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Opening extract from

The Flight of the Silver Turtle

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Chapter One

BANG! A loud explosion erupted from the kitchen, rattling the open French windows and jingling the milk-bottle chandelier. A cloud of smoke plumed out from the kitchen doorway, engulfing the sunlit dining table and the five people sitting at it.

Marcia Slick, the brown-haired thirteen-year-old sitting nearest to the kitchen, suppressed her instinct to run from the house and phone the fire brigade. The three other children at the table – Ben, Zara and Sam – seemed quite unperturbed and were laughing as much as they were coughing. Marcia had discovered during her brief previous visit to 12 Pinkerton Place that minor technological mishaps were a normal part of everyday life here.

The large woman at the end of the table, who wore a flower-covered straw hat, seemed similarly unfazed. But Marcia knew it took a lot to faze Professor Petunia Hartleigh-Broadbeam.

The gangly figure of Professor Alexander Ampersand emerged from the kitchen. His pink, beaming face was blasted with soot, and the white hair that surrounded his bald head stuck out even more wildly than usual. He was wheeling a trolley supporting a large metal box, whose burnt and buckled sides emitted a few last trickles of smoke. Arriving at the table, he lifted the box's lid, revealing a smouldering heap of slightly scrambled eggs, very scrambled bacon and completely scrambled sausages, all jumbled up in a sizzling puddle of boiled orange juice. 'Breakfast is served,' he announced.

'Do you not think your auto-breakfast-preparer might have somewhat *over*-prepared the ingredients, Alexander?' asked Professor Hartleigh-Broadbeam.

'Maybe just a wee bit,' admitted Professor Ampersand, shovelling the charred and juice-sodden debris onto six plates. 'And the separate drink-cooling compartment seems to have malfunctioned. But I think the invention's sound in principle. An ideal labour-saving device for busy families.'

Sam tried a mouthful. 'It's actually quite nice if you imagine it's *meant* to be all mixed up like this,' he said.

'It's not *too* bad,' agreed Zara, 'but it would be better without the hot orange juice.'

'The juice takes away some of the burnt bacon taste,' Ben pointed out. 'What do *you* reckon, Marcia?'

Marcia tasted some of the odd but surprisingly edible mixture. 'It's fab,' she said, smiling at her friends. 'Totally fab.'

Marcia had first met Ben, Zara and Sam only a few months before. Although their time together had been short, the perilous events they had been through had made them the closest of friends. Zara and her brother Ben, twelve and eleven respectively, lived here in this Victorian terraced house in Edinburgh with their great-uncle, Professor Ampersand. He had adopted them as babies when their Tanzanian father and Scottish mother had been killed in a car crash.

Living with a sixty-eight-year-old eccentric inventor might not be some people's idea of a perfect upbringing, but Marcia knew of no happier family. Her own parents had been obsessed with creating a perfect family and their desire to turn Marcia into their idea of a perfect daughter had led them to get involved with a sinister and illegal

medical research organization. They were now in prison.

The Ampersands would have loved to have Marcia join their family. But, after some consideration, she had decided to accept an offer of a new home from Professor Hartleigh-Broadbeam, another inventor, who had also been caught up in their adventure. It had turned out her flat was in the same part of London as Marcia had lived before, and after everything Marcia had been through, she'd liked the idea of staying somewhere familiar.

Professor Hartleigh-Broadbeam was also in her late sixties and could rival Professor Ampersand when it came to being eccentric – she gave each one of her many hats names and tended to talk to them – but Marcia found her to be a kind and considerate guardian. For the first time in her life, Marcia felt loved and valued for who she was.

And at last Marcia could attend the local school instead of the horrible private establishment her parents had sent her to. It was great to be at school with her footballing friends from the park, the friends her parents had always despised.

The one thing that troubled Marcia was that she hadn't felt able to explain her situation honestly to these school friends. She referred to Professor Hartleigh-Broadbeam as her great-aunt and gave the impression that her parents were working abroad. She knew it was wrong to lie, but she couldn't face telling people that her parents were in prison, and were there because of what they had tried to do to her. Just thinking about it brought back bad feelings that it was *her* fault her parents couldn't love her, that she wasn't good enough. She knew that such feelings were irrational, but they were lurking inside her all the same.

Now though, Marcia was back in Edinburgh for the summer holidays, with friends who knew her whole story

and needed no explanations. She and Professor Hartleigh-Broadbeam had travelled up by train the previous evening, accompanied by eleven-year-old Sam Carnabie, who lived near London. The two professors planned to work on some projects together, and Marcia and Sam could look forward to four whole weeks in this extraordinary house.