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opening extract from

A Misfitz Mystery: Two Tigers on a String

written by

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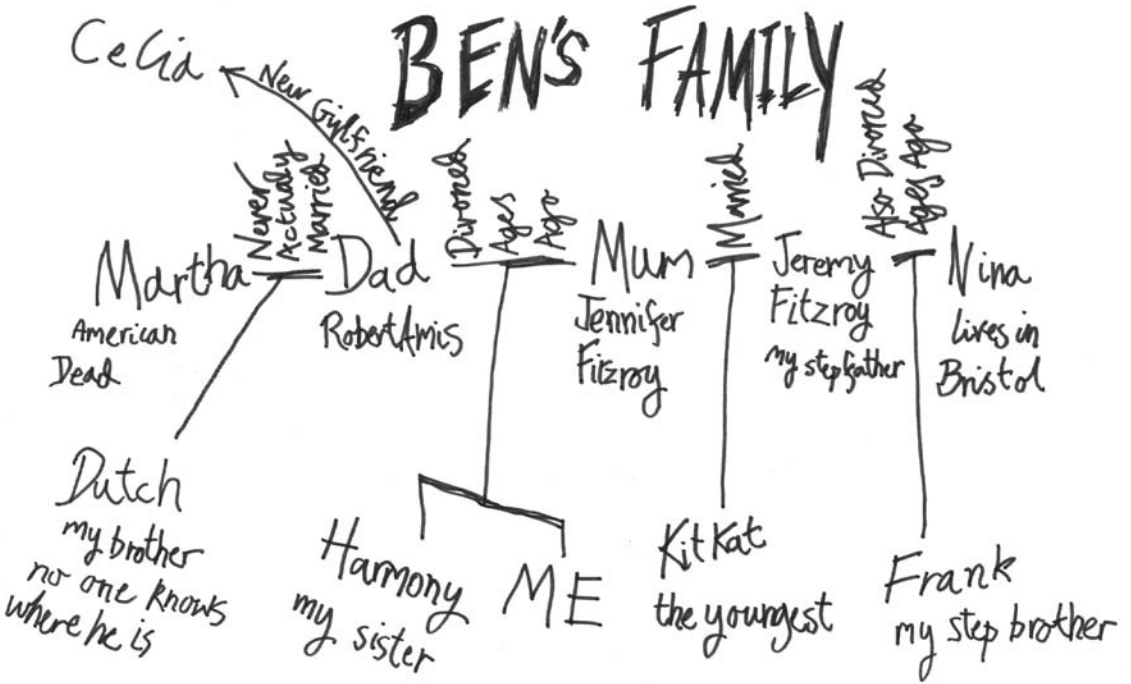
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BEN'S FAMILY
Cecil
New Girlfriend
Never Actually Married
Martha
American
Dead
Dad
Robert Amis
Divorced Ages Ago
Mum
Jennifer Fitzroy
Married
Jeremy Fitzroy
my stepfather
After Divorced Ages Ago
Nina
lives in Bristol
Dutch
my brother
no one knows where he is
Harmony
my sister
ME
Kit Kat
the youngest
Frank
my step brother

1

There was a large sign on Ben's bedroom door. He had drawn it himself. Each word was printed in large black letters.

PRIVATE
NO ENTRANCE WITHOUT PERMISSION
Please
knock first
and wait for the voice
which invites you to enter

Ben shared the house with his mother, his stepfather, his sister and his half-sister. When he wasn't at home, he was at school, crammed into a class or a playground with hundreds of other kids. In other words: he hardly ever had a moment to himself.

His room was his sanctuary. His private space.

He didn't want to share it with anyone.

Ben cleared enough space for an extra mattress. He emptied a drawer. He stacked books on the shelves, tossed wires into boxes and kicked junk under the bed.

And he wondered what he'd done to deserve it.

Half an hour earlier, his mum had knocked on his door.

"Yes?" yelled Ben.

"It's me. Can I come in?"

"Sure."

Jennifer poked her head into the room. "Will you come downstairs? Jeremy and I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Come down and you'll find out."

Harmony and Kitkat were waiting on the landing. From the looks on their faces, Ben guessed they didn't know what was going on either.

They followed their mother down the stairs to the kitchen, where they found Jeremy sitting at the far end of the long wooden table. Beside him, there was a skinny boy wearing black jeans, black socks, black plimsolls, a black T-shirt and a pair of black-rimmed glasses.

