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Opening extract from

Ribblestrop Forever

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Chapter One

It was the end of the Easter holidays.

Millie, Miles and Sanchez had flown first class from Bogotá, home to Sanchez's father. They hadn't intended to visit him but, in the end, the thought of South American fiestas and fireworks had proved too seductive and they'd rushed out for a few days of excitement. They'd returned to Heathrow airport, however, to find their onward travel plans to Ribblestrop – all arranged on brand new cellphones – in tatters. They had been hoping to share a taxi with their friends, Sam Tack, Ruskin and Oli. Mr Tack had booked it, to drive them right to the school gates, but he'd got the dates mixed up, and after a whole series of confusions he'd been forced to drive the children himself. There was room for just four in his tiny hatchback, so Sanchez, Millie and Miles were in a fix.

They were desperate to be at school for six o'clock as the orphans had promised a trapeze display that very evening, in the dining hall. The orphans had arrived that morning as well, after a sell-out run of Circus Ribblestrop in New York. Captain Routon had hired a coach and driven up specially to collect them. Sanchez phoned his father, explained the muddle, and a light aircraft was chartered within the hour.

The three children found themselves in a limousine on their way to a private aerodrome near Reading, and soon they were shaking the firm hand of veteran pilot, Timmy Fox.

'Welcome!' said Timmy. 'This is what we call "scrambling a flight", eh? In a hurry, are we?'

'We don't want to hang around,' said Millie.

They walked towards a pretty little aeroplane, alone on the tarmac.

'It's no distance at all,' said the pilot. He raised his eyebrows and grinned. 'Flown in one of these before, have you? She's sweet as a songbird – *Maisie*, I call her.'

'Never,' said Miles.

'Single engine, but still packs a punch. We won't go over fifteen hundred feet, so you'll see the landscape. I bought her six months ago and she handles like a baby. Quick and bright with a mind of her own. We can actually land at your school, can we? I've not filed the old flight plan yet, but I think this Mr Sanchez character cut a bit of red tape for me, eh? We can improvise a bit, I imagine?'

'There's a long driveway,' said Millie. 'And a big lawn.'

'We'll be fine. She can land on a sixpence, this one.' Timmy led them to the steps. 'Once we're airborne,' he said, 'I'll radio Bristol and tell 'em what we're doing. They're pretty flexible with the Foxter.' He lit a cigar and climbed aboard. 'Timmy's been around a bit. Now, anyone get sea-sick?'

'No,' said Miles.

The pilot pushed back his cap. 'Not like flying in a jet, you know! You're going to feel every bump. I used to do stunt work in the movies. Bit of action over Iraq too – came in low to Afghanistan a couple of times . . . but we don't talk about that. No looping-the-loop today, eh? Not unless you twist my arm. Now, buckle yourselves in, boys – I want to catch this westerly breeze.'

A moment later they were taxiing and, the next second it seemed, rising in a great vibrating, roaring rush. The world was suddenly nothing but sunshine and blue sky, with a patchwork of fields revolving below. Timmy Fox wore a headset, and he turned and winked at his passengers.

'I went up without clearance,' he shouted, putting up his thumb. 'I'll get a bit of a talking to, but they know the Fox. They know Foxy bends the rules! Smooth as a bird, eh? Whoops!'

A patch of turbulence caused a sudden roll, but the pilot laughed as he righted his craft.

'She's a bag of tricks is *Maisie*!' he cried. 'Oh my, this is flying!'

It was at this point that Miles unbuckled his seatbelt, and stood up. There wasn't much room in the narrow cabin, but he leant over Millie and peered through her porthole. The plane banked to the left, and the city of Reading appeared and slipped by.

'You know, I'd stay in your seat if I were you!' shouted Timmy.

'Why?' said Miles.

He hauled himself into the cockpit and crouched beside the pilot. Cigar smoke filled the little cabin, which was a mass of dials and switches.

'Is it difficult?' said Miles. 'It looks easy to me.'

