

One

*If anyone wants to know what elephants are
like, they are like people, only more so.*

— PETER CORNEILLE

Elephants can sense danger. They're able to detect an approaching tsunami or earthquake before it hits. Unfortunately, Jack did not have this talent. The day his life was turned completely upside down, he was caught unaware.

He was in a little Hubba tent at Seawall Campground, on Mount Desert Island. The night had been cool, and Jack had been glad he'd insisted on taking his warmer sleeping bag when his mom tried to talk him into the other one, the one that was lighter and easier to scrunch up.

But now it was morning, and he was hot. His sweat-soaked hair stuck to his neck and forehead. Clothes dryer—that's what the tent smelled like: a trapped-heat smell that filled his nostrils and told him the sun was high. *It's gotta be lunchtime*, he thought, kicking off his sleeping bag. Why hadn't she woken him up? He raced the tent zipper around its track and scrambled out into fresher air.

Dang!

The rental car was gone! He stood there, rooted, as if his eyes just had to adjust to the light, had to let forms take shape, and the car would be there, right where she'd left it. But the car was really gone. So was the little tent his mother had pitched on the gravelly ground next to his.

Jack tried to take a deep breath, but the air outside was now as heavy and suffocating as the air inside the tent had been.

Had she moved sites? Maybe the ground beneath her sleeping bag was too rocky and she'd decided to find a better site. Which would make sense, he suddenly realized, because the camping gear they'd spread across the picnic table was no longer there, either.

All that was left on the site was Jack and his Hubba.

He fumbled for his phone to call her. No reception in the campground—at least not in this spot.

Relax, he told himself. It probably had nothing to do with what had happened yesterday. A softer site—or one closer to the ocean—had probably opened up. She'd jumped on it and was now sitting there, looking out at the Atlantic, waiting for him to show up.

From what they'd been told, cars lined up every morning to get a spot at this campground—first come, first served. But Jack and his mother hadn't come at dawn. In fact, they hadn't arrived until late last night, and the ranger who explained the system said they were lucky—a family had just left because of a sick kid. Jack figured his mom got back in line first thing this morning to see what else was available. This was their summer vacation, and they were planning on camping here in Acadia National Park for three nights. She'd want it to be extra special.

Question was, should he pack up his tent and

take it with him? Or find her first? His stomach growled; he'd look now and pack later.

Like most campgrounds, this one had lots of looping roads twisting through the woods. Jack began with Loop A and Loop B, figuring those would have sites on the water. But unless he was mistaken, or had missed a road or two, *none* of the campsites had ocean views. So he scoped Loop C and Loop D, slowly enough to get a good look at the sites, fast enough to not look suspicious. Lots of places had a single tent, and since Jack's mother had borrowed both of the tents they were using, and because they had pitched them in the dark, Jack couldn't even say for sure what his mom's tent looked like. So he stuck to looking for the rental car.

His mother had specifically asked for a Prius. Not just because they were traveling all the way from Boston to Maine and gas was expensive, but because she believed in doing what she could to save the earth.

"So what does this car run on?" Jack had asked. "Biodiesel?"

"Nope. Gas and electricity."

"You can make energy from elephant poop,

you know,” Jack had said. “The Dallas Zoo calls it poo power!”

“P-U, talk about *biogas*!” his mother had said.

He’d laughed. His mother was so quick with one-liners.

Him? He was an expert on all things elephant.

Right now he wished he had the memory of an elephant. Was the car white or silver? Walking in circles suddenly felt ridiculous, so when he passed his own tent for the second time (it being on the only campsite with one tent and *nothing* else), he decided to stop looking. Instead, he reached into his pocket, pulled out his spending money, and tossed it onto the picnic table. Fourteen dollars and sixty-three cents. He was going to find food.

There were no concession stands in the campground, no restaurants—not even a convenience store—so Jack jogged out to the registration hut and asked the woman behind the counter (who was reading a fantasy by Robin McKinley, the same one his friend Nina had read earlier this summer) where the nearest market was.

