Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Steel Trapp

Written by

Ridley Pearson

Published by

Quercus

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

PROLOGUE

31 MAY
OPENING DAY, THE
NATIONAL SCIENCE CHALLENGE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

His heart stopped . . . It had nothing to do with nerves.

The stands surrounding the science challenge's demonstration area teemed with parents and family members, all jostling for better views. In the front rows, reporters had their laptops out, while their colleagues manned TV cameras at the back of the hall, their black lenses staring up at the stage like giant eyeballs.

Exhibition Room B of the Grand Hyatt's convention centre had been converted into a kind of basketball arena with a raised stage at one end, stands on both sides, and a cordoned-off media area at the opposite end. Prior to introductions – which were to be done alphabetically, making Steven 'Steel' Trapp one of

the last names to be called – the previous year's winner was to demonstrate his blue-ribbon invention.

Steel shielded his eyes from the bright lights that played down onto him and the other contestants, searching for his mother among the hundreds of guests in the audience. His breath caught, and he gasped aloud as he thought he recognized a face out there.

The foreign woman from the train . . . Spanish or Mexican, with dark hair and brooding, worried, eyes.

The stupid lights from the TV cameras blinded him, and though he did everything he could to block them – short of standing up and leaving the stage – he couldn't be certain that it was her.

The cameras all followed a robot that came out onto the floor – it looked like a traffic cone with a retractable arm – and tried to pick up a glass full of water, but dropped it. The glass broke, the water spilled, and the audience let out a sigh of disappointment.

But quickly, a second robot zoomed out, bounced off a chair, vacuumed up the broken glass, and mopped up the water.

The crowd applauded – the broken glass had been part of the demonstration.

Steel held his hand up to the lights once again:

empty! Her seat was empty now. He scanned the faces in the crowd, wishing he weren't part of this.

Initially, he had been thrilled to have earned a spot in the National Science Challenge. He'd come here to demonstrate and explain his remote-controlled electronic sniffer. But the events of the past few days had changed all that; he had much more serious concerns now. A human life hung in the balance. Playing with robots seemed foolish.

As the introductions began, Steel consoled the kid next to him, who seemed ready to faint. Then he searched the crowd again. He spotted Kaileigh and wondered at the injustice of her being in the stands. She belonged onstage with him and the others. Like all girls his age, she looked older than Steel. She had brownish-red hair, green eyes, and some freckles at her cheekbones. But beneath her good looks she was just another geek, and not ashamed to admit it. He was angry about the circumstances that now prevented her from participating.

He finally caught sight of his mother – near the aisle in the second row on his left – her full attention fixed on him. She glanced away quickly when caught, then slowly looked back and met his eyes. Her expression begged him not to be mad at her for staring. But he wasn't mad at her. It was his father

who had annoyed him. A week earlier his dad had extended a business trip at the last minute. He was supposed to be the one in the stands, not Steel's mum. His dad had bailed on him – bailed on a project he'd helped Steel create. His dad absolutely should have been here. His dad belonged here. His dad was a jerk for missing this. Worse, Steel had had a bad feeling about his dad just before his mum had told him he wasn't going to make it home in time for the trip. A very bad feeling. More than anything, he just wanted to see his dad in person, to talk to him. It felt almost as if . . . but he pushed that horrible thought away, as he had so often this past week.

Steel looked for the mystery woman again, and again there was a gap in the stands where she'd been sitting.

One by one, the contestants were introduced. The next kid up to the microphone wore a Hawaiian shirt, a vain attempt to be someone he was not. A nerd was a nerd. Get used to it.

One of the cameras moved at the back of the room. Steel looked in that direction. But it wasn't the camera he saw. Instead, he caught sight of two men, two faces he knew only too well.

The two federal agents from Union Station.

He could hardly think.

Oddly enough, they weren't looking at him, but instead, into the crowd. He followed their gaze.

There!

She'd switched seats. The woman with the dark eyes. The woman with the foreign accent from the train platform in Chicago. The woman who'd started all the trouble with the briefcase in the first place.

He had no doubts now: it was her, sitting only a few rows behind Steel's mother.

To his horror, he watched as his mother also spotted the agents. She got up from her seat in a hurry and worked her way down the aisle and – steaming mad; there was no mistaking that look of hers – marched toward the taller agent. Steel had to stop her.

He stood up.

An older kid next to him pushed him down and said, 'Stay in your seat, Einstein. It's not your turn, unless your name is Annie Delmer.'

Steel's belly twisted into an unforgiving knot.

There was only one explanation for the woman's being here: she was looking for the briefcase.

