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The Elephant Girl

Written by Henriette Gyland

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The Elephant Girl

Henriette Gyland

Extract



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Prologue
Ealing, London – 20 years ago

The car has pulled up alongside the park. Helen knows it because this is where she went to the circus with Mummy in the summer. Ealing Common. Mummy has told her that in the olden days people used to keep donkeys there. There aren't any donkeys now, only muddy grass and heaps of yellow leaves blowing under the trees that go all around the common.

She knows it must be early, because it isn't light yet. The street lamps are glowing orangey-red, and it's very quiet. Other cars are parked near them, but the people who own them must still be asleep, because there's no one around.

Someone brushes past the car. Helen flinches away from the window because he looks like a spaceman, but it's only a cyclist all bundled up in black clothes, gloves and glasses that look like mirrors. He leans the bike against a tree and lights a cigarette, tapping the lighter against the palm of his hand.

Turning her head, she spots another man walking his dog. He's huddled in a coat and hood and seems to be looking right at Helen although she can't see his face. The dog is big with curly brown fur and a silly face, and it bounces around its master as they walk. She follows them with her eyes, glancing beyond them to the edge of the park where she can see more cars and a red double-decker bus driving past on the big, dangerous road. The bus is nearly empty, and the cars still have their lights on.

Helen yawns. She's feeling sleepy, but it's not the real sort of sleepy like when it's bedtime. It's the kind of sleepy that Mummy says she has to be a good girl and take her medicine for. The doctor calls it a medical condition, and Helen knows the name for it. It's a long word which rolls off her tongue when she says it.

Epilepsy.

Plepsy, plopsy, flopsy, she chants silently. Flopsy is the name of her pet rabbit, who lives in a cage in the garden, and who eats carrots

and apples and his own poo. She smiles. He sleeps a lot too, even when you hold him, and that's why she called him Flopsy.

The dog is back. Fighting back the drowsiness, Helen watches it running playfully from tree to tree. She wishes that she didn't feel so tired, then perhaps she could've played in the leaves too instead of sitting in the car, which is boring, boring, boring, but she can't because they have to meet someone. Who, she asked, but Mummy wouldn't say.

A little light flashes inside her head, and she blinks and rubs her eyes. This is what happens if she doesn't take her medicine, she sees lights and colours that aren't really there, and she worries because she doesn't think Mummy gave it to her this morning. Mummy was in a strange mood, dressing her roughly without a word, no breakfast and no teeth-brushing. Helen didn't dare remind her of the medicine.

Mummy's big shopping bag is lying on the back seat next to Helen's car seat. It's a cream cloth bag edged with red ribbon and red carry handles, and it has a picture on the front of an Indian prince riding an elephant. Mummy has a lot of handbags – and lots of nice clothes too – but Helen loves this bag best because it's embroidered with gold beads and red sequins.

She lifts the top of the bag and peers inside. Perhaps Mummy put the medicine in there. Secretly she hopes not because she doesn't like taking it. She only really likes Calpol. The epilepsy medicine is a red liquid which tastes horrible, and she has to wash it down with something. Water is best; orange juice just makes it taste even more yucky. But the medicine isn't in there, and instead the bag is stuffed full of boring-looking papers and computer discs. She sighs and looks out of the window again.

Her gaze falls on a car on the other side of the road. She can't remember if it was there when she and Mummy got here, but she's sure she's seen it before. She looks at it more closely. It's a small blue car with a dent in the door. She cranes her neck, straining against the seat belt which is attached to a clip on the side of her car seat, but she's firmly stuck.

A lady is sitting in the blue car, and even though she's wearing a large coat and a thick scarf around her neck, Helen recognises her. This lady used to be Mummy's friend, but not any more. Now she sometimes stands outside the house where they live, and when Helen points her out, Mummy runs out into the street and shouts go away, leave us alone. Helen feels sorry for the lady who looks like she's lost something precious, but she doesn't like to say anything. Sometimes Mummy can be a bit scary, a bit like Auntie Letitia, actually. Helen likes Auntie Ruth better, even if she cries a lot when she thinks no one is watching.

Helen lifts her hand and waves, but the lady tugs up the collar of her coat then slides down in her seat as if she wants to sleep, and Helen can only see the top of her head. She considers telling Mummy about it, but Mummy is busy talking on the car phone. She's keeping her voice down, and Helen can't make out what she's saying. She knows she's not allowed to interrupt, and she doesn't really want Mummy to go chasing after the lady anyway, leaving her alone in the car, so she keeps quiet.

