

Hector Trogg's

*Perfect
World*



P. A. Booth

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For Jenny

CHAPTER ONE

Flight

Hector Trogg looked from the little that remained of his father's car to the tall policewoman stood in front of him.

'It wasn't me!' was all he managed to say, although he realised it sounded a little feeble.

'Well, of course it wasn't you dear,' said the policewoman. 'Eleven-year old boys don't have access to explosives.'

'Don't think he hasn't asked,' muttered Kate, Hector's thirteen-year old sister.

'There's another person coming to talk to you and your Dad and Mum, they'll explain it all,' said the policewoman kindly.

Kate furrowed her brow and then shook her head.

'Dad will do his nut; he polishes it almost every day; it's almost new,' Kate announced.

'Do you think Volkswagen will give him a new one, it is under warrant?' asked Hector.

'The word is warranty, Hector,' said Kate, unkindly, 'And given that one of the wheels is in the farmer's field next door and one of the seats smashed through Mrs Urwell's lounge window, we will be hard-pressed to claim that the car was hit by a sudden bout of very aggressive rust.'

Kate was like that; clever, but annoying.

An hour or so later they were all sat in the kitchen, as this was one of the few rooms that had not lost any of its windows. A fat man with a nasal voice was explaining that it was all related to the inheritance. Just two weeks earlier Kate and Hector had been amazed to find out that several million US dollars had been left to them by a distant relative in America called Irvine Deeds. The money was in a trust fund, and they were not allowed to spend any of the fortune until they were twenty-one years old.

It seemed as though the money had been left to Kate and Hector so as to upset all of Irvine Deeds' closer relatives, who had expected to receive the money themselves. The fat man explained that while Mr Irvine Deeds had gone to great trouble and legal expense to ensure that his will could not be challenged in the courts, he had forgotten to be clear about what would happen if Kate and Hector were both murdered. There were a large number of Mr Deeds' relatives scattered throughout the world, and any of them might be behind the attack, the fat man explained. From now, until they were twenty-one, they were at great risk.

'Brilliant!' exclaimed Hector. 'This will be really exciting.'

'No, it won't!' complained Kate. 'We could be killed!'

'No. Whoever tried to kill us made the bomb beep as we got into the car. I'm sure they are going to give us a sporting chance,' explained Hector.

The fat man groaned and put his head in his hands. 'The problem is,' he explained, 'your father's side of the family, I mean Mr Deeds' relatives, are...'

Hector and Kate looked puzzled.

'Well, they are diverse,' the fat man went on.

Hector and Kate continued to look puzzled.

'They come from a wide variety of backgrounds,' the fat man tried again.

Hector and Kate looked even more confused.

'I think what Detective Inspector Smithson is trying to say,' said Dad with a sigh, 'is that quite a number of my more distant relatives have not led blameless lives.'

Hector's look of puzzlement grew even more extreme, but Kate worked it out.

'They're crooks,' Kate explained.

'I'm afraid so,' said the Inspector. 'Big ones, and your trust fund is worth millions, although quite how they really hope to get their hands on it I don't know.'

Hector's unshakeable belief that everything would turn out alright meant that he had a good night's sleep. Kate fell asleep worrying. The following morning things got even better, at least from Hector's perspective.

The police had raided a flat and discovered more plots to murder them, while a man walking his dog had fallen into a large hole that turned out to be the start of a tunnel someone had been digging under their house. Both Kate and Hector were kept off school for the day in a house full of workmen and police. By 10am Hector had broken the controls on a police car when the officer allowed him to play with the lights and the siren.

Hector was pleased it was the officer who got a good telling off, not him. When the Inspector had finished shouting, he informed Hector, Kate, Mum and Dad that they needed a sudden holiday. Apparently, some of their inheritance could be used for this sort of thing, and so Dad hired a plane and a pilot.

'Brilliant! I can't believe it. Dad's hired a plane! I hope I get to fly it, or at least be the rear gunner,' Hector said, as he ran around the room in excitement.

'You don't hire a plane, Hector, you charter one,' said Kate in her most annoying voice, 'and of course there won't be a rear gunner's seat.'

Hector did not even bother giving his sister a shove. Today had been brilliant fun, and tomorrow they were going on a surprise holiday, missing school for another day.

The family spent a frustrating evening in two bright, clean but small hotel rooms. The rooms were joined, which did little to ease the sense of confinement. Kate felt as if they had been sent to prison; a feeling heightened by the presence of two armed police officers in the corridor. For Hector, this just added to the excitement.

Hector's next day was even better, because the plane did have a rear gun, as well as guns at the side. Kate looked sour; annoyed that her brother had been correct. Mum and Dad looked flabbergasted. Mum kept asking the pilot how old the plane was, while Dad just looked dumbfounded at the propellers attached to the giant engines. Hector suspected that he had not yet noticed the guns.

The pilot explained that the plane was usually just flown in air shows, except for a recent trip to Africa for something more exciting. The charter company was really sorry, but the normal plane had been grounded and this was all they had.

'We cannot fly in that,' said Dad, after a very long look at the aircraft.

'I am very sorry,' said the pilot waving some paperwork, 'but it is airworthy. It's legal.'

'Is it safe?' Mum asked.

'I think so,' the pilot declared confidently, 'although if you want to wait until the weekend I'm sure we can sort out something else.'

Dad turned to the two police officers, both of whom looked as bewildered as he felt.

'We were told to get you here safely,' said the smaller of the two officers, 'I can't say I expected to have to make decisions about aircraft. It does look old.'

'True,' said the other officer, 'but certificates of airworthiness are not easy to get for old planes. It will have been very well maintained. Plus, these planes safely transported lots of bomber crews. Personally, I'd give it a go. It'll be a flight to remember.'

'There has got to be a risk to waiting for another plane,' the smaller officer added.

Once the luggage was aboard, the engines spluttered and then roared. The plane did not really take off. It rattled along at increasing speed until it ran out of runway and a slight dip in the land left the aircraft without any other options.

Kate and Hector were used to the boredom of long flights, but this one was different. It was cold, very noisy, and in places rather grubby. However, it was anything but dull. They were sat amongst their luggage, and so both got out warmer clothing. Mum reluctantly let them explore, and it did not take them long to discover that there was no kitchen, drinks or food. There was no toilet either. There were parachutes, however, together with extra ammunition for the guns. Hector and Kate took one of the parachutes back to show Mum and Dad.

Kate discovered there was a hatch at the back of the aircraft you could open. She could have jumped straight out. She was sure she and Hector would never have been allowed to explore if Mum or Dad had known about the hatch.

Hector spent considerable time aiming the rear gun at imaginary aircraft. He reluctantly allowed Kate smaller turns, and they both

had fun yelling 'bandits at two o'clock', aiming just in front of the enemy plane, and watching the pretend fighter go down in flames.

Kate discovered how to load the gun, and even where the safety catch was. Hector was very keen to fire the gun for real. Kate thought firing live ammunition was a mistake, and this eventually led to an argument. They both retreated back to Mum and Dad in a sulky silence.

Some time later Dad put down his book and mentioned that he needed the bathroom. Kate told him about the hatch, and this led to a spirited debate as to whether Kate and Hector should have ever been allowed to explore. A few minutes passed before Dad returned from the hatch saying that it was the most dangerous toilet he had ever visited.

'Show me these guns,' said Dad, beckoning Kate and Hector.

Mum sat in the cold and noise with her newspaper, trying to remain as warm as possible. They were a long way into the flight, and she felt as if her body temperature had lost a degree with each passing hour.

