PROLOGUE

THE LAST STAND OF DOCTOR EXTRAORDINARY

Don't worry – the hero doesn't die at the end of this story.

He dies right at the beginning.

WAIT-
WHAT?

That's an unexpectedly sad opening for this kind of book, isn't it? I mean, it looks like a lot of fun – there's a load of pandas on the cover and everything. And then we go hitting you with that kind of sentence right at the

start. Well, sorry. But this is a story about a ghost, and you don't become a ghost without . . . well, you know. But fear not. We'll be here all the way through to make sure things don't get too miserable. And the pandas show up a bit later – you'll love the pandas. They do a little dance; it's brilliant. Just wait.

But – as the old saying goes – before you meet the dancing pandas, you've got to get through the sad part. So strap yourself in for a dramatic prologue. Because, as this story starts, Paragon City is under attack. *Cue the stirring music*.

DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUDDA DUN DUN DUN DUDDA
DUN DUN DAAAAAAA!

(It's hard to write stirring music down, but just try and imagine it, OK? Ooh, here comes a good bit.)

DUN DUN DUN DUN DUUUUN DUDDA DUN DUN DA DA
DUN DUN DAAAAAAA!

You know Paragon City, right? With its tall sky-scrapers and busy harbour, set beside the sparkling waters of Lake Sunrise? Paragon City, famous for its excellent seafood and the scenic walks you can take on the slopes of the nearby Shadow Mountains? Oh, and it's also famous

because it's constantly under attack from a very evil villain called Captain Chaos. But luckily Paragon City has a protector. Or at least it used to have one. Which brings us back to the sad thing that's about to happen.

Where were we? Ah yes. Paragon City was under attack. And this is the part of the story where the hero comes in, so please imagine the stirring music swelling to a climax at this point, as the camera pans across the surface of a lake, and the sound of jet engines builds.

DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DUDDA DUN DUN
BA-BLAAAAAARP!!!

SWOOOOOSH! A massive plane has just zoomed right above us. Everyone in the cinema goes '*Oooooooh!*' and bursts into spontaneous applause. The superhero has just made his big entrance.

Doctor Extraordinary glanced down at the controls of his supercharged plane, the gleaming black Extra-Jet, as it skimmed across the surface of Lake Sunrise, golden in the early-morning light. He adjusted one of his silver-edged black leather gauntlets (known simply as gloves to us non-superheroes) and nudged the joystick



forward just a fraction, bringing the jet's underside so close to the lake that the twin engines shot up a rainbow of spray.

That'll look amazing on the TV news, he thought to himself.

He reached up and clicked a button on the side of his large black flight helmet, which had a stylized letter 'E' on the front. 'What are we dealing with today, Holliday?' he asked calmly.

His earpiece crackled. 'Multiple blasts detected in the northern quarter of Paragon City, Doctor,' replied the voice of Professor Lana Holliday from the control centre back at Extraordinary HQ. 'I'm not sure what the threat is just yet, but we can't rule out . . . Well, the usual.'

'A giant robot?' said Doctor Extraordinary with a slight sigh.

'I mean, it might not be a giant robot on this occasion,' said the professor in his ear, attempting to sound cheery and convincing.

'Let's face it, Holliday. It's going to be a giant robot,' said the hero of Paragon City.

Bluey-white bolts of electrical current crackled round his gloved hands as he eased back on the joystick, and

the Extra-Jet rose above the burnished lake surface. Suddenly the skyscrapers and bustling port of Paragon City were spread out before him with the dark mountains beyond. Through the windscreen he could make out a large smudge of green directly in the city centre – the huge expanse of Paragon Park. And, beyond the park, a thick inky plume of black smoke rose into the pure morning sky.

'It's always a giant robot,' muttered Doctor Extraordinary resignedly, gunning the engines to urge the squat jet forward and hurrying, as usual, to the rescue.



'Massive breaking news this morning, Susie,' said the young man in the leather jacket standing on the lakefront. 'This is Ben Bailey, reporting live from the shores of Lake Sunrise for *Good Morning Paragon*, and I can exclusively reveal to our *GMP* viewers that Doctor Extraordinary, the defender of Paragon City, is on his way to save the day once again.'



Ben Bailey, with his tousled dark hair and rugged good looks, was Paragon City's most fearless and successful roving news reporter. (At least that was what it said in his online profile, which he had written himself. This profile can be found at benbaileynews.com, which he had purchased, funded and kept updated on a daily basis.)

