

# FRANKIE BEST HATES QUESTS

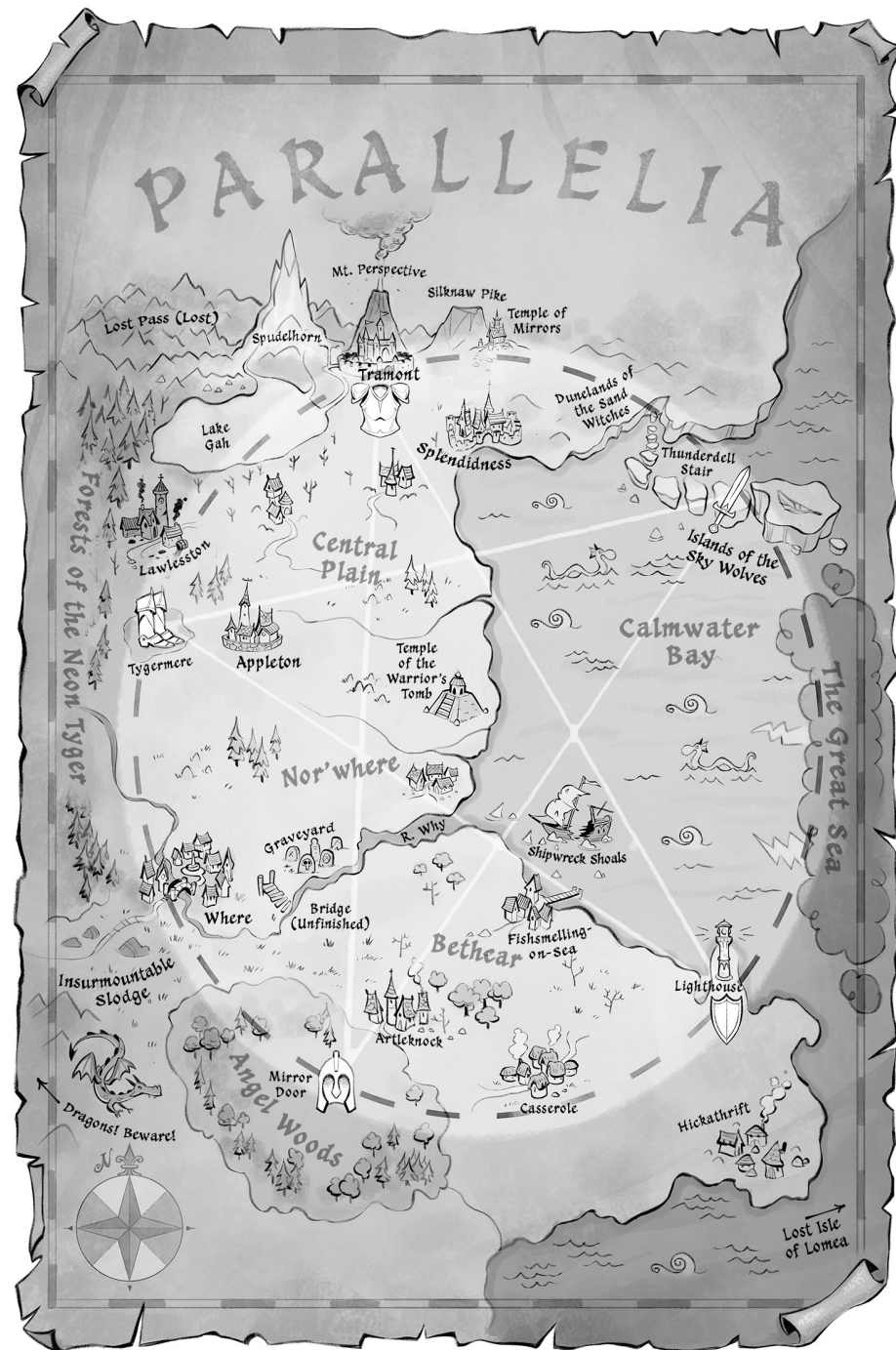
The accidental adventure  
of a lifetime

CHRIS SMITH

Illustrated by  
KENNETH ANDERSON



PUFFIN





Right, listen.

