As a sheltered child, I had little idea of what the world outside of my home was like at the time. It never concerned me – I was just a young girl – until one Saturday my parents took me to see a circus show. That sweaty, Indian summer afternoon changed my life forever.

I was taken with the elephants right away. Their astounding size contrasted their obedient, introverted behaviours – this I didn't understand. Why was the ringmaster whipping them so brutally? Their bodies were tired and streaked with healing scars from numerous lashes. I grabbed my mother's sleeve and squished my eyes shut.

"Mommy! They're hurting those animals!" I cried out, clutching her arm desperately. The pain I felt was so intense; I could almost feel the elephants wince with every crack of the whip.

"Sweetheart, it's alright. That's their job – to run around the stage carrying those beautiful dancers upon their backs," she said, trying to comfort me. But I started to cry. My father also tried to soothe me.

"Would you like a cotton candy, sweetheart?" he asked, his earnest brown eyes wide with concern.

"Well – yes," I agreed, taking the coins from Father's opened hand. As quick as I could muster, I sprung out of my stiff little seat and raced down the creaking metal steps. The crowd burst with applause as a dancer rode an elephant with only one hand on its back. I knew the cotton candy stand was to the right – but I veered left. I never wanted to buy a sweet treat. I wanted to save the elephants.

Looking back on what happened, I knew that only a young child would have been able to do what I did. The *naïveté* certainly helped. All I cared about as I sneaked behind a series of curtains doors were the animals. I wanted to make sure they were alright. Why did no one else see that they have feelings too?

I crept backstage, following the scent of sweat and manure. Large cages with metal bars thicker than my wrist dominated the room. Contained within these barren, stale pens were six elephants; five huddled together, shaking with fear and dehydration. The sixth elephant, no more than a year old, stood alone in a corner of the pen.

"Hello," I said softly to the young elephant, approaching the cage with caution. On his face were two deep slices, forming the shape of an "X." I reached my small arm out towards the two long lash marks. The baby winced, eyes widened with horror. I drew back my hand and comforted him.

"Everything is going to be okay," I said, unsure of the truth of my words. These elephants were thin and their faces weary. Was everything really going to be okay? I leaned forward, my cheeks resting against the bars. In the dim light, I saw a drop of blood run down the elephant's forehead and over his eye. He blinked, and the drop of blood fell like a tear. As I examined him closer, I noticed that his eyes were the colour of emeralds – deep green and luminescent in the dark. No other elephant had eyes like his.

"I won't hurt you," I promised him, my body still pressed up against his steel prison. As if he understood, the young elephant lifted his trunk and touched his nose to mine in thanks. I smiled as the end of his soft trunk touched my face. His warm breath

exhaled onto my face. I knew I couldn't witness this torture of animals any longer. I wanted to give him freedom.

I withdrew myself from the elephant's deep green gaze to search for the key. Glancing upwards, I spotted the dark, rusty metal key hanging on a hook high above my head. Stacking two wooden crates atop each other, I scrambled up the makeshift platform and grabbed at the air, standing on my toes. I was still too small to reach the key. And there it hung, on a rusting nail above my head. The key to freedom.

I jumped and snatched it off the hook. The crates slipped, sending me crashing to the muddy floor with a loud smash. I leaped to my feet and moved faster than I'd ever had, knees scraped and bleeding, as I jammed the key into the chained padlock to unleash the quivering beasts. Moments later, after heaving the door open with all my strength, the elephants burst from their cells and bounded through the tent to the outside. Suddenly, as the last elephant ran past, the ringmaster appeared across from me. He yelled out and tried to stop the green-eyed elephant, but the young creature cried out and thundered off in pursuit of his family. Now it was my turn to scream. I turned and ran out from backstage to the arena. I darted along the path, dodged worried mothers and crying babies, all trying to leave the circus, until I ran into a tall man.

"Dad!" I cried out, hugging my father as tight as I could. My mother stood behind him, her blue eyes lit with concern.

"Honey, where have you been? We were so worried about you! Someone released the elephants!" She exclaimed as we rushed out of the tent. The circus had descended into chaos; police now invaded the tent to calm the crowds. All of the elephants had disappeared, leaving the ringmaster and dancers alone on the stage.

"I hope they are safe now," I said under my breath.

The "Circus Disaster" – as the Indian newspapers had dubbed it – became the biggest news story of the year. In Canada, headlines read "Courageous Canadian Girl in India Rescues Tortured Elephants." I'd single-handedly caused the most extensive police investigation as a result of the incident; however no one knew to where the elephants had escaped. When the police arrived, they searched the premises and discovered the animal cages in their squalor. Animal rescue groups were immediately notified – and the whole circus tour was shut down...forever. At the time, I had no idea the release of those

elephants would also trigger a massive investigation of all other circuses in the region to ensure no other animal rights laws were being violated. As a result, hundreds of elephants across the area were also released to protected areas within the following year.

My mind returned to the present. My hands were much bigger and older now, tanned and leathery every day I cleaned elephant pens in the sweltering Indian sun. That childhood incident changed my life forever. I was never one to follow the herd – this bode me well. I started an elephant sanctuary at the age of twenty-three – that was over twenty years ago. Now, I look after all species of Indian wildlife – from elephants to monkeys. I smiled and placed the small elephant figure I treasured back on the mahogany mantle.

“Laura!” Deryl called to me from outside. “Someone’s here to see you!”

I tilted my head, confused. Our sanctuary wasn’t open to visitors on Sundays. I breathed deeply and stepped outside. A warm breeze rushed by me as I stood on the front porch. Deryl appeared from behind a stable and flashed his huge, bright smile.

“Look who’s here to see you,” he said, holding a lead rope. What he was leading grunted from concealment behind the stable.

“It’s alright,” he told it. “You can come out now.” Deryl tugged on the long lead gently, and I heard heavy thumps as the creature moved into view. A giant elephant stood before me and bowed its head.

“He just arrived a few minutes ago. Appeared out of the jungle out back,” Deryl said. Squinting my eyes, I saw two perpendicular, faded scars across its broad forehead. Suddenly, I understood. The beast stared intently at me, its emerald eyes sparkling in the sunlight. He had come back to me.