Ben gripped his microphone dramatically, staring seriously down the camera lens. 'Just a few moments ago, I witnessed the superhero depart from Extraordinary Island on his latest rescue mission,' he told his audience.

Back in the TV studio, Susie Carpenter watched the live footage from Bailey's camera operator as her lens zoomed in on a dark, distant dot above Lake Sunrise. Susie – three-times winner of Best Morning Show Presenter at the annual Paragon Television Awards – was very used to covering this kind of story. After all,

Captain Chaos tended to attack the city every few weeks without fail.

'It looks like Doctor Extraordinary's flying the Extra-Jet today, Ben,' she said, stifling a small yawn.

'That's right, Susie,' confirmed Ben Bailey, squinting theatrically into the dawn. 'We're trying to show you some exclusive breaking live-news footage right now – are you getting it?'

'Yes, we're seeing that here in the *GMP* studio,' said Susie, turning to the big screen behind her.

One of the camera crew let out an involuntary '*Ooh!*' as the feed showed the shiny black aeroplane dipping so close to the lake a trail of sparkling spray was kicked up behind it.

'Any idea what threat the doc is facing this morning, Ben?'

Most Paragonians (as they're known) simply referred to Doctor Extraordinary as 'the doc' these days. He'd been protecting their city for twenty years now – he was pretty much part of the furniture.

'Well, we know that he's chosen to use the jet rather than the Extra-Speedboat, the Extra-Cycle, the Extra-

Mobile or the rarely seen and frustratingly slow-moving Extra-Hot-Air Balloon,' the reporter replied. 'Meaning he wants to get there fast and airborne.'

'Giant robot, possibly?' asked Susie Carpenter.

Ben Bailey bridled. True, Captain Chaos did usually attack using a giant robot of some variety, but it wasn't really the done thing to pre-empt the news in this way. He'd been looking forward to a dramatic motorbike ride across Paragon City followed by a big reveal.

'No confirmation of what Doctor Extraordinary is up against so far, Susie,' he said irritably. 'But I can tell you that, as your roving reporter on the spot, I'll be bringing you the news first – live – right here on *Good Morning Paragon*.'

As he spoke, the Extra-Jet zoomed above his head, and he glimpsed one black-gloved hand held out of the window with the thumb upraised.

'For now, Ben Bailey, live on the lakefront, thank you,' said Susie Carpenter, gathering up her scripts and tapping them on the desk for no reason whatsoever. 'We'll bring you the latest on that possible giant-robot attack as we get it, but let's cross over to the *GMP* kitchen and see what Harriet's cooking up for us this morning.'

The camera cut to a grinning woman wielding a frying pan enthusiastically.

'Why, HELLO, Susie!' she bellowed.

'Change the channel! Argh! Change the channel immediately! Help! Emergency!'

With a triangle of toast clamped between his teeth and one scuffed school shoe hanging off his toes, Sonny Nelson hopped round the breakfast table on a frantic mission to find the TV remote.

'We're missing it! Quick! Find another news station!'

'Mmm?' Sonny's father looked up from his newspaper with an expression of mild surprise. 'What's going on?' He'd just come in from his night shift at the local police station, and his dark-blue officer's hat hung on the back of his chair. Rubbing his tired eyes with the palms of his hands, he looked around the small, cluttered flat wearily.

'Da-aaaaad!' wailed Sonny in frustration. 'We're *missing iiiit!* Doctor Extraordinary's on a rescue mission – it was live on TV and they've cut to the stupid cooking segment!'



'Ooh, is it that Harriet Wallace? I like her,' his dad said. 'What's she making?'

'Today, Susie, I'm going to be rustling up a cheese toastie with a difference!' burbled the voice from the TV. 'A turbo-toastie, if you will!' The studio broke into polite laughter.

'Cooking on TV is the most pointless thing ever!' complained Sonny, still hunting desperately for the

remote control. 'Only one person in the whole world gets to taste the food! Ah! Got it!'

He discovered the TV remote behind a cereal box and started clicking through the channels, searching for a live feed of Doctor Extraordinary. As he did so, a deep roaring from outside began to rattle the windows of their fourth-floor flat.

'Sounds like a plane,' said Sonny's dad through a mouthful of toast. 'Hey!' he protested as Sonny dashed excitedly to the window. 'If you're not watching that, put *GMP* back on! I want to find out how Harriet turbo-charges her toastie.'

He grabbed the remote and changed channels as Sonny threw open the window and leaned dangerously far out, looking up and down the wide street. Early-morning traffic stretched away below Sonny in both directions. The roaring grew louder and louder.

