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Opening extract from

Elspeth Hart and the Perilous Voyage

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Elspeth Hart and the Perilous Voyage

Sarah Forbes

Extract

Chapter One

EVIL DINNER LADIES IN DARING ESCAPE!

A nationwide search has started after two dastardly dinner ladies, Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash, went missing from Grimguts high-security prison yesterday. It is thought that the dinner ladies, arrested for a treacherous kidnapping and fraud plot, may have escaped by hiding in large bags of dirty laundry. Members of the public are advised not to approach them, as they are highly dangerous and smell awful.

Elspeth stared at the newspaper headline in horror.

"Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash have escaped!" she said. She whirled around and started sprinting back towards her house. Elspeth knew that the f irst thing Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash would do was come looking for her parents' precious Extra-special Sticky Toffee Sauce recipe.

Elspeth burst through the gate and raced up the steps to her front door, fumbling for her key. She shoved the key in the lock, threw open the door and rushed inside.

And then it hit her. A dreadful and familiar smell.

"Oh no," Elspeth said under her breath. "No, no, no!"

There was only one person in the world who smelled that bad – Gladys Goulash, who hated washing and only had a bath once a year. As Elspeth ran into the living room, she discovered a trail of destruction – muddy footprints,

upturned chairs, books scattered on the f loor. It had to be the work of Miss Crabb.

Elspeth Hart paused. Where had she left the precious recipe? Her mind went blank for a second, then it came to her. She had put it on the mantelpiece. Elspeth ran over and looked around wildly.

Hart's Extra-special Sticky Toffee Sauce Recipe, the one her parents had tried so hard to protect … was gone.

Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash had got what they wanted at last.

"How could I have been so *stupid*?" Elspeth cried. "I should never have let the recipe out of my sight!" The recipe was so top secret that her parents had made up a special code for the ingredients. Her mum and dad had gone to all that trouble to keep the recipe safe and now that it was gone, Elspeth felt quite lost and awfully guilty.

Elspeth gazed down at the scribbles on her trainers, feeling miserable. She trudged through the f lat, looking at the chaos Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash had caused. The kitchen window had been smashed and it looked like they'd used a ladder to climb up and get inside. In Elspeth's room, the sheets on her bed were messed up, and her parents' bedroom had been turned upside down. Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash had raided the cupboards and ransacked the bathroom. They had been *everywhere*.

Elspeth stared at the mess and bit by bit, she didn't feel so sad. She felt very, very vexed. I imagine you know, dear reader, that when someone does something horrible to you, you might feel sad at f irst. But then you might feel angry. And Elspeth was angry now.

"Right," she said out loud. "If you two reckon you can get away with stealing my mum and dad's top-secret recipe, you're wrong."

Elspeth went back into the kitchen, moving slowly this time, hunting for clues.

On the windowsill she spotted something. It was the same newspaper Elspeth had seen earlier, with the headline about Crabb and Goulash's escape, but now it was lying open at an article about a fancy cruise ship. And it had notes scrawled all over it in Miss Crabb's handwriting.

Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash had been in such a rush that they had left something *very* interesting behind.

Elspeth's eyes widened as she read.

HMS UNSINKABLE SETS SAIL

Ooh lovely!

THE maiden voyage of the record-breakingly posh new cruise liner, the *HMS Unsinkable*, is set to stun the world. The *HMS Unsinkable* carries 8,000 passengers and will set sail from Southampton to New York on Thursday 12th July at 6 p.m. Several celebrities and members of the aristocracy will be on board, including the country's richest couple, Lord and Lady Spewitt, and the famous explorer, Baron Van Der Blink. It is thought that the boat will set new standards in luxury travel – Poppy and Pippy Delamere, hairdressers and beauty therapists for the royal family, have been booked to work in a luxury salon on board. Tickets have been sold at around £50,000 one way. Read on for details of the *HMS Unsinkable*'s most

Get rid of those beauty ladies and take their places!

Nobody will find us in America!

She looked up from the newspaper.

“So you’re heading to America? And you think nobody will catch you, Miss Crabb?” Elspeth muttered. “Think again. I’m getting that recipe back.”

The article said that the cruise ship was leaving on Thursday. Elspeth Hart had ONE DAY.