I just want to make one thing totally clear before we get going, OK?

This is not a story about some mystical quest through a magical land.

It's not a story about fantastical creatures, or elves, or witches, or any of that rubbish.

Just wanted to get that out of the way before Chapter 1, in case you were put off by the title.

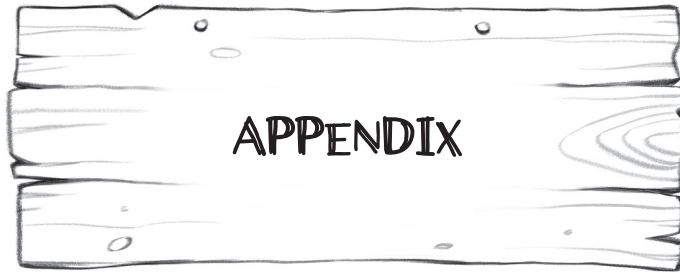
And, most of all, it is not a story about a princess.

Even though that's what my dad always calls me – Princess.

And that's what he called me on the day this story begins. The day he said goodbye.

Frankie Best  
.....

## CHAPTER 1



‘OK, Princess?’

In the back seat of the car, Frankie Best scowled so hard that her eyes almost vanished inside a fold of face. ‘**Don’t,**’ she growled, ‘**call me Princess.** You know this. Frankie’s fine. Just Frankie.’

Her father took one hand off the steering wheel to hold it up in a gesture of apology. ‘Sorry, sorry,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘Are you OK, Just Frankie?’

She gave a brief scorn-snort that meant *I’m twelve – too old for that lame dad joke*. But somehow a side order of smile squeezed its way in at the same time. ‘The answer to your question, Just Dad,’ she replied, ‘is a giant-sized no. Why did Auntie Fi’s appendix have to explode – this week of all weeks?’

Beside her in the back seat, her brother Joel looked up from his book. ‘Did it actually explode?’ he asked, eyes wide. ‘Cool!’

Annoyed, Frankie batted the book from his hands. ‘Of course it didn’t actually explode,’ she told him. ‘Body parts don’t just explode. Only an eight-year-old would think that.’

‘**HEY!**’ protested Joel. ‘**You lost my place!**’ I’d just encountered ‘Throm the Barbarian.’ He flicked frantically through the pages, muttering to himself. ‘I remember battling the Rock Grub at 352 – I’ll have to start again from there.’

Frankie rolled her eyes and gave a dramatic *humph*, pushing herself backwards into her seat as if it would slow the car down and delay her exile. She’d been looking forward to spending a week with her aunt while Mum and Dad went off on their latest expedition. Fi was her dad’s sister – much younger than him – and she was basically a non-stop spoiling machine. ‘Help yourself to anything you want!’ was her mantra, and her house was always well stocked with treats.

But there would be no week with Fun Aunt Fi this time. She was in hospital, recovering from an

emergency operation, and, after a series of increasingly frantic phone calls, Frankie and Joel were about to be abandoned at their grandad's house. The prospect made Frankie almost yearn for her own bout of appendicitis. It wasn't that she didn't like her grandfather – it was just that she hardly knew him. She had vague memories of playing with him when she'd been tiny, but over the last few years the old man had become a virtual stranger.

As if reading her thoughts, Frankie's mum twisted round in the passenger seat. 'I know Grandad's place isn't exactly kid-friendly,' she said.

'Is that why we never go and visit him, ever?' said Joel, thumb jammed firmly in the middle of his book.

His mother ignored the question. 'But you're old enough to amuse yourselves for a week, right?'

In reply, Frankie waved her phone, which throughout the entire conversation had been clasped firmly in her right hand, and Joel held up his book.

'Well, there you are, then,' their mum said decisively. 'You've both got a good week's worth of entertainment sorted there.'

