

TEN
THOUSAND
Heroes

by

P. T. Mayes



Ten Thousand Heroes

Seven Sample Chapters

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Chapter 1: A Surprise.

Robin was peddling for his life!

Through Little Shapley's high street he flew, past Broom & Sons the Butchers, past Country Delights Antique Shop, past Pendlly's the Undertakers and Bobo's Video Shack. He went over the little humpback bridge so fast the wheels of his bike left the ground for a moment and his belly did a flip-flop.

It was a beautiful spring day and flowers were in bloom all over the small village square. Wreaths of poppies were laid out at the foot of the old stone war memorial and daisies peeked out from between the headstones in St. Giles' churchyard, but Robin was too busy to notice such beautiful things. *He was late!*

Within seconds he was out of the village and riding through the glorious Kent countryside towards the small motel on the hill. He was cycling so hard his feet sometimes slipped off the pedals, which went right around and smacked him on the back of his shins, but he just grimaced and carried on peddling because he should have been at the motel ten minutes ago.

It was just as he was passing the gate to farmer Mitchell's land when a girl leapt out from behind the crumbling wall and yelled, "*BOO!*" at the top of her voice.

The bicycle wobbled. The front wheel hit a pothole and Robin, the bike – and the entire contents of the wicker basket fixed to the front of the bike – flew right over the handlebars and tumbled onto the grassy verge.

"Ha ha, got you!" cried the girl in delight, jumping up and down with such impish glee that her pigtails bobbed in the air like skipping ropes.

"Ugh," groaned Robin as he sat up, massaging his dizzy head with one hand. He was glad to see that there were no painful scrapes on his knees and elbows, only long green smears that smelt strongly of freshly-mown grass. "What happened?" The girl, whose joy had abruptly changed to concern when she saw what she had done, leapt nimbly over the wall and hurried to the boy's side. "Are you okay?" she asked him, her face ashen. "Here, let me help you pick that stuff up." Together they collected all the fallen items and put them back into the basket on the righted bike.

"Those apples had better not be bruised," warned Robin, "or Mrs Tuttle will give me hell!" He felt the giant sized bar of chocolate and found that it had snapped

in the middle. He grimaced.

“Oh, you know she won’t!” Corinne Leung scolded him. “And even if she did what’s the worst she could do to you?”

Robin knew it was true; Mrs Tuttle was as soft as fudge left out in the sun too long. But he had promised her that he would deliver the groceries to Mr Nulb up at the motel before three o’clock, and he always tried to keep his promises if he could help it.

“Are you going up to the motel?” Corinne asked after a moment.

Robin nodded. “Yeah. You want to come along?”

She thought for a moment and decided that as there wasn’t much else to do today, why not? She grabbed her bike, which she had hidden behind the wall, and very soon the two of them were cycling up the road, side by side.

The Little Shapley Motel was the largest building for miles around. It sat on the top of Hamble’s Hill like a big grey block of concrete with windows. A big sign on the roof boasted that there were over a hundred rooms available (all at low, low prices) and every single one of them was vacant. The motel had been built in the sixties when Little Shapley was the holiday hotspot of Kent, but now nobody came — all the tourists went to Margate or Canterbury or Rye instead; interesting places, unlike Little Shapley.

Edwin Nulb stood behind the old wooden reception desk like a Norwegian troll who preferred lurking in offices to hiding under rickety bridges waiting for goats to cross. He was a short, stocky man who wore the same checked sweater and brown corduroy trousers every day, whatever the weather. His hair was white and stuck out of his head like the bristles on a paintbrush and his round tortoiseshell spectacles were three times too large for his face. He tutted and glanced at his watch when Robin and Corinne ran in. “You’re late,” he said as he took the basket from Robin. He picked up an apple at random and examined it thoroughly for bruises, of which there were many. “These have been through the wars, haven’t they?”

“I’m sorry,” said Robin, colouring. “I had a little ‘accident’ on my way here.” He gave Corinne a sour look. She stuck her tongue out at him.

Instead of being cross, Mr Nulb smiled. “Oh well, the bruise is the tastiest bit anyway.” He broke three strips off the chocolate bar and gave one to Robin, the other to Corinne and kept the last piece for himself. For a moment nothing could be heard other than loud munching and the smacking of lips.