Her mind turned to the guns. Aircraft like this were used for displays, but she was sure they would not have ammunition for the guns. The more Mum thought about it the more uneasy she felt. Why take an aircraft like this on a huge trip to Africa? As she tried to imagine possible scenarios the only one that seemed realistic was that it had been used for something illegal. The pride the pilot had in the aircraft made her suspect that he had been the one to fly it down to Africa.

'Out of the frying pan and into the fire,' said Mum, summarising her worries that they were now in a bad situation. Dad, Hector and Kate had returned from the rear gun and were sat around among the bags.

'I think it will be fine,' said Hector, 'It's still in the air. It hasn't crashed or caught fire yet.'

'Thank you for those thoughts Hector,' said Dad, although he did not sound grateful at all.

'At the very least this is a rather odd plane charter company,' Mum went on, 'Providing an aircraft as old as this, and one with ammunition is extraordinary. And what where they doing flying something like this to Africa?'

'Well, we're in the air now. We just have to hope it all goes well,' Kate said, 'I can't see what else we can do.'

Kate was about to continue, but found her attention drawn to Hector, who was looking intently out of a window. Kate got up to look as well. In the distance behind them there appeared to be aircraft.

There was a bang from the front of the aircraft as the pilot emerged from the cockpit.

'Ahh, good,' said Dad, 'I have a few concerns. There seems to be ammunition for the guns.'

The pilot glared at Dad and then looked down.

'I don't ask about things like that in case I don't like the answer,' replied the pilot in a loud voice as he walked down the plane towards them.

'Hang on,' said Hector, 'aren't you supposed to be flying the plane?'

'Yes, I am. Sorry,' said the pilot as he picked up a parachute, 'but there are some fighters on our tail.'

'How the hell did we attract the attention of the Air Force?' Dad yelled, starting to get angry, but noticing that the pilot was now stood by the door ready to leave.

'It's not the Air Force. They're very old planes. They're freelancers, and I suspect they've been stolen from collectors,' said the pilot as he opened the door and the sound of rushing wind grew louder.

'You've got to be kidding!' exclaimed Mum.

'Please don't give me the whole "this cannot be happening to me" thing,' said the pilot unkindly, as he turned to jump.

'I don't think you should do that!' shouted Hector.

'Why ever not?' grinned the pilot with an evil look on his face as he turned back to face everyone, 'Too young to die are you? Too frightened to use a adult parachute because it will undoubtedly kill you? Or is it just not fair? Well, well...why not?' The pilot jumped.

'It's because that's the parachute Kate and I have been playing with,' said Hector to the empty space.

Dad partly closed the door and they all watched the pilot fall as he disappeared as a speck behind them.

The pilot confidently pulled the rip cord, and was at first confused to see a series of knots and then the remains of a sticky sweet appear, followed by a ribbon tied in a neat bow. The horror and true seriousness of the situation hit him. He scrambled madly for the reserve chute finding only scraps of material, some of which had been cut into animal shapes. The pilot was still scrambling madly when he disappeared from view. His parachute did not appear. He was just a dot, plummeting downwards.

'Can I fly the plane?' asked Hector.

'No!' said Kate.

'It's not up to you,' retorted Hector, 'I've flown lots of missions on my computer.'

'Yes, and they all end up with your plane in a heap of flaming wreckage,' said Kate.

'What about the parachutes?' Mum asked, looking at Dad, who seemed horror-struck.

'I think we'll die. We've no idea what to do. Maybe adult parachutes will flip over if there is only a child's weight. I just don't know.'

'We could strap Kate and Hector into the same parachute,' Mum suggested.

'They might shoot us as we drift down,' said Kate.

'I think we'll be plummeting too quickly to shoot,' said Dad, 'It requires training. We've just seen the pilot fall to his death. We could be next.'

Just then there were loud bangs as bullets hit the plane.

'You're in charge of the rear guns, I'll fly,' shouted Mum, as she pushed Dad towards the rear of the plane, and set off for the cockpit herself.

Kate and Hector each went to the guns at the side. Kate immediately took aim and let off a few rounds. All of their earlier play suddenly had a purpose. She could see two propeller type planes, and a single jet she thought was called a Hawk.

'Mine's broken,' said Hector, 'it won't work,' and for the first time he felt a panic rising in his throat. Dad's gun had not fired a round either.

'You need this catch to be here,' explained Kate pointing to the side of the gun. She then ran to the back of the aircraft to help Dad, just as a volley of bullets ripped a hole in the fuselage. Next, Kate ran to the front of the plane to tell Mum to fly in circles.

'We can shoot them with the side and rear guns, but it is harder for them because they have to line us up,' yelled Kate.

Hector could not help but feel a certain admiration for his sister. Kate was good in a crisis, even if she did always take the biggest slice of cake when allowed anything more than a nanosecond's head start.

Soon there was a regular rattle of all three guns. Kate was careful and determined, while Hector was having the time of his life firing anywhere. He could not be sure what sort of planes the two propeller aircraft were, but as far as he was concerned they had to be Messerschmitts. He should have been starting his maths lesson at school, sitting next to pooty Collins, but instead he was in an aerial dog fight to the death with two Messerschmitts and a jet fighter. Their plane veered wildly, the guns rattled, there were explosions as bullets hit their aircraft, and a small fire had started near the cockpit. As far as Hector was concerned, this was as exciting as life could ever be.

Aiming was easier than Kate and Hector had expected, but the problem was that the plane kept changing direction. Sometimes there was a larger, deeper rattle, and it sounded as though Mum had found the forward guns. The lights kept going on and off, and Hector thought it was because the electrics had been hit. Kate guessed that it was because Mum did not know which buttons did what. Her suspicions were confirmed when the radio was turned on full and they were all blasted with hits from the sixties.

As the Beatles sang 'All you need is love' at full volume, Dad and Hector had their first real success, and the jet fighter exploded. Yet, even the deafening radio could not drown out the thuds and explosions as the rounds from the other two fighter aircraft hit. There was now a growing hole in the fuselage next to Kate, and as Hector glanced up and down he could see other holes. It was only a matter of time before the two fighters either hit them or something vital in the aircraft. Things were getting desperate. Either they were not hitting the remaining two fighters, or their bullets

were not enough to do any real damage. The two fighters were having problems lining them up as Mum flew this way and that, but sooner or later they would succeed.

In addition to the endless chorus of 'All you need is love,' the thud and bang of bullets, the roar of the engines and the increasing wind noise as yet more holes appeared everywhere, there was now a regular deep thud that shook the whole aircraft. Either something was seriously wrong, or Mum was lowering and raising the wheels and other bits of undercarriage as she attempted to turn the radio off. Suddenly they turned sharply to port and started losing height and speed. Whatever criticisms they might make of Mum's flying, they had to admit she was difficult to anticipate. Then Mum came running out of the cockpit.

'Kate dear,' she yelled, 'would you like to have a go. I seem to have turned one of the engines off.'

Hector took his chance and dashed forward. He was going to fly the plane. This was his opportunity. He ran forward just as a hail of bullets tore fresh holes in the walls, floor and roof of the middle portion of the plane. Very soon, Hector thought, it will all be portions; small, chopped-up bits of plane falling from the sky.

Hector had just got himself into the seat and pulled back on the stick when bullets hit the cockpit sending a frightening spray of debris everywhere. He pushed the working engine to full throttle and compensated for the yaw with the rudder. Yet, they were still going down. Just then Kate arrived and began looking at the buttons. She turned the radio off, withdrew the undercarriage into the plane and was soon working on getting the port engine started again.

'I'm going to weave about,' yelled Hector, just as he pushed the stick forward and the plane lurched down.

'Got it,' yelled Kate, and the port engine roared back into life.

'Brilliant Hector,' Kate yelled as Hector pulled the plane sharply up, and they saw the bullets whistle underneath the aircraft, 'I'm off to help Mum.'