Automatically, Frankie glanced down at the screen in her hand. No messages had popped up for the last

few minutes. With a jolt of shock, she saw the words

## NO SIGNAL

across the top and her own startled face reflected back at her from a rectangle of blankness. 'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'There's no service – but we're not there yet, right?'

'Here we are,' sang her dad, pushing the button to put on the handbrake. 'And there's Grandad, all ready to . . . **What on earth is he doing?**'

With difficulty, Frankie tore her eyes away from the horrifying words on her phone to see that they'd parked in front of her grandad's house. It stood in its own large garden overlooking a neatly mown village green, and it was impossible to look at it without the word 'ramshackle' coming to mind.

*In fact, Frankie thought to herself as she looked up at the many windows, none of which seemed to be at the same level, the word 'ramshackle' doesn't quite do it justice. Frankly, it's an insult to rams. And shackles. This place is a dump.*

In the overgrown front garden, wading in waist-high weeds, stood a man in striped pyjamas and a



purple dressing gown. His long white hair was held back in an untidy ponytail and he was clutching an enormous green net in one hand. He was peering intently through one of the front windows of the house, crouched down slightly and with his other hand held up to the glass to shield his eyes from the bright sunshine.

‘Why is Grandad looking in through his own front window?’ asked Joel, scrambling across Frankie’s knees for a better view. ‘And why is he holding a net? And why isn’t he dressed at –’ he glanced down at his

sister’s phone – ‘three twenty-three p.m.’

‘Dad!’ shouted their mum sharply, snapping her door open and stepping down into the lane. Grandad turned his face towards them, holding a finger up to his lips. ‘Wait in the car for a minute,’ Mum told the rest of the family. ‘It looks like I need to have a word with him. Several words, in fact.’

Dad frowned. ‘I thought you’d made this clear on the phone,’ he said, exchanging a look with her. ‘I thought he’d promised there wouldn’t be any of this . . . this stuff for the week.’



'I thought so, too,' she replied, looking over the car roof at her pyjama-clad parent with an expression that clearly forecast stormy weather ahead. Frankie recognized it from the time she'd spilled a whole can of fizzy orange on a new and very expensive cream-coloured rug. Without further words, Mum slammed the car door and strode into the front garden, grasping the old man firmly by the elbow and leading him inside.

'What stuff did Grandad promise there wouldn't be any of this week?' demanded Joel. 'Why is Mum angry with him? Is it something to do with the same reason we never come to visit Grandad? What does he want to catch in his big net?'

'Oh . . . butterflies, I should think, Joel,' said Dad.

*Not especially convincing, thought Frankie. And why did he only answer the last question?*

'Let's just wait here for a couple of minutes,' her father went on, 'and let Mum and Grandad have a little chat. Then we'll go in and get you settled.' He glanced at his watch. 'Flight leaves in three hours,' he muttered.

In the end, they only lasted five minutes in the car. With the sun beating down on the roof and the

engine switched off, it quickly became intolerably hot. Plus Dad kept glancing nervously at his watch, clearly impatient to get to the airport. Finally, he flung his door open. 'Come on, then,' he told them. 'Get your stuff. I'm sure that's enough time for Mum to tell Grandad not to . . . that is, to have a lovely catch-up with Grandad. Let's go in.'

Frankie grabbed her bag from the boot and trailed after her dad and brother, glancing once again at her phone, which still stubbornly insisted there was

## NO SIGNAL.

As they approached the front door, she could hear her mum's voice, raised in full orange-rug-rage mode.

'You're always going on about wanting to see the kids more,' she was saying furiously, 'and I've been very clear about the conditions. For just one week, I ask you to keep that flipping door shut, to try and maintain at least an appearance of being something close to normal . . .'

'It just slipped through, Kate. It's not my fault,' answered Grandad. 'I thought I'd be able to get it back before you arrived, that's all. But the Sentinels

can handle it – don't worry. I promise you, I'll take good care of the children. They won't know anything's . . . Oh hello!' He had caught sight of Frankie and Joel, bags in hand, standing uncertainly in the doorway. Grandad and Mum were facing each other angrily in the cluttered hallway, Mum with one pointing finger still raised.