'DAD! COME AND LOOK! I CAN SEE HIM! DAD!'

The gleaming ebony shape of the Extra-Jet was

approaching, filling the street with the scream of its engines.

'I've already seen it on telly.' Sonny's dad was still glued to the toastie preparation taking place on screen.

'Now the secret to a really great toastie is to butter BOTH sides of the bread!' Harriet Wallace was shouting excitedly into the camera. 'DOUBLE BUTTER!' she added at top volume, opening her mouth so wide that her quivering tonsils were clearly visible on screen.

'But it's him!' cried Sonny. 'It's Doctor Extraordinary! He's about to fly past our actual window on his way to actually rescue the actual city!'

In case you hadn't realized, Sonny Nelson was Doctor Extraordinary's number-one fan. His bedroom was plastered with posters of his hero, diagrams of all the doc's various vehicles and maps of his headquarters on Extraordinary Island. Sonny's shelves were crammed with books about the doc's missions and back issues of the magazine *Extraordinary Weekly*, which was only available to members of his official fan club, the Sidekicks.

As Sonny leaned out, waving frantically, the Extra-Jet



approached the window. Abandoning all thoughts of safety, he let go of the window frame so he could wave with both arms, frantically signalling to the passing plane. To Sonny's utter delight, the black-helmeted figure in the cockpit noticed him.

Doctor Extraordinary eased back on the controls, the twin-jet engines rotating to bring the plane into a momentary hover so he could give a quick thumbs up in the direction of the windmilling arms in a fourth-floor window. Then, with a screech, the jet lurched forward and away.

Shortly afterwards, there was a roar from below and a large crimson motorbike drove past, weaving rapidly in and out of the traffic. Roving reporter Ben Bailey was on the trail of the day's big story, his camera operator

perched on the back of the bike and holding on for dear life.

As Sonny ducked away from the window, grinning from ear to ear, the Extra-Jet was already roaring over the trees, lawns and fountains of Paragon Park. Doctor Extraordinary allowed himself a brief look down. And, to be fair, it's hard not to fly above an enormous statue of yourself without at least glancing at it. Because that's exactly what was at the very centre of the sprawling park.

The statue stood with its legs apart, straddling a wide plaza surrounded by lawns, benches and trees, and behind it was a sparkling white concrete building with a gigantic letter 'E' emblazoned on its roof. This was the Doctor Extraordinary Museum – although, to be quite honest, he hadn't visited it since the day he'd conducted the official opening ceremony five years ago.

(Sonny Nelson, as you can probably guess, had a season ticket and spent hours every week gazing at the various exhibits – including the remains of the mysterious meteorite that had given Doctor Extraordinary his

superpowers in the first place. And – as roving reporter Ben Bailey might say – more on that later. The large rock was kept in the very centre of the building in a special reinforced glass case, the strange crystals at the heart of the stone pulsating with an eerie blue-tinged white light.)

'Come in, Holliday,' said Doctor Extraordinary, tearing his eyes away from his own huge bronze doppelganger and steering the jet towards the plume of thick smoke. 'I'm almost there. Will have eyes on the threat in a moment. Stand by.'

He zoned out for a moment, gazing absently towards the distant horizon. After twenty years of constantly saving Paragon City, Doctor Extraordinary had recently been finding himself unable to shake off a slight weariness. He'd even, once or twice, caught himself dreaming about retiring and going off to save something else for a change. But somehow there was always a new threat the city needed defending against.

'Roger, Doctor,' replied the professor's calm, capable voice in his ear, snapping him back into the moment.

'Though I might as well tell you now,' the doc went on. 'It's going to be a giant robot. It's always a giant robot.'

(Just to put things in context even further for you, this was the fifth time that year Captain Chaos had attacked Paragon City, and all previous times she had done so using a giant robot. And it was still only 12 May.)

DOCTORS AND CAPTAINS – A QUICK NOTE

We just want to break into the story here because you're probably all wondering, What the actual coleslaw is going on? You've got a hero who's called Doctor Extraordinary, and a baddie called Captain Chaos. You've got your doctors and captains the wrong way round, you pair of absolute antelopes.

It's true that, up until now, most doctors in this kind of story have been villains. (See Octopus, Evil, No.*) But we've realized that in real life doctors are kind of amazing, so we've decided to reclaim the word 'doctor' by having a good character called Doctor something. Plus, doctors are generally great. Like really great.*

Similarly, most captains have been reasonably heroic. (See America, Marvel . . . *Actually, we can't think of a third one right now, but you get the general idea.* Birdseye*! There you go – that's another.) And, although captains are all right, we think doctors are better. So in this book the hero's a doctor, and the villain's a captain.*

If you think we've gone mad and you hate this idea, then please make this book into a smoothie and drink it. Otherwise, read on.