Blue streaks of light blink in her head, and everything around her turns a hazy sort of purple, like smoke. Helen knows what's happening to her. It's called fitting, and it means that her head goes funny. She doesn't like the fitting; before it starts, it makes her tremble all over, and it's always horrible afterwards. But there's nothing she can do. Helpless in her car seat she gets that sick blue feeling of being all alone which she knows so well. Terrified, she tries to call out to Mummy, but the words don't seem to come out of her mouth …

Helen returns to the world around her. Her eyelids flutter but feel like they've been glued together, and she's too tired to try and open her eyes yet. Her arms and legs are heavy, and she's thirsty. She rubs her eyes and opens them slowly. She doesn't remember why she fell asleep. Was it night time? So why isn't she in her bed like she always is when she wakes up in the morning? Then she remembers that she's

in the car with Mummy, and that Mummy was on the car phone when Helen started fitting.

Except Mummy isn't on the phone any more. She's still sitting on the front seat, but her head is dangling in a funny way, and her arm is lying on the other seat as if it just fell there. The lady from the blue car is leaning over Mummy and has both her hands on Mummy's chest.

'Oh, God!' she cries. 'Oh, dear God!' She lifts Mummy's chin up and puts her mouth over Mummy's as if she wants to kiss her, but it's a weird kiss where she blows air into Mummy's mouth.

Helen twists in her seat and presses the button on the seat belt clip. The seat belt snaps out. She isn't supposed to do that when they're driving because Mummy says they might have an accident, but they're not driving right now so she thinks it's probably okay.

'What's the matter with my mummy?' asks Helen, and leans forward. She doesn't like what the lady is doing, and she can't understand why Mummy doesn't push her away. There's a knife with red stuff on it on the other seat next to Mummy's hand, and Helen recognises it as the one Mummy uses for opening letters. She doesn't understand why Mummy would bring it in the car.

The lady ignores her and keeps blowing air into Mummy's mouth. Helen is just about to push the lady away because she doesn't think Mummy really likes what she's doing to her, but then she sees that Mummy's white shirt has gone completely red at the front as if someone has spilt paint all over her. Her eyes are open and looking at Helen, but she doesn't seem to see her, and some red stuff is coming out of her mouth where the lady is blowing. It's all over her neck too.

Helen hits the lady on the shoulder with her fist. 'Leave my mummy alone!' she shouts angrily. 'Stop biting her!'

The lady pulls away from Mummy. She has tears in her eyes, and her lips have gone red from the stuff from Mummy's mouth. 'I never meant …' she whispers hoarsely. 'I'm so sorry.'

Helen freaks out. Shrieking, she jumps back and cowers in the corner of the back seat looking for somewhere to hide, something to

hide behind, but there's nothing there, not even the elephant bag with the papers.

'I'm so sorry,' the lady says again. 'Oh, you poor, poor baby!' She stretches out her hand towards Helen. It's covered in the same bright red stuff. When Helen finally realises what it is, she screams in horror, a loud piercing sound like a seagull. As she flails her arms, kicking her feet spasmodically against the seat in front of her, her brain scrambles and short-circuits, and everything goes black …

Chapter One

Goa, India – Present Day

This is the first day of the rest of your life.

The thought struck Helen as she watched the sun setting over Arambol Beach, the Goan resort area where she'd lived and worked for the past two years. It hung like a fiery orb from a breathtaking rosy sky, the sea below an expanse of weathered gold, broken only by lazy white-tipped waves.

Sunsets sometimes did that. They made you take stock of your life, think about all the times you'd been at a crossroads and chosen one way over another, even if that way turned out to be a mistake.

She'd lost count of how many times she'd had that exact thought. She never welcomed the realisation that the rest of her life lay in front of her. It meant making plans, and she'd grown used to thinking only of one day at a time. The only responsibilities she had were her shift at The Sundowner bar and paying her rent. Sometimes she went to the market in Anjuna but not much else.

And every second of every day she pretended she wasn't unhappy.

Sighing, she rose from the palm leaf she'd been sitting on and put out her cigarette in the wet sand. For a moment the sweet cloying scent of cannabis lingered, then it dissipated in the crisp evening air. Goa was a liberal place compared to the rest of India but not like it had been at the height of the hippie era, and she didn't want to provoke anyone.

On her way back along the beach to the bar she met some local boys playing cricket. When the ball rolled along the sand, she picked it up and bowled with them a few times, to their delight. The boys, about eight or nine, timed their batting well, and when one of them hit a particularly fast ball she ruffled his black hair in encouragement.

Then she left them to their game and waved to Mamaji Madhu and her daughter-in-law, who were standing in the sea in their saris.

Together they ran a convenience store on the high street, which sold food, toys, shoes and more, all in one big jumble, and everyone knew they loathed each other. There was no sign of that now, as they splashed and giggled and cooled themselves down after yet another humid day.

'*Namastē*,' called Mamaji as Helen passed them.

Smiling, Helen returned the greeting. 'Hello.'

