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Opening extract from

Ribblestrop

Written by

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Chapter One

Sam Arthur Tack knew that he was on the threshold of an adventure: the biggest adventure of his life. In fact it was his first adventure, being as he was only twelve years old. He wasn't to know just how dark and dangerous his adventure would be, but he was still close to tears.

'Be brave, son,' said his father.

His mother had tears rolling down both cheeks. 'You make sure you write,' she said. 'As soon as you get there.'

'I can't, though, I—'

'As best you can, love. Draw a picture.'

'I will.' Sam's voice was a cracked whisper and his lips were wobbling.

'It's an opportunity,' said his mother. Her voice was swerving and shaking too: she tried hard to steady it. 'If anything goes wrong, I want you to promise me—'

'Nothing will go wrong,' said his father. 'He's only off to school. Now, where's that pound I gave you?'

'In my pocket.'

'You buy a sandwich when you get to Exeter. We're going to miss you, son.' He shook his son's hand. 'Good luck. Goodbye.'

The train should have left then, to avoid further embarrassment. But trains never leave conveniently and this one was

already six minutes late due to a mix up over staff in the buffet car. The sad farewell had a little while yet to run. Sam rested his chin on the window of the carriage door and let his hands disappear into two long blazer sleeves. He was wearing brand new clothes: jacket, cap, shorts, shoes, all of them too big. The only thing that fitted him was the black-and-gold striped tie, which roped in an oversized grey shirt collar. He pushed the window a little lower, and everyone tried to think of something to say.

It was lucky for one and all that just at this moment a fat boy, in the same unmistakable school colours – the black and gold of a bee – should cross the platform lugging a well-stocked briefcase, plus various parcels.

'Darling, look!' said Mrs Tack. 'A Ribblestrop blazer!'

It was true. The boy was wearing the very same garment as her son: the same vivid stripes that caused the eye to jar slightly as if a mild hallucination was taking place.

'Hello. Are you *Ribblestrop*?' said Mr Tack.

The fat boy looked up. He was breathing heavily. 'Yes I am,' he said. 'Jacob Ruskin, I'm a second year – I thought I'd missed this train!' He had a cheery voice and was full of beaming confidence. 'Can I get in here? Is this your boy? I say, a new recruit!'

'This is Sam.'

'I thought I'd missed this train. I'll just—'

'Watch out!' cried Mr Tack.

The boy yanked open the door and Sam immediately fell on top of him. His parents watched as their son's two bare knees smacked onto the concrete platform and the new school cap, grabbed at and scrabbled for, rolled between platform and train.

There was a moment of silence.

'I'm sorry,' said the fat boy. 'I didn't realise he was leaning – I thought he was . . . oh Lord. Is he alright?'

'Blast it,' said Mr Tack. Mr Tack was lowering himself painfully and was staring into the dark space under the train.

'Nobody wears those caps,' said the fat boy. 'I wore mine

once for the school photo: I couldn't tell you where it is now. I say, your son's very brave . . . Do you need a handkerchief? Look . . .'

The boy climbed up into the carriage and offered Sam, who'd staggered to his feet, a chubby little hand.

'What a gaffe. Sam, do you need a hand up?'

'His knees are bleeding,' said Mrs Tack.

'Excuse me,' said a voice.

'I think I . . .'

Sam was more worried about the fact that his left eye had hit the fat boy's head when he fell, and he now felt as dizzy as if he'd been punched. There was a throbbing in his skull and the station was swimming.

