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Opening extract from

Hero.com

Written by

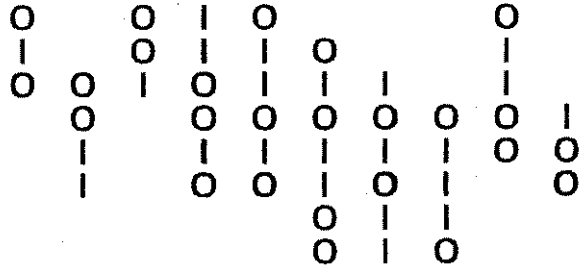
Andy Briggs

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Frozen

The C-130 transport plane bucked against the invisible eddies that swirled around the aircraft 10,000 metres above the earth. More commonly known as a Hercules, the aircraft was the workhorse of the air force—but it had not been designed to take the kind of punishment that was hammering it now.

The malevolent storm had appeared from blue skies. Snow pelted the craft and choked the four powerful engines—one of which was still aflame from the missile impact—forcing it rapidly to lose airspeed and precious altitude. Below, the bleak continent of Antarctica beckoned to the Hercules's passengers with a sub-zero embrace.

Inside, two twelve-year-old boys—Toby and Pete—gripped the safety harnesses bolted to their jump-seats, their knuckles white as the plane bellyflopped. Any items not secured jumped into the air—and remained there, held in a curious state of zero gravity as they nosedived towards the earth.

Toby thought he was going to be sick for sure.

Having watched countless documentaries on the television he remembered the term 'parabola': NASA flew planes towards the earth to simulate zero-G. The planes were affectionately known as 'Vomit Comets'. And that's exactly how he felt now, feeling the bile rise in his throat.

He also recalled seeing that they would have about forty seconds of this nauseating feeling before the plane crashed into the ground. And after everything that had happened this week, he was pretty sure they wouldn't survive *that*.

All these thoughts flitted through Toby's mind in a second. He smashed open the restraining clip on his safety harness and floated out into the cargo area of the plane like he'd seen astronauts do on television.

Pete watched Toby free-float out and unbuckled his own belt to join him. Unable to precisely control his movements, Toby floated upside-down, the inverted perspective disorienting him further.

Thirty seconds to impact . . .

'We have to open the rear doors!' yelled Toby over the monstrous droning of the Allison Turboprop engines.

Pete looked around frantically. 'The release switch is automated. It's in the cockpit.'

'Dammit!' cried Toby.

They both knew there was no time to break through

into the fortified cockpit and override the mechanical Drone Pilot.

Twenty-five seconds.

Toby kicked himself away from the bulkhead, and soared towards the rear of the aircraft, steadying himself as he flew over pallets held in place with canvas webbing. He knew once they opened the door the supply pallets would create an additional problem.

Pete tried to use his arms to swim through the air; instead he revolved uselessly on the spot.

Toby cried over to him. 'I can't do this! This is your area of expertise!'

Pete threw out a hand and steadied himself by catching the pallet webbing.

'Blast the doors and use the pallets to spring out!' cried Toby.

That was the problem with flying; it was difficult to do if you were plummeting. You needed a springboard to push yourself upwards. Even with superpowers, physics always butted its unwelcome nose in.

Twenty . . .

Pete laboriously heaved himself over to Toby. Both boys planted their feet against the pallets; coiled for action.

Pete removed his glasses—he had long learnt his lesson—and focused on the rear cargo door that opened like a jaw under the Hercules's tail section.

BAM! A concentrated beam of blue energy leapt from his eyes and blew the cargo door into twisted metal fragments. Frigid winds sucked at the aircraft's contents.

The sudden loss of pressure pulled the contents of the craft out with teeth-jarring speed. The pallets vaulted under their feet, rocketing the teenagers out into the blizzard. Inertia pushed them flat against the boxes underfoot but both boys knew they had to push upwards; otherwise they would simply crash into the ground with the rest of the aircraft.

Using every part of their remaining strength, they pushed—and suddenly they found themselves flying up, away from the aircraft and its cargo of supply pallets—

And towards the jagged mountains!

