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opening extract from

How Kirsty Jenkins Stole the Elephant

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Summer

Chapter 1

Kirsty stumbled and fell towards the acid green leaves. As they scratched her face she realised that they were exactly the same colour as the Amazonian poisonous frogs she had seen in the river earlier. She got back to her feet quickly. This was a dangerous place; deadly snakes hunted in the canopy above, jaguars padded through the undergrowth. She stepped forwards carefully so that the ginormous, man-eating beetles couldn't gnaw her boots. One of her fellow explorers had lost his big toe that way only yesterday. Her stomach rumbled. She had been trekking for days and supplies were running low.

'Can I eat some peas, Granddad?' she shouted.

The thump, thump of her Granddad's shovel stopped.

'Are you still there? I thought you'd gone home,' said Granddad.

'No. I'm just on an expedition. We've got no food. We might have to resort to cannibalism. So, can I eat some of the peas? Please, please?' Her fingers came

to rest on a thick pod, right above her left shoulder. She grinned at Granddad, even though she couldn't see him past the wig-wam of leaves.

'You're worse than all the birds, slugs and snails put together. I'm amazed I ever have anything to take home from this allotment.' Granddad started shovelling again. 'Go on then, I wouldn't want you to have to eat any fellow explorers.' Kirsty heard him chuckle.

The pod cracked open between her thumbs. Her tongue teased out each pea and guided it onto her back teeth. Then, crunch, her whole mouth flooded with sweetness. She settled down onto her back, looking up through the leaves at the summer-bright sky. Granddad was digging again. She could hear people on the other plots too, the squeak of a wheelbarrow, the whistle of a kettle boiling on a gas stove, shouts and laughter as people gave each other advice. Everyone was here today, working on their little plot of land. Everyone here grew fruit and vegetables to take home. But none of them did it as well as Granddad. She picked a wodge of chewed pea off her back tooth. If only she could eat Granddad's peas every day! When she ruled the world it would

always be summer and peas would grow all the time. And she wouldn't have to share a room with Dawn every weekend, bossing everyone around, just because she was the eldest.

Thinking about Dawn made her feel annoyed. She sat up quickly and the leaves scratched her face again. The expedition! She had almost forgotten! Kirsty clapped her hands. Her fellow explorers leapt to attention. She had managed to find them food, scavenged from the unwilling jungle. That would stop the whispers of mutiny. For now. She uncurled the ancient map of Hazdrubal and set a course south. She was either leading them to untold riches, or to certain death. Only time could tell which it was to be. With one hand holding her compass and the other clutching a knife, Kirsty hacked a path through the clinging vines.

'Come on, pet.' The shovelling had stopped. Granddad was just outside her pea wig-wam.

'It isn't time to go,' Kirsty said.

'I'm afraid it is. I promised your Dad I'd have you home early today. It's the weekend. Ben and Dawn

will be at your house soon. You never know, you might even have fun with your brother and sister.'

'Half-sister,' Kirsty muttered. Dad was Ben and Dawn's Dad too, but they had a different Mum. Dad had been married to their Mum once. But then he had married Kirsty's Mum. At weekends they came to Kirsty's house. Ben was nice, but Dawn was a total pain. When she wasn't there, Kirsty and Dad would do nice things together, like listen to Dad's records, or watch Kirsty's DVDs, or even just re-arrange their collections. But when Dawn was there, she moaned and yelled and spoiled everything.

Kirsty curled up inside the plants. It was a tight squeeze, though she knew that Granddad had planted them wide apart, just so she could keep on using her den. She rested her head on the ground. It smelled of warm earth and the tang of leaves. A few weeds had grown up amongst the peas. She pulled one out of the ground, its silvery roots and all.

'If you don't come out, I'll have to come in and get you!' Granddad said.

Kirsty started giggling despite herself. She knew what was coming. Granddad was going to get her to move the way he always did – with lots of laughing and screaming. His hand reached in and grabbed her bare foot. His rough fingertips tickled and tickled her sole until she cried with laughter.

'Stop it! Stop it!' she yelled. Now there would be a twisting tug-of-war as she tried to break free. She yanked her leg. Granddad's grip loosened. Her foot sprang back towards her. He had let go. Granddad had let go on the first tug! That wasn't right. Kirsty frowned.

Cough, cough, cough.

It sounded like Granddad was coughing from some place deep, deep inside. It sounded like it hurt. Kirsty struggled out through the plants.