Looking at the two of them, you would have guessed immediately that they were father and son. They were the same shape – tall and skinny – and they shared the same awkward, angular movements. They even had the same expression on their faces, cool and detached and amused, as if they considered themselves to be a little more intelligent than anyone else in the room.

Frank raised his right hand. "Greetings, fellow siblings."

"What are you doing here?" cried Kitkat. She darted forward and kissed her half-brother on his cheek.

"Hello, little brother," said Harmony. She put her arms round her stepbrother and gave him a hug.

"Hi," said Ben, hanging back, not wanting to hug Frank and hoping Frank wouldn't want to hug him either. To his relief, Frank looked as if there was nothing that he liked less than hugs, hugging or being hugged.

Jennifer asked them to sit down.

"I've got something to tell you," she said. "Frank has come to stay with us."

Kitkat clapped her hands together. "Hurray!"

Jennifer smiled. "Yes, of course, it's lovely that he's here. But. . ."

And then she paused as if she didn't know how to continue.

Jeremy took over. "Something rather extraordinary has happened. Yesterday morning, Frank said goodbye to his mother, just as he always does, and went to school. When he came home in the afternoon, she wasn't there. He hasn't seen her since. She seems to have disappeared."

2

Everyone started talking at once.

"Calm down," said Jeremy. "I'll answer all your questions. Just give me a chance to hear myself think."

When they were quiet, Jeremy told them what had happened earlier that evening. He explained how he had rung Frank, expecting to have an ordinary conversation about homework and computers, and learnt that Nina hadn't been seen for a day and a half.

"As soon as I heard what was going on, I left work and drove straight to Bristol. I met Frank and then rang the police. They advised me to bring him back to London. They said there was no need for him to stay in the flat. They're looking for Nina now. They seem very confident that they're going to find her. Tomorrow morning, they're coming here to talk to Frank."

Jeremy turned to Ben.

"Your brother doesn't really want to be here," he said. "He'd much rather stay at home on his own, but he's too young to do that. So he's come to stay with us. Now, as you can appreciate, this is a very unusual and difficult situation. With any luck, it won't last for more than a day or two. As soon as Nina comes home, Frank will go back to Bristol. Till that happens, I hope you won't mind sharing your room with him."

"No problem," said Ben, trying to sound as if he meant it.

Ben lived with his family at 32 Cardinal Road, one of the nicest streets in Queen's Park, a peaceful suburb of north-west London.

The house fitted them perfectly.

The top floor belonged to the children. It was like an island, detached from the rest of the kingdom. The adults went up there, of course, and checked on the inhabitants, making sure they weren't breaking any laws. But if the kids behaved – if they got up in the morning, went to bed at night and didn't make too much noise or mess – they were allowed to rule themselves.

Harmony had the biggest bedroom, Kitkat had the smallest and Ben's was in-between the two,

which will tell you, if you don't already know, who was the oldest, who was the youngest and who came somewhere in the middle.

Jennifer and Jeremy had the next floor down. They shared two rooms, a big bedroom and a small study with just enough space for a desk each, squeezed between piles of paper and stacks of books and two tall grey filing cabinets.

The ground floor was occupied by a long, thin kitchen and a large sitting room. Through a pair of big glass doors at the back of the kitchen, you walked out of the house and into a lush garden with high trellis on all three sides, covered in clematis and creepers.

There was enough room in the garden for a tent. Ben would have been happy to sleep there. He wouldn't mind sleeping in his mum's study either. Or even in the sitting room.

So why couldn't Frank?

Ben knew there was no point arguing. Whether he liked it or not, he was going to have to share his bedroom with his stepbrother.

Till Frank's mum turned up.

Come back soon, thought Ben.

Please.

*

Jennifer and Jeremy carried a heavy mattress into Ben's room. They were followed by Frank with his bags, Harmony with a duvet and Kitkat with a pair of pillows.

"You're meant to knock," said Ben.

No one took any notice.

Jennifer and Jeremy made a bed for Frank, then stood back and admired what they had done.

"Perfect," said Jennifer. "Doesn't that look cosy?"

They all turned to look at Frank. He was staring at the mattress, but he didn't say anything.

Jeremy said, "Right, it's time for bed. You've got school in the morning. Kitkat, have you cleaned your teeth?"

"Hours ago."

Ben showed Frank which shelves he could have for his clothes and his books. Kitkat took him to the bathroom and told him where to put his toothbrush. Harmony fetched him a glass of water.