Yours,
Captain Chris and Doctor Gregory (or the other way round, depending on which one of us you like best)

End of quick note.

The Extra-Jet roared above Paragon Park, passing the tracks of the city's public-transport system, the Loop. This monorail coiled round the city on overhead lines, looking from its vantage point in the sky not unlike a large snake curled up between the buildings. Doctor Extraordinary pulled the joystick back to gain more height as he drew closer to the cloud of smoke, which he could now see was billowing out of the windows of a high skyscraper. And, clinging to the side of the building and shooting flames into the smashed windows from its gaping mouth, was a gigantic metal figure.

'Come in, Holliday,' said the superhero into his mouth-

piece. 'I have visual confirmation. It's another giant robot.'

The professor chuckled. 'Looks like I won the bet.'

'What?'

'Oh sorry,' she said apologetically. 'I was talking to someone here in the control room.' She cleared her throat. 'That's confirmed, Doctor,' she added in a more official tone. 'Giant robot attacking the city. Again. I'll inform the police department – should I tell them you've got the situation under control?'

'Why don't you contact the scrap-metal department while you're at it, Holliday?' said Doctor Extraordinary dramatically as he eased the jet into a hover above a smaller building next to the giant-robot-bedecked tower block. 'You can tell them to expect a big delivery. Of, er, scrap metal. Because I'm about to turn this heap of junk into . . .'

At this point, he realized he was about to say 'scrap metal' again, and he'd already done that twice. But give him a break; this was the fifth robot attack of the year, and he was starting to run out of puns.

'. . . into, erm, spare parts!' he concluded, smiling to himself with relief.

'Affirmative, Doctor.' Holliday was also relieved that the Doc had salvaged the cool superhero quip – they were always repeated on the evening news bulletin. 'See you back at HQ for brunch.'

'Start the pancakes, Holliday,' said Doctor Extraordinary confidently as he brought the Extra-Jet in for a smooth landing and pushed back the canopy with a thickly muscled arm. 'This won't take long. Although –' he spoke quietly to himself as he eased himself out of the pilot's seat – 'I can't help wishing now and then that Paragon City would save itself. Just occasionally. Anyway . . .'

He broke off with a sigh, vaulting neatly over the edge of the cockpit to land on the rooftop in the established hero landing pose – one hand in the air, the other fist on the ground, rear leg stretched out to full capacity. (DO NOT allow your parent or caregiver to replicate this pose at home; they'll probably do themselves a hamstring-based mischief or something. It's for heroes only.)

As the doc left the jet, the lights in the cockpit immediately blinked out, and the engines began to wind down. That's because the Extra-Jet, instead of running

on normal aviation fuel, was actually powered by Doctor Extraordinary himself. That's right – one of his two incredible abilities was the mysterious electrical power that flowed through his body. He was basically a human battery.

And what was his other superpower? we hear you ask. Well, it's a slightly less unusual one, but just as useful. Doctor Extraordinary was the strongest being on the entire planet. To be exact, he was one of the two strongest beings on the entire planet. He was not only more powerful than a locomotive, he was more powerful than eight locomotives that had all been welded together to make some kind of incredible super-locomotive. Not that anyone would ever actually bother to do that; it's very silly.

Anyway, we're getting sidetracked again. Where were we? Ah yes, that's right. Our hero, Doctor Extraordinary, was on a rooftop, about to leap into action.

DUN DUN DUN DUN DUN DA DUUUUR!

He tensed his legs, squinting up at the giant robot clinging to the building above him, his brain calculating angles and velocity.



'HEY, DOC!' came a shout from across the street. Ben Bailey and his camera operator had taken up position on the roof of an office block opposite. 'You're live on *GMP*! Do you have any words for our viewers?'

Doctor Extraordinary fought down a slight irritation that he'd been interrupted in this fashion just as he was about to execute a very dramatic leap. But he mastered his annoyance – after all, it's very important to maintain good relations with the press if you're a superhero.

'There's no cause for alarm, people of Paragon City!' he said loudly in a reassuring tone of voice. 'Looks like Captain Chaos is up to her old tricks again, but there's no need to fear as long as I'm here.'