'I'll get it, Sam,' said his father. 'I'm worried this blasted train will set off and—'

'Excuse me!' said the voice again. It was pitched high, but had a strange grating sound under the shrillness. 'Excuse me please, do you mind? What's that? No, no – I can't hear you . . . Could you . . .' It was an elderly woman; severe, tall and thin. She was sweating with the strain of dragging a large suitcase-on-wheels whilst trying to talk into a cellphone. The strap of a handbag had become coiled around one arm, and she was also carrying a large, box-like briefcase that appeared to be metal. She wore a high-necked white blouse under a grey suit and, as she fought her way forward, she gave off the powerful scent of cigarettes, perspiration and heavy perfume. Mrs Tack, Sam and Ruskin tried to move out of the way as a wheel of the suitcase rolled over Sam's toes. They cowered back as best they could, and the woman grunted her way up into the train. Her metal case tipped dangerously, and Ruskin moved in to assist. 'Leave it, thank you!' rasped the woman. 'I can manage. What's that?' The case crunched against the side of the train, scratching the paintwork. 'No,' she barked into the cellphone. 'No, no, no . . .'

Mr Tack was still on his knees trying to locate the fallen cap.

'When the train leaves,' said Ruskin, 'you could hop down onto the tracks. Then you could send it on.'

'Blast it!' muttered Mr Tack.

'He won't need it, honestly,' continued Ruskin.

'Go on, darling,' said Mrs Tack. 'You'd better get a seat, both of you.'

Sam let the fat boy lead him shakily down the carriage. He pressed two handkerchiefs to his knees. It hadn't been a hard fall, and he wasn't a frail boy. But he did suddenly feel rather faint: the result, he knew, from eating no breakfast. It was also, he knew, a result of the tension of the morning. From his parents' loving attentions as they admired his silly clothes, carried his trunk out to the car, and drove earnestly through the South London traffic to get to Paddington way too early. They'd sat in a café for an hour not eating anything. When the train finally moved and the platform slipped away, Sam's faintness turned to sickness. He pressed one hanky to his mouth and waved the other.

'You blub if you want to,' said the fat boy. 'I did. I thought your gran seemed rather nice.'

'That's my mother, actually.'

'Oh. Are you their only one?'

'Yes.'

Ruskin pressed his cheek to the glass to get a final view. 'Yes, she's crying her eyes out, poor thing. I expect you'll get a bit homesick, won't you? The new boys always do. We had two leave last term, they just couldn't stand the place. And another boy fled. Boarding isn't for everyone, I suppose, though Dr Norcross-Webb tries to make it jolly. I love it!'

'Who's Dr Nor—?'

'Norcross-Webb's the headmaster. He founded the school and does everything. Or he did last term. We're supposed to have a load more teachers now, after the accident – and that includes a

new headmistress, which'll be fun. I just hope there's enough boys, it's *boys* we really need. Five wasn't enough for anything.'

Sam looked at his sleeves and wondered where his hands were. Ruskin sat back with his arms folded. 'I love it,' he said. 'It wasn't at all what I expected, so I just hope it hasn't closed. Money's pretty tight and everyone's on these scholarships, so no one really pays full fees – I'm on a singing scholarship.'

'Singing what?'

'Dr Norcross-Webb wants to start a choir. There's an organ in the chapel – or there was. No one knew how to turn it on, thank goodness, because I can't sing a note. It was out of bounds anyway, the roof was so dangerous. After the fire, well . . . that was that. What made you choose Ribblestrop? It's a good school, but . . . what on earth made you choose it?'

Sam stared at Ruskin. He'd had to make several adjustments very quickly and at least it had taken his mind off feeling sick. Ruskin was built like a ball and his thick glasses were round as well, as if there were two marbles stuck to his eyes. He had short, jet-black hair that seemed to be painted on his head like a helmet. His mouth, when it wasn't talking, settled into a friendly, wise smile. He was smiling now, waiting for Sam to answer.

'We saw an advert,' said Sam. 'The fees were low and my parents don't have much money.'

'Nor do mine.'

'They wanted to send me to private school, you see. The school where we live is quite rough and they promised they'd send me to a private one if they could find one cheap enough.'

'I got bullied at my last school,' said Ruskin. 'And the food was bad. It was chips every day. My father used to be a boxer, in the army – so they wanted a school with a good sporting tradition.'