No sooner had they taken flight, than the Hercules smashed forcibly into the side of the mountain. Pete's mental countdown had not taken account of the fact that the ground had swept up in the form of the Neptune Mountain Range to meet them.

The Hercules transport erupted into a vivid orange fireball. Twenty freefalling pallets impacted into the inferno seconds later. Toby could feel the flames licking his heels, but he urged himself to fly faster, throwing out both arms before him, just in case that assisted. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pete banking downwards, away from the fireball's path. Toby lost no time in joining him.

They arced around and down in a flight path that a military jock would term a 'yo-yo manoeuvre'. Within seconds the steeply sloping, icy flanks of the mountain were underneath them and the Hercules was lost from visibility in the storm.

The cold bit hard, zapping Toby's energy even through the multilayered thermal gear that covered almost every centimetre of him. He knew he had no choice but to land firmly on the mountain slope, or risk dropping from the sky and rolling the rest of the way downhill. A quick glance confirmed Pete was thinking the same.

Toby pivoted so he was no longer aiming headfirst down the mountain. He slowed, dropping the last metre to the ground. He fell on all fours to keep his balance, and sank to his knees and elbows. Pete landed next to him. Already the driving blizzard had coated them with a layer of frost.

Pete's teeth chattered. 'That . . . was a new experience, huh?'

Before Toby could reply a noise got his attention. It was bass-heavy, countering the wind's tremolo. The ground beneath them shook; with a feeling of dreadful realization, Toby turned his gaze uphill.

The flaming carcass of the aircraft was sledging down the hill, and gaining momentum with every second.

'Watch out!' screamed Toby.

He had no time to push his friend aside, and no strength to take flight again. Instead he could only leap sideways with the very last of his energy.

His face was buried in the snow as he landed, and the world shook around him as the burning twisted debris thundered past like a runaway locomotive. He remained motionless as, seconds later, he was pelted with smaller debris that bounced off his protective gear. Toby was certain that, had he not been wearing the multiple layers, a jagged piece of shrapnel would have cut him open.

The ground stopped trembling and the driving wind howled some more. Toby picked himself up and looked wildly around.

Pete had gone.

'Pete! Where are you?'

Panic seized him, overriding the permeating chill. He staggered forward.

'Pete! Please?'

He looked hopelessly around, and then dropped to his knees. With every ounce of self-control, he stopped himself from crying; tears would freeze over his eyeballs in the −50° Celsius atmosphere and no doubt blind him.

If the aircraft had struck Pete then he would surely be dead. Pete's current range of superpowers would do nothing to save him from being crushed by a flaming aircraft.

Dead. Maybe like Lorna, Emily . . . and his mother.

Toby shook the dark thoughts from his mind and assessed his situation. It was almost as stark. He was two thousand miles away from the nearest civilization, which was located on the tip of Argentina, trapped at over a thousand feet on the snow-covered peak. Hurricane-strength winds promised to spirit him away if he dared fly again—not that he had the strength.

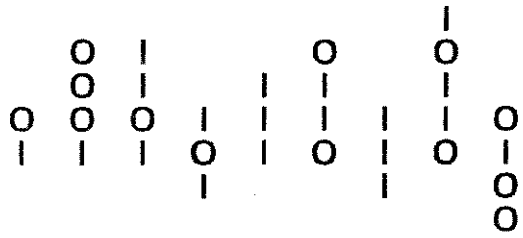
His best friend was probably dead. His sister and her friend had been caught, and a madman held his mother captive: an unspeakably evil villain who had demolished Fort Knox in the United States.

And it seemed Toby was the only person who could now save the world from disaster.

Talk about a bad week.

Toby reflected on how the last seven days had transformed their lives beyond imagination. In one moment he and his friends had turned from teenagers into superheroes. The innocence of their youth had been stripped raw.

Everything had changed the day they chanced on the source of their extraordinary powers . . .



The Storm

It was cold, but crystal blue skies offered a perfect day for laser-tag in the forest that stood at the end of the road. Brown fronds crunched noisily underfoot, but the flaxen leaves that still clung to the trees offered just enough cover to hide. As usual the game between Toby and Pete was fast and furious. Toby was the more athletic of the two, and pressed his advantage by sprinting through the trees, leaving Pete exhausted by the time he caught up. Plus, Pete was never a good shot. In fact, had the gun been a high-energy laser, rather than a toy, half the trees in the forest would have been on fire. Now *that* would be fun.