Ooh, that rhymed, he thought to himself. *I'll have to remember that one. Could make a new line of T-shirts.*

'This robot does look slightly larger than the previous ones,' said Ben Bailey, hoping to make his news story sound suitably dramatic so the programme didn't cut away to another cookery segment. 'Are you sure you can handle it?'

Doctor Extraordinary rose to his feet. 'Well, you know what they say,' he said with a smile and a raise of one eyebrow. 'It's not the size of the giant robot, it's the, er . . .' He paused, searching for a suitable quip and failing to find one. 'What I mean is,' he continued, 'it doesn't matter how large the robot might be. Doctor

Extraordinary is here!' And at this point he unfortunately decided to throw in a phrase that was about to become horribly ironic.

'NEVER SAY DIE!'

roared Doctor Extraordinary, preparing once again to leap into action.

With a powerful thrust of his supercharged legs, he soared into the air in a massive jump, landing squarely on the giant robot's shoulder with a clang. Reaching down, he ripped off a square metal panel and tossed it away like a Frisbee. Ben Bailey's camera zoomed in as the doc stood there, the morning sunlight catching his black cape with its silver edging, as it blew and rippled in a fresh breeze.

This must look amazing on TV, thought our hero. *Perfect time to bust out the catchphrase.*

('Dad! Dad!' said Sonny urgently, watching all this back at his flat. 'He's going to do the catchphrase moment!'

'He does that every time,' replied his father with a yawn.)

'Onward to the unknown!' said Doctor Extraordinary,

looking straight down the camera lens before he dropped out of sight through the robot's hatchway.

'Well, there you have it, Susie,' said Ben Bailey, stepping into position in front of the camera with the giant robot clinging to the skyscraper framed nicely behind him. 'Live on *GMP*, we've just grabbed a huge exclusive. An actual interview with Doctor Extraordinary during his latest rescue mission.'

'Thanks, Ben,' said Susie Carpenter back in the studio. 'We'll check in with you later. For now, let's see how those cheese toasties are coming on, shall we?' Giant-robot attacks weren't playing well with the viewers these days – it was rather old hat, to be honest.

Inside the chest of the robot, Captain Chaos sat behind a curved control panel, laughing wildly as she mashed levers forwards and backwards. 'Yes, smash, my pretty!' she was cackling. 'DESTROY! A-HA-HA-HA!'

The captain, a tall woman with a long face and bright, wide eyes, was dressed in an outfit that was so peculiar it really deserves a paragraph all to itself. So here it is:

Captain Chaos's Outfit: *A Descriptive Paragraph*

Imagine, if you will, a kid who couldn't decide which superhero to dress up as, so picked a small section of each different outfit and cobbled them all together into some kind of wacky mishmash. That's kind of the look Captain Chaos had ended up with. Her top had a tight-fitting yellow middle, a left sleeve that was baggy and bright neon pink and a right sleeve that was ribbed and dark purple. The thick belt around her waist was pure white, with a gold buckle in the shape of the letters CC. Her left trouser leg was a patchwork of rainbow colours; the right leg was bottle-green corduroy, but cut off at the knee. She also had on high yellow leather boots and – oh yes – a jester's hat. It looked as if a fancy-dress shop had been sick all over her. But, let's be honest, it's cool to discover your own style, and it kind of suited her. The outfit was the least villainous thing about her. The fact that she was, once again, trying to smash one of Paragon City's neighbourhoods into rubble was considerably more villainous.

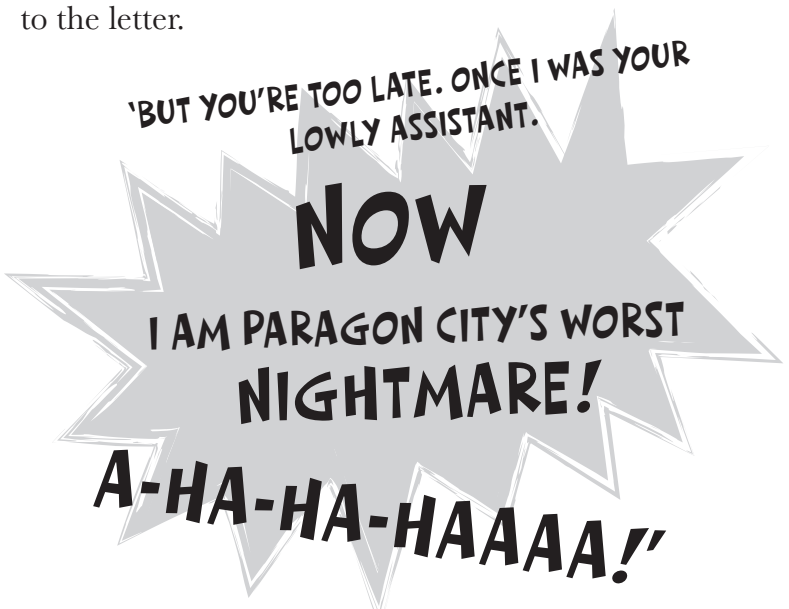
(End of descriptive paragraph. Hope you liked it.)