Mum had found Dad knocked unconscious, and worse than that, they were running out of ammunition. Mum, it seemed, had fired both side guns madly until all the ammunition was spent. Only the rear gun had a few bullets left, and that was only because the gun had become too hot to use. The only good news was that one of the pursuing fighters had part of a wing missing, and seemed to be weaving, as if the pilot did not have full control.

Kate slipped into the rear gunner's seat and was pleased to find that the gun had cooled down. She noticed the large hole in the very rear of the plane. Kate took aim at the undamaged fighter. She had a calm, steel-like determination as she fired, but the fighter pilot had seen it coming and pulled up sharply, taking him out of the line of fire, and moving him further back from them. The damaged fighter had disappeared, but the remaining pilot seemed determined.

Kate fired the smallest burst she could manage just as the fighter pulled to the right. She quickly aimed a fraction in front of the fighter and fired a longer burst, but the pilot had pushed the stick forward, in a manoeuvre that made Kate think he must have his stomach in his mouth. She waited until he brought his guns into line and then fired again. So close! So close!

Kate decided to wait. He had to line up again and she would get him eventually. Now she understood what she had to do; just wait until he was lining up, trying to keep his aircraft straight and level. He dodged and pulled left and then right. Finally, he lined them up. Kate fired a longer burst, but it was soon over. The long burst turned out to be a very short burst. The ammunition was spent. The fighter was still in the air.

'That's it! We've no more ammunition,' Kate yelled to her mother, who was tending to Dad as he lay on the floor. She turned to see the remaining fighter moving closer in. Hector was still weaving about, but it was a big plane. Without the fire from the rear and side guns to keep the last fighter at bay there was nothing to stop it getting close and finishing them all in a hail of bullets.

'The parachutes, the parachutes!' yelled Mum.

Kate grabbed a parachute, pushed it into the hole at the very end of the plane and let it fall as she held onto the harness and pulled the rip cord. It billowed it out and was ripped from her hands, becoming a sudden frightening wall the pursuing fighter had to avoid. Kate rushed to get the next parachute. She pushed it into the hole again, held on to the harness and waited for the fighter to line them up once more. Just as the fighter swung into a direct line with them Kate pulled the rip cord and the parachute expanded, before being ripped from her hands once more. Again, it billowed out into a sudden flapping wall the fighter had to turn hard to miss.

It was a brilliant bit of innovative thinking; superb adaption; magnificent make do. Yet, Kate knew that it would work only as long as there was a ready supply of parachutes. Time was running out. Their last hope was fading. If only Hector could push the plane into a suicidal dive and yet pull out just in time to land safely then all would be well. Yet, the plane's wings simply would not manage. They could not out-dive a fighter. The wings could not pull the plane out of a vertical dive when they had so many holes in them.

Kate felt a hot wave of panic. She had to do something different, but she also had to keep pushing the parachutes out of the hole at the end of the plane. What she needed was a smart bomb like the ones in the computer games, but they did not exist; they were fantasy. As Kate pushed the last parachute into the ragged hole at the

end of the plane she felt a sense of hopelessness. They were not going to make it. The fighter pilot was too clever; he knew what he was doing; he knew they had run out of ammunition; he was waiting for the right moment to fire a final volley of bullets into their stricken plane and send them all spinning to their deaths.

As the last parachute exploded out into a fragile but, for the fighter pilot, huge advancing wall, Kate huddled down, clutching the side of the aircraft. The plane pulled up; it rose and slowed. Then it rolled to starboard and then pitched down, leaving Kate feeling as though her stomach was trying to get out through her throat. Kate knew Hector was trying everything. He knew things were desperate. He would have guessed that the ammunition had run out, if only because of the absence of a reassuring rattle of return fire whenever the fighter's shots ricocheted through the plane.

Then it happened; the final rattle of gunfire that would destroy the plane, and destroy them all. The plane lurched upwards and slowed. There was a huge crunch as the plane began to disintegrate. The rear of the aircraft where Kate clung huddled partly exploded, and then buckled and groaned. Yet, to Kate's surprise she was not spinning down. She could not hear the crunch and splinter of the plane as it continued to fall apart. There were no bullets spraying in, just the sound of the engines and the wind. Even stranger, Hector was yelling in triumph.

'What happened?' yelled Kate.

'I think Hector managed to reverse the plane into the fighter,' Mum yelled back.

'You can't reverse a plane,' shouted Kate.

Yet that was exactly what Hector had managed to do. He was trying to avoid the fighter, but by pulling up sharply he had slowed the large plane. The fighter had simply run into the back of them.

'I think the fighter crashed into the rear of our plane,' yelled Kate.

'Yes,' shouted Mum, 'radical braking. Your father has managed to get several cars to run into the back of our car at roundabouts. It's probably genetic.'

'Is Dad OK?' Kate asked. It seemed strange, but when death seemed imminent, even her father laid in her mother's arms was something she could ignore. Now she was worried.

'He has muttered a few things. I think he's just hit his head.'

'Kate dear,' shouted Mum after a pause, 'things don't look too good. When I said parachutes I was rather hoping we would parachute to safety. It never occurred to me that you'd use them as a weapon. Are there any left?'

Kate just shook her head. Their problems were definitely not over. One engine was on fire and the other was leaving a dark trail of smoke across the sky. Added to this, Kate had just noticed that there were other planes around them. She raced forward to the cockpit. The best place for her now was at Hector's side.

Hector, rather annoyingly, was in a very good mood.

'It's a Typhoon,' he explained.

'What?' questioned Kate.

'It's a Royal Air Force plane,' said Hector, pointing to the plane on the starboard side. 'Fly by wire, carbon fibre.'

Hector's wild unfettered enthusiasm and simple joy at being near a Royal Air Force vacuum cleaner, that by some accident of design could fly, left Kate feeling exasperated.

'And that one,' said Hector, pointing to their port side, 'is another type of jet fighter, but it's not British. I think it's American. It might be a Raptor. They've got vectored thrust. That means the power is directed.'

'Hector,' shouted Kate, 'why is this good?'

'I think they're here to protect us,' explained Hector. He went on to demonstrate his enthusiasm by waving wildly to both of the pilots. As far as Kate could see they were waving back.

'You don't think they're a bit late,' said Kate, 'in case you hadn't noticed the last plane that was trying to shoot us out of the sky was rammed by the highly dangerous pilot I'm sitting next to. It wasn't shot down by those two, and the other one that was trying to kill us might come back.'

'No,' said Hector, still wildly cheerful, 'that old fighter would never dare attack with these two jets near us.'

This was undoubtedly true. Unfortunately, there was very little either of the planes could do to help them stay in the air. They were losing height; the fire in the starboard engine was getting worse and spreading down the wing. When Kate looked at the starboard wing she could see that quite a bit of it was missing.

The good news was that all of the port wing was still there, even if there were quite a few holes ripped in it. The even better news was that Kate could see that the two jet fighters were leading them to an airfield. It had bright lights and what looked like a lot of fire engines judging by the blue and red flashing lights.

'Oh no,' thought Kate, 'Hector loves fire engines, he'll probably die of happiness before he lands the plane.'

As they neared the airfield Kate could see the roads surrounding them were crammed with cars and people. They had all stopped to watch their stricken, flaming aircraft attempt its desperate landing.

Kate spent the next few seconds looking over the controls. She tried to ignore the fact that the starboard engine was now fully alight and had stopped spinning completely. She decided to lower the landing gear early so that if she got it wrong she would have time for another attempt. She did not think there was any possibil-

ity that Hector might turn the aircraft around for a second attempt at landing. They only had one chance!

Nothing happened. Kate knew she picked the correct controls because she had raised the landing gear earlier after her mother's eccentric time in the cockpit. Kate moved the switch to lift the landing gear up and then pressed the switch down again.