But after almost an hour of punishing laser combat, the sky had glowered. Bloated clouds rolled across the sun and brought a heavy shower that forced the boys to retreat from the forest. The autumns had become increasingly erratic thanks to their parents' legacy of global warming. By the time they reached the garden gate the shower had bloomed into a torrential downpour that

hammered a rhythmic tattoo against the garden furniture.

And the back door was locked from the inside.

'Lorna!' yelled Toby as he rattled the handle and thumped on the wooden frame, flakes of old paint floating to the ground. 'It's raining! Open up!'

Pete had caught him up and joined Toby in beating the door. 'Why's it locked?' he asked, cold raindrops dripping across his glasses and blurring his vision.

'My sister, that's why.'

On cue, shrill laughter from the window above got their attention. Lorna brushed her long dark hair from across her face as she watched her brother's predicament. A flash of blonde hair appeared alongside to watch with equally wicked amusement: Emily.

'Getting wet?' taunted Lorna. 'Not a good day to be stuck outside.'

Toby stood back, waving his laser-tag rifle in frustration. 'Oh, very witty. Very *clever*. You'll pass your exams in a flash with comments like that!'

Pete was not as adept in sarcasm as his friend and shouted, 'Can't you see we're soaked?'

Lorna was unmoved. 'Serves you both right!'

Pete scowled. 'What've I done?'

'Not letting us join in your stupid game,' chided Lorna.

The rain was coming down harder; fat drops slapped

their faces. And each strike infuriated Toby. 'If it's so stupid, then why are you upset?'

'Upset? Do I *sound* upset? I'm having a great time! I'm in here, nice and warm. And *dry*.'

Toby held back his angry reply; he didn't want to risk aggravating his sister. He swapped a glance with Pete who knew what was coming next. The ultimate weapon. 'If you don't let us in right now . . . then I'll tell Mum when she gets back.'

'A bit old for that, aren't we?'

So maybe the 'ultimate weapon' didn't apply as much when you're twelve, or in Lorna's case, an unscrupulous thirteen and a bit.

'Looks like you're stuck!' said Emily with delight.

Lorna nodded. 'And after all the stupid jokes you two have played on us, nothing's going to change our minds.'

No sooner had the words slipped from her mouth than a jagged lightning bolt stabbed the ground with multiple forks, blasting a pair of heavy branches off a solid oak tree that had dominated the garden for over a hundred years. With a terrifying crack of electricity, fragments of wood shot across the grass.

Lorna blanched, looking up in shock. Toby and Pete spun round; the smell of charred wood invaded their nostrils as several scarred branches crashed to the floor in a shower of embers just a few metres away.

* * *

Toby's scalp was red by the time Lorna had finished vigorously towelling it dry. Now his hair pointed in every direction, as if he'd been electrocuted.

'Stop it! It hurts,' complained Toby as he pushed Lorna back.

'I said I'm sorry!' sighed Lorna. And to her surprise she actually was. Like most siblings, she and Toby fought occasionally (or constantly if you listened to their parents), but it was never too serious.

The four of them sat around the large, solid-timber kitchen table, with a bottle of cola standing open. Pete refilled his glass for the fourth time, pausing only to belch loudly.

'You almost killed us out there!' accused Toby.

Lightning licked across the heavens as if to emphasize his point. It was now a tempest outside, the sky as dark as charcoal.

'Which means we're stuck with each other in here,' warned Lorna.

Pete and Emily exchanged a surreptitious glance. They had long watched their friends bicker—and while they openly supported them, inside they wished they'd both just get it over with. Some disagreements had been known to continue for *days*. And this was just the kind of thing Pete would rather avoid.

'Well, just keep out of my way and we'll be fine,' said Toby. 'No more arguments.'

'Fine. We'll do our own thing.'

'Good,' said Toby sullenly.

'There are lots of things we can still do inside.'

