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Opening extract from

The Runaways

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Chapter 1

Harvey always wore the turquoise ruff around his furry black-and-white neck for the show. So when he saw the baby elephant heading towards him, intent on pulling it off as she'd managed to do the day before, he skittered away from her before she got a chance.

Tara gave a trumpeting *squee* as she headed after the Border collie across the elephant tent. But Harvey was too old and wily to be caught by a two-year-old elephant and he hid under the oversized props they sometimes used in the act. Tara knelt down and stretched out her

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trunk as far as it would go, but hard as she tried she couldn't reach him. Finally she gave a trumpet of frustration, headed back to her mother, Shanti, and had some milk instead.

Drink over, the baby elephant watched from the other side of the tent as fifteen-year-old Albert, dressed in a turquoise 'Arabian Nights' elephant trainer's costume, carefully combed his hair in front of the full-length mirror. Harvey poked his pointy nose under one of the props and watched Tara watching Albert.

Deep in thought, Albert put the comb back in his pocket and didn't pay attention to the little elephant as she pottered over to him.

Tara stuck out her trunk and ruffled his just-combed fair hair.

'Tara!' he said, pulling out the comb again and quickly smoothing his hair back down. 'You can be a little minx sometimes!'

Tara gave a joyful *squee* that sounded almost like a giggle. Not sorry at all. As soon as he'd

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finished combing his hair, she went to mess it up again, but this time her mother stopped her with her trunk and a warning noise.

Albert felt sorry for the elephants. In the wild they'd be able to wander wherever they liked. Tara would have other elephants to play with and probably a watering hole or a river to splash in rather than the bucket of water that was all he could manage to give her. He always treated the elephants with kindness, unlike some trainers he'd heard about. But, nevertheless, they spent most of their days and nights tied up in their tent, apart from when they were performing for the public in the big top.

He really couldn't blame Tara for wanting to play or for being mischievous. She was bored. He knew that the circus wasn't the right place for the elephants to be, but he tried to make it the best place for them that he could. Maybe their new home would be better. He hoped so.

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'Here, Shanti, let's put this on you,' Albert said, picking up the multicoloured headdress the Asian elephant wore during the show. It had been made especially for her and had her name embroidered across the star in the centre.

Shanti bowed her giant head so he could tie the headdress behind her ears. She'd been part of circus life from the time she was five years old and she was now twenty-two.

'You look beautiful,' he told the sweet-natured, gentle elephant as he pressed his face into her warm, rough skin and ran his hand down her trunk. Shanti made a soft rumbling sound.

Tara, however, did not help Albert like her mother had done. As soon as she saw him pick up her own much smaller headdress she turned round so her bottom was facing him instead of her face. When Albert walked round to the front of her she made a noise that sounded very much like a giggle and turned round the other way.

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‘Come on, Tara, you know you have to wear it,’ he told her. He didn’t want them to be late for their very last show.

But Tara only shook her head and backed away as he stepped towards her. They’d played this game before.

Harvey came out from under the props and looked from one to the other, his tail wagging.

‘Hmm,’ said Albert, putting his hand in his pocket and acting as if he didn’t care a bit what Tara did. He pulled out an apple, one of Tara’s favourite treats, and Tara stretched out her trunk, wanting to take the apple from him.

Albert looked at the apple in one hand and then he looked at Tara’s headdress in his other hand and waggled it. Tara knew exactly what she needed to do if she wanted the apple.

She stood quietly in front of Albert and let him put on her headdress with her name embroidered across the star like her mum’s.

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‘That’s a good elephant,’ Albert said, giving her a stroke. Tara’s skin was much less rough and a lot more furry than Shanti’s. She even had a tuft of fur on the top her head that gave her an impish look. It matched her personality, he thought.

Albert bit into the apple and shared the bitten pieces between the little elephant and Shanti. Harvey barked and nudged Albert with his nose.

‘Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten you.’ Albert smiled at the old dog. ‘There’s a bone for you, but not till after the show.’

