

Read some excerpts from “*An Elephant Never Forgets*”

Extract from Chapter 2:

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‘Like logs,’ said Gina shutting the connecting door. ‘You’re already dressed. Where’s Nimal?’

‘Giving his hair the finishing touches,’ whispered Rohan, nodding towards the bathroom. ‘I think one bottle of gel was insufficient.’

As they were chuckling, the bathroom door opened, and they turned to stare at Nimal who was looking very natty in a light blue T-shirt and navy trousers, his hair lying flat on his head and not standing up as it usually did.

‘Wow, Nimal!’ exclaimed Gina. ‘You look really, er, really, um, *cool*.’

‘Thank you, mon enfant,’ said Nimal, with a grin. ‘I’m glad you approve.’

‘I’m not sure the others will *recognize* you,’ continued Gina cheekily. ‘I’ve *never* seen you like this before.’

‘And perhaps you never will again,’ said Nimal loftily. ‘So feast your eyes on this thing of beauty. But, for this evening, if you will strive to look gorgeous, I may deign to take some notice of you.’

‘Oh, blow! He’s got verbal diarrhoea, Gina,’ said Rohan. ‘It’s the hairdo. Quick, let’s destroy it.’

They advanced threateningly on Nimal. ‘I’ll shut up. No rough-housing. You’ll make a noise and wake the two sleeping beauties,’ he pleaded, backing towards the door.

Gina giggled and promised to desist. ‘Where’s Anu?’ she asked, cuddling Hunter.

‘Lost in her world of words,’ said Rohan, looking at his watch. ‘We’d better fish her out.’

‘Yeah, Gina, you can use our bathroom. I’ll help you iron your clothes before I fetch Anu,’ said Nimal.

‘I’ll get Anu,’ said Rohan. ‘If you go on your own, Nimal, the hotel staff will die of fright.’

He ducked Nimal’s karate punch, and left the room.

‘Anu? It’s 3:30,’ he said, entering the room where Anu was busy at the computer. ‘Sorry, sis, I didn’t mean to make you jump.’

Anu looked around and grinned. ‘No problemo.’

‘How’s it going?’ asked Rohan.

‘I’ve edited four chapters so far. Boy, editing a book is time-consuming, though so critical,’ said Anu. ‘Let me just save this draft. You look spiffy – that green T-shirt suits you.’

‘Thanks,’ said Rohan with a grin.

Anu packed reference books, papers, discs and pencils into her writing case, while Rohan tidied the room. She had a tendency to spread her things all over the place when she was in the throes of writing, and her room generally looked as if a cyclone had hit it.

They went upstairs to find Gina already dressed.

‘Good grief, Nimal!’ exclaimed Anu, spotting him. ‘I mean, er ... you ... you ... er ... you *do* look nice,’ she concluded lamely.

‘Nimal blushed in embarrassment,’ said Rohan mischievously, pretending to read from a book. “‘Look,” he mumbled, “it’s only my hair after all. The gel didn’t work so I was compelled

to use *glue*. But it was only one bottle and ...” Rohan trailed off as the others collapsed with laughter.

‘Perhaps *you* should be writing books, too, Rohan,’ said Nimal, slightly pink in the face, but taking their ragging in his usual good-humoured way. ‘I just thought I should try and look a bit decent for a change.’

‘You *always* look nice, Nimal,’ said Gina earnestly. ‘I feel very proud when I go out with you and Rohan, because you’re both so handsome.’

‘I’m touched, Gina,’ said Nimal, giving the little girl an affectionate hug.

‘I agree, and I must say your slightly longer hair, compared to your usual crew cut, suits you,’ said Anu, smiling at him. She turned to Rohan and continued, ‘By the way, bro, is Darini going to be at Umedh’s this evening?’

Rohan winked slyly. ‘I hope so, sis, otherwise – *what* a waste of glue!’ He ducked as Nimal threw another punch at him, and continued, ‘Do you want to use our bathroom, too?’

Anu dressed quickly and they had just laid out their gifts when Amy and Mich joined them.

‘Oooh, Nimal,’ said Mich staring at him, ‘you ... er ... look ... um ... v-very d-different.’

‘And extremely handsome,’ added Amy hastily, trying to keep a straight face.

‘Gee whizz, as you girls would say,’ said Nimal. ‘I hope all this stammering and stuttering means something good, Mich. I was just trying to tame my hair – for *your* sakes – and, since the rest of you always look stunning, I figured I should try not to look like something Hunter had dragged in backwards through a hedge.’