Captain Chaos's menacing smile faltered as a voice sounded from behind her. 'Stop right there, you motley maniac!'

The supervillain spun in her chair, baggy left sleeve flapping, to see Doctor Extraordinary standing behind her, hands on hips.

'Doctor Extraordinary,' she said calmly. (It's an unwritten rule of being a supervillain that, when your arch-nemesis appears, you have to greet them by name.) 'I should have known you'd show up sooner or later,' she purred, once again following the villain playbook to the letter.



Doctor Extraordinary was prepared for this little speech. It was the exact same one that Captain Chaos made every single time he thwarted one of her evil schemes, even down to the cackle at the end.

'Of course it's me,' he replied. 'It's always me, isn't it? Who else would it be? It's always you, and it's always me, and it's always – *always* – a stupid giant robot.'

He had grown a little tired of this same old narrative. Yet again, the idea of leaving Paragon City behind once and for all rumbled in his mind like distant thought-thunder.

'There's nothing stupid about this robot!' said Captain Chaos, stung. 'This is my greatest and most destructive creation yet! The Chaos-Bot Five!'

'It looks very similar to the Chaos-Bot Four,' said Doctor Extraordinary, frowning.

'How dare you?' shrieked his enemy. 'This one has flames!'

'I thought the last one had flames?'

'The last one fired bombs,' corrected Captain Chaos.

'Oh yes,' the doc said. 'I'd forgotten.'

'You're not taking this completely seriously, are you?'

Captain Chaos narrowed her eyes and swept her long hair away from her long face angrily. 'There's no point in my evil team of scientists designing a series of huge robots to attack Paragon City if the city's defender is just going to treat it like a trip to the funfair! This is serious! I am dangerous! Very, very dangerous!'

'Yes, yes, I know.' Doctor Extraordinary tried to focus. 'Let's get this over with, shall we?' He thought for a moment. 'Your giant robot is about to be turned into spare parts!' He'd used that quip once already, but he really was fresh out of ideas. 'Stand aside!'

'Never!' Captain Chaos snarled, closing in on her arch-enemy with her arms spread wide.

Outside, Ben Bailey filmed the giant robot twitching angrily and swinging to and fro on the building as the hero and his arch-nemesis wrestled across the room deep within its chest, slamming each other into the controls. They were evenly matched for the simple reason that they had the same superpowers. You may have noticed a few pages ago that we described Doctor Extraordinary as 'one of the two strongest beings on the entire planet'. Well, for reasons that will become clear in a flashback

sequence later on, Captain Chaos was the other one.

'You won't stop me this time, Doctor Extraordinary!' the villain went on.

'You say that every time,' grunted the doc, pushing her back against the control panel and reaching for a large red button marked **SELF-DESTRUCT**.

'Don't you dare touch the **SELF-DESTRUCT** button!' said Captain Chaos furiously, pushing him away with a sudden burst of strength. 'You'll destroy my greatest creation!'

'Your fifth "greatest creation" this year,' corrected Doctor Extraordinary. 'And, besides, if you didn't want anyone to destroy it, why did you get your evil scientists to build it with a large obvious button labelled **SELF-DESTRUCT**?'

'Every evil creation must have a **SELF-DESTRUCT** device fitted to it,' said Captain Chaos, her brow furrowing with puzzlement. 'It's basically a legal requirement.'

'It absolutely is not a legal requirement,' Doctor Extraordinary pointed out, somersaulting over a chair and aiming a high kick at his enemy's chest. 'Although it does make my job a lot easier.'

'Not a legal requirement, then,' said Captain Chaos.

'What's the phrase I'm looking for? An unwritten rule, that's it! It's an unwritten rule that every evil scheme must have a **SELF-DESTRUCT** button. It's in every story I've ever read about villains.'

'Well, if you've read it in a story,' said the doc, jabbing at the captain with his gloved fists, 'then it's not unwritten, is it?'