“Tired of Dinty Moore?” she asked. “Seawall Camping Supplies. Right down the road.”

Jack knew all about Dinty Moore stew—not from camping, but from the nights when his mom had to work late and he made his own dinner. “Do you know if—” He was going to say, *If a woman with short blond hair and a light-colored Prius has come through*, but a feeling in the pit of his stomach made him change his mind midsentence. “If that store you just mentioned has those bright—those neon-red hot dogs?”

The woman laughed. “Red snappers! Absolutely!”

Jack smiled. As least one of the things his mom had promised on the drive to Maine was going to happen. He was going to bite into a glowing red hot dog and hear a *snap*.

The first thing Jack did once he’d left the park and was on Route 102A was pull out his phone again. There was a single bar—he had a tiny chance of reaching his mother. He punched in the number. Yes! It was ringing!

But she didn’t pick up. He wished they hadn’t argued in the car last night. He wished he’d tried to be a little more understanding.

He hung up and tried again, this time listening to her voice-mail message: “Becky Martel here—or *not* here, to be exact. Don’t leave any old message. Wow me!”

He waited for the beep and then shouted, “Where are you?”

Two

Separated elephants keep in touch with infrasonic calls, sounds too low-pitched for humans to hear.

Seawall Camping Supplies didn't look like any store Jack had ever visited. It was a cabin—with a porch and everything—and had signs all over it. HOT SHOWERS AND LOBSTER POUND, read one sign. Another said, IT'S COOLER ON THE COAST. He would have felt nervous about walking into the strange place if not for a third sign that read, COIN-OP SHOWERS INSIDE STORE. CHANGE AT THE COUNTER. The sign made him laugh, and he wished his mother was there to share the joke.

A rack of stuffed animals greeted him just inside the door: lobsters, seals, moose, and black bears—but no elephants. The decklike wooden floor creaked as he ambled—among maps and maple syrup, fishing line and Goldfish crackers, all jumbled together—to the counter, where a woman in an apron was waiting to take his order.

“How much are the hot dogs?” Jack asked.

“You can have two dogs, chips, and a small soda for four dollars,” she said.

“Red ones?”

“Of course. What do you want on ’em?”

“Mustard,” he said, taking a five out of his pocket and then, before handing it over, asking, “Can I buy a paper, too?”

The woman nodded at the pile of newspapers by the door and added the price of a *Bangor Daily News*.

Jack sat down at a table on the porch to wait and scanned the headlines, barely giving himself enough time to read the words. *Breathe*, he reminded himself after a moment, the way his mother would. *What’s the worst that could have happened?*

Car accident. Definitely. The only thing he knew for sure was that his mother had taken the car. She’d

taken the Prius and had headed off somewhere this morning (*Last night? As soon as I fell asleep?*) and, although she was a good driver—in fact, that was her job, driving a shuttle for the Intown Inn—he figured anyone could speed off these twisty island roads.

BLACK BEARS caught his eye, but it was an article about a football team and not wild animals. Another headline, about a missing nine-year-old girl, stopped him. (Did adults get kidnapped?) Jack was reading this story when the woman brought his food.

“Scary, isn’t it?” she said, glancing down at the paper. “Sure hope they find her safe and sound.”

Jack nodded, thinking about his mom and pushing the paper away. He took a bite of his hot dog and heard the snap—the snap his mom had told him about, the snap *she* was supposed to show him . . . show him and laugh about. *She* was supposed to show him the hot dog’s thick casing and its candy-apple color, then they were supposed to laugh and eat and talk about the first time she’d ever had a red hot dog in Maine.

He felt heaviness in his arms and put the hot dog down. Dang it! These were supposed to be the

best three days of his whole summer. The ones that were going to make up for all the boring days he'd spent in their nothing-to-do apartment. Mom, in her exploding firecracker way, had borrowed equipment, read online reviews, made lists of all the best places to visit, circled maps, and even downloaded music for the car ride. She could hardly stop talking about Sand Beach, Thunder Hole, and all the other great things she wanted him to see on this trip.