'Come on,' shouted Kate in frustration, as she desperately waggled the switch back and forth.

Kate looked around the cockpit at the holes, tattered cloth, smashed glass and shattered metal, and decided that her attempts were futile.

Hector had seen the problem and reassured Kate that he landed his plane in the computer game without any landing gear lots of times. At first this had simply been because he forgot to put the landing gear down, but later he landed without landing gear just because it was fun. The main thing, he explained to her, was not to hit the ground too hard, but to skid along. A tumble and spin on the ground was always something that lost you points.

'Well,' said Kate, 'at least if you crash this you won't lose any points. Your head may no longer be connected to your bottom via the middle part of your body, but at least your score on the computer game won't go down.'

Hector spotted the sarcasm but ignored it. This was brilliant; this was better than the best daydream he had ever had; better even than the ones in religious education lessons. He was about to crash land a real plane and he was unsure whether to concentrate on the controls and the task at hand, or whether to carry on trying to count fire engines.

'Hector,' yelled Kate, 'you're looking at the fire engines. Concentrate on landing the plane you buffoon. If I live, and I have all my

limbs, I'll buy you a really big model fire engine. And in case you haven't noticed the port engine is now on fire as well.'

'Oh great!' exclaimed Hector, as visions of a brand new favourite toy swam the into view in his mind's eye, alongside the real vision of the rapidly approaching runway. He snapped back into reality because the plane yawed to one side as Kate lowered the flaps. Not all of the flaps worked, and Hector had to stretch to reach the pedals for the rudder.

The concrete was racing below. It looked hard and unforgiving. There were flashing blue lights all around as the fire engines raced along beside them.

The landing was brutal, but relatively quick. Hector flew along the runway for quite some way before making contact. He did not stall the plane, but he certainly made it lose a lot of its speed before it finally made contact with the concrete runway. There was a crunch as they hit the ground, followed by a horrible deafening scraping noise that filled the whole aircraft.

'See,' said Hector cheerfully as the fuselage scraped to a halt on the runway concrete, 'I said we'd survive.'

'Yes,' said Kate, 'and I said you always land in a heap of flaming wreckage, and you have.'

White spray filled the air as the fire engines poured foam on the burning wings. Men were suddenly breaking into the aircraft. Kate and Hector were quickly wrapped in fireproof blankets and carried to waiting ambulances.

'Who are you? Where are we?' asked Kate, looking round for Mum and Dad. The men did not seem to understand her. Hector realised that they did not speak English, and so decided to speak slowly and loudly.

'Do - you - have - any - cakes?' he yelled at them.

Minutes later Kate and Hector found themselves in a large airport building, in a strange land, with hostile natives, no real law, and nothing sensible to eat. They had landed in France.

Dad was taken off to hospital in an ambulance with Mum. Kate and Hector were assured that it was just a precaution.

It was two hours later when, in front of an impromptu gathering of several hundred people, Kate and Hector had been presented with medals. Hector repeatedly said that he would swap the medal for a ride in one of the fire engines, but either the local French dignitaries did not understand him or they did not believe him.

The ceremony went on for about fifteen minutes, which in Hector's view was approximately fourteen minutes too long. He liked the applause and congratulation, but he did not like the speeches. Kate had to endure an annoying Frenchman who kept patting her on the head. Added to this Hector kept hissing threats about what he would do if his model fire engine did not turn up soon.

It was not until almost 9 o'clock that night that they heard that Mum and Dad were safe and well. Dad had received a nasty blow to the head, and the hospital had decided to keep him in for observation.

They also heard from Inspector Smithson. His message was that a special security nanny would be arriving to keep them safe.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs Warp

A security nanny. What on earth was a security nanny? This question went through Kate's mind again and again. The crowd had departed. The dignitaries had left. Kate and Hector had been sat in a corner of a large police office.

They had been told, in faltering English by a very tall French policeman, that they would be taken quickly and quietly to a secure house. The words discreet, quiet, hidden, dark, all seemed to swirl around whatever was planned next. The police were hushed, and now and then one of the policemen would glance over at Hector and Kate.

Hector had been very disappointed at the idea of being bundled into a small car and smuggled off to an anonymous house.

'It's a good idea Hector,' Kate had assured him, 'We need to disappear somewhere safe.'

Hector's glum mood lightened slightly when the blue reflected flash of police lights danced around the grey office. There was a sudden bustle and urgency. It was apparent that many people had just arrived. Kate and Hector were beckoned outside. Kate could not believe her eyes.

'What happened to discreet?' she asked.

It was a motorcade. It was their motorcade! Hector was in raptures. He counted no less than seven police cars; all with their blue flashing lights on. There were two vans, the insides of which could not be seen. There were four police outriders on motorbikes. In the

very middle of the motorcade was a large heavy S-class Mercedes limousine. Hector guessed at once that it would be bullet-proof.

Once inside the Mercedes, Hector went straight to the middle arm rest. If there was a mini refrigerator with some chocolate that was where it would be. It was exactly as he hoped; there as even some milk. Better than this was the noise when the motorcade began to move. All of the police cars seemed to have turned on their sirens. It was deafening!

Kate on the other hand was horrified, not just by the lights and sirens, but by how close the cars travelled together, and just how quickly they moved. It was fast, very fast, bordering on reckless.

While Hector experimented with every button he could reach, and managed to turn the air conditioning to very hot, very cold, completely off, and something resembling a gale; Kate noticed that the anonymous man in the passenger seat had a gun on his lap. The problem, she mused, with having so many people surround you with guns is that only one needs to be an assassin. Indeed, the perfect cover for an assassin had to be someone working for security; someone with a reason to carry a gun. None of these thoughts made her feel any more relaxed.

After twenty minutes of their journey the driver managed to disable all of the buttons within Hector's reach. Kate was relieved, as it had felt as though she was riding on the inside of a very plush but erratic hair dryer. Hector was growing bored. He had eaten his way through everything he found in the refrigerator, played with every button and control he could reach, and wiped his chocolate covered hands on the immaculate leather interior of the Mercedes. The milk he had spilt was still soaking into the seat.

That was the annoying thing about Hector; he was nearly always happy; very happy! Plus, he looked, as he so often looked; like a labrador that has been thrust into a chocolate and jelly filled

fridge only to be pulled out grubby, full, and still eating the last thing he'd managed to get his teeth into.

The motorcade veered right into a winding tree-lined drive. Grass-level lights illuminated the gaps between the trees, revealing an immaculate paper-flat lawn stretching away into the darkness.

As the lights from the château came into view it was apparent to Kate that the French authorities believed that discreet could still be grand. The man in the passenger seat with the gun turned around and spoke for the first time in a thick accent both Kate and Hector found difficult to understand.

'There are guards around the perimeter, but there will only be one person with you,' he explained, 'This will be the security grandmother.'

Kate understood this to mean that the security nanny was already waiting for them. She was, for the first time, impressed with Inspector Smithson's speedy arrangements.

As Hector and Kate got out of the car armed French police peered out into the inky dark of the night, their machine guns at their hips as they tried to look as important and tough as they could. The sirens were no longer blaring but the lights on all of the police cars were still flashing. It made Kate feel anxious. It made Hector feel important, and he grinned as he bounced on the balls of his feet.

'Oh hello dears,' came a very English voice, 'I'm Melinda Warp. I am here to look after you.'

In front of Hector and Kate stood a middle-aged woman. She was slightly plump and only a little taller than Kate.

'Are you the security nanny?' asked Hector, in a tone that exuded disbelief.

'Yes,' smiled Mrs Warp, 'that's right.'

'But I thought you'd be an Olympic athlete, or a Kung Fu expert, or mud wrestling champion or something like that,' Hector blurted out in the same slightly disrespectful tone.

