



THE GREAT

ANIMAL

ESCAPADE

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*To Mum and Mark,
and to Dad and Brenda,
with love.*

Also by Jane Kerr

The Elephant Thief



Chapter One

Ladies and gentlemen! Boys and girls! Welcome to Belle Vue . . . the most magical, marvellous and mesmerizing zoological gardens on this great earth!

The bellow rolled across the heads of the waiting crowd with the force of summer thunder – and Danny grinned. He couldn't help it. Even though he'd heard the speech too often to count, he never tired of it.

'Come and flock to our flamingos. Peer at our penguins. Gape at the gazelles. Marvel at the monkeys. Coo at the camels. And admire the finest specimens of lion and lioness in the entire country.'

Danny waited for the pause – the hitch of breath that meant Mr Cogwell was preparing for the final roar. 'But please, we beg of you, leave time for our star attraction:

Her Majesty's personal favourite. An elephant without equal . . . the biggest, brightest, most bewitching beast at Belle Vue . . . Maharajah the Magnificent!

Loud applause followed the gatekeeper's grand announcement. It was Danny's cue to move. He took a breath, whistled sharply and raised an arm. Beneath him, Maharajah swayed heavily then stomped forward. The crowd turned towards the noise – and everyone's mouths dropped open.

Danny was wrapped in a cape of purple silk; on his feet were a pair of embroidered slippers; and coiled around his head sat a bright green turban topped with peacock's feathers. But far more incredible than that – Danny was sitting on an elephant.

Maharajah the Magnificent. Larger than a mountain. Wider, higher and just as indestructible. With ears like tablecloths, and tusks as tough and hard as bone.

'Will you look at that!'

'Biggest animal I've ever seen!'

'Aye. I reckon there's countries smaller.'

Gently, Danny eased Maharajah to a stop in front of the visitors, then leant forward to stroke a hand across the solid dome of Maharajah's skull. A happy rumble vibrated through his palm and Danny's nerves eased.

He looked down. A cluster of faces stared back at him. Despite the early hour, Belle Vue Zoological Gardens had already attracted a crowd and, from this height, Danny could see even more people lining up at the ticket office. It was going to be another busy day.

Hastily, he whistled again and Maharajah dropped to his knees. Danny slid down but as soon as his feet touched the ground, he felt a tug on his cape. A small girl, eyes as wide as copper pennies, had pushed through the spectators.

‘Can I touch him, mister? Please? Can I?’

Smiling, Danny nodded. And the girl lifted up on to her toes, tracing her fingers over Maharajah’s rough, wrinkled skin; across the deep ridges that criss-crossed his trunk and then through the tufts of hair on his forehead and chin. Soon, other children were pressing forward to do the same. But if the attention bothered Maharajah, Danny could see no sign. He simply knelt patiently, and eventually it was Danny who made the signal to Mr Cogwell.

The gatekeeper nodded back. ‘That’s enough, ladies and gentlemen! Boys and girls! Maharajah needs his rest but if you make your way to the elephant enclosure later today, you’ll see him again.’ He waved a fan of folded paper above his head. ‘Now, can I recommend one of our illustrated maps? Yours for only a halfpenny – the 1872 guide to all the great wonders of the park . . . the cobras, the camels, the cockatoos. And of course, our new Nile crocodile, Cleopatra . . .’

Mr Cogwell’s voice faded into the distance as Danny led Maharajah down the tree-lined avenue that cut across Belle Vue. Past the lions and tigers pacing in their cages; past the monkeys chattering in the ape house; and past the brick-walled pit, where the great Siberian bear reared up on his huge hind legs to glare at them.

At the end of the avenue, a stone archway led into the Italian gardens. Danny ducked inside, guiding Maharajah into the shade of a giant palm. Immediately the elephant lifted his trunk to pull down a branch and chew through the leaves.

Dropping the harness, Danny glanced around. Good. The gardens were empty. Hurriedly, he untied the purple cloak then tugged off the feathered turban. The slippers would have to stay, but he stuffed the rest of the clothes into a bag slung across Maharajah's back. It felt ridiculously good to get rid of the costume.

'Oi, you! Boy!'

Danny turned and all his good humour vanished. Tom Dalton was striding down the path towards him, shoulders wide, every step a swagger. Tom was the grandson of one of Mr Jameson's most trusted workers. He was also the only person who'd never welcomed Danny to Belle Vue.

'I've a message from Mr Jameson. He needs to speak to you. Says it's important.'

'Where . . .' Danny's chest tightened and he had to stop to take a breath. For most of his life, he'd been mute – unable to talk – and even though his voice had returned, speech still didn't come easily. 'Where . . . where is he? Mr Jameson. Where is he now?'

Danny hated that his words stumbled into each other, and he hated it even more when Tom's lips curled into a sneer. They might be a similar age, but they had little in common. While Danny was slight and scrawny, a brown-

skinned boy still growing into his bones, Tom was big and broad with a shock of fair hair and all the confidence of height and muscle.