'Look, stop arguing with me about grammar!' said Captain Chaos crossly. 'All I'm saying is . . . *don't touch that button!*'

At that moment, Doctor Extraordinary reached the main control desk with a flying leap and smashed his fist down on the red button.

Immediately, there was a hiss from the control-room doors, a red light began to flash in the ceiling, and a calm robot voice declared, 'Self-destruct sequence initiated. All exits have been sealed. Chaos-Bot Five will self-destruct in thirty seconds.'

'What was that?' siad Doctor Extraordinary. 'What did that voice just say?'

'It said Chaos-Bot Five will self-destruct in thirty seconds,' replied Captain Chaos. 'What did you expect

it to say after you'd just pressed the large button clearly marked with the words **SELF-DESTRUCT**?'

'No, before that,' said the doc urgently. 'The bit about the exits.'

'Chaos-Bot Five will self-destruct in twenty-five seconds,' intoned the calm robotic voice.

'The exits?' said Captain Chaos.

'Yes! It said something about sealing the exits!'

'Hang on. I'll get in touch with supervillain support.' She pressed a button on the control panel. 'Come in, Castle Chaos. Are you receiving me?'

'This is Anna Podium back at the lab, Captain,' crackled a voice. 'How can I help you?'

'She's the real brains behind these robots,' explained Captain Chaos, looking up. 'She heads up the Evil Robot Construction Department at the castle. Brilliant scientist, completely brilliant. Ah, Podium,' she said into the microphone, 'we've just activated the **SELF-DESTRUCT** on the Chaos-Bot, and it said something about the exits. What's going on with that?'

'Yes!' The crackly voice from the radio sounded excited and, if we're being honest, more than a bit deranged.

'That's the most brilliant and chaotic advancement I've made in this latest robot. If the **SELF-DESTRUCT** sequence is initiated, all the exits are immediately sealed. It's impossible to escape, even with super strength like yours, Captain.'

'Chaos-Bot Five will self-destruct in fifteen seconds,' added the robotic voice.

'Are you joking, Podium?' raged Captain Chaos into the microphone. 'We're sealed inside a robot that's about to explode? What on earth is the point of that?'

'Well,' said Anna Podium, top villain scientist, giant-robot inventor and – it was now becoming clear – totally unhinged, 'it's designed to stop anyone activating the **SELF-DESTRUCT** mechanism. Obviously!'

'Don't you think,' shouted Doctor Extraordinary from the other side of the room, where he was tugging frantically at the heavy metal doors, which refused to budge even a millimetre, 'that it might have been a good idea to tell your boss that before she set off? Or have clearer signage?'

'Chaos-Bot Five will self-destruct in ten seconds,' interrupted the robot voice.

'Oh, this is just great, isn't it?' Doctor Extraordinary's face was sheened with sweat as he pushed desperately at the doors. 'I'm supposed to be making an after-dinner speech at the town hall tonight. The mayor's coming! What about overriding the **SELF-DESTRUCT** system?'

'Great idea!' Captain Chaos pressed the **TRANSMIT** button once again. 'Podium, can we override the system and stop the **SELF-DESTRUCT** sequence?'

'What would be the point of that?' came the answer. 'Not very evil, is it? Stop the **SELF-DESTRUCT** system just because you've changed my mind? That's the worst idea you've ever had.'

Anna Podium gave a slight snort that sounded very much like a badly muffled chuckle.

'Oh –' Doctor Extraordinary was about to say something rather rude at that point, but fortunately he was stopped by the robot exploding.

Ben Bailey had been broadcasting the whole thing from his nearby rooftop. 'We've seen Doctor Extraordinary drop inside the giant robot,' he told the viewers excitedly. 'He's probably reached the control room by now, and I



imagine he'll be wrestling with Captain Chaos, trying to activate the robot's **SELF-DESTRUCT** system.'

'And, Bwen,' asked Susie Carpenter back in the studio, through a mouthful of cheese toastie, 'bwhy boes Pwaptain Phaos bwild his bwiant bwobots with **PHELF-BESTWUCT** physssstsms?'

(For the full effect, please read that sentence out loud with a mouthful of hot bread and melted cheese. Just be careful of any nearby soft furnishings.)

'Sorry, Susie,' said Ben in a confused tone. 'I didn't quite catch that question. You appear to have your mouth full of cheese toastie.'

He was feeling a little frustrated. He'd only been put back on air after he'd called the studio and pleaded that this was a major news story, and he was rather nettled that he was considered less interesting than a turbo-toastie. And now, to make it worse, the toastie was preventing him from understanding the show's host.