'Well, I'm sure I can do all of those things,' said Mrs Warp, 'but first we have to get you up to bed.'

The thought of bed and sleep after such an intense and exhausting day seemed to sap the little energy remaining in Kate and Hector. As she walked towards the château's doors Kate was surprised to see the motorcade gone. She had not really noticed.

Hector's sleepy attempt to persuade Mrs Warp that he had a special exemption from cleaning his teeth signed by the UK Prime Minister had no effect, as she clearly did not believe a word of it. Nor would she be persuaded that, despite crash-landing a burning plane, he was really quite clean and did not need a shower.

Hector could barely remember the shower, and it was just a few minutes before he was drifting off to sleep in the warm comforting bed. Kate, despite the worries that swam around her head, soon followed Hector. Mrs Warp's kind smile was the last thing both Hector and Kate saw that day.

It was the same kind smile Hector saw in the morning. The curtains were open, the sun streamed in, but best of all there was a breakfast tray. Hector had never been allowed breakfast in bed; this was brilliant! Kate was equally surprised, but not as pleased. The idea of prising Hector from a bed where he had glued himself in with jam was not appealing. Nevertheless, Kate was pleased that her and Hector were in the same bedroom. It was reassuring to see her little brother after the frightening events of yesterday.

'Mrs Warp, when will we see Mum and Dad?' asked Kate.

'Very soon dear,' said Mrs Warp, 'They are going to let your father out tomorrow.'

Kate could see Hector looking to the window. The bright sunshine of a brilliant spring morning might just as well have written in the air 'please explore the château'. With five floors, if you included the cellars, and large grounds, the château was an open invitation neither Kate nor Hector were going to ignore.

Just fifteen minutes later Kate's worst fears were realised, as Hector had managed to get the contents of every little pot of honey, jam, marmalade, margarine and butter onto his face, hands, arms, hair, the bed, the sheets, and even a portion of the wall behind the headrest. As Mrs Warp dragged him out, Kate could even see some jam on one of his feet.

Kate ignored Hector's shouts for help as Mrs Warp made him wash in the shower. Kate went to the window and looked out over the sunlit lawns and paths. She felt her spirits rise.

Once Hector was out of the shower and getting dressed, Kate asked Mrs Warp about the gardens. Mrs Warp began to describe various plants and trees in much more detail than was needed. As Hector struggled with his socks, and Kate's conversation with Mrs Warp continued, Kate sensed something unusual about Mrs Warp. If asked she would not have been able to explain her feeling; it was just a feeling. Mrs Warp was odd.

Kate and Hector's clothes appeared to have been washed and dried in the night. Once they were dressed, Mrs Warp was quite happy for them to explore and enjoy themselves. They started with the cellars, which were a great deal less exciting than they expected. They were full of junk, rubbish and abandoned furniture. One room was locked, and although Hector was excited by the possibility of mystery and adventure, these lively expectations were soon doused by Mrs Warp, who informed them that it was the gardener's room.

They worked their way up the different floors, finding nooks, hidden rooms and grandiose areas for entertainment. There was an air of decay, painted over with a new layer of synthetic hope. It was a monument to an era passed, but a fantastic place for hide and seek.

A short time later Kate was hiding on the second floor. She could hear Hector's taunts as he advanced up the main staircase. The problem, Kate had discovered, was that so many of the rooms were poorly furnished. They were large, but there were very few places in which to hide. Hector's confidence that he had her caught, cornered, and that he was closing in, was justified.

Kate slithered up the banister, trying to press her weight down using her hands so that her feet would not make the floorboards creak. The top floor was much smaller and only had three rooms, but it was her last hope with the advancing, gloating Hector stumping ever upwards.

Kate opened one of the doors, gripping the door handle much more tightly than was necessary, to discover a small cupboard full of coats and old clothes. She quickly buried herself in a smelly pile of discarded curtains.

Kate could feel her heart beating as Hector's heavy tread reached the top floor. It was only Hector, and nowhere near as dangerous as the previous day's events, but it was still thrilling and jangling and breathtaking. It was something of a disappointment to hear Hector's voice exclaim in awe, rather than gloating threat.

'Wow,' said Hector, 'I can see everywhere,' Then he shouted, 'Whatever you do Kate, I can see you.'

Kate did not hesitate. The game was over, Hector had definitely discovered something.

As Kate scrambled out from under the curtains, through the landing and on through the next open door, her jaw dropped as she took in the vast array of television screens, all of which showed different views of every single room in the château.

‘This is awesome,’ said Hector, whose line in hyperbole was unrivalled.

Kate, however, was gripped, not by the vast array of television screens, but by the surprising window, which had handles around its side. It was made, not of glass, but of polythene. It flapped gently in the wind. Outside the window Kate could see the beginnings of a huge rope slide.

‘Wow,’ said Hector, following Kate’s gaze, ‘let’s try it now!’

‘I really don’t think you should,’ said Mrs Warp as she entered the room, ‘For one thing, it is far too dangerous, and for another, it is time for lunch.’

‘Then why is it here?’ asked Hector.

‘It is there so anyone can escape if things get tricky. After all, this is not a normal house.’ said Mrs Warp, her usual kind smile returning.

Lunch turned out to be a vast selection of salad, meats and fruits. There were supposed to be sausages, but they had been taken, Mrs Warp explained, with a glance to the young man who had appeared at the kitchen door.

The man began to talk in French, and both Kate and Hector were surprised with the apparent ease with which Mrs Warp slipped into what they assumed was fluent French. Mrs Warp turned to Kate and Hector.

‘Do you like dogs?’ asked Mrs Warp, ‘only our gardener has been looking after his uncle’s dog. His uncle died two days ago,

and no one wants the dog. You could play with it in the grounds this afternoon if you liked.'

'His name is Bandit,' explained the gardener in a thick accent, 'And he is a terrible thief.'

'Does he keep getting caught?' asked Hector.

'No, it's the fact that he keeps stealing things,' explained Mrs Warp, 'and he has just been caught with the sausages that were for lunch.'

A young chocolate brown labrador appeared in the doorway, complete with a permanently happy look.

'Ahh, you are soooo cute,' exclaimed Kate, rushing to cuddle the dog.

This was what Bandit did best. He seduced his victims, stole their food, and then looked cute again so he would be forgiven. It was a constant cycle of looking cute, stealing and eating. Bandit was very good at it. He could already tell that the young female would forgive him easily, while the boy had a sticky look which, at the very least, would mean he would be good to lick.

In the garden that afternoon Bandit was more than fun. He was a runner, a jumper, and great at hide and seek. In fact, he was too good. He just used his nose. Kate noticed that when Hector went to hide while she covered Bandit's eyes, Bandit would follow the exact path Hector had run, even if Hector had gone in zig-zags. Following a scent was just easy for him.

Bandit found other things he was not supposed to find. Hector and Kate did not know that police officers, trained by the French Special Forces, were positioned in the garden in hides dug into the ground. They could not be seen, but Bandit could smell them, and their holes in the ground were his favourite toilets. Every time

Bandit trotted off to the toilet there would be a yell of complaint as a French police officer emerged covered in dog wee.

Some of the French police officers thought the whole thing was very funny, but these were generally not the ones that Bandit had used as a toilet. By late afternoon there was a gathering of police officers on the drive. Some of them wanted to get rid of Bandit, while others still thought the whole thing was funny. Kate and Hector sat with Bandit between them watching. One officer seemed to be claiming that someone had stolen his lunch, and the glances in their direction told Hector and Kate that Bandit was head of the suspect list. To be fair, Kate reflected, Bandit would be at the top of anyone's suspect list.