Timmy grinned and coughed. 'They don't fly themselves, chummy, that's for sure. You take a jumbo – that's pretty much flown by computers, these days. Your air-jet pilots spend most of the time doing crosswords. It's these little chaps that take control and . . . well, I'll say it myself, sonny: skill – nerve!' He puffed at his cigar. 'Maybe judgement's a better word. You have to feel the wind, hear the way she's handling. It's not child's play, that's for sure.'

Miles was nodding. 'What's that knob there?' he shouted.

'I can see you're interested. I like that in a boy! Now, that's my air-speed indicator, okay? That stops us stalling.'

Miles pointed to a dial. 'What's that one telling you?'

'Ah, don't look at that. That's the fuel in the primary tank. It's as good as empty, but the reserve's full, and I reckon a forty-five minute journey's okay on reserve. We won't need more than . . . oooh, thirty litres? We should have filled up beforehand, really, but the wind was perfect. I didn't want to miss it! Who are your friends, by the way? The dark boy seems pretty important – some kind of prince, is he?'

Miles smiled. 'No. He's a mafia gangster's son. Drug-running mainly, so he has to be careful of kidnap.'

'Right. I thought as much.'

'The girl's called Millie. She's been expelled from four schools, which is one less than me. We've been on holiday together.'

'Ah.'

'You've probably heard of Ribblestrop.'

'Have I?'

'It's the place where the chaplain got eaten by a crocodile, and before that the deputy head was killed by a train. The headmaster's great, but he doesn't really have much of a grip. Oh, and the local policeman hates us too – but that's all right now because he got sacked for attempted murder. I think most of our problems are solved. Do you want one of these?'

'One of what? What are you offering the Fox?'

'Colombian gobstoppers. They're mixed with coca-leaves – they give you quite a buzz.'

Timmy Fox stubbed his cigar out and looked at the bag in Miles's hand. It was an innocent-looking brown colour, crumpled from its time in the boy's blazer pocket. Miles held it under pilot's nose.

'Looks pretty tasty, I must say,' he said. 'That's one thing about old Foxy – he's got a sweet tooth and tries anything once.'

'These are beautiful. They last for two hours each.'

The pilot grinned and eased his craft into a gentle climb. He had felt the vibrations of turbulence again and he flicked some switches in the roof. 'I shouldn't really, sonny. My dentist says I'm a little bit too partial to – whoops!'

The plane juddered into an air pocket and Miles was butted forward.

'You see?' said Timmy. 'It's a roller-coaster, sometimes – she's as game as a bird, is this little girl. I'll just take the one, thank you. What's your name?'

'Miles.'

'Thanks, Miles. Here's to you.'

He took the offered sweet between forefinger and thumb and rolled it. It was smaller than a ping-pong ball and up close it had a peppering of purple spots. Putting it into his mouth, he tested it with his teeth.

'Oooh! Hard!' he mumbled, trying to get his tongue round it.

'You can't crunch them,' said Miles. 'Don't even try. I've got a suitcaseful, for the orphans.'

It was at this point that Millie came forward. She put her hand on Miles's shoulder, and then leant on his neck. The plane soared upwards, so she had to grab his shirt collar.

'Are you flying the plane, Miles?' she cried. 'If you are, I want to know where the parachutes are kept.'

Timmy Fox laughed long and hard. 'No parachutes today!' he shouted. The sweet bounced against his tonsils and he tried to get his tongue behind it.

Miles squeezed to his right in an attempt to make room for Millie. The plane came out of the air pocket into a gust of hot air. Timmy hadn't felt it coming, so the plane rose again,

more violently, as if caught on a wave. Then the wave was gone and the nose came down, hard and fast. Millie and Miles were jerked backwards, while Timmy Fox – who was safely belted into his seat – received a violent jolt. The gobstopper spun against his uvula, where the digastric muscle strained at once to eject it. The plane bobbed yet again and the pilot panicked. He tried to swallow and disaster struck. The gobstopper was sucked straight into his windpipe where it lodged like a cork in a bottle.

Timmy Fox's eyes bulged. He did his best to cry out, but his airway was blocked – all that emerged was a choking groan.