'I love sport, it's the only thing I'm good at. Is there lots?'

'No. None at all.'

'Oh. I thought you—'

'There *will* be. Dr Norcross-Webb says we're pioneers, like in the Wild West. We can do anything and everything, if we put our minds to it.'

'It is a *real* school, isn't it? We saw the brochure and we thought it looked quite posh.'

'Yes, I saw that. It's called "marketing", Sam. He spent lots of money on the brochure because it was a *calculated investment*.'

'I was worried it would be too posh.'

'Well, the building's pretty grand, if you stand at the other side of the park and look at where Lady Vyner lives. It was falling down when I arrived, and then Miles set fire to the dining hall, so we lost the library and the chapel. He was expelled, so that meant we were down to four, because two had left; and then poor old Tomaz ran away. That's why he had the brochure made, you see, because we needed more boys. By the time we get there, there could be loads! There's Lord Caspar – he's the grandson of the owner – but he doesn't come all the time. He's a law unto himself quite honestly and he may not come back, he says he hates the place – but then, to tell you the truth, he's just a teeny-weeny bit spoilt.'

'Who set fire to it? One of the boys?'

'Yes, I told you – Miles. He was one of those rather disturbed children that can't really fit in. He was friends with Tomaz, and Tomaz was the orphan who ran away. Miles got really upset, so he splashed a load of petrol around and the fire went right through the roof. We had five fire engines; it took ages to get under control. One of the things we're supposed to be doing this term, actually, is rebuilding. The headmaster sent off for a book on DIY, and our summer project . . . well. Take a look at this.'

Ruskin was delving among his parcels. The train was speeding along now and Sam knew there was no turning back. He watched the fat boy untie some string and gingerly withdraw something from brown paper.

'We had to build a model. You had to calculate the maximum span of a timber beam, bearing in mind a load of – I can't remember – one hundred thousand kilos, I think. Ever so complicated. My brother helped me a bit, but it took ages . . . What do you think?'

Sam wasn't sure what to think. Ruskin's model had four walls and was then a mass of struts and beams. It was exquisitely built and reminded Sam of a cathedral in miniature.

'You could probably get away without some of the purlins,' said Ruskin. 'But we decided to be better safe than sorry. It took most of the holiday, but the best project wins a rosette.'

'And that's the roof we're going to build?'

'If there's enough of us. It's not as complicated as it looks, actually. The principles are pretty straightforward; it all works in triangles. Do you want some tea, Sam?'

Sam didn't know what he wanted. Thoughts and feelings were getting more confused than ever, so he nodded gratefully. Ruskin smiled happily and attended to the other items in his bag. In a short while he'd laid out a flask and two plastic cups. The train was juddering, so pouring was tricky, but soon there were two steaming cups of boiling water. He produced two tea bags from his breast pocket and dunked vigorously. He had cubed sugar, a whisky miniature that held fresh milk, and a plastic teaspoon. Finally, he set down a lunchbox and opened it to reveal a stack of homemade biscuits.

'I expect you want to know about the other boys,' he said.

'Yes.'

'Well, they're both good fellows. Do you take sugar? One of them is from South America. He's a funny one, I'll tell you about him – ever so nice, I really hope he's coming back. The other boy's quite old. Sixteen, he says. But he looks older, and he doesn't really talk. We so need eleven! The only game I'm any good at is football.'

'I thought it was a big school. I thought I was lucky to get in.'

'Oh, you are! It is! It's a smashing place, really! It's got such an interesting history, too – it was a research base in the Second World War. You know how these stately homes got taken over by the army? They built bunkers and everything – there's tunnels underground. So after the war, it became a donkey sanctuary, I believe. Then the monks arrived, and they're still there, but you don't see them – am I talking too much? I'll just tell you this. The story goes that our headmaster bought the place in *one* day. He made "the offer" in the morning and took the cash round in a suitcase that afternoon. He bought the donkeys too. They live on what used to be tennis courts, but what *will* be the football pitch – not that you can really play, not with three people, even when the headmaster goes in goal. And Sanchez can't run too well, because he lost a toe.'