Bandit was leaning on Kate, and Kate could see that Hector was leaning on Bandit. As Kate watched an exceptionally tall man with a suitcase approach the police officers, it occurred to her that Bandit was with them now, and she rather liked the idea. Bandit was probably not much use in a tight spot, but if they were murdered by an assassin Bandit would probably make sure the assassin went without lunch.

The tall man was now walking towards them, removing his hat.

'So this is the Hound of the Baskervilles?' he asked, smiling, 'My name is Gary Rhodes,' he continued in an Australian accent, 'and I'm here to provide some information.'

'Are you a police officer as well?' Kate asked.

'No, no, well not really. I work for the Australian Government. I need to talk to you inside.'

A short time later they were in the kitchen with Mrs Warp, Gary Rhodes and, strangely, the gardener. Kate and Hector began to suspect that he was really a police officer as well.

Gary Rhodes explained that he had already seen Kate and Hector's parents. He had news; there was an Australian assassin, known commonly as Sludge, on their trail.

'We think he was in England on his way to you there, as he can't travel on normal aircraft flights,' said Gary.

In answer to Hector's unspoken question, Gary produced a photograph of a short, stumpy man with a misshapen face and no hair.

'He is too easy to identify, and far too large.'

'He looks tiny,' exclaimed Hector.

'Yeah,' replied Gary, 'he looks tiny in the photograph. He is really six and a half feet tall, but very broad, which is why he looks small in pictures. He is incredibly tough, strong, tenacious...well terrifying actually.'

'He looks like a troll,' said Kate as she took the photograph from Hector.

'Yes, and he's about as bright as one. He grew up in Australia's toughest institutions for young offenders, where he terrified the staff. He left aged thirteen when he stole a car belonging to the head of security. They were rather pleased, as he had taken to thumping holes in the walls and had begun to experiment on the main beams supporting the building. He's about thirty-two now, and has survived five shootings by various police forces around the world.'

'What?' exclaimed Kate, 'He's like a vampire; he can't be killed.'

'No, no,' said Gary reassuringly, 'He's been lucky in part, but he is also very tough.'

'If he is that large, and he looks like a camel's bottom, why haven't you caught him yet?' asked Hector.

'We have, several times,' said Gary. 'The police in Singapore caught him first. If you include the seven with life-threatening in-

juries, twenty-nine officers managed to wrestle him into a police van. Not the largest coppers, but very brave. They were exhausted, but then had to watch while Sludge just punched a hole in the side of the van and ran off.'

'We, that is the Australians, caught him when he was foolish enough to catch a scheduled flight home on a fake passport. In fact, you might like to see the passport.'

A photocopied sheet was pushed towards Kate and Hector showing a lopsided figure with long hair and a frilly hat. The passport was in the name of Mrs Hemingway. Both Hector and Kate laughed.

'Yeah, stupid wasn't it,' said Rhodes, 'and Sludge is stupid most of the time, but don't underestimate him. I tell you, Qantas don't want to see Sludge again. We surrounded the plane with troops, all with machine guns. He came quietly, but broke out that night. The usual subtle approach, straight through the wall. Some idiot decided that Sludge would break a normal wooden bed, and so they gave him a steel, reinforced bed that he couldn't break. Well, we happen to think that Sludge was strong enough to break that bed as well. He didn't try to break it, however, not when a steel, reinforced bed makes such a good battering ram. The armed guards got there just as he broke through the wall. He threw the bed at them and then some of the rubble from the wall he'd just demolished. Some of the bricks he threw went so fast they took out part of the next wall. Sludge ran in among the guards, knocked them out, and for good measure, bent their guns.'

'Clever,' the gardener muttered in his thick accent.

'Why is that clever?' asked Kate.

Mrs Warp explained, 'Well, by running in among the guards it made it difficult for them to shoot him. They could not shoot without possibly shooting one of their colleagues.'

Mrs Warp then turned to Gary Rhodes, 'How close is he?'

'He's here. He got a small boat from England. The boat owner asked him to pull it onto the beach, but Sludge misunderstood and pulled it eighty metres inland. You can see his footprints. He stole a car and drove down across France. Sludge is a dreadful driver, and stole a different car after each of the six accidents he had. As far as we can tell, he's been joined by a Chinese gentleman called Mr Tick. We think Mr Tick is supposed to increase the team's average IQ, but adding a senile sheep would do that.'

Gary Rhodes did not stop for tea. It was as if he was eager to get away; aware that they were already doomed; reluctant to have the opportunity to get to know and possibly like them.

Tea was a somber affair. Kate had hidden behind a door and listened to Gary Rhodes briefing a senior French officer. He kept emphasising how fast and strong Sludge was. He was trying to impress upon the man just how many people Sludge had killed, and that while he was undoubtedly dim, he could be resourceful in a fight. The French officer, however, dismissed a good deal of what Gary Rhodes told him. The Frenchman was either well-prepared or surprisingly complacent.

Things turned ugly when Gary Rhodes suggested that there was a spy in the French police, and that not everybody in the French force could be trusted. Kate had eaten her tea in silence, trying to digest more than the iced buns.

Once alone with Hector, Kate explained everything she had heard. Hector, as usual, seemed quite unperturbed.

'I expect we'll have to fight Sludge,' he said casually.

'Hector, he'll murder us in an instant. And, there is a spy. Someone on the French side could be helping Sludge.'

'Yes, I think it's Mrs Warp,' said Hector, 'She has a gun, some explosives and a box marked piano tuning kit in her handbag,' He then added in his most casual tone, 'I should think she was too closely watched last night, and tonight will be the night she does us in.'

'Hector, how could you think that, she's been really nice. She's looked after us, and made nice meals, and just been nice,' Kate trailed off.

Hector was looking smug. He was miming shooting and blowing up.

'Oh no Hector, what are we going to do?' Kate whimpered as a feeling of hopelessness engulfed her.

'Nothing,' said Hector, 'I've already done it. I've nicked the bomb and the gun and hidden them under your bed.'

'Why my bed?' exclaimed Kate.

'Well, I didn't want the blame if they're found,' explained Hector, as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world.

Hector began to act rather strangely at bedtime. He cleaned his teeth and had a shower without an complaint.

'You're not a French boy pretending to be Hector are you?' asked Kate.

'You'll see,' replied Hector in an undertone.

After Mrs Warp left them Hector triumphantly revealed that he had managed to smuggle Bandit up to their room. He also had a spade and axe he had taken from somewhere downstairs. Kate sat on the floor, and she and Hector cuddled Bandit, who sat passively, but apparently happy, between them.

'We'll see Mum and Dad tomorrow,' said Hector, and Kate smiled, feeling reassured for the first time.

'I don't want the excitement to stop.' Hector confessed.

'You just think we'll survive and everything will turn out right,' Kate observed.

'Yep!' said Hector.

They sat in silence for a while, before turning to a discussion of what to do tomorrow. Hector was convinced there would be hidden tunnels. He was sure Bandit could sniff them out. Kate was beginning to laugh. There was something infectious about Hector's wild and utterly unrealistic optimism.

Eventually, Bandit settled down in the gap between the beds. Hector and Kate climbed between the crisp, clean sheets. It appeared as though their beds had been changed. Kate believed this was down to Hector's disastrous breakfast in bed.

Their sleepy talk soon turned to conspiracy. Kate and Hector were for once agreed; they should keep Bandit. Hector had a range of thoughts on how Mum and Dad could be manipulated, deceived and emotionally blackmailed.

Hector's favourite plan was to convince Dad that he should take up clay pigeon shooting. They should then claim Bandit was a highly trained gun dog. Kate pointed out that gun dogs were for retrieving birds that had been shot, and clay pigeon shooting did not involve shooting real birds.