“Excuse me Mr Nulb,” Corinne asked, chocolate smeared across her chops. “Do

you need us to help with the rooms again?" Since Mr Nulb couldn't afford to employ any maids or staff to clean the rooms she and Robin sometimes went around and dusted them for extra pocket money. Each room got exactly fifteen seconds of dusting, just enough time to move the dust from one corner of the room to another, or underneath the bed or a handy rug.

"I don't think that's going to be necessary today," replied Mr Nulb and winked rather mysteriously. Robin and Corinne looked at each other and then gasped.

"*You're not going to sell the motel, are you? You can't do that!*"

"No!" he laughed, taking off his spectacles and cleaning them with a red spotted handkerchief. "Nothing of the sort. Run out into the car park and take a look for yourself." He rubbed his hands together in glee. "I think we're going to be very busy again, and very soon from the look of it!"

Intrigued by Mr Nulb's mysterious comments the children ran through the reception, down the corridor, through the empty kitchens and into the large and thoroughly empty car park at the back of the motel.

"What could he mean?" said Corinne as they raced up to the fence.

"I have no idea," replied Robin. "Let's find out."

Together they looked over the fence into Hamble's Valley, with its gentle green slopes, oak trees and bubbling brook.

But today there was no gentle green valley, no trees and definitely no bubbling brook. They had all vanished. In their place there now stood a town; a large sprawling town with high-rise offices, brick buildings, shopping malls and homes and even a few squat factories with tall smoking chimneys that belched black smoke into the summer sky.

Both children were so stunned all they could manage to say was: "*Wow!*"

"When did they build that?" gasped Corinne.

Robin shook his head. "I have no idea. They certainly kept it quiet."

Suddenly Corinne was running back to the motel. "I bet I can get down there before you!" she shouted, laughing.

Robin, who was always ready for a challenge, raced after her.

In the reception area Mr Nulb was waiting for them, looking very smug indeed. "Woke up this morning and *hey presto*...there it was," he said, nodding. "It certainly wasn't there last night, that I can tell you. They must have grown it from magic beans or something. It's amazing what they can do with science these

days... *Hey!*”

Both Robin and Corinne had run straight past him, through the door and were heading for their bikes.

“Be careful,” he shouted after them. “We don’t know who our new neighbours are yet.”

Chapter 2: Riddlington.

“Well, that’s about the most original name for a town, ever,” Robin called over to Corinne as they zipped past a big sign that read: “Welcome to Riddlington. Town of the Future.” The sign showed a grinning family of four walking through a gleaming mall, their arms laden with oddly weightless shopping. Even their pet cat and dog were grinning.

The road was wide and new and very empty. There wasn’t even a white line down the middle of the road.

“Where is everybody?” asked Robin. “Maybe it’s what they call a ghost town,” she called back.

“There’s no such thing as ‘ghost towns’ in Kent, you only get them in old cowboy movies.”

They cycled on. Tall, sparkling buildings rose up to either side of them. A solitary hawk flew across the sky, its brief cries echoing between the spotless walls. To their right there was a department store, the windows full of mannequins modelling the latest fashions, while on their left they passed a burger bar called the “Super Pig-Out”. It was empty of both staff and customers but all the lights were on inside, as if it was expecting a lot of customers at any moment.

“I don’t like it here,” said Corinne. “It’s creepy. Let’s go home.”

But Robin was intrigued. “No, not just yet,” he said, “I want to see some more.”

He turned the handlebars and peddled up to a computer game shop. Leaning the bike against the window he tried the door. Despite the fact that the door had a sign on it saying that the shop was open 9am-5pm, Monday to Saturday, the door was locked. He peered through the glass. Boxes crowded the shelves and, just like in the burger bar, all the lights were on. The sight reminded him a little of the story of the Mary Celeste, a ship found drifting out to sea; but even though there were hot meals laid on the table and a smoking pipe in the Captain’s cabin, there was no sign of either the crew or the passengers. It was as if they had all vanished into thin air. But this place was different — nobody had been here in the first place. To him it felt as if the town was waiting for someone to come and live in it. Nearby Corinne was checking a clothes boutique. “I really like that one,” she said,

pointing to a glittery mauve jacket a dummy was wearing in the window display; but when she tried the door she found that it was secured by a thick chain and padlock. “Maybe they shut on Saturdays, you know, like some places shut early on a Wednesday afternoon.”