'Sanchez . . .? Hang on, is he one of the other boys?'

'Sorry, yes. The South American boy. He was injured, so he can't really do games, though he does try. When you lose your big toe your balance goes, so he's got a limp.'

'How did he lose his toe?'

'It's a secret, but I'll tell you. You're bound to find out.' Ruskin leaned forward and his voice became a whisper. 'This is true, apparently. Though it sounds like I'm making it up. He was kidnapped and held for ransom. And the kidnappers, to show they meant business . . .'

Sam winced.

'Yes. With pliers.'

'Did his parents pay the ransom?'

'Sanchez said they didn't. When the toe fell out of the envelope, they sent the bodyguards in. There was a shoot-out.'

'And Sanchez escaped?'

'He's a very tough boy. I wouldn't want to mess with Sanchez. He's not a show-off, but he can wrestle a donkey to the ground. I saw him do it after Miles had bet he couldn't – admittedly, it was Peter Pan, the oldest donkey, but even so . . .'

'Who kidnapped him?' said Sam. His eyes were wider than they'd ever been. His mouth was slightly open.

'I don't know. His family are from South America, rolling in money. All his clothes are tailor-made. But he's not a show-off, honestly.' Ruskin lowered his voice and leaned in over the table. 'The reason he's at Ribblestrop is so no one can find him. He keeps a gun under his bed, just in case: there's a little hole in the wall. Seriously. Dr Norcross-Webb knows his father, and my father thinks that's where the first lot of money came from. You see, nobody would dream a boy like Sanchez would go to a school like Ribblestrop. So he's safe.'

Chapter Two

It was at this point that Sam experienced his second accident of the day. He was destined to suffer three. It was not serious in itself, but it would set off a chain of interesting events. Ruskin had the dangerous habit of resting his eyes on occasions. This involved removing and pocketing his glasses – he'd been advised to do this by a teacher who'd despaired of the boy's painfully slow reading. The effect of this 'eye-resting' was that for short periods Ruskin was almost blind. He would grope and grab – and that could be lethal. He was now seeking to pour more tea.

The same complex ritual started: tea bag and cup, spoon to tea bag, hot-water flask standing by. Sam went to finish the cup he'd hardly touched: there was a flurry of hands as Ruskin tried to organise the table, and the large, heavy flask inevitably tipped over. A lake of boiling water swept wave-like over the edge of the train table onto Sam's shorts. He suppressed the scream, turning it into a long high-pitched gasp. Ruskin grabbed at the flask, upsetting the cup. Thus the wave was joined by a short geyser and Sam gasped again. Ruskin rushed to help. But what could he do? Sam's thighs and tender regions sizzled in scalding water; the boy fought to keep cloth from flesh.

'This is totally my fault,' cried Ruskin. 'I cannot believe this.'

'It's alright.'

'It's not. Hang on . . . glasses. Hold on, Sam. Oh my word, you're soaking!'

'Oh no.' Sam was whispering.

'Are you burned? I'm so sorry . . .'

'It's alright.'

'Stand up, Sam. No, sit down. Oh my! Have you any spare shorts?'

'No. I only . . . Ow. Help.'

'Look. I have. They're in my trunk, which is down in the—'

'I think I'll stand up.'

'You're completely red, look at your legs! Should I stop the train?'

Ruskin flapped while Sam dabbed at himself with two soaking handkerchiefs. He was feeling sick again and the fire round his thighs was fading to hot clamminess. The seat was wet as well.

'Such bad luck. Look: let's go down to the baggage car and see if my trunk can be got at. Then you can have my spares – and I've got a towel as well. Can you walk?'