'Did you catch any butterflies, Grandad?' asked Joel innocently. 'I like your house. We haven't been here for years and years and years. It's just like Spingle's Cottage, isn't it?'

'Butterflies?' their grandfather replied, coming over and squatting down with a click of old knees to be at eye level. 'No, not yet. But maybe we can have another go later – how about that? And what about you, Frances? Fancy a spot of butterfly hunting?'

'Frankie's fine, thanks, Grandad,' she told him.

Clearly, there was some fairly hardcore grown-up stuff going on here, but she wanted no part of it. There was only one thing Frankie was bothered about.

'Thanks for having us to stay,' she went on politely. 'Now, if you just want to give me the Wi-Fi code, that'd be great.'

Her grandfather's craggy face creased into a frown. **'The . . . the what? Whose code?'**

'Wi-Fi code,' Frankie repeated briskly. But, as her grandfather continued to look at her blankly, a cold spiral of pure fear wound its way down from her shoulders. Something fluttered inside her chest like a canary that's just about to have a really, really bad day down the mine.

*Surely*, Frankie thought to herself. *Surely . . .*

'The Wi-Fi code?' she repeated. 'The, you know . . . code. For the Wi-Fi. **WHY . . . FIE . . .**' She enunciated the last two syllables loudly, sounding like one of those annoying people on holiday who don't speak the language and just shout things slowly at the waiter as if they'll learn English through sheer volume.





'I don't know what that is, I'm afraid, petal,' said Grandad. 'Is it something to do with television?'

**'Are you actually kidding me?'**

'Because I don't have a telly, you see . . .'

By now, the canary inside Frankie was spiralling towards the ground like a downed fighter plane, black smoke belching from its bird bottom. **'WHAT?'** Her voice leaped up several octaves, and even more decibels, and at that moment there was a scuffling and a thump from the living room to her right.

'Dad . . .' said Frankie's mum in a warning tone of voice.

'Oh, don't worry about that,' he soothed. 'It's just, er, the cat. No, not the cat. I haven't got a cat, have I? It's just the, ah, the wind. Yes, terrible wind we get here. Wind central, it is.'

'Mum,' said Frankie pleadingly, 'you are not about to abandon me for a whole week in a house with no functioning internet connection? Right? And no TV even?'

'I've got lots of books,' Grandad protested mildly. 'And I think there's a couple of jigsaws somewhere.'

'I like jigsaws,' said Joel, nodding approvingly. 'Do any of them have dragons on?'



'Of course you like jigsaws,' Frankie told him. 'You're the world's biggest nerd.'

'I'm not actually that big,' he replied matter-of-factly. 'I was one hundred and twenty centimetres high three weeks ago, which is below average for my age.'

Frankie released a brief scream of frustration.

Their dad, who throughout this whole exchange had been hovering in the front doorway, looking at his watch approximately every eighteen seconds, broke in at this point. 'Kate,' he said tensely, 'we've really, really got to go.'

'Go, go – we're fine here!' Grandad reassured him, his bright, bird-like eyes twinkling. 'Got everything you need? Long johns, igloo blueprints, reindeer repellent?'

'I can see where Mum gets her comedy talents from,' said Frankie icily. 'And there's no such thing as reindeer repellent.'

'Nonsense,' he said. 'I use it every day.'

'There aren't any reindeer around here.'

'Pre-cisely!' He grinned. 'Strong stuff, isn't it?'

Frankie groaned.

'Right –' her mum pulled her in for a brief hug –



‘we’re off. See you in a week. Be good!’

‘**But, Mum,**’ wailed Frankie, ‘**the Wi-Fi! And there’s no phone signal. How am I supposed to –**’

‘Bye!’ Already her mother was waving from the garden path.

‘Bye, Princess!’ her father called cheerily, holding open the car door.



**‘DON’T CALL ME PRINCESS!’** snapped Frankie automatically, but only half-heartedly. Suddenly she had other problems to deal with.

Within seconds, the car had started and roared away, carrying her parents towards their week in the wilderness above the Arctic Circle. But Frankie felt as if she had entered a wasteland far more challenging than the frozen tundra.