Robin shook his head. “But it’s Saturday afternoon! *Nowhere* shuts on a Saturday afternoon!”

Pushing their bikes they walked on. They saw a supermarket that was full of food and a toyshop stuffed with toys, but there were no children playing with them. There wasn’t a soul to be...

“*Hey you! Stop! That’s right, you kids there! Stop I say!*”

Both children jumped and span around. A policeman was striding towards them fast, hands on hips. Corinne had never seen such a policeman in her life: he was huge and he twirled his truncheon around his index finger like a gunslinger twirled a gun. His face was like a lump of rock with two tufts of bright red hair suspended above watery little eyes. He had a tattoo of a scorpion just below his right eye and the moustache above his lipless mouth was so bushy and red she was sure it couldn’t be real. His eyebrows twitched like they were alive. They appeared to be full of sparks.

“And what do you two think you’re up to?” demanded the policeman. He sounded like a bad Hollywood actor trying to do an English accent.

The children gaped at each other.

“Cat got your tongues? You boy, answer me, what are you doing here?”

“We were only looking,” Robin insisted. “Honestly.”

“That’s right,” said Corinne. “And anyway, why are all the shops shut?”

“Why?” the policeman said, looking blank, then he scratched his head with broken fingernails. It sounded like he was scraping a rusty nail against a blackboard. “Why indeed. Why, why, why...?” He suddenly snapped his fingers — it sounded like a car backfiring. “Because this town hasn’t opened yet, that’s why!” “Hasn’t opened yet?” exclaimed Corinne. “That’s silly. How can you have a town that hasn’t opened yet?”

The strange policeman tried to think up a smart answer, but when he couldn’t he said: “Because we haven’t, so *ner!*” Then he frowned at the children so hard they took a step back. “So, if the town’s closed, what are you two doing here, eh? If you’re both so smart answer me that?”

“We’re window shopping,” said Robin quickly. “For when it does open. Is that

a crime?”

The strange policeman shook his head. “No, I don’t think so; but remember, I’ve got my eyes on the two of you — one eye on *each* of you —so don’t try anything funny. Now, run along and don’t let me catch you again or I’ll have to arrest you!” He grinned. “Maybe the town hasn’t opened yet, but the prison certainly has!”

Robin and Corinne jumped onto their bikes and rode away like the wind. After a while Corinne looked back and shivered when she saw that the policeman was still staring at them. His fiery eyebrows seemed to glow.

“Did you get a good look at the uniform he was wearing?” said Robin as they peddled back up the hill with some difficulty as it was so steep. “I don’t think that was a real policeman’s uniform at all. It looked all wrong.”

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“My uncle is a policeman in Canterbury, and *his* uniform doesn’t look a bit like that. I think that man hired his uniform from a fancy-dress shop. And have you ever seen a cop with scorpion tattooed onto his face?”

Corinne had to admit that she hadn’t.

Mr Nulb was waiting for them outside the motel. “Well?” he asked when he saw them, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “Am I going to be rich or am I going to be very rich indeed?” His smile vanished when they both shook their heads and told him that the town was closed.

“Closed?” he cried as they cycled past. “You’re pulling my leg again, aren’t you? Just like the time you said aliens had landed in Farmer Blake’s field and were looking for cheap accommodation for the night?”

But by then the children were too far away to hear him.

Chapter 3: What do You Want to Be?

“Riddlington?” said Robin’s father as he sawed through a sausage with a knife. “There’s no such place as Riddlington.”

Robin was balancing peas on his fork. “It’s just past the motel, in Hamble’s Valley.”

Tina Dawson poured tea into three mugs. “Well, I was walking Molly in Hamble’s Valley only last week and I didn’t see any town, and there was definitely no building work going on there. If there was I think I would have seen it.”

Making sure that neither of his parents was watching, Robin slipped a sausage under the table to Molly, their golden retriever, who sucked it up like it was a sting of spaghetti. “But I *did* see it!” he insisted. “And Corinne saw it too! I’m not making it up. Honestly!”

Mr Roger Dawson put down his knife and fork with a clatter. “Now look Robin, you’re mother was there last week and she didn’t see anything. Now I know something about building and I can tell you that it’s not possible for anyone to build an entire town in one week. It’s simply can’t be done.”