Amy smiled knowingly at Anu. Personally, she thought Rohan and Nimal were two of the handsomest boys she knew – with their sharp features, dark brown eyes, light brown skin and athletic builds. No, she certainly had no objection to hanging out with *them*. And to add to that, they were decent guys.

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Extract from Chapter 3:

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They collected their luggage and moved to the exit.

‘I don’t see the Vijaydasas. Can you boys spot them?’ said Anu.

‘Nope,’ said Rohan, looking easily over the heads of the other passengers. ‘But there are three people waving at us. Come on!’

At the exit gate, two tall women and a shorter man came up to them.

‘You *must* be the JEACs – the Patels and Larkins – correct?’ stated the man.

‘That’s right,’ said Rohan, smiling politely.

‘Welcome to Sri Lanka!’ said all three, beaming at them.

‘Unfortunately, Lalith, Priyani and Sanjay couldn’t meet you tonight, so we offered to come instead. We’ll explain later,’ said one of the women.

‘And my darling cousins were actually on time because they took *only half a day* to get dressed,’ boomed the man. He had such an infectious laugh that the youngsters began laughing, too.

The women smiled at his teasing and introduced themselves, as they greeted each child with a hug.

‘I’m Chandini – Priyani’s cousin,’ said the older woman. She was tall for a Sri Lankan woman, slim and pretty.

‘And I’m Renuka,’ said the other woman, who was even taller, also very pretty and had long curly hair. ‘Chandini’s sister, and,’ she continued, before the man could introduce himself, ‘this vertically challenged man is our cousin – Priyani’s brother. We had earth tremors the last time he roared with laughter.’

‘I’m David,’ said the man. ‘My giantess cousins quite outstrip me. We’re all *very* pleased to meet you.’

Hunter, who was on a leash and had been standing behind the children, now pushed his way forward.

‘Hunter, sit! Shake with friends,’ said Rohan.

The dog sat down and waved a paw in the air, and the three adults shook it solemnly before fussing over him. Hunter, recognizing kindred spirits, licked them thoroughly.

‘I nearly forgot. I have food for you, Hunter,’ said David, offering him some dog treats. Hunter licked him gratefully, got his “okay” from Rohan, and gobbled up the goodies.

‘Good boy,’ said David, patting him. ‘We thought he might be hungry after the flight because he wouldn’t have been given much food to eat, right?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Nimal, ‘and thanks a ton.’

‘You only call me “sir” if you attend my school – I’m principal of a school close to the Conservation – please call me David. Also, if you like, you can call Chandini *Akka*, and Renuka *Akki*. They’re my older cousins and “Akka” means “big sister” – since we couldn’t call both of them “Akka”, we rechristened one of them “Akki” and the names stuck.’

‘We’d love to call you Akka and Akki,’ said Amy promptly, ‘if you don’t mind,’ she finished, looking at the smiling women.

‘If our verbose cousin had given us half a chance, we’d have suggested it ourselves,’ said Akki.

They were a merry, friendly trio and the JEACS felt as if they had known them for years.

‘Let’s find our van,’ said David, leading the way out of the terminal. ‘Girls, let me take your knapsacks. What *do* you have inside, Gina?’ he continued, pretending to stagger as she handed it over. ‘A baby elephant?’

Giggling, Gina said, ‘No, just some books and my flute. I couldn’t possibly fit a baby elephant, or rather, *aliya*, into it.’

‘Clever girl,’ said David, as they loaded the van, climbed in and drove out of the airport. ‘You even know the Sinhala name for elephant. Now, what do *you* know about Sri Lanka, Mich?’

Mich, a little shy, had not said a word so far, but she remembered something she had learnt from a Sri Lankan friend. ‘Every year they have a festival, in August, and there are lots of elephants all decorated beautifully. They go in a procession, taking the tooth of the Buddha from one temple to another. And there are dancers, fire-eaters, and acrobats. I think it’s a religious festival but it’s also a big tourist attraction, isn’t it? It’s called *The Perahera*.’

‘Excellent,’ said David. ‘It’s the annual *Esala Perahera* which is held in Kandy – a city in the middle of Sri Lanka. The elephant is considered the only animal worthy of carrying the reliquary which houses the tooth.’

‘What’s a “reliquary”?’ asked Gina.

‘A container for holy relics,’ explained Anu.

‘Good! Take ten marks for the right answer, Anu,’ said David. ‘Oh, sorry. I keep forgetting I’m not in school. Akka’s a teacher, too, but she teaches physical education – and beware – she may suddenly order you to start marching or to touch your toes.’