The children retreated to their bedrooms and climbed into bed. Jennifer and Jeremy visited each of them in turn, kissing them goodnight and switching off their lights.

Half an hour later, the house was quiet.

Just as they did every night, Jeremy and Jennifer

double-locked the front door and checked the bolts on the garden door, then went to bed.

They talked quietly for a few minutes, discussing the children and planning what to do in the morning. Then they switched off their lights and whispered, “Goodnight”, “Goodnight”.

They didn’t have a clue what was happening one floor above them.

3

Kitkat was the first to leave her room.

She couldn't sleep. Too many thoughts were buzzing round her head. For all she knew, people might go missing every day, but this was different. This wasn't a picture on the news or a name on the radio, but someone she had actually met. Her half-brother's mother. Her father's ex-wife. A member of her family.

She wanted to know all about it.

She *needed* to know all about it.

She crept out of bed, tiptoed across the landing and knocked very gently on Ben's door. Her knuckles made so little noise that no one could possibly have heard her.

There was no answer.

She knocked again, just as quietly. Again, there was no response from the other side of the door. She turned the handle, pushed the door open, put

her head into the room and whispered, "You awake?"

"Yup," replied a low voice.

"Me too," added another.

Thirty-two Cardinal Road was an old house and the floors were thin. If they spoke loudly, Jennifer and Jeremy would hear them through the floorboards and come upstairs to investigate.

Kitkat padded into the room and closed the door behind her. "I can't sleep," she said. "Can I come and talk to you?"

"What about?" said Ben.

"What do you think?" said Kitkat.

"Global warming?"

"Ha ha." Kitkat sat on the floor between Ben's bed and Frank's mattress. The only light in the room was the gloomy yellowish glare from the street lamp directly outside the window and none of them could really see the others, but it didn't seem to matter. Kitkat turned to Frank and said, "Hey, big bro."

"Hello, little sister."

"Are you OK?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Are you sure?"

"Yup. Why? Don't I seem OK?"

"I suppose you do," said Kitkat. "It's just. . ."

"What?"

"If my mum went missing, I'd be miserable. And you aren't."

"You needn't worry," said Frank. "I'm anxious, stressed and depressed. I just don't show it."

"That's very dangerous," said Kitkat. "If you don't express your emotions, you'll get cancer."

"Really? How do you know?"

"I saw someone talking about it on telly. When you bottle up your emotions, they stay inside you, and then you get cancer. The thing is, Frank, you should show us what you're really feeling. Deep down inside. You should open up to us. We're your closest relations in the whole wide world. If you can't trust us, who can you trust?"

"That's a very good question," said Frank. "Maybe I shouldn't trust anyone."

"You can trust us. Can't he, Ben?"

"Of course he can," said Ben.

Kitkat turned her attention back to Frank. "You see? You can trust us. OK?"

"I suppose so," said Frank.

"Good. So, what happened? Tell us everything."

"It's pretty late," said Frank. "Maybe we should talk about this tomorrow."

"I'm not tired," said Kitkat. "Anyway, if you don't tell us what happened, we can't help you."

"How are you going to help me?"

Before Kitkat could answer, the door opened and light flooded into the room. Ben, Frank and Kitkat looked at the figure who stood silhouetted in the doorway. To their relief, they realized it was only Harmony. She closed the door behind her before speaking in a whisper: "What do you think you're doing?"

"Nothing," said Kitkat.

"Talking," said Ben.

"Come and join us," said Frank.

Harmony thought for a moment, then came into the room and sat cross-legged on the floor alongside her little sister. "You should be asleep," she said. "You've got school tomorrow."

"I can't sleep," said Kitkat. "I'm too excited." She looked round at her siblings. "We're all here! The Misfitz – together at last. All for one and one for all!"

"You shouldn't be so excited," said Harmony. "We're only together because Frank's mum has disappeared."

"You don't have to worry about Frank's mum," said Kitkat. "The Misfitz are going to find her.

Aren't we?" She looked expectantly at the others, but none of them answered. Kitkat didn't care. "Frank's going to tell us what happened to his mum," she said. "Not just what Dad told us. The whole story. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Aren't you?"

Frank shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose I could. If you really want to know."

"Yes," said Kitkat. "I really do."

"Me too," said Harmony.

"Me three," said Ben.

"OK," said Frank. He hesitated again. "Where should I start?"

Ben said, "When did you know your mum had disappeared?"

"When I came home from school."

"Then start there."