Sam peeled himself off the seat and stood dripping in the aisle. A handful of other passengers were staring, icily, as if the boys were seeking attention.

'I'd better take our stuff. Follow me.'

Ruskin packed the bags and, when he'd done so, Sam managed a bow-legged, dripping hobble down the carriage. The first toilet was engaged, but the second one was vacant. Sam dried himself as best he could and emerged slowly.

'I'm a clumsy oaf,' said Ruskin. 'I do apologise.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Follow me. I'm fairly sure we can get at my trunk – it's in the baggage car, which is right down the end. If we can get to it, we can do a quick change; I mean obviously they'll be a bit big, but you're wearing a belt. If it was the other way round we wouldn't stand a chance – oh my word, look!'

Sam was still prising wet cloth from his thighs, so he didn't look up. The dividing door closed as Ruskin barged excitedly forward, and Sam's thin body was crushed in the steel frame. An angry-looking businessman leaned from his seat. 'Don't play with the doors! Sit down!'

'I can't really. I'm—'

'You boys are a blessed nuisance. Up and down, up and down!'

Sam shoved the door back as hard as he could and staggered out of the carriage. A train conductor was heaving his way through, looking haggard. Sam's 'Excuse me' was lost as the big man wrenched open the door. Then there was a clatter of points and Sam was thrown forward, catching his forehead on the luggage shelves. His friend was way down the far end of the next carriage, so Sam hobbled after him, realising that had this happened a few hours ago, he would have undoubtedly started to cry. Perhaps he was growing up already, he wondered, just as his father had promised. Perhaps he was a man and was responding to burns and blows the way a man would do. Double vision was the price you paid.

When he caught up with Ruskin, the boy seemed at a loss: he was staring at a passenger, in a trance-like state. At length, he managed two words: 'I say . . .'

Sam saw a blurred version of what Ruskin was looking at. Sitting in a seat was another child, in the identical black-and-gold stripes of their own uniforms. But this child was slumped low, with its feet on the empty seat opposite, and was listening to music through headphones. It was unaware it had an audience; it was gazing at the scrubland of outer London. This was just as well: Ruskin's scrutiny had gone on now for a full minute. The child's head nodded to the beat of the music; its mouth was chewing. Ruskin seemed dazed.

'Oh my word,' he finally said.

'What?' said Sam. 'What's the matter?'

'Look at this.'

The child in the seat turned at last. A frown spread instantly across its features.

'What?' it said. Aggressive. Confident.

'Hello,' said Ruskin.

The child clicked off its music and yanked the earphones out of its ears.

'Why are you staring at me? What do you want?'

'I'm so sorry,' said Ruskin. Apologies seemed to tumble out of his mouth. 'I didn't mean to stare, it's just we saw your ... blazer. We thought – I thought – I'm so sorry, I thought you were *Ribblestrop*.'

The child's frown turned to confusion. 'What are you talking about?'

'Same colours, everything. From the other end, you see, you looked like you were on your way to Ribblestrop Towers, my school, but—'

'I am,' said the child. 'I think. Don't say you're there as well.'

'I'm a second year,' whispered Ruskin.

'I'm new,' said Sam, over Ruskin's shoulder.

The child's eyes flickered back and forth as if it were watching fast tennis.

'Look, I don't mean to be rude,' said Ruskin. 'I don't mean to be rude at all. But ... you're a girl, aren't you?'

The child's face scrunched into a wizened glare. Her hair, brushed hard back from her forehead and ears, was drawn into a short plait. She'd put on a little lipstick. There was just a hint of glittery eye shadow as well, on her eyelids. A jewel gleamed in the left earlobe and there was a ring on one finger. Ruskin was looking at her legs, half hidden by the table, but still stretched up onto the opposite seat. They were covered to the knee by shorts, and this was confusing.

'I mean, you *are* a girl. You're a girl, and Ribblestrop's a boys' school,' he said. 'Well, it was,' he added, weakly.