As the youngsters burst out laughing, Akka said, in her droll way, ‘I would tell David to touch *his* toes but, unfortunately, his stomach is the camouflage behind which his toes hide, and he’d fall over if he attempted to get a glimpse of them.’

David roared with laughter, and the JEACs joined in. There was obviously a great deal of affectionate bantering amongst the cousins.

‘Don’t worry about Akki trying to *teach* you,’ said David. ‘She just tries to *control* everybody.’

‘Really?’ said Mich and Gina.

‘Don’t listen to him,’ said Akki, with a smile. ‘I’m the *Financial Controller* for the Conservation, which means that I deal with their accounts.’

When they reached the main road to Colombo, the driver accelerated and the van sped along. Amy and Mich were petrified since he appeared to narrowly miss hitting the other vehicles on the road.

‘Oooh,’ squealed Mich. ‘Are you *sure* he’s a good driver?’ she whispered to Akki.

‘Oh, yes, dear,’ said Akki comfortably.

‘Whoa, we just missed another car,’ said Amy, clutching Rohan’s arm as the van swerved to avoid oncoming traffic.

‘Don’t worry, ladies,’ said David. ‘In the west the driving is relatively tame, but if we aren’t aggressive here, it’ll take us all night to get to Colombo – which is only 25 kilometres away. The driver’s good – we missed all the cars on the way out, and I’m sure we’ll miss them on the way home, too.’

‘Er ... okay,’ said Amy. She added, apologetically, ‘In Canada, we drive on the other side of the road and they ... er ... drive rather *differently* here, don’t they?’

‘That’s what I would call the understatement of the century,’ teased David.

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Extract from Chapter 4:

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‘Sure thing,’ said Rohan, speaking for everyone. ‘Now, could you tell us about the problem?’

‘I’ll explain,’ said David. ‘As you’re aware, elephants translocate and need lots of space to wander in – but, while Sri Lanka’s become very conscious of the importance of conservation, it’s a small country, and there’s a limited amount of space. Therefore, because of development in the rural areas, some of our farmlands have ended up on the edge of conservations and jungles – like Alighasa. Not all our conservations have good fencing, and for the past three years, the farmers around Alighasa have encountered numerous problems. Unfortunately, some of our barriers, even though we keep strengthening them, cannot restrict the elephants, who break through now and then – resulting in the destruction of the farmers’ crops and the loss of money which most of them can ill afford. In retaliation, to protect themselves from the rampaging elephants, they kill them.’

‘In addition, we face an ongoing tussle with ivory thieves, who kill elephants without compunction, merely to obtain their tusks and sell them; and occasionally, the elephants are dismembered and certain parts sold illicitly for use in traditional medicine. Therefore, one way or another, elephants are being decimated, and while we conservationists are protesting against this, the farmers are petitioning the government to protect their crops.’

Neeka continued the story. ‘Five years ago, the Alighasa Board of Directors appointed Lalith to manage the Conservation, and he’s the best manager we’ve ever had. He developed the Conservation rapidly and started petitioning the government for more land for the elephants – the land north of the current Conservation is perfect for this purpose. We assured the government that we would fundraise, both locally and abroad, to raise enough money to build strong barriers around the current Conservation and that we would relocate the elephants to the new area so that they couldn’t break out and destroy the farmlands.

‘Finally, six months ago, the government consented to give us the land. Two months ago, the papers were signed and the property officially handed over to our Conservation. We’re now one of the largest conservations in Sri Lanka – here’s a rough map of what the NC will be like, and this is the northern boundary of the OC. Sorry – until we find a good name for the new section, “OC” stands for Old Conservation and “NC” for New Conservation. The gap between the OC and the NC covers a distance of approximately half a kilometre and we need to move the larger wildlife through that gap into the NC. As you see, there are natural barriers of high, rocky hills on the north, west and east of the NC and a wall is only required in the south, along with a gate.

‘We’ve put up a temporary wooden fence which no other creatures, excepting the elephants, can destroy, and we’ve moved some of the larger animals into the NC. We’re currently working on a cement wall, parallel to the wooden fence. It’ll be 3.048 metres deep and 12.192 metres high, and not even elephants can break through; once it’s complete, we’ll relocate the elephants. The construction site was divided into five sections and two sections in the west are completed; we’re now working on the central and eastern segments.’

‘But what about the other animals in the OC?’ asked Nimal.

‘It’ll become like the “Harmonious Paradise” at the Patiyak Wildlife Conservation,’ said Neeka, ‘with smaller animals which cannot break out through our fences. More staff will be hired and the government will get bonus points for creating jobs – a definite selling point for them.’