Outside the beach bar she glanced over her shoulder at the fading light. A haze was quickly settling over the sea with threatening clouds blowing in from the south, and it wouldn't be long before it started raining again. Late May and the start of the monsoon was characterised by sudden downpours and thunderstorms, but between the rainfalls you got the true flavour of Goa as a lush and fertile land. Helen loved the monsoon. With fewer tourists to cater for she had time to read and meditate, to steer her thoughts in the direction she wanted them to go.

Although not to where they'd taken her earlier.

A sudden gust of wind lifted and tossed her hair across her face and made the loose cotton shirt she wore billow around her like a tent. Shivering, she hugged herself and ducked inside the shack.

The Sundowner was a typical palm thatch and bamboo shack with solid wood floor and a raised verandah facing the sea. Three of the walls were fashioned from bamboo wattle whereas the fourth wall was made from an old advertising hoarding, proclaiming the delights of Kingfisher beer. In stark contrast to the clapped-together exterior, the interior was cooled by ceiling fans and lit by colourful electric lanterns. A row of downlighters reflected against the gleaming hardwood bar.

Behind it Joe, the owner, was drying glasses. 'Been out for a tea break?' His lilting Australian accent made her wonder if he was being sarcastic, although she knew it often just sounded like that.

She searched his face for signs she'd annoyed him. 'I haven't been too long, have I?'

Joe simply tossed her an apron. 'Here, give us a hand.' He knew it

wasn't a tea break, but by tacit agreement neither of them ever talked about Helen's epilepsy and her use of cannabis to prevent seizures. She wound the strings of the oversized cook's apron twice around her slim waist and tied them at the front.

They worked in silence broken only by the gentle tinkling of the wind chime. Through the front of the shack where the doors had been pushed open to the verandah, Helen saw a flash of lightning followed by a low roll of thunder, but the storm was still far away over the sea.

The bar was deserted apart from a small group of local fishermen discussing the day's meagre catch over *chai*, a sweet tea stewed with milk and sugar. A young Indian couple entered, hand in hand, and chose a table in the corner. Helen put the tea towel down, picked up a pad and went to take their order.

Approaching the holidaymakers, she mentally pigeon-holed them as she did with all the customers at the shack. Newly-weds, with eyes only for each other. When the weather cleared, they'd probably write their names in the wet sand and enclose them in a heart, and maybe later they would take that obligatory post-nuptial trip to the sacred Darbar Sahib in Amritsar.

She envied them their obvious happiness but flicked on the charm in the hope they might leave her a decent tip. Their order taken, she lit the tea light on their table and returned to the bar.

Joe lit a cigarette and stared out across the sea. 'Rain's coming.'

As if on cue the wind chime jerked violently, and the heavens opened. Soon water poured from the edges of the roof, and although partly covered, the raised verandah was instantly awash with torrents of water, making the boards slippery and treacherous. The beach had emptied as quickly as it had filled earlier during the lull in the weather. No one in their right mind would be outside in a downpour like this.

And yet …

A lonely figure was making his way across the sand pockmarked by heavy raindrops. As the rain increased, he made a run for it, thumping clumsily up the steps and under the palm-leaf roof. He was

a short, rotund man with a shock of white hair and a white beard, and his polo shirt and chinos were soaked. Shaking off the worst of the rain, he stumbled into the shack and chose a high chair by the bar.

'Horrible weather we're having,' he said.

Joe wiped the counter with his tea towel. 'What can I get you, sir?'

The stranger's eyes met Helen's, and she had a curious feeling that she ought to know who he was, but she couldn't place him.

'I'd like to try some of your fire water.' The stranger grinned at Joe, but his eyes slid back to Helen. She turned away and loaded a tray.

'One *feni* coming up,' said Joe.

He took down a shot glass from a shelf behind the bar and poured a generous measure from a colourful terracotta bottle, then placed the glass in front of the customer with an utterly neutral expression on his face. Despite herself, Helen stopped what she was doing and watched surreptitiously as the man downed the drink in one.

Predictably he gasped for breath. *Feni* was double-distilled and fearfully potent, and the uninitiated were well-advised to try it with cola first. The fishermen jeered and roared with laughter, and even Joe had trouble concealing a smirk. Yet all the time the stranger's eyes had been on Helen, giving her the impression this was nothing but a show, entirely for her benefit.

What did he want from her?

She thought of herself as a good judge of character. In the two years she'd been here, she had learned to spot the different types of holidaymakers. She recognised the middle-class, middle-aged English divorcees seeking spiritual healing through meditation and Ayurvedic treatments after their husbands had done the clichéd bunk with a younger woman. Then there were the honeymooners, like the couple in the corner, and the old hippies drifting north from Anjuna, one time a hippie haven but now a ravers' paradise, seeking the quieter beaches where they could chill out for a while. Sometimes there were families who wanted to experience a holiday away from the exclusive resorts further south, but mostly it was people like

herself, whose faces spoke of a recent pain and a need to find themselves. Helen avoided that type more than any other.