Chapter Two

Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash were hurrying away from Elspeth’s house at top speed in a stolen car, planning how to get on board the *HMS Unsinkable*. They had done a lot of bad things in their time, from making soups full of toenail clippings to kidnapping Elspeth Hart, but this was one of their nastiest plans yet.

“Hah!” said Miss Crabb, as they zoomed on to the motorway. “A luxury trip to New York on the *HMS Unsinkable*. Won’t that be lovely! And when we get to America, we can start making the Extra-special Sticky Toffee Sauce and selling it for loads of money.” She shoved the recipe down the front of her jumper to keep it safe.

“Ooh, New York,” said Gladys Goulash. “Is that near York?”

Gladys Goulash was very stupid. Miss Crabb only kept her around to do all her dirty work.

“No, you fool! It’s in America – that’s a completely different country.” Miss Crabb smiled, showing her grimy false teeth. “Just the right place to set up our top-secret Extra-special Sticky Toffee Sauce factory. We’ll make millions, Gladys Goulash!”

Gladys sniffed. “Why can’t we just f ly there? Much quicker that way,” she said.

Miss Crabb stamped her foot in rage, accidentally hitting the accelerator and making the car lurch forward. “You KNOW we’ve been banned from f lying ever since we started a f ight on the plane back from our holiday in Spain,” she said.

“Oh yeah,” Gladys said. “The one where we tried to take that donkey home with us!”

“And in case you have forgotten, you blithering doughnut, we’re ON THE RUN!” Miss Crabb continued. “That means the police will nab us if we try to leave the country.”

“Well then,” said Gladys Goulash, “they’re not gonna let us get on a big posh boat, are they?”

“Gah!” Miss Crabb was losing her temper. But then she remembered how useful Gladys Goulash would be for doing all the hard work in her Extra-special Sticky Toffee Sauce factory while Miss Crabb lay around eating biscuits and having naps. She would have to put up with her dim-witted friend for a bit longer.

“We’re not going to buy tickets,” she said crossly. “We’re going to go on *in disguise*. We’re going to pretend to be the ladies who run the hair and beauty salon on the *HMS Unsinkable*. We’ll buy wigs so nobody can recognize us, then we’ll bluff our way on board. If that doesn’t work, I’ll shove my way on – I have very sharp elbows. And then we’ll lock the real hair and beauty ladies up in a cupboard and take their place! Eee-hee-hee!” Miss Crabb sat back, looking extremely smug.

Elspeth raced to the train station, carrying a rucksack stuffed with some clothes and the newspaper Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash had left behind. She knew

she'd need help if she was going to get the better of Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash, and there was only one person she could trust – her best friend, Rory Snitter. Rory had been Elspeth's only friend when she was forced to live in the Pandora Pants School for Show-offs. The other students at the school hadn't cared about Elspeth at all.

Elspeth knew where Rory lived, but she had no money to buy a train ticket. She paused at the station entrance to catch her breath and thought hard.

The station was packed full of people rushing to catch trains, pushing into queues and drinking cups of coffee. Elspeth was glad it was busy – it meant she could slip in between the grown-ups without being noticed. There was a train to Rory's village leaving in f ive minutes, so Elspeth headed towards the platform, hoping she might be able to talk her way on board without a ticket, but there were barriers in the way.

"Excuse me, please can I get on the train? My mum's on it already. She's got our tickets," Elspeth said to a ticket inspector. She crossed her f ingers behind her back.

"A likely tale," said the ticket inspector. He scowled down at Elspeth. "I've had enough of kids like you mucking about. Summer holidays start and this place is over-run. I ought to report you!"

Elspeth's eyes widened. "Please don't report me," she squeaked. "I'll go home at once. Sorry!" Elspeth scurried away as fast as she could. But she didn't go home. Elspeth Hart didn't give up that easily.

She hid behind a coffee stall and waited.

From her hiding place she could see that people were lifting bikes and big

suitcases into the luggage carriage at the very end of the train. If Elspeth could just sneak in there, she wouldn't need a ticket at all. But she still had to get through those barriers.

"Unless…" she said to herself.

Elspeth waited until the ticket inspector was busy helping someone else, then she followed a man with a bike who was striding towards the barriers. As soon as the gate opened to let him through, Elspeth hurried behind and followed him towards the luggage carriage, trying to look casual. She was desperate to make a run for it, but that would only draw attention to her. Once the man had loaded in his bike and turned away, Elspeth leaped into the luggage carriage and hurried to the darkest corner.