‘No Wi-Fi at all, seriously?’ she repeated weakly to her grandfather, hoping wildly that this had all been some form of elaborate welcoming joke.

‘It’ll do you good to spend a week without the **prrrrrrecious**,’ taunted Joel.

That was his nickname for Frankie’s phone – a nickname that she found incredibly infuriating, mostly because it was so accurate. Every time she reached into her pocket, it seemed he was somewhere nearby, croaking, ‘The **prrrrrrecious** is calling us. **Yessss, musst** look at the **prrrrrrecious**,’ until she chased him away. But now, of course, there was no point looking at it. She did anyway, though:

## NO SIGNAL.

‘Make yourselves at home, then,’ said her grandad, looking slightly awkward and embarrassed now the three of them had been left alone. ‘Feel free to, you

know, have an explore.' He waved vaguely at the staircase.

'Awesome!' breathed Joel excitedly. 'This house is brilliant! I'm going to check all the wardrobes for fauns!' He pelted away up the stairs, leaving Frankie and her grandad alone in the untidy hall.

'I'm just going to check on the cat,' he told her. 'No, not the cat. Still don't have a cat. I'm going to check on the wind.' He disappeared into the living room, dressing gown billowing out behind him like a wizard's cloak. 'Don't worry!' he called over his shoulder. 'It won't be so bad. You'll see.'

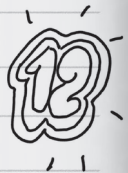
'It's already bad,' moaned Frankie quietly to herself, slumping down on the stairs and closing her eyes. 'Badder than bad. No phone signal. No Wi-Fi. Trapped here for a week. This is worse than actual prison.'

## The Journal of Frankie Best

I have decided to start this journal because it now seems inevitable that I shall die of boredom within the next seven days, and I want to leave a record of my life so far. I've found this old notebook in my bedroom at Grandad's house and, although it feels kind of like school to be writing on actual paper with an actual pen, there is literally no alternative in this house, which appears to come from Victorian times.

My name is Frankie Best and I am twelve years old. I'm staying here at Grandad's house for a week while Mum and Dad go camping in the Arctic. You know, writing that down, it strikes me that's not an entirely normal thing for parents to do. Perhaps a bit of an explanation is in order. Here you go.

You know that mobile game *Spingle's Quest*? The one where you have to



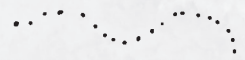
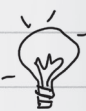




manoeuvre the little green elf, Spingle, round a forest, collecting gemstones?

Everyone went absolutely mad about it like four years ago? Well, my mum and dad created it. And if you're now thinking to yourself: *Wow, cool parents!* well, that's exactly what I thought, too . . . four years ago. But I was eight, to be fair. The same age Joel is now.

When you're eight, having parents who designed the hottest game of the year is amazing. Everyone wanted to ask me questions about how they came up with the idea. Everyone wanted me to explain how to unlock that secret level where you get to play as a baby dragon (there's a hidden door in the back of a tree trunk in the north-west corner of the forest, if you didn't look it up online already). And everyone wanted to come back to mine for a playdate to try and get secrets out of Mum and Dad about *Spingle's Quest II*,



then *Spingle's Quest III: The Dragon's Secret*. ✓

My innocent little eight-year-old brain thought that *Spingle's Quest* was the most brilliant thing ever. I had posters on my bedroom wall, all the soft toys lined up at the head of my bed . . . the lot.

But last September it all went badly pear-shaped.

Over the summer, between the end of one school and the beginning of another, everything changed – and nobody thought to send me the memo. Loads of the same kids were there when I wandered through the gates on the first day. Sure, the lessons were going to be different, but surely things would be basically the same. How wrong could I have been?

Two of my best friends from my last school, Bernie and Evie, were talking to a crowd of kids I didn't know. I happily marched up to them and said 'hi' . . . little

suspecting that I was about to be ambushed.

'Oh, here she is,' said Bernie to one of the boys. 'Hi, Frankie.'