‘That’s superfantabulous,’ said Anu. ‘So actually, you’re expanding, not merely relocating, right?’

‘Correct,’ said Akki. ‘Also, since the half-kilometre gap between the two conservations is part of the Conservation, it’ll be developed once we’ve raised more funds – it’s currently barren but we’re planning some reforestation later on.’

‘What about staff residences, auditoriums and a petting zoo in the NC?’ asked Rohan, studying the map.

‘The spots marked in red indicate where some buildings will come up, but our first priority is to move the wildlife; we’ll deal with the residences later,’ said David. ‘However, if Mr. Cock-a-doodle-doo continues ...’

He trailed off as the youngsters exclaimed in one voice, ‘Mr. *WHO*?’

‘Sorry, that’s *our* name for him. His real name is Mr. Kurukulaarachchi and he’s a petty government official,’ said David, laughing at the looks on their faces.

‘Mr. Kuku – kuru – arrarch. Gosh! That’s a tongue twister,’ said Amy, trying, unsuccessfully, to get her tongue around the name. ‘No wonder you’ve changed it. But why Mr. Cock-a-doodle-doo?’

‘Because, in some ways he’s just as silly as a rooster, and appears to think he’s “the 29th Wonder of the World”,’ said Neeka caustically. ‘He’s the chief troublemaker in *attempting* to turn government officials against us – which is surprising because he supported us when Lalith was appointed manager of the OC.’

‘And if not for the firm stand taken by Delo Samaratunge, Jeevana Abeykoon and other wonderful folk, his attempt would have succeeded,’ said Akka. ‘Delo’s a fantastic speaker and from what we heard, she received a thunderous round of applause after she spoke up in favour of giving us the land and, when the voting took place, only Mr. Cock-a-doodle-doo and one other voted against.’

‘Yes, Delo’s superb,’ said Neeka, enthusiastically. ‘She invited government officials – all those involved in the decision-making – to visit Alighasa and see for themselves what the OC and NC were all about. We worked hard and organized a detailed educational tour, and the officials had a wonderful time. They learnt a great deal, and the papers were full of their glowing reports the next day. You’ll meet Delo at the fundraiser since she’s one of our chief guests.’

‘Did Mr. Cock-a-doodle-doo – or “Mr. CADD” for short – go as well?’ asked Rohan curiously.

‘I like your acronym. No, Mr. CADD feigned illness,

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Extract from Chapter 7:

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A bold rabbit hopped near Nimal, and the boy made a soft sound. The rabbit pricked up its ears, yielded to the fascinating charisma Nimal exuded towards all creatures, and hopped into the boy’s arms, nestling there and looking up at him trustingly. Nimal stroked the creature gently and more rabbits loped up, quickly surrounding the boy, as he crooned over them.

Suddenly there was a soft “plop” to Nimal’s left and the rabbits dispersed rapidly into the undergrowth. Nimal looked towards the sound and saw a girl crouched on all fours, as if she had just dropped down from a tree. They stared at one another, neither saying a word. Then, just like the rabbits, the girl moved cautiously towards Nimal, her eyes never leaving his face, her bare feet making no sound. Nimal stayed still and began to talk in a low voice.

‘Hello! You must be Mahesika. I’m Nimal. Aren’t the rabbits fantastic?’

Mahesika smiled and nodded, keeping her big, brown eyes on Nimal’s face as she continued to move towards him. When she reached the mat she sat down in a corner; she appeared to be tongue-tied.

‘If we stay quiet for a bit,’ said Nimal, still in the same low tone, ‘the rabbits may come back.’

Mahesika nodded eagerly and Nimal began to make a soft crooning sound. Soon, the rabbit that had first made friends with the boy came back to him, although it eyed Mahesika warily until it was safe in Nimal’s arms. The girl didn’t move.

‘It’s okay now,’ said Nimal, cradling the rabbit and caressing it. ‘Do you want to pet it? Don’t make any sudden movements.’

Mahesika moved closer to Nimal and reached out her hand tentatively. The rabbit lay quiescent in Nimal's arms, and didn't flinch or run away when Mahesika stroked it gently. She smiled delightedly at Nimal. After a few moments, Nimal encouraged the creature to rejoin its mates, and it hopped off reluctantly.

'So you like animals, too,' said Nimal conversationally.

'Yes, very much,' said Mahesika shyly. 'But I have never seen animals behave like that with anyone.'