There was a pregnant pause.

Lorna's and Toby's eyes locked as though reading one another's thoughts. Toby's leg muscles tensed, and by the time he was on his feet Lorna had already bolted ahead of him through the kitchen door.

Like her brother, Lorna enjoyed sports, in particular cross-country running. But Toby had the advantage in short-distance sprints and he shoved her against the wall as they passed in the hallway, leaving her shouting after him as he entered their father's study.

'Toby! Stop! That's so not fair!'

Emily and Pete followed in their wake, eager to join the chase but unaware of their destination.

The study was lined with reference books, framed maps, and photographs of exotic destinations, souvenirs from their father's constant travelling. A heavy desk, the size of a wardrobe, sat in front of massive bay windows offering an impressive view of the garden and the angry storm.

Toby vaulted the side of the desk and slipped straight into the comfortable leather reclining chair, situated directly in front of a large LCD computer monitor. He

stabbed the desktop computer's power button as Lorna sprinted into the study and sat heavily on his lap, knocking the breath from him.

'Get off it!' Lorna shouted, and punched his arm for emphasis.

'Why should I?' said Toby, trying to push her off with little success. He swallowed the comment he was about to make about Lorna feeling heavier. He knew mentioning her weight would turn the situation nuclear.

Pete and Emily had now entered the room as the computer booted up, its cooling fan noisily whirling away inside.

Lorna pressed her weight harder on Toby's stomach before she climbed off him.

'Emily and I were going to use that!' she protested.

Toby grinned as the Windows theme played from the computer's speakers. 'Tough. I was here first. You could've used it while we were outside.' His hand had already manoeuvred the mouse so he could select the Internet icon. Two clicks and the broadband connection took him online as thunder boomed outside.

'We have homework to do!' protested Emily.

'Well go do it then,' said Pete smugly as he dragged a high-backed wooden chair across to sit by Toby.

Emily glared at him. 'I meant *on* the computer.'

But Toby and Pete already had their noses in the

on-screen browser, scrutinizing the numerous links on the colourful homepage that had appeared.

'Check out the movie trailers,' said Pete, placing a greasy fingerprint on the screen as he pointed to the link. He glanced up at Emily. 'If you've homework to do, don't you have a computer at home?'

Emily shook her head. She had an older brother at home, and was used to having to fight to get her own way. She was annoyed at Pete, his attitude always seemed to change around Toby. When he was alone with Emily they had fun and he was always looking out for her. But as soon as Toby entered the equation Pete would side with him no matter what. She wasn't going to allow him to get his own way this time. She opened her mouth to respond—as lightning lit up the room like a flashbulb. A second later thunder clapped the air with astonishing fury, making them all jump.

'Storm's getting worse,' warned Emily.

Lorna followed her gaze outside as she had a troubling thought. 'Toby, I don't think you should be on the phone during a thunderstorm.'

Toby didn't look up, as a series of the latest Hollywood movie trailers appeared on-screen. 'We're not on the phone. We're on the net.'

'Yeah, but it still uses the phone line, stupid.'

Pete looked up at her, his mouth forming the words

to agree. But whatever sound came out was masked by a blinding flash of lightning and a simultaneous sonorous roll of thunder that made the pictures on the wall rattle as if a bomb had exploded outside.

Which was close to what had actually happened. Lorna saw the jagged fork of lightning lick the top of the telegraph pole at the end of the garden, and when she closed her eyes she still had the ghostly after-image imprinted on her retina. None of them saw the electric bolt crackle along the phone cable towards the house.

The computer made a high-pitched death rattle before the screen went blank.

Pete's heart was hammering from the momentary excitement. 'Wow! That was close!'

Lorna shook her head. 'It struck the telephone pole. Look, it killed the computer.'

Toby stared at the blank screen in horror. 'Oh, God, no. Not now.'

A vengeful smile tugged Lorna's lips. 'Dad is going to kill you for breaking his computer! All his work files are on it!'

Toby blanched and felt a sudden sickness in the pit of his stomach. Lorna was right. Their father was an archaeologist and, as far as Toby knew, all his research was stored on the hard drive. He just prayed that his father had had the foresight to insure against exactly this type of situation.