I scattered a general wave round the crowd of newbies, along with what I now realize was my last truly innocent smile.

My childhood was about to end with the finality of a crow flying through the rotor blades of a helicopter. And I know that's a troubling image – but I need you to understand just how hideous this was. Listen.

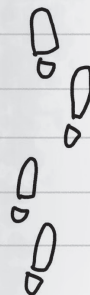


'Is it true then?' asked the boy, smirking.

He had a plump reddish face and – I'm not just adding this in with hindsight, promise – a mean, smug kind of expression.

'Did your parents build *Spingle's Quest*?'

It's really hard to write down the amount of sarcasm he managed to get into those two words. He said them in a kind of high-pitched, childish voice, elongating the 'I'



sound, and tottering forward on tiptoe in a clumsy imitation of the way Spingle walks in the game. Everybody else in the group broke up laughing – including Evie, who I knew for a fact had been sleeping under an elf-themed duvet cover as recently as mid-July.

I shuffled my feet. Sure, now would have been the perfect time to stand up for my parents and their game. I should have had the strength of character to defend Spingle and all his elfy ways . . . but it was day one. School's a harsh, unforgiving place. So instead I curled my mouth into what I hoped was a cool, cynical sneer.

'Yeah . . . lamest thing ever,' I told him. 'I was hoping nobody would find out.' The laughter grew louder, but at least now we were all laughing together.

Just like that, my parents' job had gone from being the most wonderful thing in the world to a hideous embarrassment.



There seemed to be some unspoken agreement among everybody that now we were at secondary school, *Spingle's Quest* was no longer cool. There were certain things you were allowed to be interested in – phones being the principal one – but elves were definitely not welcome. And you know what? I felt embarrassed and, soon, pretty furious about it. I felt as if Spingle the Elf had let me down and made me look ridiculous in front of everybody.



That very first day I went home and took down the *Spingle's Quest* posters. I bagged up the soft toys – Spingle the Elf, Darzil the Dragon, Wombo the Wise Old Warlock, all of them – and stuffed them under my bed.

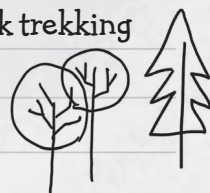
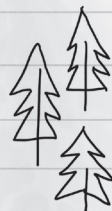
'Too grown-up for Spingle now?' said my mum quizzically when she came in to say goodnight. I groaned and pulled the duvet over my head.

'Do me a favour, OK?' I asked her. 'Just don't

mention Spingle the Elf to me ever again.'

There was a pause, then I felt her hand pat my head through the duvet before her footsteps receded and the door closed.

Anyway, look, I got sidetracked here. I was telling you where my parents were going for a week and why we were being dumped at my grandad's house, wasn't I? So basically, when they want to come up with new ideas, they take themselves off somewhere. And, as quite a lot of money's started coming in from the games, their expeditions have been getting more and more elaborate. To brainstorm ideas for *Spingle's Quest II*, they camped on some island in a Scottish loch. The third game was dreamed up in the Sahara Desert, would you believe – they spent a week messing about with camels there. And now, to come up with ideas for *Spingle's Quest IV*, they're spending a week trekking through Lapland.





They have two rules for these creative expeditions: it has to be somewhere they've never been before, and they have to be completely out of touch with the rest of the world. No phones, no emails, nothing. And, ironically, that's exactly the situation I now find myself in here at Grandad's house. We're not even supposed to be here – we're meant to be at Aunty Fi's, stuffing ourselves with chocolate in front of a huge TV. Curses upon Aunty Fi's rubbish, low-quality appendix and its ability to ruin my life.

OK – so I'm stuck here for the week. I'm going to make a list of things I want to do to fill the time.



1. Find a phone signal.



Yep, that should just about cover it. Frankie Best, signing off from Day One of the GREAT EXILE. If you find this book next to my wizened, died-of-boredom body, please tell my parents I will NEVER FORGIVE THEM FOR THIS – NO, NOT EVER.

Right, goodnight.

