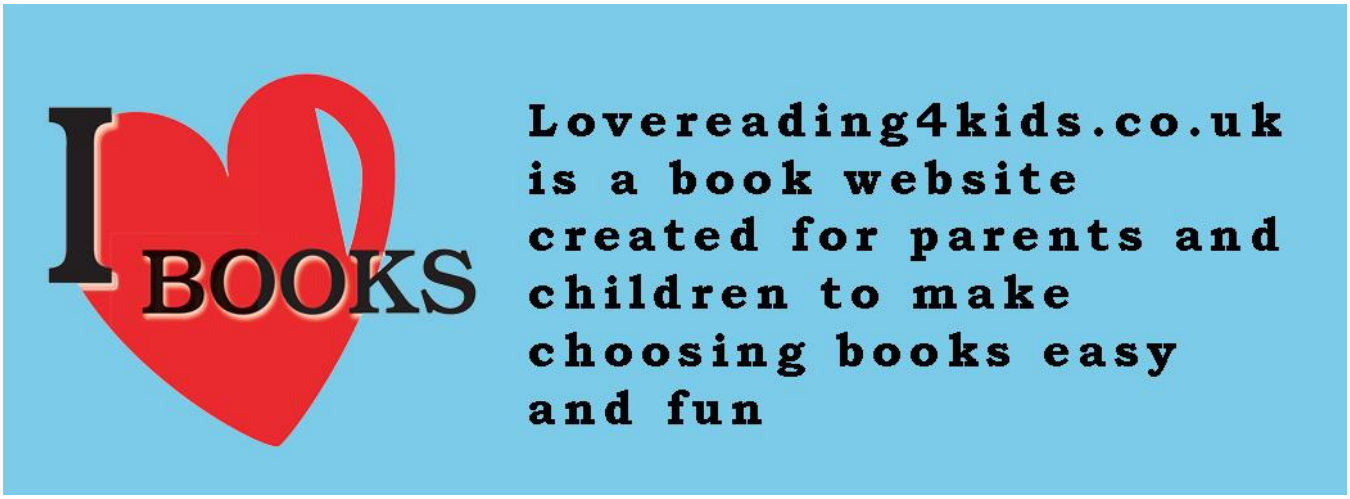


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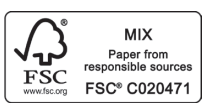
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CHAPTER ONE

IF HUGS COULD KILL

It was a normal Tuesday morning at the factory of Snaztacular Ultrafun, the world's biggest toy manufacturer. Hundreds of conveyor belts whirred and clanked, carrying thousands of gleaming new toys towards the brightly coloured boxes in which they would be packed and delivered to shops. Balls, bikes, building blocks … dolls, dominoes, ducks … whistles, walkie-talkies, water pistols – the factory made them all.

Snaztacular Ultrafun's toys were not like the ones made by other companies. They were much cleverer and much more fun. Every toy



contained a tiny computerised brain that gave it a personality and allowed it to walk and talk as if it were alive. They were the ultimate playthings: bikes that took you home if you were too tired to pedal, footballs who wanted to be kicked, board games whose pieces tidied themselves away once you had finished playing with them, dolls that acted just like real people. Children went crazy over them.

A red light flashed on a control panel. An alarm hooted.

'Yikes!' cried a white-coated technician who had been monitoring that morning's toy production, leaping out of his chair in surprise and banging his knee on the leg of his desk.

As each toy trundled on its way along the conveyor belt, it underwent a complicated

series of scans and tests to make sure it was working properly. The company was rightly proud of its products and it wanted each toy to be perfect for the child who would eventually play with it. The red light meant a fault had been detected in one of the toys. And if the technician let a faulty toy leave the factory, he would get in big trouble with his boss.