“It wasn’t a week, actually,” said Robin, “it was overnight. Mr Numb said the town wasn’t there yesterday.”

“And that’s even more absurd.”

“If you don’t believe me then why don’t you go and take a look for yourself,” said Robin sulkily. “Then you’ll see I’m not fibbing.”

Mr Dawson looked hard into his son’s eyes to try to tell if he was lying or not. “Don’t worry, Robin, I will.”

There was silence as the family ate their dinner.

“So,” Mrs Dawson said suddenly to her husband. “How’s the work coming along at Mrs Baker’s bungalow?”

“Just fine,” he replied with his mouth full. “Now she wants me to rewire the electrics in the bathroom. The moment I finish one job another one comes along.”

Roger Dawson had lived in Little Shapley for as long as he – or anyone else – could remember. He used to own a sweetshop but that had closed years ago and now he did odd jobs around the village. He cleared gutters and painted windowsills

and knocked down brick walls and then built them again. Recently most of his jobs had been for an old woman named Eunice Mabel Baker who had moved to the village only a few years ago. He was at her bungalow all week long, fixing this and mending that, putting up wallpaper and weeding the garden. Robin just wished his father still owned the sweet shop so he could get free sweets. The front doorbell rang. *Bing bong.*

“Now who could that be at this time?” wondered Tina. “Some people have no consideration.”

“It’s Craig,” Robin said, jumping down from the table. “He said he’d be coming over.”

“Well tell him he can come back when you’ve finished your dinner, dear.”

“I’ve finished.”

Robin ran down the hall to the front door. Craig was standing on the doorstep with so many comic books clutched in his arms that he was staggering under their weight. “Help me!” he cried as all the comics began to slip from his grasp. There was an almighty *FLOP* as forty comics fell onto the doorstep, their multicoloured pages fluttering in the breeze. “Quick, help me pick them up! This is my brother’s prized collection; if he ever finds out I’ve borrowed them he’ll kill me!”

The two boys rushed about like crazy, picking up the comics. Robin had to chase Spiderman all the way down the front garden path to the crooked gate. Eventually they were all stacked in two neat piles in the hall and Craig was fletting over a Batman, trying to straighten out the bent pages with the flat of his hand. “I hope Michael doesn’t look at them too carefully,” he said. “He says that some of these are worth a lot money.”

“For comics?” asked Robin, amazed. “Yeah, for comics. He’s visiting a friend in Cardiff for a fortnight so he doesn’t know I’ve taken them. Now let’s get these upstairs before anything else bad happens to them!”

The boys tramped upstairs to Robin’s bedroom, each carrying one pile, and a minute later they were strewn all over Robin’s bedroom. There were comics on the floor and comics on the bed; comics on the desk, and on the shelves and on his computer and balancing on Molly’s nose. You couldn’t step anywhere without accidentally treading on a *BAM!* or a *POW!* or a *KAPOW* or *ARRGGGHHHH!* Robin was munching on a chocolate bar, reading about the oldest Superman comic he’d ever laid eyes on. In fact it wasn’t even called Superman (Good old Supes’ was holding a green car over his head while people were running around in panic)

but Action Comics. Meanwhile Craig was perched on the end of the bed with his head shoved deep between the covers of Dragonball Z.

“Wow,” said Robin. “I wish I was a superhero.”

“Bah,” replied Craig without taking his eyes from the comic. “Once you’ve fought one super-villain you’ve fought them all. It must get really boring after a while.” He looked up. “Hey, don’t get chocolaty fingers on that!”

Robin rubbed his chocolaty fingers on his jeans and quickly turned the page, hoping Craig wouldn’t see the huge chocolate thumbprint he’d left right on the middle of Superman’s face. “Still, it must be great to be able to fly faster than a rocket, run around the world in ten minutes and bash-up super villains with one finger!”

“*Pish!*” responded Craig, (using a rather polite term his father often used), “This stuff is just fantasy. Now, investment banking, that’s where the real excitement is these days, take my word for it.”

“Is that what you want to be when you grown up,” asked Robin, “an ‘investment whatsit’?”

“Investment *banker*,” Craig corrected him sternly, nodding. “Of course I do. And what do you want to be?”