Behind him, Miles was laughing. He'd fallen against Millie and caught her with his elbow, so she was clutching a bleeding nose. Sanchez looked mildly concerned, but had been reading a magazine – so wasn't sure what had happened. Their expressions changed, however, when the plane suddenly keeled over to the left and the engine started to scream. An alarm sounded at once and then pulsed urgently.

'Miles!' shouted Millie.

They saw, with horror, that their pilot was clawing the air, completely helpless. He was spluttering too and changing colour before their eyes. He managed to get one hand back to the controls and they were level again – but only for a few seconds. Timmy Fox grabbed his own throat, gagging, and a moment later, there was a sickening lurch to the right. His headset fell onto his knees.

Sanchez was up now, but it was Millie who reacted fastest. The cockpit was tilting heavily, but she managed to dive forward and get her hands onto the joystick, her nosebleed forgotten. Miles was beside her in a moment, grabbing at the gasping pilot. He was bright red and the red was turning to purple.

'Heart attack!' shouted Millie. 'Do something!'

Miles guessed what had happened and tried to slap the man hard on the back. The blow bent him forward and he managed to disengage his seatbelt so he fell heavily onto the controls. Sanchez was now right behind them, while Millie leant through the confusion of arms and knees to steady the all-important joystick. Miles tried to thump the pilot again, but the control area was too congested. Timmy Fox levered himself up somehow and fell backward into Sanchez's arms. With Miles's help, he was lowered to the narrow strip of carpet behind, where he lay gasping. Millie jumped straight into his empty seat and gazed through the cockpit window as fragments of cloud hurtled towards her. Seconds later, Miles was back with the headset clamped to his ear.

'Do something!' Millie was shrieking. 'Get the pilot!'

'Fly the plane, Millie!'

'Oh my God! How can I? I don't know how to fly a plane!'

She eased the joystick back and they rose slightly. The alarm stopped, but a red light kept flashing and a buzzer was buzzing. An oxygen mask had fallen from above and bounced uselessly, knocking at their heads.

'Hello?' shouted Miles, into the mouthpiece of the headset. 'Is anyone there, please? Hello?'

'I don't know what I'm doing, Miles!' cried Millie. 'Get help!'

'Just do what you're doing. Keep us up. Hello? Is anyone there? Mayday, mayday – come in, please. Ground control, this is . . . oh God . . . this is a very small plane up in the sky. We've lost our pilot and we don't know what to do.' He turned to Millie in despair. 'How do you work these things?'

'I don't know. I don't know anything. Ask Sanchez!'

Her eyes were dancing from dial to dial, from switch to switch. Some of the needles were moving up and she

spotted two that were moving down. She pushed the joystick forward and felt the plane respond and sink – but whether that was good or bad, she couldn't say. There were pedals under her feet, but she didn't dare press them. At least they were going straight and, though everything was vibrating, it seemed like they weren't about to fall out of the sky.

Miles, meanwhile, was experimenting with a small black knob on the headset. When he turned it, a green light came on.

'Hello?' he said, again. 'Is anyone there, please? This is a real emergency – I'm not playing games here. Help!'

A man's voice answered, utterly calm. 'Come in, *Maisie 202*. State your position, over.'

'What?' said Miles.

The voice remained relaxed. 'Come in, *Maisie 202*,' it repeated, slowly. 'This is Bristol control. State your position, over.'

Miles swore under his breath. 'I think our pilot's dead,' he said. 'That's the position.'

'OK, *Maisie*, can I ask you to identify yourself and repeat that, please? Over.'

'Yes. My name is Miles Seyton-Shandy. I'm going to school, but I'm on a plane without a pilot because the pilot's choking to death, and my friend is trying to fly the plane. I have no idea where we are except up in the sky. Over.'

Miles's eyes were full of tears. He had just realised the danger. They were racing along at more than a hundred miles per hour.

The voice on the radio seemed to become even calmer. 'Okay, good . . . That's good, Miles. I'm reading you – sounds like you've got a situation up there, so I'm requesting priority airspace. Can you re-confirm, please? Your pilot is down? Over.'