FRIDAY, 13 MAY
TWO WEEKS BEFORE
THE CHALLENGE

Kyle Trapp's heart soared. He loved flying, and he was currently piloting a single-engine Cessna two thousand metres above Lake Michigan. The sky shone blue above lake water of cinnamon gray. Kyle possessed information vital to the investigation, a secret so sensitive that he couldn't trust telephones or e-mail; he could deliver it only in person. He checked his watch: another two hours.

The smell hit him first: a nasty, bitter taste at the back of his throat. It took him just seconds to realize it was electrical. The plane's avionics – the flight instruments – all went dark simultaneously. He tapped the various dials. Nothing. Without electronics, he couldn't set the plane to fly itself, so he steadied the yoke and double-checked

the fuses by running his hand over them, feeling for one that might be sticking out. Again, nothing.

The motor coughed and sputtered, then caught back to life.

He stayed calm, as he'd been trained, and tried to determine the cause, and therefore the solution. He pulled his laminated checklists out of the door's side pocket, flipped through the pages, and tried some circuit breakers, to no effect.

Every electrical instrument on the plane's console was dead. Only the vacuum-assisted devices still worked: the altitude indicator and the compass.

He pulled a backup radio out of his flight bag, switched it on, and tuned to an emergency frequency.

A new smell: burning oil.

The motor was on fire.

Coughing, he set the radio down on the copilot seat and twisted open the small vent, letting in much-needed fresh air.

The altitude indicator informed him the plane was slipping to the right. Seeing this, he jerked the wheel too strongly, an amateur mistake. The radio slipped off the seat and banged out of sight.

A haze filled the cockpit, despite the vent. He coughed and gagged as it grew thicker.

He reached under his seat for the fire extinguisher –

but where to aim? He couldn't *see* any fire, only smell it.

With a fire raging on the other side of the console, he couldn't use the supplemental oxygen without risk of causing an explosion.

The fuselage began to shudder. The plane picked up speed, now in a steep dive.

Gagging and coughing, he pulled on the yoke, worked the rudder, but everything felt wrong. It wasn't just a dive, it was a spiral. The plane sank faster and faster, the whine of the wind in the side vent now a scream. *What to do?*

He knew how to pull out of a 'dead man's spiral' – he'd not only studied it during his training, but he'd practised it – so why couldn't he remember now? Then he realized why: his head was faint. He wasn't thinking clearly. He was on the verge of passing out.

The motor coughed once more, and died.

His head swooned. He couldn't see, couldn't stop coughing, couldn't think. And yet he pulled the plane out of the spiral. He levelled off and spotted a tiny island up ahead. Or was that the shore?

Holding the yoke one-handed, he unfastened his harness, and lunged across the passenger seat, his right hand frantically searching for the fallen hand-held radio. He felt something . . . *but no, that wasn't*

it. Again his fingers touched cold metal – but this was some part of the seat. *Not the radio.*

One last try: he had it.

He depressed the button on the side of the radio, raised it to his dry lips, and managed to get out one word, over and over like a prayer:

'Mayday . . . Mayday . . . Mayday . . .'

He forced his door open, battling the air pressure holding it shut. For a moment, the cockpit cleared, and he could see.

Sand . . . flat sand . . .

He set the flaps and gripped the yoke with both hands.

1

THURSDAY
TWO DAYS BEFORE
THE NATIONAL
SCIENCE CHALLENGE

'FIDOE stands for Fully Integrated Digital Odour Evaluator. It is to robots what a bloodhound is to the world of dogs. I recycled parts from the MITZ-AI-5, capitalizing on momentum components to conserve battery power.' Steel's voice faltered and cracked above the steady hum of the train carriage's ventilation system. The train stood at platform seven in Chicago's Union Station, awaiting its scheduled departure.

'I'm not saying I understand it the way your father does, but you delivered it well,' Judy Trapp said to her son.

'I can't do this.'

'Of course you can. You read that *very* well. You'll do fine. Read some more.'

'Later,' he said. 'If that's all right.'

'Later is okay,' she said, 'as long as we rehearse the whole talk. It's going to be different with an audience. The more you practise, the easier it will be when the time comes.'

He knew she wouldn't push him – his mother was in awe of his brain power. She was always defending him to his more demanding father. She pretty much gave him whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. He didn't overuse this power – or tried not to – but he knew she was there when he needed her.

'Can I go check on Cairo?' Steel asked. It seemed unfair that their dog had to ride in the baggage compartment.

'Ste . . . ven!' She used his first name rarely, but when she did, it was typically in a tone of voice that informed him he was on dangerous ground. The nickname, Steel, had been the work of one of his teachers, who, astonished by his photographic memory, had said in front of all his friends that he had 'a mind like a steel trap' – making a play on words with his last name. But the nickname had been picked up by his classmates and had stuck, eventually finding its way into his home.