Where was she? Why had she taken off when they already had more things on their list than they could possibly do? He could imagine her going off to get something—some last-minute thing they needed to make this trip *absolutely perfect*—and then meeting someone interesting. Someone who made art out of sea sponges, or wrote the messages in juice-bottle caps. She would be unable to pull herself away. “Can you believe it, Jack?” she'd say. “He sits in an office all day, thinking up what to write inside the tops of bottles.”

Yeah, OK. But why take the tent?

She would have some train of reasoning, no doubt: first she thought *this*, and then *that* occurred to her, but then . . . It would be one thought sparking

another, until all the ideas burst into flames—or so it seemed to Jack. It didn't even make sense to try and figure it out; he knew that by now. Sometimes he couldn't even follow the thoughts *after* she explained.

And now a whole morning was shot. Well, he wasn't going to just sit around and wait, not this time, dang it. She could go off and have her amazing time—he was going to have his own adventure. He was on Mount Desert Island, and he hadn't even put his toes in the ocean yet. He'd change that.

He cleared off his table—leaving the newspaper for someone else to read—and walked across the street to where lots of people had pulled over to escape their cars and teeter along the tumbling, rocky shore.

The day was growing steamy, and the ocean air smelled like warm olives. Jack bounced from the dry, sea-worn stones down to the darker, seaweed-covered boulders below. As he did, he couldn't help examining each group of tourists—the large family with the grandfather holding on to the shoul-

ders of twin boys to balance himself; two girls in green camp T-shirts who stood outside their camp group, uninterested in the wildlife in a tidal pool; a bunch of older women sitting around a flat rock as if it were a table and sipping something from a thermos—all the while searching for his tall, willowy mother, her cropped blond hair. He didn't bother to search the more remote edges of the beach; she hated being alone.

A boy about Jack's age, eleven, but with shorter hair and a wide smile of bright white teeth, was tossing a Frisbee with his little sister. The girl's long blond hair whipped across her face as she flung the disk into the air. Neither had much of a throw; the Frisbee kept smacking nearby rocks, sometimes getting wedged between them. It didn't matter. It was impossible to run on this treacherous beach, and both of them laughed at the senselessness of the game. So did their parents, who were watching from stone chairs.

Jack wished he could be that boy, a kid who had nothing more to worry about than where his Frisbee landed. A boy who could make his parents happy just by playing a silly game.

Then he immediately took it back. His mom was cool. Real cool. Cooler than a lot of other moms. He promised himself he'd tell her that when she returned.

She definitely wasn't on this beach. Should he go back to the campsite in case she was there? *Nah*, he thought. *She'd know to look for me here*. He'd stay, give her time to come down. He imagined her sneaking up behind him, surprising him here.

He took off his sneakers and socks, then peeled off his shirt and carefully wrapped his phone inside it. He tucked the bundle in a dry crevice of a fairly large boulder. Maybe once he got down to where the tide had receded, he'd even be brave enough to swim. (Though it didn't look as if anyone else was even thinking about going near the foamy, churning water.)

At the first bright algae-green tidal pool he came to, Jack picked up a snail and examined its shell. Then he crouched, preparing to pick up a crab.

"It'll pinch you."

Jack looked up. The Frisbee kid and his sister had come up beside him.

"Not if I pick it up from behind," said Jack. He

carefully positioned his fingers on the back of the crab's shell.

The boy's sister squealed as Jack lifted the crab into the air. It waved its pincers frantically.

"He's so big!" said the girl. "Isn't he, Aiden?"

Used to be huge until the Elephant Child shrank it, thought Jack, remembering a story his mother had told him.

