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Opening extract from

The Ringmaster

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For Dad,
who has the gift of quiet encouragement

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07.00, Nairobi, Kenya: Hot and dry, storm approaching.

Looking back, the day had started much like any other. Darcie had resisted her father's attempts to get her up for school – a job delegated to him by Mom when she went to the States to get her regular manicure. Darcie hadn't actually stirred out of bed until the Kenyan maid, Tegla, came in with her ironed shirt and threw open the curtains. The drama of the swift equatorial sunrise had already passed; the sun was beating down on the lawn as the gardener watered the crimson flowers of the hibiscus that rioted on the wall opposite.

'Mr Lock, he say hurry up,' said Tegla hanging the shirt on the wardrobe.

'Mmrumph,' answered Darcie from the depths of her pillow.

Tegla passed the bed and slapped her on the rump as she would one of her own children. 'And I say you are

lazy girl. My Winston has been up for hours.'

This didn't make Darcie feel any better. Just at that moment she hated Winston. She hauled herself out of bed and fell into her clothes. Running a quick comb through her black hair, she bunched it back and inspected herself in the mirror. She looked a mess. Darcie grinned, knowing that Mom wasn't here to disapprove of her tomboy of a daughter.

Darcie clattered into the kitchen to find her father sitting with a copy of Kenya's leading daily newspaper propped up on the teapot. A lizard scuttled up the whitewashed wall and disappeared into the rafters. The kitchen smelt of the freshly squeezed passion fruit juice – Darcie's favourite, prepared for her breakfast by Tegla. Mr Lock flicked his eyes up to his daughter, a small frown settling on his face. Mr Lock was immaculate with his crisp shirt and tie, grey suit with jacket hung neatly on the back of his chair, carefully groomed hair and moustache.

'Every morning –'

Here it came – the daily lecture from Mr Grouch.

'– I see Tegla ironing your shirt but by the time you've decided to grace us with your presence, it looks as if it has spent the night at the bottom of the wash basket. How do you do it?' He moved her schoolbag off the chair beside him to make room for her.

'Just a talent of mine, Dad. You're lucky to have such a gifted child,' replied Darcie, grabbing a piece of bread and spreading it with guava jam.

'Well, one thing's sure: you didn't inherit it from your mother or me.' Mr Lock flapped the newspaper over a page and subsided into the sports section.

'Has Mom rung at all?' asked Darcie through a mouthful.

Mr Lock shifted the paper uneasily. 'No, Darcie. You know she doesn't like to call when she's in New York.'

'Gosh, having your nails done must require *so* much concentration,' said Darcie sardonically. She resented her mom being away so often for no very good reason.

'Look, Darcie. She's busy. She'll call when she can.'

Darcie stared at her father's bent head. She prayed she would not end up like him when she got older –

neat, steady, set in her ways, doing some dead-end job in the consular section of the British High Commission. She knew she wouldn't end up like her mother – the only highlight in *her* life being to fly once a month to the States just to file her fingernails and do some serious shopping. Darcie promised herself that she was going to do something much more interesting – be an explorer, play international women's soccer, fence in the Olympics, something exciting, different at the very least.

Her father stood up. 'Hurry or you'll make me miss my first meeting.'

Darcie trailed out of the kitchen, toast in hand, schoolbag dragging on the floor.

'I might be a little late back tonight,' her father announced as he reversed their car out of the garage. The guard waved them off before shutting the blue gates, hiding the secret world of their lush green compound from the dusty road. 'Will you be all right?'

'I'll be fine. You don't have to worry, you know.'

As they drove towards the international school,

Darcie watched the local kids standing at bus stops by the side of the road, all dressed in clean white shirts no matter how poor their background. She wondered how their mothers managed it. Her own rich life so close to so much poverty sometimes seemed wrong.

Michael Lock smiled at his daughter's serious expression. 'I know I shouldn't worry, but it's habit. I trust you not to get up to any mischief in my absence.'

'Do I ever?'

'No. You're not a bad kid for a grumpy old man like me.' He tooted as a male cyclist wobbled in front of him out of a side road, a woman sitting on the back and a live chicken strapped to the handlebars.

'You're not old!' protested Darcie.

'But you think I'm grumpy?'

She met his eye and grinned.

'It's my age, Darcie. Miserable midlife hormones – I can't help it.'

'Hey, hang on!' Darcie cried in mock outrage. 'I'm the teenager here. I'm the one who's supposed to have the raging hormones!'

Michael Lock pulled up outside the school gate.

'No wonder your mom needs a break from us both once a month. Here, don't forget your bag!'

School had passed in the usual blur of lessons and time misspent kicking a ball about with some boys under the mango tree during breaks. In the heat of the day, she'd cooled off in the school pool playing water polo, and then dozed through the next classes.