'Dad's not even in the country!' He wondered where exactly he was; somewhere in Mexico, Mum had said. His work meant that it was usual for him to disappear for weeks on end with only a satellite phone for communication, and that was usually temperamental at best.

'Lightning could have blown the fuse, or even the power pack!' said Emily.

Pete looked at her sceptically. 'Oh, you're a PC expert all of a sudden?'

Emily rolled her eyes and tried to hide her smile.

Pete examined the casing. 'Fan's still on in the computer. Maybe it's just the screen?'

Toby thumbed the monitor's power button with a faint trace of hope. His spirits lifted as an image slowly returned to the screen.

'Thank God!' he said, breathing out a huge sigh of relief. He flicked a victorious look at his sister. 'It's not broken.'

Lorna pulled a face. 'Well, you should get off it before you do break it.'

Not willing to chance his luck any further, Toby reluctantly agreed. 'Point taken.'

His hand found the mouse, guiding it across the virtual desktop, to shut the system down. Pete suddenly grabbed his wrist to stop him.

'Wait! That's not the website we were on before.'

The movie trailers had been replaced by a completely different set of icons and text, all of it unfamiliar.

'So? You'd still better turn it off,' warned Lorna.

Toby waved his hand to silence her. 'Hold on, Lorn. Take a look. This is weird.'

Lorna and Emily crowded next to the boys. A bold banner filled the top of the screen: 'HERO.COM'.

'This another of your stupid comic book sites?' Emily asked.

Pete pointed to the screen, leaving a new greasy splodge where his finger had been. 'Look at the web address.'

'www.geekybrother, by any chance?' said Lorna smugly.

The address bar on the screen was devoid of the usual 'http:' or 'www' prefixes and instead a series of strange characters replaced them. 'What kind of site is Hero.com?' asked Lorna.

'One that's not on the Internet,' said Toby ominously as another flash of lightning and a thunder roll indicated the storm was retreating. But the rain outside drummed more heavily.

Underneath the banner, a series of four icons stood out. Toby passed the pointer over each; it changed to a hand, indicating the icons were separate links to click on. But other than the enigmatic title, there was not another word in English . . . or any other language for that matter.

'Click on something,' urged Pete.

'OK. The first symbol, I suppose,' said Toby, motioning towards a swirling whirlpool. He clicked and moments later the webpage changed to another series of icons. These looked more familiar: a stickman-like figure in various poses: flexing muscles, lines coming from its eyes, stretched horizontally, shimmering, bloated . . . There were many and Toby had to scroll down the page to see them all.

'This is stupid,' said Emily. 'It's just another dull nerdy website.'

With a faint pop, a smaller window appeared on the screen. Paragraphs of text wavered between dozens of languages before finally solidifying into English.

'I can't read that. What's it say?' said Pete taking off his glasses and rubbing the dirty lenses vigorously on his shirt.

Toby read aloud, 'Welcome to Hero.com. As new visitors you have a free two-day trial download. Maximum of one download per person. Be sure to check out the mission board and don't forget to fight on for justice!'

Silence filled the room as they each took in the words.

'Junk,' said Lorna. 'I've heard about these things. They ask you to download what turns out to be a virus onto your computer then they take all your bank details.'

'It's called phishing,' said Pete.

Emily glanced at him. 'You would know that, wouldn't you?'

'I know a lot of stuff,' he snapped back defensively.

'So what's the harm? I don't have a bank account,' said Toby.

'Duh! Our parents do! It's all a big scam to get money!'

Toby looked thoughtfully at the screen. 'Maybe they're just games? And the first two days are free?'

'You're an idiot,' said Lorna.

Toby's cursor circled the screen, the pointer falling on the icon of the stickman crouching on all fours. 'We've got a virus checker. What's the worst thing that can happen?'

His finger clicked the button.

The screen seemed to ripple. Toby could have sworn the very material of the LCD screen bulged towards him like a funnel, whipping out to tap him gently on the forehead, all in a split second.

Lorna gaped at her brother, not quite believing her eyes. But the expressions that Pete and Emily wore confirmed that something bizarre had just occurred.