'Are you seriously telling me *you* go to it?'

'It's a boys' school,' said Ruskin, faintly. The girl had a rather gravelly voice. Her cheeks were ghostly pale and striking because of sharp cheekbones. 'But it can't be. I suppose it isn't. What I mean is, it used to be a boys' school. Can we sit down?'

'Here? Why?'

Ruskin started to slide into the seat, forcing the girl to remove her feet.

'We were on our way to the baggage car.'

'Oh no.' The girl was sitting forward. 'Your friend's wet himself.' She was pointing rudely at Sam's soaking shorts.

'No,' said Sam. 'There was an accident.'

'What do you mean, it's a boys' school? No one said to me it was a boys' school, I was told it was for girls. Look, you – if you untuck your shirt, no one will see. Look at the state of you! Seriously, what is that?'

'Tea,' said Sam.

'Mainly hot water,' said Ruskin. 'Look, shall I go down to the baggage car and get the spares?'

'You'll have to take them off,' said the girl. 'You can't sit in soaking-wet shorts, you'll get shrivelled. No one'll see, we'll dry them out of the window.'

'I can't really do that,' said Sam.

'I had to do this once with a scarf when someone was sick – I had to wash it in the loo and then we tied it to the door handle between Bristol and Tiverton. It's a warm day, you'll be fine.'

Ruskin nodded and smiled: 'You know, that's not a bad plan, Sam. Because I'm not sure they'll let us in the baggage car and even if they do, my shorts won't fit you. This is all my fault, you know.'

'Then you can dry them,' said the girl. 'What's your name? Sam?'

'Yes.'

'Take them off and give them to your friend. Come on,

nobody can see.' The girl was standing up, taking control. Her hand was thrust out and the train was slowing.

Sam feared disaster was on its way. After all, he'd lost a cap, he'd been bruised and scalded. The day had more bad luck in store, that was for certain. But he was one of those boys who found it hard to resist strong-minded people for fear of being thought rude. He struggled out of his shorts, pulling his shirt-tails down to his knees.

'Give us your tie as well. Then we can tie the shorts to the door just in case fat boy lets them go – a little safety device.'

This husky-voiced confident girl: Sam just couldn't disobey. He took off his tie, feeling as if the world was conspiring to steal his whole uniform. At least he had the blazer – and that was the item his parents had saved for hardest. There was only one store in London where you could get them, and they'd only had an unclaimed special order in stock – a blazer, it seemed, that had been made for a small bear. 'He'll grow into it,' said the bored salesman, who'd realised straight away that the Tack family was virtually penniless. The other option had been buying a small dinner jacket and stitching gold ribbons onto it. Sam's mother was keen but her son had managed, politely, to make his opinion known, and they'd come home with the overcoat model. It was quite useful now, to wrap himself up in. He curled into the seat and watched the approach of Reading.

'Your friend is very strange,' said the girl.

Ruskin had disappeared into the toilet. He was intending to give the shorts a scrub and then devise the clothes drier.

'I was warned this was a freaky school,' said the girl. 'I guess I should be glad if he's the least freaky. What's his name?'

'Jacob Ruskin.'

'My name's Millie Roads. This is going to be my fifth school. Dad phoned the headmaster and told him the government would put a year's fees up front if they'd take me straight away.'

'Oh.'

'How old are you? You look like a gnome.'

'I'm twelve.'

'You've got a black eye coming – are you a fighter? I had this friend called Katie who could beat up anyone. I was trying to persuade her to come to this *Ribblestrip* place, because she got kicked out of the last school, same as me. She did aikido and flattened our housemaster. Then we trashed the place. I think you've got the skinniest legs I've ever seen.'

'I know.'