'Granddad?'

He was bent over, coughing into his huge, white handkerchief. At the sound of her voice, Granddad looked up, his eyes were all watery. 'I'm fine, pet. Right as rain.' But he struggled to get the words out.

Kirsty shivered, despite the sunlight.

Winter

Chapter 2

Kirsty was already awake, even before the phone rang. She couldn't sleep. Granddad had been in hospital for ages. Summer had turned into Autumn, and now Winter was here and every week Granddad got worse. Today, at the end of visiting hours, the Doctor had taken Dad aside and whispered to him. And then, Dad had picked up Dawn and Ben from their Mum's house and asked them to come and stay, even though it was a Monday and not the weekend at all.

It all seemed wrong, and scary.

And then the phone rang in the middle of the night. 'Waaake up, waaake up,' it seemed to say.

Suddenly, everyone was awake, as if they had just been pretending to sleep too. Mum came in and turned on the light and then she was gone. Dawn was out of bed, but with that angry-bear face that meant you shouldn't speak to her. Kirsty went to the bedroom door. Dad was on the landing. Ben came out of the front room, where he slept, carrying his jeans.

Kirsty felt cold all over.

'What's going on?' she asked. Nobody answered. 'Mum?'

Mum came out of her bedroom. 'That was the hospital on the phone, love. They want us to get there as soon as we can. Please, go and get dressed.'

Kirsty went back into her bedroom.

The car park was almost empty when they got to the hospital. They all got out of the car. Kirsty's breath rose in white mists, like ghosts floating up into the sky.

Inside, the hospital smelled sad. It gave her a funny pain in her chest. Just past the front doors, Ben stopped. He stood still in the middle of the corridor. Kirsty suddenly felt sorry for him, even though he was three years older than her. His eyes were wide and shiny, his clothes were done up wrong. He seemed to be trembling. Dawn stood next to him, not moving. She still looked cross and crumpled.

'Are you OK?' Mum asked.

Ben didn't speak.

'Are you...would you like your Mum to be here?' Mum said.

Ben nodded gratefully.

'There are some phones down here,' Mum said. 'Dawn will help you, won't you, love? Come up as soon as you're done.'

Upstairs, a nurse stepped out from an office as they passed by. 'Mr. Jenkins?' he asked. Dad stopped. The nurse looked serious, but kind. Mum put her hand on Dad's arm as the nurse talked.

Kirsty tried to listen to what the nurse said, but she couldn't concentrate. Granddad was what mattered. Getting to Granddad. The grown-ups were looking at each other. Kirsty looked down the corridor. It was empty. She knew which room was Granddad's. She took a few steps backwards, away from the adults. She pressed her back against the wall and moved towards Granddad's room. She opened the door.

Granddad?'

He didn't move. She was too late. The pain in her chest throbbed hard.

'Granddad?'

His head turned slowly. 'Kirsty, pet? You're a sight for sore eyes.'

'Oh Granddad!' Kirsty rushed across the room and dropped down onto the bed. She buried her face in the crisp hospital sheets. The tears felt hot in her eyes. Granddad's thin hand came to rest on the back of her head. It was so light! Small, small strokes that she could hardly even feel, as though he was fading away.

'Shh,' he whispered. 'Shh. Stop these tears. You're like a wet weekend in Blackpool, and I've had quite enough of those for one lifetime.'

Kirsty grinned despite herself. 'How are you, Granddad?'

'Not too bad. I've got all these machines to keep me right.' He lifted his hand towards the equipment that blinked and hummed around his bed. 'Listen, pet. I'm glad to see you. Right glad.'

Kirsty had to get right up close to hear what Granddad was saying, his voice was hardly even a whisper.

'Listen. What do you think about my allotment?'

'Your allotment?'

'Yes. Do you like it?'

'Of course I do! It's brilliant. The best ever. It's the jungle, and it's Sherwood Forest, and it's that place in Harry Potter with the massive spiders.'

'The Forbidden Forest?'

'Yes. I love your allotment.' It was true, all her best games and adventures happened there.

'Good. Because I want you to look after it for me.'

'Why, where are you going?'

Granddad didn't answer. A machine bleeped a few times, then everything was silent again. Kirsty swallowed a sob.

'Will you do it? Will you look after it?' Granddad asked.

Kirsty nodded. She couldn't stop the tears now. 'I promise.'