'Bwy bed –' Susie Carpenter paused to give a large swallow – 'I said,' she went on more clearly and less crumbily, 'why does Captain Chaos build her giant robots with **SELF-DESTRUCT** systems?'

'Well, Susie, it's really hard to say,' Ben replied. 'I suppose you might call it an unwritten rule of baddies. But there certainly will be a **SELF-DESTRUCT**, and . . . yes, in fact, you might be able to hear that?'

'Self-destruct sequence initiated!'

boomed a voice from the robot's mouth.

'I don't know if you caught that, Susie,' said Ben, 'but I can exclusively reveal – live – here on *Good Morning Paragon* that the robot's **SELF-DESTRUCT** sequence has indeed been activated.'

'We did hear that, Ben, thanks,' said Susie with a sniff. 'It was extremely loud.'

'ANY SECOND NOW,'

declared Bailey seriously, 'we'll see Doctor Extraordinary heroically leaping out of the robot before it explodes. Stay with us here on *GMP* for this breaking live-news story.'

'And more toastie secrets coming up with Harriet,' added Susie, worried that some viewers might switch channels rather than watch yet another live superhero rescue.

'ANY SECOND NOW,'

repeated Ben, 'the hero of Paragon City will appear.

Probably carrying the unconscious form of his enemy, Captain Chaos, who will escape to fight another day.

ANY . . . SECOND . . . NOW.

Just keep watching. He'll escape . . . before the robot explodes. That's what happened last time. And the time before that. And, indeed, the time before that.

ANY . . . SECOND . . .'

Bang.

The word 'bang' doesn't really do justice to the noise that interrupted Ben Bailey's live broadcast at this point. But it's the best word we can think of. You need to imagine a big bang, though. Like a really, really big bang. In fact, to do it justice, we really need to write the word 'bang' in such big letters that it fills an entire page. You know what? This is our book, and we can do whatever we want, so let's just make that happen, shall we?


BANG

That's better.

With a BANG so large that it filled an entire page, the giant robot exploded in a ball of orange flame. The heat was so intense that Ben Bailey had to duck down beneath the parapet of his rooftop, shielding his head with his arms, as a shower of tiny pieces of superheated metal pattered over him like really, really unpleasant rain. All over Paragon City, TV viewers watched in total disbelief.

In the *GMP* studio, Susie Carpenter had frozen with her mouth open. She'd been just about to take another bite of turbo-toastie, and a blob of hot cheese slowly detached itself from the sandwich and plopped on to the leg of her smart trouser suit.

'Susie!' her producer was screaming in her earpiece. 'Don't just sit there gawping! *Say* something!'

Susie Carpenter was a professional. Within a few seconds, she'd collected herself, arranging her face into a sombre-yet-approachable expression.

'The rest of today's programme,' she said seriously into the camera, 'will be a tribute to Doctor Extraordinary, the world's only superhero and defender of Paragon City,

who has just –' She searched her brain for the appropriate expression. 'I'm not quite sure how to put this. Who has just . . . very sadly . . . been blown up inside a giant robot along with his arch-enemy, Captain Chaos.'

'That's great!' shrilled the producer's voice in her ear. 'Keep going just like that! Viewing figures will be through the roof! Look a bit more devastated!'

In his flat, Sonny Nelson was watching in complete and utter shock. He literally could not believe what he was seeing. Susie Carpenter was now dabbing unconvincingly at her eyes with a tissue as, on a screen behind her, a mushroom cloud of smoke expanded over the northern half of the city.

'What's going on?' asked his father, coming back into the room wrapped in a towel. 'Has he saved the day yet? Did he blow up the robot?'

'He . . .' Sonny couldn't quite believe what he was about to say. 'He did blow up the robot, but he was . . .' He swallowed painfully – it felt like something was stuck in his throat. 'He was still inside it.'

'What?' His dad gaped at him. 'Still inside the

robot? When it blew up? You don't mean he's . . . he's surely not . . .'

'Yeah.' Sonny Nelson steeled himself. 'He's gone.'

Phew. OK, that's the sad bit over with, we promise. From now on, it's silliness and pandas a gogo. And there's a good reason for all this, honestly. Look, if you're feeling a bit deflated by all that, don't stop reading now, whatever you do. Keep going through Chapter 1 and you'll feel a lot better. Guaranteed. We're sorry about this, OK? Here's a picture of a dolphin playing the flute to make it up to you. That's the prologue over and done with. Let's start the book properly, shall we? You're going to love it . . .