'I'm thirteen, by the way, so we won't be in the same class. Katie was amazing! She could make bombs from soap powder. We put lighter fuel on a pillow, OK? And the pillow had a label saying: *This pillow comes up to fire safety standards,* which was a joke. I said in court that the school should sue whoever makes its pillows, because it went up like a torch, and we'd put it in the laundry trolley with these bags of salt and soap powder. The laundry room was in the basement, just under the girls' common room, so in our opinion it was all an accident waiting to happen, and that's what the judge said. What did you get slung out for?'

'Slung out of what?'

Millie snarled with impatience. 'Your last school! The school before Ribbledee-whatever it is. Why did you leave, if it isn't top secret?'

'I haven't been expelled from anywhere.'

Millie stared a moment, then shrugged. 'I thought this dump only took kids who'd been slung out – there's this government scheme, isn't there? My dad was told it had bars on the windows, that's why he was sending me. Twenty-four-hour round-the-clock patrols and all that.'

'Ruskin said it was a normal school.'

'What's he going to know about normal? You think he's normal? Look – do you smoke, Sammy-boy? Silly question. I'm dying . . .'

The train was slowing to a stop. There was a clattering of doors and a few travellers made their way down the corridor.

'Reading,' said Millie. 'Can you imagine living here?' She peered into the grey gloom beyond the station buildings.

'My uncle used to live in Swindon—'

'Set fire to the place, that's what I'd do. A lot of very grateful people. Katie went to jail, by the way. I was the accessory, which just means the best friend – I held the pillow, closed the door. Can I ask you something, Sam? Who cuts your hair?'

'My hair?'

'Is English your first language?'

Sam blinked. 'My mother cuts my hair.'

'Yes, you look a bit like a boy in one of those very old films. Tell you what, when we get to school I'll get my razor and do you a real haircut. Have you visited this school? Have you seen it?'

'No,' said Sam. 'I've seen pictures, but I haven't been there. Look.'

Sam felt around in the folds of his jacket. The school prospectus was in a deep pocket, bent in half. He set it on the table and smoothed it out. It was a comforting sight after all the snippets of information from Ruskin, let alone the dark hints from this terrifying new girl. Sam was reassured to see the same honey-coloured buildings that had impressed his parents so much. And the crest, with a lion and a lamb. The photographer must have been lying in the gravel: the main building loomed up like a cliff, with a fabulous tower climbing up to blue sky. On the next page, in an inset photo, a blond boy sat curled on the lawn reading a book. You could almost hear the birdsong. The headmaster was smiling in another corner, looking totally normal and completely in charge: not a man to let someone down, or dream up an elaborate hoax. A man in a gown, with a wise smile.

'They never sent us one of them,' said Millie. 'The government pays for me, something about investing in me now so they

won't go bankrupt later on – that was my father's joke anyway, and everyone laughed a lot. Hey, fat boy – you're back . . .'

Ruskin was back. He wore a forlorn look, but the nickname Millie had invented stung him. He swivelled his head towards her.

'Would you be kind enough not to call me that? I'm not going to call you skinny girl or anything, so I think we could agree basic manners.'

'Basic manners? I'm just trying to be friendly.'

'Sam, there's been an accident.'

Ruskin looked exhausted. He wormed into the chair opposite Millie. 'It's back to Plan B.'

'What Plan B?' said Millie. 'What happened to Plan A?'

'Sam, I'm going to get some shorts for you from the baggage car, but I won't be able to until we get to our station. Apparently, they don't allow access to the freight during transit, or something like that. But I can run down to the baggage car and pretend—'

'What happened to Plan A?' said Millie, again.

Sam said: 'Where are my shorts?'

'I was holding them out of the window.' Ruskin looked pained. 'I had attached the tie. I think my mistake was choosing the very small window – I was using the one in the toilet, which doesn't allow you the space you really need.'

'Oh my . . .' said Millie.

'Did you drop them?' said Sam, quietly.

'Yes, and unfortunately it wasn't the platform side, or one could have just nipped out and picked them up. I chose the other side so as not to draw unwanted attention.'