The scolding had a bit of his father in the sound of it, and for a moment it took Steel aback. Truth

was, his mother was out of her element taking him to the National Science Challenge.

She didn't belong here; she never paid any attention to his science projects. *So why now?* It occurred to him that she was there in place of his father because his parents were having problems. He wasn't blind. He'd seen plenty of families self-destruct. But his own? It seemed inconceivable. Still *. . . the way she was acting . . .*

'Ah, come on, Mum. Please?'

'You can visit Cairo only if the guard is free to help you. He has to unlock the baggage car. You heard him. It wasn't my idea.'

She used that excuse whenever handy: it was always somebody else's idea if it amounted to denying him something.

He let his dark hair fall over his eyes, and brushed it away in time to give her the Steel look: a hint of childish sincerity, a touch of playfulness. Cairo gave him the same look when she wanted to go outside and play with her rope toy.

His mother didn't respond in her usual way, so he sneaked a look at himself in the reflection off the window glass: his ears stuck out a little far; his new glasses looked too big – he hated them. His mouth looked small and his nose too big, all because of

those stupid glasses. His mother claimed his face was 'growing into itself', whatever that meant. But combined with his stringy long legs and straw-thin arms, there wasn't much to grow into. Sadly, he thought he looked like the geek he was. He was the walking stereotype of the human nerd, and there wasn't anything he could do about it. If he got spots on top of it all, he was going to go live on an uninhabited island.

'Seventy-eight,' he said.

'Seventy-eight what?' she asked. She always got suckered into these tricks of his, and he felt bad for messing with her, but he wanted to visit Cairo; if she wasn't going to let him, then he was going to mess with her.

'The train carriage,' he said, 'seats seventy-eight passengers. There's space for two wheelchairs.' She looked at him like he was speaking a foreign language. He went on to recite every statistic about the train that he'd read off an Internet site two weeks earlier. He loved to impress her.

'Wow! You are truly amazing,' she said. So proud. So very proud. She couldn't help herself.

'I read it on the Internet.' Steel had a photographic memory and total recall. He needed to read something only once, and even a year later he could recite

it by heart. That was his secret: it wasn't that he was so clever, he just never forgot anything. People assumed the two things were the same – but he knew differently. Clever was knowing everything *and* possessing the creativity to see beyond what you knew. His father was like that. His father had the gift.

'I could look for a guard. If I found one, and he agreed to let me in, then I could go check on Cairo. What's wrong with that?'

She lowered her voice. 'She isn't supposed to even be here, Steel, you know that. I fibbed to get them to allow her to come along. I don't want to push it.'

'You think the guard cares about any of that?' Steel asked. 'I bet they love having a dog on board. Rules don't always make sense, Mum. Everybody knows that, even the people who make them.' He tried to work this logic on her whenever possible, since most of the rules he had to live by were hers and his father's. He could tangle her up pretty well when he really put his mind to it. She wasn't a bad debater, but her heart often got in her way.

'Well, it wasn't me who made this rule,' she said. 'It was the guard, and we're going to obey it. You can look for a guard once the train is a half an hour or so out of the city. The guards have things to do,

don't forget, other than helping little boys go pet their dogs.'

'I'm not a little boy.' Steel gazed out the window at the steady stream of passengers arriving on the platform. His mind wandered to Cairo and what she must be going through. A cross between a German shepherd and a saluki hound, she was a decent-size dog with a dark blond coat and 'feathering' on the backs of her legs. Her travel crate was big, but she was the type of dog that liked to run around and play. She had to be going crazy. He looked down and studied the page of his talk, taking a mental picture of it. Immediately it was committed to memory. He felt tempted to show off and recite it for his mum, but he thought he might wait and use it as a negotiating tool.

Her mobile phone rang and she answered it. This was good: when she got into a good, solid phone call she mentally left the room.

He considered making a break for the baggage car. She wouldn't follow, wouldn't stop him. Probably wouldn't even notice. And if she did notice, she wouldn't make a scene. But he'd pay later, and it was going to be a long trip. He wasn't crazy about the idea of spending nearly two days with his mother mad at him. Better not push it.

'Hold on, just a minute,' she said, cupping the

mobile phone. 'Steel, I'm going to take this by the toilet. It's private.'

'Is it Dad?'

'No. Just private.'

She headed down the aisle and began talking again. Something weird was up: she didn't usually keep secrets from Steel.

He looked down the central aisle at all the people settling in. He knew which head belonged in what seat. Had it memorized. It was just the way his mind worked, some people remembered songs, or dialogue from films. Steel remembered anything and everything he saw: the plays of an American football game, a maths equation three lines long, or the backs of heads of seventy-six people in a train carriage.