Albert checked himself one last time in the mirror before they left the tent. It was the last time he’d wear the sparkling turquoise elephant trainer’s outfit before he set off for the front. The last time for, well he didn’t exactly know quite how long, that he, Shanti, Tara and Harvey would perform together.

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When the war started in August 1914 his father had said it would be over by Christmas. Everyone thought it would be done and dusted in a few months. But it was now September 1917 and the war was still going on, only his dad wasn't around any more to see the end of it. Thinking about how much he missed him made Albert feel sad. At least his father had got to see Tara being born before he died and Albert was glad about that. It had always been very important to his dad that Shanti was happy and no mum could have been happier with her baby than Shanti was. Not many people get to see a newborn elephant, and Tara had looked so sweet as she took her first wobbly steps while Shanti stood protectively over her. For a long time she hid under her mum's tummy whenever she was scared or worried about anything.

'But you don't seem to be scared of much these days, do you? More like full of mischief

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and fun!' he told the baby elephant as she stretched out her trunk towards his head and he ducked back from her before she could mess up his hair again.

The band started to play, which meant the matinee audience must be seated. It was time to go on.

Albert still felt nervous before each performance even though he knew no one was really watching him. The audience only had eyes for the elephants, and that was just the way it should be, in Albert's opinion. Shanti and Tara were the most beautiful, majestic and just downright magical creatures he could ever imagine, and he wanted to share their grace with everyone.

Harvey pushed his head under Albert's hand and Albert stroked him.

'Come on then, one last show. Let's make it a good one,' Albert said, as they headed for the big top. 'Tails!' he instructed, and Tara held

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on to Shanti's tail as she was supposed to do. Shanti, as always, took the lead, with Harvey bringing up the rear.

The band was playing a new tune now.

Harvey panted as he waited to go into the ring.

'Wait for it,' Albert told him, as he looked round the tent flap at the afternoon's audience.

Those who'd paid the most for their seats got to sit on the comfortable maroon velvet padded chairs at the front. But there were only two people sitting in those seats today. A middle-aged woman with her brown hair tied in a bun, and a suited man in a hat sitting beside her.

The rest of the audience at Whitehaven was pitifully small. Maybe twelve in total on the cheaper bench seats. Six of those were voluntary nurses in uniform, plus a soldier and his girlfriend and three children with their mum.

Albert bit his bottom lip. Not enough people to keep an elephant in cabbages; certainly not

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enough to pay a whole circus crew. Not that they had a proper crew any more. Most of the younger men had enlisted already. The circus was on its knees and couldn't go on. This matinee wasn't just the last show for Albert, the elephants and Harvey. It was the last show for everyone else in the circus too.

The ringmaster, Jedediah Lewis, was in the centre of the ring. He whisked off his top hat, raised it in the air, and shouted, 'And now for your delight and entertainment, at great expense, all the way from the jungle . . .'

As the first note of the popular 'Royal Decree' march was banged out by the band, Harvey gave a small whine and put out his paw.

Albert pulled back the tent flap and the three animals ran into the circus ring. As Albert went past the maroon chairs, he heard the woman say:

'Now we're in for a treat.'

'Whatever you say, Beatrix,' the man told her as he checked his pocket watch.

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The animals paraded round until the music changed to a tinkling lullaby and then, quick as a flash, Harvey jumped into the pram that Albert pushed into the ring. Shanti curled her trunk round the oversized handle, and as 'Rock-a-bye Baby' continued to play she rocked the pram back and forth as if she were lulling a baby to sleep. Meanwhile, Tara took the giant-sized baby's bottle that Albert held out to her. It was filled with water that she tipped into her mouth.