'So your little friend's shorts are down on the tracks?' said Millie.

'They are down on the tracks,' confirmed Ruskin.

'So jump down and get them.'

'I can't.'

'Why not? You drop the boy's shorts out of a window and you're not going to jump down and get them? What sort of a friend are you?'

'You misunderstand me – the doors on that side of the train are locked.'

'Jump out the window. You can't leave his shorts on the track.'

'I think they went on the electric rail. I really wouldn't like to try to retrieve them – and in any case, there's a hefty fine if you trespass on the railway.'

'This boy has his first day at a new school and he's arriving half naked! Come on, Sam, let's sort this out.'

Sam had sunk into his blazer. He felt the blood draining from his face, neck and even his chest. He felt thin and weightless but surprisingly calm, as if all this had been foretold in a half-remembered dream. 'Sam, get up!'

Millie's hand yanked him to his feet and Ruskin rose to stand out of their way, protesting. 'We're about to leave the station, Sam – I feel awful about this, but is there anything we can do, really?'

'Yes, there is!'

As Millie spoke, the train humped forward: that movement that says: *Sorry, everybody – your last chance to get off has just gone* . . . She hauled Sam into the corridor and wrestled with the window, then leaned out and twisted at the door handle. Rails and sleepers were now rumbling past and, as Sam stared, the station was giving way to a large car park.

'It's alright, Millie—'

'The door's locked. Stop the damn train, it's an emergency!'

'I think Plan B is quite workable, you know,' said Ruskin. 'It's foolproof, really.'

But Millie had one of those brains which gets fixed obsessively on the one idea. No doctor so far had been able to help. She marched back into the carriage and had the presence of

mind to pick up her coat and bag. Then she reached up and pulled the emergency lever, holding firmly to the handrail as the train went into an instant spasm of emergency braking. Twenty-five miles an hour, if that – they hadn't been going so very fast, but there was still plenty of dramatic lurching and screeching. Interestingly, the elderly thin woman with the awkward luggage was on her feet at that moment, rooting around in the overhead rack. She was still jabbering into a cellphone, which her chin crushed to her shoulder. But her agitation was increasing, and she was trying to drag the briefcase down from above while keeping the handbag open on her seat. She was already off balance, so the abrupt halt of the train sent her crashing to the floor, jarring her shoulder as she fell. This injury meant she didn't report the disappearance of her purse, with its collection of credit cards, for a full two hours. She was forced to visit Reading General Hospital, and was separated from her luggage: all this meant substantial delay to the train, and was how the new deputy headmistress of Ribblestrop Towers was prevented from taking up her new post for a further six days.

Of course, Millie, Ruskin and Sam were unaware of this. They stood at the door and, as the locks sprung open, Millie heaved it open. The ground was a long way down, but she leaped nimbly onto the rails and stood staring up at a bewildered Sam.

'Hurry up!' she shouted. So Sam leaped too.

'Is this wise?' said Ruskin, from the doorway. But then, at the other end of the carriage, he caught sight of the train conductor, looking more horrified than any adult he'd ever seen: he was clearly getting ready to scream. Clutching his precious bag and model, Jacob Ruskin launched himself out of the train, headbutting Sam hard on the other side of his temple as he landed. The three children then staggered and stepped carefully over the tracks, making their way to scrubland.

They reached it not a moment too soon.

They hadn't heard the train zooming in from the other direction and they certainly hadn't seen it. The delayed 10:21, a through train from Bristol to London Paddington, was on the very track they'd stepped across, and the driver only saw three blurs of black-and-gold. The train missed the skinniest by ten centimetres. And the passengers in the now-to-be-seriously-delayed stationary train – the 11:14 to Penzance – were so horrified by the accident they thought they'd witnessed, there were several screams. For a full hour most people assumed the three children had been atomised. Because of this misunderstanding, nobody gave chase.