'Now that was a strange . . . optical illusion. Must have been. You OK, Tobe?' asked Pete.

Toby nodded. The room seemed to revolve unsteadily around him as though he'd been spinning on the spot.

He placed both hands firmly on the desk to steady himself. 'I'm fine. Just a little dizzy.' The feeling passed as soon as he said it. He pulled his hands from the desk.

They wouldn't budge.

Toby frowned. He pulled harder. This time his hands peeled away like a suction cup on a window, complete with a loud noise like a Velcro-strip tearing. The others backed away from him, concern evident on their faces. Toby examined his hands. They seemed normal enough, if a little grubby.

'What's wrong?' asked Pete.

Toby remained silent. He stood up from his chair, hands held straight out with his palms up. His fingers tingled as if he'd been sleeping on them. Some inkling appeared at the back of his mind, spurred on by his overactive imagination.

'Something's different,' he mumbled.

Lorna raised her hand to his shoulder, but the expression on his face made her hesitate. 'What is it?'

Toby turned to the curtains and gingerly touched them with one hand. The material instantly stuck to his fingers like glue and would not drop away until he gave his fingers a sharp flick.

'What's on your hands?' Lorna asked.

'Some kind of electrostatic charge?' asked Pete. 'Like when paper sticks to a comb, or you rub a balloon on your hair and it sticks to the wall.'

Lorna shot Pete a scornful glance. 'Thanks for that, Professor. I am in the highest set for science, OK?'

Peter winced. He hated being called 'Professor', that was the nickname the bullies at school had attached to him.

A million thoughts swirled around in Toby's mind. He'd read enough comics and watched enough hours of cartoons to be able to put the pieces together. Even if the pieces were extremely unlikely, or even impossible.

He turned to face a wall and extended his hands, palms up, fingers splayed. Toby licked his lips in anticipation; then thrust his hands forward.

They stuck to the wall!

Emily's mouth opened in amazement. 'What's happening to you?'

With a grunt Toby placed one foot against the wall, then the other. They stuck too. Whatever had happened to him had also affected the material of his trainers.

'What the heck?' exclaimed Lorna, astonished at the sight of her brother held fast against the wall.

'I'm walking . . . *on* . . . the wall!' said Toby in astonishment.

Using all his strength he managed to free his right hand and left foot, positioning them further up the wall. Then he followed with his opposite limbs—pushing him higher up the surface.

Pete pushed his glasses firmly on his nose, as though it would dispel the illusion. 'That's utterly impossible!'

Pulling himself further up the wall, Toby positioned himself nose-to-nose with the ceiling.

'Impossible or not . . . he's doing it,' said Lorna in an awed voice. She was smart and, if she were under duress, she'd have to admit they all were. But Toby's actions defied both physics and logic, at least to the best of her knowledge. Surely, she thought, if people could walk up walls then everybody would be doing it? She would have seen it on TV. A voice of reason chimed from the recesses of her mind: she must have fallen unconscious when the lightning struck. This *must* be a dream.

But as her nails dug into the palms of her clenched fists the pain assured her she was still conscious, which meant this had to be *real*.

'We'll be famous,' she murmured.

'That's awesome!' exclaimed Pete.

'No, *that* is so *weird*!' Emily added.

'Watch this then,' said Toby, now feeling a little more confident with his new-found skill.

Leaning backwards as much as he dared, he moved one hand to the ceiling, quickly followed by the other. Making the transition from vertical wall to upside-down ceiling with his feet was easier than he'd anticipated.

'This is brilliant,' he exclaimed as he scuttled across the ceiling like a lizard, as the others started giggling despite their trepidation, 'except I can feel the blood rushing to my head.'

Lorna shook her head. 'This can't be possible.'

'You're right,' said Pete, grinning as he pushed himself into the leather chair and rolled forward to the keyboard. 'It's the website! It lets you do the impossible! Gives you the power. I have to try this!'

Emily craned over his shoulder. 'How? You can't just download it. It's not music you know! You can't download physical things. If you could, nobody would leave their homes! They'd be downloading pizza all the time.' She wavered, suddenly uncertain. 'Can you?'