Albert glanced over as the scant audience *ooohed*, *aaahed* and clapped. His eyes widened as he watched a red-faced, broken-nosed man sit down at the back of the bench seats. What on earth was Carl from Cullen's Circus doing here? There was bad blood between Albert's family and Cullen's Circus where Carl worked as the elephant trainer. Shanti had come from there and the last time Albert's father had seen Carl he'd been so angry with his cruel treatment

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of her that there had almost been a fight. But what was Carl doing at the Lewis Brothers' show?

Albert looked back at the animals as the audience gasped and pointed at Tara. So far the little elephant had never squirted the water from the giant baby's bottle at the audience. But she'd squirted it at the ringmaster only the day before. Jedediah had been furious, until he'd heard the delighted audience's reaction. Always a showman, his angry face had changed to beaming smiles as he took a bow. Then he waggled his finger at Tara who lifted her trunk and gave her distinctive high-pitched trumpet in response. That had made the small audience laugh even more.

Albert knew the ringmaster wanted Tara to squirt the water at him again today, but instead she pointed her trunk in Harvey's direction, as she'd been taught to do, but not too close because Harvey wasn't fond of water.

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Now, when Harvey saw what Tara was about to do, he jumped out of the pram and ran around the ring. *Good boy, just as we practised*, thought Albert. Harvey never let him down. Tara turned in a circle, her trunk pointing after him as he ran. But, just before she did finally spray the water, Harvey jumped back into the pram and Shanti used her trunk to pull down the hood so he'd be protected. The audience clapped and clapped.

Next, Albert threw an oversized football into the ring and Tara dropped the bottle, ran over to it and started to push it along with her trunk. Harvey jumped out of the pram and managed to stand on top of the ball before Albert blew the whistle and Harvey jumped off again. Shanti picked the ball up with her trunk and threw it across the circus ring into the goal that Albert had just placed there, as both Tara and Harvey ran after it.

When the game of football was over, the band struck up and the elephants and dog

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paraded round the ring once more, only at a slower pace now, in time with the familiar music. Shanti waved a giant-sized Union Jack flag, Tara swished a twenty-foot-long yellow ribbon around her, and Harvey, wearing a miniature soldier's cap, walked on his hind legs before running up Shanti's back to sit behind her head. The audience applauded and Albert smiled, swelling with pride.

Albert glanced over at the benches. Carl was gone and Albert was glad. His attention was pulled back to the show as Tara gave one last trumpet as she made her way out of the ring to the sound of the 'Pomp and Circumstance' march. Shanti raised her trunk in a wave of goodbye, and Harvey followed the elephants out of the ring.

'A big round of applause for our amazing elephants and their dog friend . . .' The ringmaster's voice faded as Albert, Shanti, Tara and Harvey left the big top.

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Once they were outside, Harvey looked up at Albert and wagged his tail.

'Good boy,' Albert said, giving him a scratch behind the ears. 'I'm going to miss all this.' But most of all he was going to miss Harvey and the elephants.

Back in the tent, the woman on the maroon chair said, 'I really should write a story about a circus.'

'Bit of a change from bunnies,' said the man.

'Not if it's a guinea-pig circus,' she smiled.

The six volunteer nurses clapped and clapped.

'I love that baby elephant . . .'

'What a character . . .'

'The "Pomp and Circumstance" march makes me think of our boys at the front,' one of the nurses said, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

'No tears, now,' another of the nurses said firmly, as she smoothed down her new apron.

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‘That won’t help our soldiers once we’re over in France, will it?’

The nurse shook her head.

‘A cheery face then, that’s what they need.’

The nurse with the handkerchief sniffed.

‘I heard they were going to use more elephants on the farms to help out with the ploughing,’ another of the nurses said as two clowns came running into the ring.

‘Really?’ said the apron nurse.

‘Well, Lizzie the Sheffield elephant has been a great success for Tommy Ward’s scrap metal business, hauling scrap metal and munitions across the city. I was reading in the newspaper about her helping herself to a carter’s lunch just the other day.’

‘No reason why a farm elephant shouldn’t work out well too,’ the handkerchief nurse said, and the other nurses agreed as they settled down to watch the rest of the show.

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