'He has a special gift,' said Anu, joining them on the mat. She had been a silent observer from the time Mahesika joined Nimal. She put out her hand, saying, 'Hi, Mahesika, I'm Anu.'

'I've heard about all of you,' said Mahesika shyly, shaking hands with her. 'Are the others still sleeping?'

'Just waking up,' said Rohan, poking his head out of the tent and grinning at her. 'Big crowd for you to meet. I'm Rohan, *Ayubowan*.'

Mahesika smiled as he joined them, putting her hands together in the traditional greeting, too.

'And here comes Amy,' said Nimal.

'Hi, Mahesika,' said Amy, beaming at her. 'Where did you come from?'

'Hi,' said Mahesika. 'I was in the mango tree and saw Nimal with the rabbits. I wanted to pet them, too.'

'So *you* were the one watching me,' said Nimal. 'I thought I felt eyes on me, but didn't see you till you dropped down. Thank goodness it wasn't a leopard or some other dangerous animal.'

'You'd probably have had the leopard purring all over you and trying to sit in your lap,' said Rohan with a laugh. 'You know, Mahesika, any animal will go to him – big or small. We're waiting to see him with the elephants.'

'Really? Do *all* animals come to you, Nimal?' asked Mahesika, gazing at him in awe. 'You must have some special kind of ... of ... scent, which brings them to you. I don't know the right word.' She was fast losing her shyness with the friendly JEACs.

'We call it "charisma",' said Anu. 'It's fascinating to watch.'

There was a bark from the pink tent and when Rohan unzipped it, a black form darted out of the tent and into the shrubbery. Mich and Gina emerged from the tent and came over to greet Mahesika.

'Gee, look at Hunter,' said Mich.

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Extracts from Chapter 8:

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After a rapid wash, change and breakfast, they piled into Akka's Jeep, along with David and Akki, and bowled along the trail to the northern gates. Hunter was left behind on this occasion, as dogs were not allowed.

'We're looking forward to seeing Nimal's charisma at work,' said David. 'Also, Akki has a camera and will take pictures.'

'Wish we could have seen the doe and fawn,' sighed Akki.

‘Oooh, look!’ squealed Mich suddenly. ‘Elephants! Lots of them, and teeny, weeny baby ones!’

A herd of sixteen elephants consisting of females, young males and four infants were sauntering majestically along the banks of the river, obviously heading for the bathing spot. Their caregivers – twelve men dressed in sarongs and shirts – waved as the Jeep drove past. They knew that the children were coming to bathe the elephants.

‘Are the elephants friendly?’ asked Mich.

‘I don’t know if you’d call them *friendly* as such,’ said David. ‘They’re very obedient and peaceful, and allow humans to throw water on them, feed them, and ride on them, but they won’t approach you of their own accord. As for the infants, they’re boisterous, but very trusting – as are most infants. And, naturally, they love the bottles of milk everyone gives them.’

‘Oooh, are we going to give them milk, too?’ asked Gina.

‘Of course you are, and bananas as well,’ said Akka, pulling up in the car park.

The youngsters ran into the building, changed into swimsuits and rejoined the adults.

‘Oooh, they’re coming, they’re coming,’ chanted Mich and Gina, dancing up and down in excitement.

The chief mahout came over to greet the adults, whom he obviously knew, and then greeted the children traditionally. He spoke sufficient English to converse with them.

‘Ah, Mahesika,’ he said, ‘you also with visitors? All elephants like Mahesika because she very good.’

The elephants entered the water and spread out, and the mahout asked the children to observe the animals first. The infants loved the water and frolicked in it gleefully, using their wobbly little trunks to spray each other and their older family members. Some of the bigger elephants lay down in the shallow water.

‘Now you come,’ said the mahout, and the children followed him eagerly.

With Nimal in the lead, they entered the water a short distance from the largest group of elephants. Each child was given a bucket and a long-handled brush, with instructions to splash the animals with water, and then use the brushes to scrub their thick hides. ‘Elephants be very happy you do this,’ explained the mahout.

However, before they could follow the mahout’s instructions, the matriarch of the herd rose to her feet and trundled towards Nimal. The mahout and the other caregivers began to move hastily towards her, assuring the adults that she had never attacked anybody. Rohan signalled to them to stop, asking David to explain that Nimal could handle the situation.

Nimal stood stock-still, completely unafraid, and as the matriarch drew near, he began to speak to her. She reached the boy and put out her trunk to touch him; then she gently patted him on the head, blew down his back, and wrapping her trunk around his waist, lifted him into the air. The gasp of horror....

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And so on and so forth! Read the book and participate in their adventures!