Eventually, Jack let the crab go, and without saying a word, he and Aiden leaped from one slippery rock to the next toward the water, while Aiden's sister wandered back toward her parents. They dipped their feet into the freezing-cold sea until Aiden's parents called them away from the dangerous surf, and then they whipped seaweed at each other's legs instead.

Jack imagined his mother standing on the shore, watching, smiling at their foolishness.

He started to ask Aiden if he wanted to build a castle out of the rocks, when Aiden's father called down to say they were leaving.

"Are you staying at the campground?" he asked instead.

Aiden nodded.

“Me too,” Jack said.

“Maybe we’ll see you at the ranger’s talk tonight,” Aiden replied, then ran to catch up with his parents.

Jack watched Aiden’s family gather their things and walk away together. Aiden’s mom draped her arm over Aiden’s shoulder. Jack walked over to his shirt and checked his phone, praying for a message.

Nothing.

He scanned the beach one more time, hoping to see her face.

No such luck.

It’s OK, he told himself, tucking his phone back into his pocket. *It hasn’t been that long*. He looked down at the rocks on the beach, the rocks that only an hour or so ago had been almost completely underwater. As he looked at them now, he saw something: a bird’s-eye view of elephants, a whole herd of them. The smooth, darker rocks were grayish brown, some with speckles. One particularly rounded rock looked just like the back of the leader. That rock called to him.

Jack climbed back down and lay upon its warm surface.

He remembered the first time his mother had taken him to see an elephant. He had been really little, no older than four. They'd been at a circus, and he'd hated it—hated the chaotic music, the sudden snap of the ringmaster's whip, the diamond-eyed clowns. So she'd carried him away from all that and into another tent, a tent where the most enormous animal he'd ever seen stood only a few feet away. Jack had whimpered and buried his face in his mother's neck, but he couldn't resist peeking at the huge creature. And then the elephant had reached toward him with her trunk, reached toward him and tapped him on the shoulder. He'd squealed and plunged back under the cover of his mother's chin. But the elephant had tapped him again, and kept on tapping him till he lifted his head and looked over at her. Slowly, slowly, she'd reached out her trunk again and touched his cheek. Jack remembered giggling, remembered feeling as if the elephant tent were the safest place in the world.

Jack lay facedown on that rock until he'd pulled every last bit of heat from it, and then he meandered back to the campground. He strolled past the wooden registration hut, with its pointy roof

and welcoming porch (no Prius in the parking lot), past the signs below towering trees that directed drivers to the proper loop in the thick, scrubby woods, past the entrance to the outdoor amphitheater, to A-loop. He decided to take the long way around the circle. He told himself that if he was extra patient, if he remained calm and hopeful, if he walked slowly enough around the shady A-loop, checking each and every site for the car, his mom would be back.

As he turned to the right, he heard Aiden's voice and his little sister's, too—Julie, he remembered Aiden calling her—and realized that they were the family that had hung an enormous blue tarp over their entire campsite, protecting it from rain. He was tempted to pop through the brush that made their site particularly private and say hi, but didn't want to draw too much attention to himself, didn't want Aiden's parents to start wondering who this kid was, anyway, and why he was just hanging out, all alone.

Plus, he didn't want to break the spell.

But it wasn't to be. His Hubba was still the only thing on his site.

“Anything wrong?”

Jack jumped. He’d been so intent on seeing his mom—willing her to appear right there at the picnic table, waiting for his return—that he hadn’t heard the park ranger come up behind him.

She was dressed in a gray uniform with a badge and carried a clipboard. Her face was slightly wrinkled; her eyes were kind.

At this point, any other kid would tell the ranger that his mother was missing, that he had no idea what had happened to her. Then the adults would take over. They’d ask questions and put out a missing-person report. Someone would take him in and feed him dinner while they looked for her. And they’d probably find her. If not tonight, then soon.

But Jack wasn’t any kid. And his mom wasn’t just any mom.

“Nope,” said Jack, placing his hands in his pockets. “Everything’s good.”