So when the pretty woman with the dark hair and sunglasses left her seat and headed off the train and out onto the platform, Steel quickly jumped up, following her window to window, paralleling her movement *away* from the direction of his mother.

Mid carriage he looked up into the overhead rack and saw what he could picture so well: the briefcase. He'd seen her carry it on board, and now she'd left without it. He reached up. He found himself out on the platform, pursuing her. He struggled against the tide of late arrivals, the woman's briefcase in hand.

'Hey! Lady!' he called out in his croaking, cracking voice. It was an embarrassment to even talk. Why couldn't he be a year older right now? He hoisted the briefcase over his head – the thing was light as a feather.

She had to be ignoring him, for she certainly could hear him: everyone was looking in his direction.

'Excuse me! Lady!' he shouted even louder, still hoisting the briefcase.

He caught up to her at last.

'Lady! Lady! Your bag!'

She stopped and turned slowly, as if she didn't want to turn around, as if she were one of those monsters in a horror movie that had the face of the devil. But it wasn't true: she had a nice face. Spanish, maybe. Her eyes widened when she saw what he carried. 'What are you doing?' She couldn't take her eyes off the briefcase. 'What the' – she caught herself – '*heck* are you doing with that?'

Winded, Steel blurted out at her, which was pretty much the way he talked, winded or not. Talking with anyone other than his mum and dad, his mouth became a bottleneck, an impediment to the speed at which his mind worked. The faster he spoke, the fewer words piled up waiting to get out, so he spoke very fast.

'You left this – and I saw you – and I started to follow – and I tried to catch up because I thought you'd forgotten it – and the train's going to leave any minute now – and that would leave you *off* the train and the briefcase *on* the train – and so here I am.' He pushed the case toward her. She didn't accept it, raising her arms.

'Not mine.'

'Yeah. Yours. You carried it on the train not five minutes ago. I saw you. I'm six rows behind you.' He squinted. 'You were seven rows from the front, aisle seat, left side. You have a red squishy thing holding your hair in a ponytail. When you came in, you put the briefcase in the overhead rack and sat down.' Again he encouraged the briefcase toward her.

Her face remained impassive. 'I'm sure you are mistaken.'

Steel knew himself to be many things – precocious, overconfident, intelligent, geeky – but not mistaken. Not now. Not ever. 'No, actually. I'm never wrong.' He stated it for her just like that. He got a rise out of her, too. She took a step back. He said, 'You boarded with this briefcase. You put it up in the overhead rack, and you left the train without it. You don't strike me as a terrorist, and it isn't heavy enough to contain a bomb. . . .'

She looked him up and down. 'You have me confused with someone else, young man. And that means at the moment you've stolen someone's briefcase, and I do not imagine this person will be happy about that.'

'You're wrong,' he said. 'You're lying to me. Why are you lying?'

Her impassive face broke, and she looked clearly uncomfortable. She glanced around the busy platform.

He repeated, 'I saw you. I am *not* making a mistake. I don't make this kind of mistake.'

'Well, you have made one now. You will miss the train,' she said. 'Thank you for trying to help me, but honestly, *it is not mine.*' She delivered this with such an overbearing, angry determination that he didn't challenge her. Never mind that she was flat-out lying.

'Whatever,' he said.

'Good luck at the challenge,' she said. She answered his puzzled expression by pointing to his sweatshirt. It bore the logo and the dates for the National Science Challenge. *Washington, D.C.* and *6–8 June.*

'Oh, yeah,' he said. She'd made her point: he wasn't the only attentive one.

'Goodbye.' She said this in a definitive, final way. No room for discussion. She turned and hurried away.

Steel reentered the train carriage lost in thought.

He absolutely knew what he'd seen. Wasn't going to hear otherwise. So why had she lied?

He was about to return the briefcase to the overhead rack when he spotted his mother standing by their seats, nearly shaking from anger.

He walked down the aisle, past passengers readying for the trip, and joined her.

'Explain yourself, young man.'

When she was mad at him – really mad, like this – she scared him. He knew at these times he held no power over her, and that scared him even more.

He explained himself. What had started out as a good deed had ended in a confused muddle. His mother knew to trust his visual memory. She didn't question for a moment if he was sure what he'd seen. She'd lived with him for fourteen years.

'Well,' she said, 'I can hardly be mad at you for attempting to do a good deed, now can I?' She glanced up the aisle.

'I think we should mention it to a guard. Unattended bags . . . it's no different to an airport.'

'It's not like she's a terrorist or something.'

'Just the same, he'll know what to do. We'll mention it to the guard,' she said.

And that was that.