Pete tapped the screen. 'Look! "Hero.com". Says it all. Toby's just turned himself into a superhero.'

Lorna tore her gaze away from her brother. 'Pete, no! You don't know the . . .'

Click! Again the screen seemed to funnel out and tap Pete on his forehead. He found the micro-experience unsettling. Emily blinked, missing the whole event.

Toby scuttled in a circle on the ceiling. He peered down at them, his voice filled with excitement. 'Well, what did you choose?'

Pete shook his head. 'I have no idea. I was going for the flying guy . . . but the mouse slid. I clicked on something else.'

He climbed from the chair and stretched his arms expectantly. Nothing happened.

'Come on!' he screamed. 'Go!'

'Maybe it only works the once?' Lorna said.

Pete walked around the desk to the centre of the room, where he stretched his arms out. Toby looked down.

'The screen said a two-day trial,' said Pete. 'It's got to work!'

'Try and jump?' suggested Toby.

Pete jumped, his feet thumping hollowly on the floorboards. 'Nothing,' he reported. A sensation spread through his body, a pleasant kind of pins and needles.

'Maybe it made you stronger or something?' said Emily.

Pete flexed both his arms like a champion weight-lifter as he strained what feeble muscles he had. His arms grew warmer as blood coursed to his biceps—

WHUMP! Snarling orange flames covered his body as though somebody had covered him in petrol and lit a match. Emily screamed as waves of heat seared her face. She could feel her fringe burning. Lorna stepped back, too amazed to say anything.

Toby, who was directly above, had the full impact of the heat blast; flames singed his clothing. He threw his arms up to cover his face, flailed wildly and swung, upside down, from both feet.

Pete stood calmly in the centre of the room, staring at the flames dancing across body and clothing.

'I can't feel a thing!' he exclaimed. 'It tickles slightly, but it's not hot. Not even warm.'

Toby gawped. 'That's incredible.'

'It's impossible,' Lorna whispered. 'You should be burnt alive by now.'

Pete clapped his hands together—a blue spike of fire momentarily gushed from his palms like a Bunsen flame.

'Pete, stop it!' shouted Emily. She looked and sounded worried.

Pete looked up with an expression usually reserved for Christmas Day. 'This is so cool! I mean hot!'

'You'll hurt yourself!' she warned.

'The rug!' shrieked Lorna.

All eyes were drawn to Pete's feet where a circular section of the fine-printed rug had already burned away, the edges smouldering in a slowly increasing circle. Toby just had time to take this in, when an ear-piercing screech made him look round.

'The smoke alarm!' he said.

'Pete!' warned Lorna. Then she saw something beyond him. Through the window, past the lightning-struck telegraph pole, a black BMW four-by-four had turned into the drive, windscreen wipers battling the rain.

'Mum's home!' wailed Lorna.

The moment Pete's attention faltered the flames extinguished in a dull thump. For a moment the four of them stood in confused shock, before Lorna gathered her wits.

'Tobe, turn the computer off! Pete, roll the rug up. We'll have to hide it for now. Em, help me stop the smoke alarm.'

Without question everybody moved into action. Toby scuttled down the wall head-first, and with a faint popping noise vaulted both feet off the wall to the floor and twisted his hands free.

Emily and Lorna dragged a chair into the hallway, directly beneath the smoke alarm. Lorna clambered onto the chair, which creaked under her weight, and stood on her toes—but still the button to mute the device was just out of reach.

Toby slid in front of the computer and grabbed the mouse. But he hesitated. If he closed the website now, would he ever find it again? Was this his only opportunity? This was something he simply couldn't ignore; the implications of what had happened were momentous, and he certainly couldn't let his mother's bad attitude stop them from exploring the find of the millennium.

Since turning twelve, Toby had never seemed able to get along with his mother. It wasn't as though he was always in trouble, in or out of school. It was just a feeling

that nothing he did was good enough for her. She just always seemed to favour Lorna, and with his father rarely around, to whom could *he* turn for support?