The man at the bar didn't seem to fit into any of these categories. He appeared normal enough, although more conservatively dressed than most beach tourists, but behind the Father Christmas beard and the apple cheeks, redder now after the *feni*, lay a certain hawk-like awareness that made her feel uncomfortable. Involuntarily, she clasped the silver elephant pendant she'd inherited from her mother, which hung from a chain around her neck.

The movement didn't pass him by, and a small smile creased his lips. Pulling a photograph out of his pocket, he turned his attention to Joe. 'I was wondering if you could help me,' he said. 'I'm looking for one Yelena Dmitriyeva Stephanov. I was given to believe she'd be here.'

'We don't have a Yelena – what was it? – Stefanov,' Joe replied without looking at the picture.

Helen felt her stomach muscles tighten at his next words. 'She probably goes under the name of Helen Stephens. Honey-coloured hair, hazel eyes, five foot seven. No?'

Joe crossed his arms and said nothing. He'd never give her away, but this stranger already knew who she was. Why keep up the pretence?

'Who's asking?' She clenched her fist around the pendant to stop herself from grabbing him by the collar and yelling at him to just leave her the hell alone.

Grinning widely, he stuck out his hand. 'Ronald Sweetman, solicitor. I represent your grandmother, Agnes Ransome.'

She shook his hand but only because it would be rude not to, and wasn't surprised by the strength of his grip. As she'd suspected, the whole teddy bear demeanour was a front. 'I don't have a grandmother.'

'You seem to have a grandmother when you withdraw your allowance every month.' He sent her a sharp look from under bushy brows. 'I should know, I deal with the paperwork.'

Helen glared at him. ‘For your information, Aggie has threatened to cut that off many times. I don’t know why she doesn’t just do it. I couldn’t care less.’

It was pure bravado. The money was useful. Besides, she knew Aggie would never stop sending it, because Aggie had abandoned Helen to the ‘care’ of social services and a children’s home at the age of five and was still atoning for it. As she would for the rest of her life if Helen had anything to do with it.

Probably Mr Sweetman was aware of this too, for his expression softened a little. ‘Step-grandmother, then,’ he said mildly. ‘She wants you to come home.’

‘She does, huh? Fat chance.’ Joe touched her briefly on the shoulder. Mr Sweetman noticed and probably made his own assumptions about their relationship. *Let him*. He’d be wrong. ‘This is … where I’ve chosen to live. There’s nothing for me in England. Nothing.’

‘Mrs Ransome needs you.’

‘Needs me?’ Helen scoffed. ‘Aggie’s never needed anyone in her entire life, and she certainly doesn’t need *me*. That’s just bullshit.’ Her voice rose, and the few customers in the shack turned to look at her. She sometimes wondered what drove her to keep fuelling this inextinguishable rage she carried around inside her, but it had become as natural to her as breathing. She could never stop feeling that way. Couldn’t and wouldn’t. *Ever*.

Mr Sweetman eyed her for a moment the same way a lazy, fat cat might look at a mouse, deciding whether it was worth the bother, then he shrugged and got down from the bar stool. ‘Well, if that’s your final word …’

The rest, if there was more, was drowned out by a flash of lightning and a tremendous boom. A vicious gust of wind sent needle-sharp drops of rain up under the awning and in through the open door where they bounced off the wooden floor. The few lighted tea candles extinguished, and the electricity fizzed and cut out, then returned unsteadily.

In the flickering light the solicitor's eyes were bright and hard like polished granite. Shivering, Helen felt her nerve failing. 'It is,' she said in a tired voice. 'Please just tell her I'm not coming back.'

'I see,' he said and returned the photograph to his pocket. 'It looks like I've had a wasted journey, then. Sorry to have troubled you.' He left a few coins on the bar for Joe, nodded to Helen, and turned towards the door.

His comment was probably designed to make her feel guilty, and it might have worked if it wasn't for an overwhelming sense of relief. This was another person she'd never see again, and all the painful memories could go back in the box where they belonged. Memories of her mother and of Aggie's betrayal.

One day when she had the strength, she might take them out again.

As Mr Sweetman paused in the doorway for the rain to ease up, it suddenly seemed odd to Helen that Aggie had chosen to send her minion all this way when she must have known what Helen would say. A pointless wasted journey indeed. Aggie could be accused of many things, but doing something on a whim wasn't one of them.

The solicitor turned around as if he sensed her thoughts.

'There was one other thing Mrs Ransome asked me to tell you,' he said. 'Fay is out of prison.'

To be continued ….

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