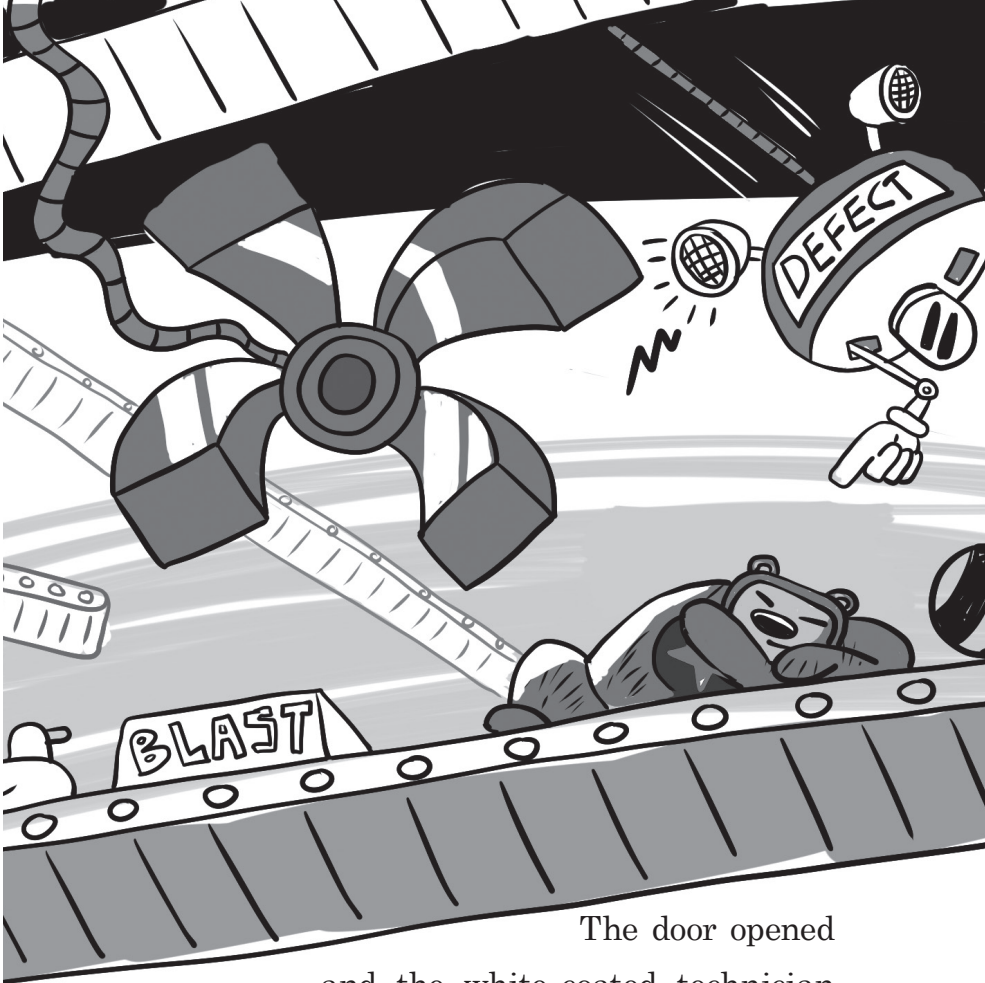
Rubbing his knee, the technician examined his computer screen. The system had detected a problem with one of the Snugaliffic Cuddlestar teddy bears. The Snugaliffic Cuddlestar range were the most advanced teddy bears money could buy. They could sing lullabies, tell bedtime stories, bring you a glass of warm milk – but most of all they were designed for cuddling. When you hugged one

of these bears, it actually hugged you back. In a world where many parents were simply too busy to do trivial things like hug their children, they sold in their millions.

The technician jabbed a button on his control panel. A huge metal claw descended from the ceiling and snatched the faulty teddy bear from the conveyor belt.

★ ★ ★

The teddy bear's eyes flickered open. He had been expecting to find himself in a cardboard box, rattling along the road in the back of a lorry on his way to a toyshop. Instead, he saw that he was in a dingy metal room. There was a table, a chair, a computer, a half-eaten ham sandwich. But no children to play with. He frowned. What was going on?



The door opened and the white-coated technician entered. He was carrying a large object that was hidden under a white sheet. He placed the object on the floor and consulted his computer screen.

‘You are Snugaliffic Cuddlestar serial number 427935, yes? Made this morning?’

The teddy bear nodded. ‘Yep.’

‘It says here you’ve been assigned the name Dan. Is that correct?’

‘That’s me,’ said the teddy bear. All Snaztacular Ultrafun toys were given individual names to help make them unique.

‘Well, Dan, it’s like this. The computer says you’re faulty and it’s up to me to find out whether it’s something that can be fixed. We have a reputation for making the best toys in the world and we can’t let shoddy merchandise out on to the market, can we?’

‘Whatever you say, pal,’ said Dan the teddy bear. He wasn’t interested in boring stuff about markets or companies’ reputations.



He was programmed for fun.

'Good,' said the technician. 'Let's get started.' He whipped the sheet off the mysterious object he had brought with him.

Dan's large brown eyes widened in surprise. The object appeared to be a little girl with a miserable expression and outstretched arms. She looked in serious need of a hug.

The technician rapped his knuckles on the girl's head. It made a hollow metallic sound. 'This is a hug test dummy,' he explained. 'The electronics inside it will tell us how good you are at hugging. Pressure, duration, snuggliness and so forth. Kindly hug the dummy for me, Dan.'

Dan dashed forward. This was more like it! He was made for hugging and now he had

a chance to do some! He embraced the dummy girl in his furry arms and gave her a good squeeze.

There was a screech of wrenching metal followed by a loud bang. Dan stepped back, shocked. The dummy girl fell to the floor, her back bent horribly out of shape, her arms twisted at alarming angles and smoke pouring gently from her ears.

The technician raised his eyebrows. *'Oh dear.'*

'What happened?' asked Dan.

The technician waved a small electronic device over Dan's head. The device bleeped and the technician consulted a little screen set into it. 'Ah. Just as I thought. Unfortunate.'

'What is it?'



'You have a faulty snuggle chip. It's telling your robotic limbs to use a thousand times the usual pressure. In simple terms, you don't know your own strength. I'm afraid you can't be allowed near children.' He gestured to the twisted remains of the hug

test dummy. 'Imagine if you did that to a real child. That would *not* be good for business.'

Dan shrugged. 'So reprogram me. Make me less strong.'

The technician shook his head. 'Much too fiddly to reprogram a single microchip. More trouble than it's worth, I'm afraid. Far easier to take you apart and start from scratch.'

'Take me *apart*?' Dan's robotic heart suddenly thumped with fear.

'Don't worry,' said the technician with a sickly smile. 'It won't hurt. Well, not much.' He pointed to a large yellow 'X' painted on the floor of the room. 'Kindly stand on the X for me, Dan, if you would.'

Dan shuffled over to the X. His furry brows

knitted in confusion. ‘Why here?’

‘Because that’s where the trapdoor is.’