After the final bell, Darcie took a taxi to her fencing lesson at the Country Club. She didn't have any real friends at school at the moment: the transient life of the international community meant that no sooner had she formed one attachment than it was ripped up as her family moved on. It worried her that she didn't seem to fit in unless as part of the short-lived camaraderie of a sports team. The guys just looked at her as an honorary boy with a mean right foot. With the girls she struggled to keep up with their interests of clothes and boyfriends, frankly finding both subjects boring. They'd long ago sensed she was an outsider so

rarely included her in their social life. So the club was where she preferred to hang out after classes as she could be part of something without feeling lonely. You could ride, play tennis, polo, learn almost any sport there.

The defence attaché at the High Commission had taken up her dad's challenge to teach his daughter a 'civilised sport rather than all that ball-kicking nonsense'. Major Parker had been British fencing champion in his youth and brought to the lessons an uncompromising standard. Today he had been particularly testy, picking holes in her technique until she felt like hurling both abuse and her gauntlets at his shiny red face. She bit her tongue instead. Good fencers never lost their temper and she was determined to be the best.

It wasn't until after the major dropped her at the corner of her road that she suspected something was wrong. The gates to the bungalow stood wide open. Darcie rushed into the house, making her way to the kitchen at the back. Tegla was nowhere to be seen, no

supper had been prepared. She peeked out the window. Winston was not waiting on the lawn to play football as he usually did. Most worrying was the disappearance of the guard at the compound gate. And Zorro? Where was the black Alsatian? Darcie dumped her schoolbag and raced around the garden. Nothing and nobody. Just a chain with an empty collar by the open front gate.

Darcie was scared: Nairobi was notorious for violent burglaries and the absence of the Kenyan staff was ominous. She tried not to panic. First things first. She closed the gate. Now, the telephone – she'd ring the High Commission. Dad was probably still working late.

'Hello, British High Commission,' said the lady on the switchboard. 'How may I help you?'

'Can I speak to Michael Lock please?'

There was a pause.

'Michael Lock,' repeated the lady.

'Yes, Michael Lock. Consular section.'

Another pause.

'I'm afraid we no longer have a Mr Lock in our

consular section,' the lady replied. 'Can I put you through to someone else?'

'No,' snapped Darcie. 'Look, I know he works there.'

'I'm sorry but Michael Lock is not on our staff.'

Darcie pummelled the sofa cushion in frustration. She knew that voice. It was the old lady who sat sometimes at reception. She'd even met her at Christmas parties. She dredged through her memory to see if she could think of her name.

'It's Mrs Smith, isn't it – Gladys Smith?'

Silence.

'Mrs Smith, it's me, it's Darcie. Dad's not come home and there's no one here. I'm worried. I need to talk to someone.'

Darcie thought she could hear clicking and shuffling on the other end of the phone.

'Sit tight, Darcie. Someone's coming for you,' said the woman – and put the phone down.

That wasn't good enough. Darcie wasn't about to sit tight in an empty house. If the High Commission were going to be so useless, she'd call someone else. Darcie

leafed through the family address book. It had very few entries, her parents having a small circle of acquaintances and no relatives. There seemed nothing for it but to call her mom's friend, Doreen Clutterbuck. A blonde Texan with silver-painted nails, Darcie couldn't bear her normally but this was an emergency. She rifled through to the right page and picked up the phone.

Beeeep.

The line sounded funny – it wasn't dialling. Then nothing. Not the faintest whirring or click of the Kenyan telephone exchange.

Darcie swore and slammed the phone down. Why hadn't her stupid parents given her a mobile like she'd asked them? If they'd listened to her, she wouldn't be stuck now. But what did the dead line mean? Was there a problem at the telephone exchange? Or had some housebreakers lured the staff away and now cut off the phone, leaving a fourteen-year-old girl alone to defend her home?

But what about Gladys Smith and her claim Michael

Lock didn't work at the consulate any more? Darcie rubbed her eyes. She didn't have time to think about that. It was all too weird.

She went to the window looking out on the driveway. Were the thieves going to break in now they'd cut the phones off? She couldn't see anyone. The sun was sinking behind the palm trees fringing the road to the city centre. The air was sour with the smell of rubbish and wood fires from the street corner. In the distance she could hear the call to prayer crackling on the loudspeaker from the mosque. Everyone else was going about their normal business – shopping, cooking, travelling home. No one had noticed that Blue Gates Bungalow had abruptly dropped out of normality.

Should she sit tight or go looking for help?

Mrs Smith had told her to wait – but then she had said Michael Lock no longer worked there, which was obviously wrong.

She'd also said someone would come for her. Darcie decided to give it a few minutes. They must realise this

was an emergency. Someone would be round from the High Commission very soon to explain.

Darcie sat on the veranda and hugged her knees, a torch and the gardener's spade for protection. A mosquito whined in her ear. She slapped it away. The night-time chorus of cicadas swung into action, finding a pitch just within human hearing, shrill enough to grate on the eardrum like thousands of squeaky hinges. It was hot.

Darcie waited.

And waited.

Soon it was too late to go and search for help from one of the neighbours. She might get shot at if she turned up unannounced at one of the well-fortified mansions that surrounded her family's modest bungalow. People round here were edgy since the most recent spate of burglaries. Someone would come for her.

At midnight, a black car with diplomatic plates turned up at the gate and switched off its lights. A moment later, two men got out. And that was when the madness began.