Kate favoured emotional blackmail. She believed they should emphasise the shock and fear the attack on the plane had caused, following on from the bomb attack on Dad's car. Bandit was a source of security, and if Mum and Dad did not want them to grow up emotionally scarred they should allow them to keep this source of warmth and hope.

Hector privately thought it was the best plan, but could not agree on the grounds that his sister had thought of it. He suggested variations on his ideas as he and Kate spoke in the darkness, over

Bandit's increasingly loud snores. Neither he nor Kate could recall slipping off into a deep sleep.

There was a shot from the grounds. Kate woke first, wondering whether she had imagined the sound. It was dark and silent as Kate looked around for a clock. There were more shots and these woke Hector. Kate and Hector looked at each other through the gloom of the darkened bedroom, and then got out of bed and ran to the window.

There was shouting in French and then two bursts of automatic gunfire. After this there was an eerie silence that seemed to last for minutes, but only lasted seconds. Then there was frantic shouting followed by three explosions.

A huge squat figure was running across the furthest lawn towards the house. Sludge had broken through. He was coming to kill them.

Beneath them another figure had emerged from the house. The gardener was running towards Sludge, clearly aiming a gun. Sludge saw him, dived to his left, rolled and shot. The gardener slumped to the ground.

Next, Mrs Warp ran across the lawn. She had a strange sort of run, like someone who has had running explained to them, and even seen diagrams, but never actually practised it. Sludge fired twice, but he must have missed because Mrs Warp did not stop. Mrs Warp then pulled something from her pocket and threw it towards Sludge. Sludge could be seen to half-grab it, push it away, and then scurry around the other side of the fountain in the centre of the lawn. The brief flash from the hand-grenade Mrs Warp had thrown showed that she had adjusted her direction and was now heading towards the fountain. Sludge rolled around the edge of the fountain and fired a volley of shots, none of which hit Mrs Warp.

Sludge launched himself across the fountain, and was clearly surprised, judging by his yell, to be hit hard by Mrs Warp. They fell, thrashing into the water of the fountain. Mrs Warp hit Sludge again and again, while Sludge replied with blows of his own.

'She's amazing, how does she do that?' Hector asked in awe.

'I think it's because she's not fighting Sludge, as Sludge would beat her in a fight,' said Kate in a tone of horrible realisation. 'I think the French have repelled Sludge but been betrayed, and that man she is fighting is trying to save us from her; he's trying to save us from Mrs Warp.'

'Oops,' said Hector, 'let's go downstairs, but take the gun.'

A short time later they were downstairs. Kate and Hector had quickly dressed. Kate had the gun tucked into her shorts. Hector had unwisely hidden the bomb in his underpants. Bandit had followed them down, hoping to join in the fun. As expected, Mrs Warp was already back in the kitchen.

'Everything's all right dears. I think that Mrs Sludge has left us alone for the moment.'

'You didn't kill him then?' asked Hector.

'No, I tried, but she's, he's, she's, he's, surprisingly strong,' said Mrs Warp in her usual, calm, pleasant tone.

'Now, let's have you two off to bed,' she added, smiling reassuringly.

'Shouldn't we get help for the people that have been hurt?' Kate asked.

'Is Burt hurt, Burt hurt, Burt hurt?' Mrs Warp asked.

'Sorry,' said Kate, confused. 'I don't know who Bert is?'

'There is no Burt here, ear, bear, fear, vinegar,' said Mrs Warp, shuddering slightly.

Kate noticed a fizz and a crackle, and then Hector tugged at her arm and was pointing to Mrs Warp's legs.

They had holes in them, and lower holes had water seeping out.

'She's a cyborg,' yelled Hector, just as Mrs Warp lent forwards, gripped the kitchen table and crushed the thick wood to splinters.

Kate saw Hector dash around the kitchen and open a small door.

'Hector, what are you doing, run!' yelled Kate.

There was a burst of machine gun fire as Mrs Warp's chest opened to reveal two barrels with flame flying from each one. Mrs Warp reached for the fridge to steady herself and pulled it to the ground. As the fridge contents rolled to the floor Bandit took his chance, and threw himself head-first into the food.

Kate and Hector ran for the stairs, and scrambled up. At the first landing Kate paused to turn and look. Hector hit her hard in the side with a half-shove, half-rugby tackle.

'Keep going, keep going,' he yelled.

It was lucky they did keep going, as moments later a volley of machine-gun fire ripped through the place they had been standing. Mrs Warp was staggering about firing. Most of the bullets were exploding into the staircase, sending wood splitters flying everywhere. Mrs Warp's right arm began revolving wildly, making it difficult for her to keep her balance, there were sparks coming out of her neck, and a small fire had started near her bottom. Mrs Warp was definitely not human.

Kate stood transfixed as Mrs Warp advanced towards the stairs still firing. As her foot reached the first step she stopped firing and spoke. She still had the same smiling face, but her voice was very different; she sounded like a robot with a cheap speech synthesiser.

'Would you like a cup of hot chocolate, is that why you came downstairs?' asked Mrs Warp.

'Go away,' yelled Kate, just as she noticed that Hector was missing.

Mrs Warp began to advance unsteadily up the stairs. They were creaking and groaning, which was not surprising given that most of the top step had been shot away by the machine guns in Mrs Warp's chest.

'This will do the trick,' yelled Hector, appearing suddenly with the axe he had taken earlier.

Hector began to chop at the tattered top step. The creaking grew louder, and as Mrs Warp was just four steps from the top, the whole staircase gave way. Mrs Warp fell, briefly. Her hand caught the edge of the landing as she fell, and amazingly she held on to the rest of the staircase with her other hand.

Hector advanced with the axe.

'Don't do that,' said Mrs Warp, in her robot voice, 'I want to tuck you in.'

'Rip our limbs off more like,' said Hector, as he raised the axe once more.

'No Hector,' yelled Kate, 'You can't cut nanny's hand off.'

'She's not a nanny; she's a murdering robot on a mission to kill us!' Hector exclaimed.

Mrs Warp smiled and looked from Kate to Hector. Kate was momentarily lost in thought.

'Fair point,' said Kate, 'Get on with it.'

It took quite a bit of chopping to remove Mrs Warp from the landing, but her hand finally came loose and she and the stairs fell. As if to underline her robot credentials, Mrs Warp never once cried out or complained. When she hit the ground she picked herself up and muttered something in her robot voice about making hot

chocolate. She fizzed, crackled and disappeared into the kitchen with her bottom still on fire.

Hector and Kate slumped onto the floor of the landing. Only now did the question of what to do next hit them. They were stuck in a French château with no way down from the first floor, and a mad murdering robot was making them hot chocolate.

'What about the servant's stairs?' asked Hector, 'Really big houses like this have servant stairs, don't they.'

'No, not here, I think they must have removed them, probably security,' Kate answered. Kate buried her head in her hands.

'Oh no Hector, what are we going to do?'

'It'll be all right,' said Hector, 'we seem to have been given a sporting chance.'

'Oh yes,' replied Kate sarcastically, 'a mad robot that intends to give us hot chocolate and then murder us, and just in case we escape another madman is on our trail who can thump holes in prison walls. Very sporting!'

'Why don't we shoot her?' asked Hector.

'Have you seen the number of holes in her already, and they have made no difference,' said Kate, despondently.

'No,' said Hector, 'but water might. How about you shoot her and I'll use the fire extinguisher.'

'OK,' said Kate, 'but watch out for the machine guns in her chest.'

'I think she's out of ammunition,' said Hector with a shrug, 'She shot loads and loads..,' Hector stopped as Mrs Warp appeared once more.

Mrs Warp's bottom was no longer alight, but she seemed to be fizzing and crackling more than before.