"All aboard!" cried the train guard. Elspeth shrank back into the shadows as he peered into the luggage carriage, then the door slammed closed. Elspeth heard the faint sound of the train's whistle and they started to move. They were off.

Elspeth let out a long sigh of relief, then she looked around. It was dark in the luggage carriage, with just a chink of light coming from a high-up window. She found herself a fat suitcase to sit on and leaned her head against the side of the carriage, closing her eyes and letting the rhythm of the train soothe her.

She couldn't stop thinking about her parents and the note they had left her:

Dear, dear Elspeth,

If you find this note, darling girl, you've made it home — that's wonderful. We know someone kidnapped you. We had a mysterious phone call from a woman who wouldn't give her name. She told us you've been stolen and taken to the other side

of the world … but we are getting on a plane tonight. We will find you! Go straight to the police and ask them for help.

Mum and Dad xxx

The other side of the world could be *anywhere*. Her parents must have written the note in a hurry, before they had a proper idea of where they were going. Where could they be?

When Elspeth thought about her parents looking for her in some strange place that she had never even been to, she felt very sad and very small.

Then she opened her eyes and told herself to be strong. She would f ind her parents one day – she *had* to. But for now, she just had one mission – to get that recipe back.

Elspeth *couldn't* let Miss Crabb and Gladys Goulash win.

Chapter Three

Elspeth climbed down on to the train platform and looked around. Weaseltoe was a quiet station in a peaceful little village. Elspeth could see trees and pretty cottages and even a pond with ducks on it. She slung her rucksack over her shoulder and went right up to the first person she saw – an old man with a walking stick who was tottering along the main road.

"Excuse me," Elspeth said politely. "I'm looking for Snitter Towers. Do you know where it is?"

The old man rolled his eyes. "Oh, I know where it is all right, young lady. You

can't miss it," he said. "Just keep following this road. It's a huge white building with a big metal gate. Ridiculous place. That Mrs Snitter's a bit loopy, if you ask me."

Elspeth nodded and hurried on before the old man started asking any questions.

Soon the houses thinned out and Elspeth found herself walking along a tree-lined road. After a few minutes, she spotted high turrets and spires in the distance, and as she came closer, she could see a white building with a tall gate in front of it. The house was absolutely enormous.

If you can imagine a shimmering white castle, dear reader, then you can picture Rory Snitter's house. It was like something from a fairytale. Looking through the railings, Elspeth could see a fountain with a white marble swan on either side of it. There was also a tennis court and a massive swimming pool.

"Wow," breathed Elspeth. She followed a high wall all the way around the house until she found herself back at the big gate. She peeked through again, wondering what to do next.

"I *assume* you have a reason for being on Snitter property?" came a voice from the other side of the gate.

Elspeth jumped. She looked up to see a very tall, pale man in a black suit. He had perfectly neat black hair slicked over to one side and was standing with his hands clasped together in front of him.

"Oh. Yes," Elspeth said. She took a deep breath. "I'm here to see Rory. I'm Elspeth – one of his friends from school."

"Hmmmmm," said the man, peering down at her. He took a monocle from his pocket, popped it in front of his left eye, and stared at her more closely. "I will have to search your bag, young lady. We have security measures here. The

property must be protected at all times."

"Of course," Elspeth said nervously. She handed her rucksack through the bars of the gate and the man quickly looked through her things. "Do you … work for Mr and Mrs Snitter?" she asked.

The man breathed in through his nose and stood up very straight. "I do," he said.

"I am Mr Tunnock, the butler. I am in charge of the house and grounds – and I'm also in charge of Master Rory, as his parents are not here." Mr Tunnock f licked a tiny bit of dust from his jacket. "I am proud to say I have served this family for over eighteen years."

He handed Elspeth her rucksack. "Very well," he said, punching a code into the metal gate. "You may enter."

The gate creaked open and Elspeth went inside. As they made their way down the long drive, past the fountain, she spotted a small f igure.

"Rory!" Elspeth yelled.

Rory stopped and stared. Then he dropped the tennis racket he was carrying, ran towards Elspeth and gave her a huge hug.

"Elspeth! What are you doing here?" he cried.