‘Calm down! No need to get so excited.’ Tom’s sneer deepened. ‘He’s over by the lake. On the shore opposite Firework Island. But you’d better get a move on. He said you’re to be quick.’

Danny heard Mr Jameson before he saw him. His voice boomed out from among a group of finely dressed gentlemen. They stood, poised like penguins, on a platform jutting into the boating lake.

‘... and let me say again, my dear sirs, you won’t regret puttin’ your money into Belle Vue. This is goin’ to be the biggest show you’ve ever seen. “Prince Dandip and the Fight for Flamenca.” A rip-roarin’ re-enactment of one of the greatest battles of our time. Told in twenty minutes, and all for only two shillin’s.’ A pause. ‘Or a half-crown, after four o’clock.’

As Danny walked nearer, the group parted. A stout, solid man in a bright red waistcoat stood in the centre, gesturing furiously. James Fredrick Henry Jameson, owner of the Belle Vue Zoological Gardens – and, as usual, he was weaving a plan.

‘Now, take a look over there.’ Mr Jameson stabbed a finger across the lake, and the men swivelled to follow his direction. ‘You see that island? We’re stagin’ the whole show right there. It’ll be set in Spain. Near a village. The

British army against the French. The fireworks will blast away as the battle begins. Rockets. Firecrackers. Sparklers. All fallin' like raindrops across Belle Vue.' He waggled his stubby fingers in the air.

'Everythin' will look hopeless but then Prince Dandip and Maharajah will appear on the top of the hill. The hero of the hour – and his elephant – ridin' down to stop the fightin'. Just exactly as it happened in the village of Flamenca.'

Standing at the edge of the jetty, Danny only just managed to stop a snort. Not one word of the story was true. Flamenca didn't exist – and neither did Prince Dandip. Every part of the battle was a figment of Mr Jameson's imagination. Over the last few weeks, he'd mapped it all out, scene by scene, on the huge, battered desk in his study.

'And of course, there'll be explosions. And in between, an orchestra playin' music. And right at the very end, Her Majesty's face will appear, lit up against the horizon. Big as a house. My man, George Dalton, has it all worked out, and there's nothin' he doesn't know about fireworks.'

Danny stepped on to the platform, letting his boots thud loudly on the wooden boards. Immediately Mr Jameson turned towards the noise.

'There you are, lad. At last! I've some people I want you to meet.' He motioned Danny closer. 'These are the gentlemen from Thirsby and Snade. The bank that's puttin' money into Belle Vue.' Clapping a hand around one shoulder, Mr Jameson pulled Danny to face the group. 'And

this is the boy I've been telling you about. Danny . . . Prince Dandip of Delhi, himself.'

The silence that followed was deeper than a winter forest. The gentlemen looked at Danny, and Danny looked at the gentlemen. And then the man at the front of the group broke the silence. '*This* is the boy?'

Mr Jameson nodded. 'Yes.'

'*He's* the star of the show? The boy on all the posters? The prince?'

'Yes, Mr Snade. This is him.'

The banker's mouth thinned. 'Well, I can't say I'm not disappointed, Jameson. I'd imagined he'd be bigger. More regal. Less . . . less . . .' His eyebrows rose, almost to the line of dark curls across his forehead. 'Less foreign-looking.'

Mr Jameson's grip tightened, and Danny knew it was both an instinctive reaction and a warning. So, he stayed silent – even though his chest churned angrily.

'I don't know why you'd think that. Danny's done this before. He rode Maharajah more than two hundred miles – from Edinburgh to Manchester – dressed as an Indian prince. You might remember it. The story was in all the newspapers. People loved him. The *Queen* loved him!'

'Yes, that may well be true.' Mr Snade's lips curled. 'But I'm only concerned about the here and now. You've borrowed a great deal of money to fund this show of yours and there's no room for mistakes! Because let me make it clear, I expect to at least double the bank's investment.'

'You will, sir. Don't you worry about that.'

‘Let’s hope so.’ With a scowl, Mr Snade snapped his attention away from Danny. ‘But I suppose the main draw will be the elephant. I’m assuming we are able to see him, Jameson? The bank must check on *every* detail.’

Slowly, Mr Jameson released his grasp on Danny’s shoulder then jerked his chin. ‘Go on, lad. You’d better fetch Maharajah.’

As Danny walked back along the jetty, he could still feel the anger churning in his chest, and he hoped that for once, Maharajah had ignored his instructions to stay nearby. Mr Snade and the other bankers wouldn’t wait for long, and if Danny took his time, they’d be gone soon enough.

But when he searched along the shore, Maharajah was exactly where he should have been – under the shadows of the stone archway. And Danny knew there would be no sneaking away unnoticed.

Slowly, he reached for the long, wooden cane tucked into his belt. His ankus – with this he could command elephants. It had taken practice and patience, but eventually he’d mastered the complicated combination of movements and whistles. And, so far, Maharajah had never failed to understand.

Raising the cane, Danny blew out a sharp signal, and Maharajah’s head lifted, ears flapping. He lumbered out from his hiding place and down towards the lake. On the jetty, Danny heard shouted exclamations from the bankers.

‘Good Lord!’