'I have put the milk in the microwave dears,' said Mrs Warp in her robot voice. 'I will climb the outside of the building and find some sheets you can use to climb down.'

Mrs Warp disappeared into the night, and Kate and Hector raced upstairs to stop her getting through any of the windows. They ran from room to room to see where she was attempting to climb.

'Hang on,' said Hector, 'she can't climb, she only has one hand.'

'Oh yes she can,' said Kate, who was looking out of one of the windows.

Hector joined her, and to his horror saw that Mrs Warp was climbing the building using just one hand. One finger would dig into the corner of the building then another finger would extend further and get a higher grip. Mrs Warp's hand was anything but normal. The whole thing looked bizarre and revolting. Mrs Warp was moving slowly but inexorably up the outside of the château.

'Shoot her Kate,' yelled Hector, as he rushed to find a fire extinguisher.

When Hector returned Kate had emptied every bullet into Mrs Warp, whose eyes were now flashing red and blue.

'Good shooting dear,' said Mrs Warp in a robot voice.

Hector aimed the fire extinguisher and emptied it all over Mrs Warp.

'Oh dear, these cardigans never fall back into shape once they've been soaked,' said Mrs Warp, in the same robot tone.

Hector stepped back, convinced that nothing would stop Mrs Warp. Kate flashed past just as Mrs Warp reached the window, and hit her hard on the head with the blunt side of the axe. Mrs Warp wobbled and more sparks flew out. Kate hit her again and again.

Suddenly there was a whirl and a slump as Mrs Warp's lights went out.

'Thank goodness,' groaned Kate as she sat on the floor. 'If she comes back to life we'll use the bomb.'

'We can't,' said Hector, 'I put it in that time safe.'

'Time safe?' questioned Kate, 'What time safe?'

'The one in the kitchen,' replied Hector, 'I put the bomb in and selected the time I wanted it to be kept safe.'

'There isn't a time safe,' said Kate.

'Yes there is,' retorted Hector, 'between the fridge and the chopping board.'

'Hector, you idiot, that's the microwave. You put the bomb in the microwave,' said Kate with incredulity.

'Well it's not my fault, it didn't look like a microwave; it didn't have a Start button,' explained Hector.

'That's because it's in French. Are you sure you didn't start it?' asked Kate.

'Sure, but Mrs Warp did for the hot chocolate,' said Hector slowly.

'Oh no!' wailed Kate, 'we're trapped!'

'We'll be OK,' said Hector confidently, 'Most explosives will not go off in a microwave.'

'How do you know this?'

'I looked it up on Google. All the boys at school know what will explode in a microwave. C4, the plastic explosive, is really safe.'

'Are you sure?' Kate asked, her confidence returning.

There was a bang from downstairs as the microwave exploded.

'What was that?' Kate asked.

'I think it was the microwave exploding,' replied Hector, 'but it was only a small explosion.'

There was another bang and then a rushing noise. Kate turned to glare at Hector.

'It's started a fire, hasn't it?'

'Let's go and have a look,' Hector suggested.

'Are you a complete idiot? What sort of person advances towards the flames when things are exploding?' Kate declared rather than asking, as there were more bangs and the roar from the rapidly spreading fire began to grow.

'The rope slide!' bellowed Hector, as they both rushed for the top floor.

Once they had burst into the room on the top floor they discovered several sliders. Hector and Kate took one each and pushed off. It was strange after the panicked rush to the slide to be drifting through the quiet night making hardly a sound. Good rope slides are kept slightly loose so that the person using it naturally slows down near the end of the rope. Kate and Hector were surprised to find themselves slowing down high above the ground. Before they knew it they had landed on a platform high in a very large tree. Two surprised French policemen were asking them questions in French.

'Something's gone wrong,' Kate explained.

'Are you sure?' asked one of the policemen in a thick accent.

'Yes,' said Hector, 'Mrs Warp, but we've fixed it.'

'Fixed it?' questioned the police officer, just as the fire in the cha-teau exploded through its windows.

The police officers looked at the château in horror, and then one of them began talking into his radio. The other policeman began hooking Kate up to a harness looped over another rope slide.

'Bandit,' shouted Hector, pointing to the ground.

There he was, trotting happily along, seemingly unperturbed by the ball of flame the château had become. Kate watched him as she was pushed off, down the second rope slide.

Once Kate reached the end of the slide she could see several police officers, some with machine guns. Surprisingly, Inspector Smithson was there, along with another man, who appeared to be in charge.

'I am Inspector Mason. Where is Mrs Warp?' asked the man in a French accent.

'In the château, but there is something you should know,' stutered Kate, 'She's a robot. She tried to kill us.'

'Impossible,' said Inspector Mason, 'She would only protect you. She is programmed only to help. She is the finest example of French engineering. But, if she is lost, destroyed...it would be tragic. Are you sure?'

'Yes,' said Kate, 'I think she was just outside the château when it exploded, when the fire burst out.'

'Then she may have escaped,' said the French Inspector.

'She went rather wrong. She started firing the machine guns in her chest,' Kate tried to explain.

'Ahhh, but she is worth millions of Euros, there will be hell to pay if she is lost. We must pray she has not been too badly damaged,' said the French Inspector shaking his head.

They all turned to look at the burning château.

'This was our best safe house. It cost many millions, and it has been destroyed. How did it happen?' the Inspector continued.

'I don't know,' said Kate, keen to minimise her role in the carnage.

They all stood in silence in the still night, with only the crackling of the château as it burned, the orange glow spreading out over the lawns to meet the blue flashes of the police cars on the perimeter.

Bandit arrived and sat next to Kate, just as Hector slid down the rope slide.

'Hello,' said Hector, in his usual cheerful tone, 'Don't worry about Mrs Warp, she was a mad robot assassin, but we did her in eventually.'

There was silence. Hector noticed that the man who seemed to be in charge was staring at him in an unfriendly way.

'Did her in? Did her in? You destroyed Mrs Warp!' yelled the French Inspector.

'It wasn't easy,' Hector declared.

In the stunned silence that followed Hector decided the Inspector needed an explanation.

'Well, Mrs Warp already had some holes and water in her, I saw it leaking out. I chopped off her hand with an axe when she was clinging on to the landing. Kate shot her when she was climbing up the building and I sprayed more water into her using a fire extinguisher, and then Kate sort of finished her off by hitting her on the head with the blunt part of the axe.'

'That was an accident,' Kate said weakly.

'Yes, she meant to use the sharp end,' Hector added in an attempt to be helpful.

Inspector Smithson had started to wave frantically behind Inspector Mason's back, trying to tell Hector to shut up. Hector completely misunderstood this, and carried on.

'The château caught fire because I put a bomb I found into the microwave in the kitchen,' Hector explained.

'You put a bomb in the microwave?' asked the French Inspector, in a constricted voice.

'I found it, but I thought the microwave was a digital safe, and I was trying to stop old Warty Warp getting it,' said Hector.

'Old Warty Warp,' shouted the Inspector, 'was trying to protect you! She was on our side! You hooligans! You vandals.'

'Now, I understand you're upset,' said Inspector Smithson, 'but I am sure Kate and Hector were doing their best. They need our help and protection.'

'Protection!' retorted Inspector Mason, 'Maybe you could persuade Sludge to protect them; he'll be dead before sunset. Who is more dangerous, Sludge or these two hooligans? They've managed to burn down our top safe house and destroy an indestructible robot, who was incredibly expensive and highly sophisticated. Mrs Warp was almost perfect, the secret engineering pride of France, and your hooligans finished her off with an axe?'

'They are two young children who need a good night's sleep and our help,' said Inspector Smithson in a measured tone.

Inspector Mason stormed off.

'Don't worry,' said Inspector Smithson, 'I'll sort something out.'

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