'He's unconscious,' said Miles, taking a quick look behind him. Sanchez had the man laid out in the recovery position. He had his knee in the pilot's back and was jerking his shoulders. 'I don't know if he's breathing or not. He swallowed something and it got stuck.'

'That's good, that's fine. You're going to have to stay very calm, Miles, and relaxed. You're going to have to answer all my questions, clear as you can. When you finish what you say, try to remember to say "over", because that makes communication simple. First question: who is at the controls of the plane? Over.'

'Millie Roads. But she doesn't know what she's doing. Over.'

'You're doing fine at the moment. We're getting a fix on you, and we're going to pull all air traffic in the area well back. You've got a completely clear corridor, okay, so there's no emergency if you hold her steady. I want you to look at the controls and tell me when you have located a black dial with two white needles. They're like the hands on a clock. Over.'

Miles scanned the forest of dials. 'Black with white needles,' he said to Millie. 'Can you see anything like that?'

Millie pointed and put her hand straight back on the joystick. She was rigid with concentration.

'I've got it,' said Miles. 'Over.'

'Good boy. What's it reading at the moment? It's going to tell us your altitude. Over.'

'The big hand's on six. The little one's on two!'

'Excellent. Ask Millie to ease the joystick back, very gently. Can you do that? Over.'

'Millie,' said Miles, 'pull the lever back a bit. Slowly.' He held the mouthpiece. 'We're doing it. We want to come down, okay? We want to be on the ground!'

'The numbers should be falling now—'

'Over!'

'What? No, listen: when the big hand's at zero, that's the altitude to hold. So we're bringing you just a little lower, where you've got a good, safe space and visibility's best. Is that okay, Miles? Over.'

'It's okay. Yes, we're going down a bit. Can you send us a new pilot or something?'

'I'm handing you over to a colleague now, Miles. She's senior to me and she's going to keep you safe and get you on the ground. Is that okay?'

'Don't go!' said Miles. 'Don't leave us!'

'I'm right here, but Sandra's taking over communication now. She's more familiar with your craft than I am.'

'I'm right here, Miles,' said a woman's voice. It was deep and wonderfully sensible. 'I'm with you, okay? I'm with you all the way. We're going to get through this together. We're clearing an emergency landing site for you in Bristol; the only problem at this stage is the airfields you're passing are all short runways. Now, in normal circumstances, a short runway would be fine for your craft, but—'

'You think we can land this?' said Miles.

'We'll talk you through it. We're with you every step of the way.'

'We're going too fast!'

'No, no. We're going to find a nice, long airstrip for you. We're going to practise your approach, give you a couple of dry runs. It's much easier than you think. '

'What about petrol? The pilot said we were flying on reserve.'

'Flying on reserve. Are you saying your first tank's dry?'

'I don't know.'

'How do you know you're on reserve?'

'The pilot told me. He didn't fill up. He said he normally would, but he didn't want to miss some wind or other.'

'And he said you're flying on reserve?'

'That's what he said. What can we do?'

There was a pause.

'Miles,' said the voice. It was just a little firmer. 'We're going to try something a little bit different in the light of what you've just told me. Can you take a look at the reserve gauge? That's three dials to the right of your altimeter. It's a needle over a white strip about three centimetres long – have you got that?'

'The needle's at half,' said Miles. 'Is that good?'

'The needle's at half of the white area. So you're how far from red?'

'About one point five centimetres.'

'Okay.'

'It's bad, isn't it?'

'No, it's—'

'We're running out of fuel! Oh God!'

'No, no, no. There's enough fuel, just not enough to give us too much leeway. We're going to have to make some more emergency arrangements. I'm going to leave you for a moment. I'm going to brief my colleagues and scramble a helicopter.'

'Don't go!' cried Miles again.

There was no answer. He glanced at Millie and saw that her face, like his own, was a mask of terror.

'Are we going to die?' she said.

'I think so,' said Miles. 'We'd better tell Sanchez.'