His swell of rebellion was dampened by the sound of the car door closing. He knew he had little alternative. Thinking fast, his hand zipped the mouse pointer across the screen. Moments later the computer was shutting down. He turned the switch off at the mains: just his little contribution to using less energy and saving the planet. Then he raced over to Pete, who was struggling to roll the rug.

'Move it!' said Toby, helping him.

Lorna strained for the red smoke alarm button again, annoyed at herself for not being taller. She made one big leap off the chair—and missed. Instead she landed on the floor with both feet, the impact causing a small table to wobble precariously.

'Toby!' yelled Lorna. 'I can't reach the alarm!'

Pete and Toby stashed the rug in a nook between two bookcases. Pete began to frantically stack the fallen books back on the shelf as Toby raced into the hallway.

'Let me try!' said Toby as he climbed on the chair. But he was marginally shorter than his sister, and the button was well out of reach.

'Can't you climb up the wall?' suggested Emily.

Toby looked at her in surprise. Why hadn't he thought of that?

'Hurry!' urged Lorna.

Toby took a deep breath and launched himself off the chair. Pete ran into the hallway just in time to see Toby stick midway up the wall. He scrambled on to the ceiling as if it was the easiest thing in the world. Racing on all fours, he reached the alarm and stabbed the button—silencing it—just as a key was inserted in the front door lock.

Lorna used her foot to kick the chair against the wall. Toby pulled his feet off the ceiling—and hung from his hands, unable to let go.

'Help!' he said, as the front door began to swing open.

Pete and Emily both jumped up and grabbed a leg each. Toby's arms and legs felt as if they were being plucked from their sockets as they tried to pull him away from the ceiling. He wouldn't budge. Toby yelled out in pain as Emily hung from his leg, her feet cycling wildly.

'Let go of me!'

Emily landed back on the floor. Toby heaved himself back to the ceiling and flattened himself just as the door swung fully open. Sarah Wilkinson entered with her arms full of paperwork and her wet black hair plastered across her forehead.

'Hi, Mum!' said Lorna in a bright voice she hoped would hide her nervousness. Emily and Pete forced

wide smiles on their faces and they all tried to avoid looking up at the ceiling.

Directly above them Toby held his breath, not daring to move a muscle. He didn't know if it was his imagination, but it felt as if his grip was giving way.

Sarah frowned, suspicious at being greeted in such a welcoming manner. She looked around. 'Where's your brother?'

'Oh . . . he's hanging about.' Lorna thought her mother looked tired; in fact she often did these days, and she hoped it was not because of her mother's diabetes. But even with the fatigue she showed, Sarah still seemed young for her age—thirty-eight was ancient by any standards, and Lorna hoped that she'd inherited her mother's genes.

Sarah looked suspiciously at Pete. 'What's going on?'

'Nothing. Need a hand?' asked Pete, pointing to her bundle of papers.

That off-the-cuff offer of assistance deepened Sarah's suspicions. 'Seriously, what's happening here?'

Lorna smiled innocently. She was good at that. 'Nothing. We were all just . . . doing homework.'

A smell snagged Sarah's nostrils: 'Can I smell . . . burning?'

Lorna didn't hesitate. 'Yes, but it's OK. Lightning hit the telephone wire outside. It sparked a lot. Gave us all a scare. But we're fine. No damage done.'

Sarah closed the door behind her and nodded. She knew her children's penchant for getting into mischief, but nothing seemed out of place. And if there was a crisis, she hoped she'd raised them to be self-sufficient enough to cope with it.

She was worried because they didn't see much of their parents these days. Her workload had increased, and her husband was forever away on field trips. Right now she was too tired, and wanted nothing more than to take her insulin and sink into a relaxing bath.

'If you say so. Just don't use the computer. I need to work on it tonight and I don't want it damaged by lightning.'

Sarah moved into the lounge, her voice receding. Toby let out a huge breath and scuttled safely down the wall. Lorna wheeled around on him with an accusing finger.

'See? You nearly got us into trouble. You and that stupid website.'

'What did I do?'

Lorna and Emily trudged upstairs. 'I guess that's the end of that!'

Toby and Pete exchanged a glance. They both knew she was wrong. Something like this could not be forgotten, or swept aside. Something like this needed to be explored and tested.