Robin had thought about this for a long time. “A hero.”

Craig laughed. “I don’t think they teach that one at school.”

“Yes they do!” Robin said defensively. “A person needs all sorts of knowledge to become a hero.”

“Such as?”

“Geography. You have to know where the villains are if you’re going to get at them.”

“And?”

“Maths, so you can figure out the secret code to the doomsday machine.”

“Doomsday machine!” scoffed Craig. “But where will you find all these super-villains to fight? They don’t exist, except in here...” He tapped the cover of a comic with a finger. “They’re all just made up. They’re stories.”

Robin was quiet for a moment, and then he said: “Oh yes they do exist! I saw one earlier today.”

Craig looked at him sharply. “Oh yeah? Where? And don’t tell me its Mrs Higgins with the glass eye. She can’t help looking like that.”

Robin shook his head. “No, it was in the new town, just past the motel. He was as big as a house and had eyebrows like flames and he was wearing a policeman’s uniform, but he wasn’t a real policeman. If he wasn’t a super-villain then I don’t what he was.”

Craig frowned. “There’s no town behind the motel.”

“Oh yes there is.”

“*Oh no there isn’t!*”

“*Oh yes there is!*”

“*Oh no there isn’t!*”

This went on for some time before Robin eventually said: “Do you want to bet?”

Craig thought for a moment and then nodded. “Sure, why not. The loser has to lick the winners boots until they shine!”

Robin hid his smirk by pretending to scratch an imaginary itch on his nose. “You’re on.” he said. He would make sure he got his boots as muddy as possible. Craig was in for one very big and very unpleasant surprise.

Chapter 4: The Secret Shipments.

After meeting Corinne at her house the three friends cycled up the hill to the motel. A bright orange light was shining from one of the bedroom windows. “Looks like Mr Nulb’s actually got a paying customer for once,” said Corinne.

“Don’t be daft,” muttered Craig. “Who’d stay there? I’d rather spend the night in a haunted house than in that draughty old dump!”

As they neared the motel they saw Mr Nulb carrying out a bag of rubbish to the bins, whistling *My Old Man’s a Dustman*.

“Hey, Mr Nulb,” Robin called out. “Congratulations, you’ve got a guest”

“Didn’t I say things were looking up,” said the man as he threw the bag at the bin. He didn’t throw it high enough and the bag split open against the side of the bin. Old banana skins, apple cores, empty crisp bags and gnawed lamb chops were scattered across the ground. “*Oh diddle!*” he said.

“So, what’s your customer like?” asked Craig. “Did his car break down nearby, just like the last person who stayed?”

“No, not at all,” replied Mr Nulb irritably, picking up the garbage with a look of disgust on his face and depositing it into the bin. “He’s actually quite respectable, I’ll have you know.”

Robin looked up at the lit window and saw the silhouette of a man standing there, holding aside the curtain. All the hairs on the back of Robin’s neck stood on end. The man quickly stepped back into the bedroom and allowed the curtain to fall back into place.

“Now don’t you kids go disturbing my one and only paying guest,” said Mr Nulb with a wink. “Off you go and don’t bother me again.”

The three rode on, over the top of the hill and down into the valley. Every light in Riddlington was on. The high-rise buildings shined like beacons while the shops glowed with a cold fluorescence and the streetlamps blazed a hot yellow. The children felt like they’d stumbled upon a secret land, like Avalon or Atlantis. “My word!” exclaimed Craig, braking hard and skidding to a stop. “This certainly wasn’t here before! Where did it all come from?”

“We don’t know,” replied Corinne. “But there it is all the same.”

“It’s like it just fell out of the sky.”

“My dad says that the only way they could have built the town so quickly is by bringing all the buildings here on the backs of lorries,” said Robin.

Corinne laughed. “Now that’s the most stupid thing I have ever heard in my life!”

Robin’s face turned red. “They *do* move buildings on trucks in some parts of the world!”

“But not whole office blocks, they don’t!”

Craig wasn’t listening to them. He was shaking his head. “It just doesn’t make sense?” he said. And then he frowned. “What’s that sound?”

They all turned. Lights were approaching them from the hill. Lots of lights, all in pairs, like shining eyes. Soon they could also hear a deep throaty sound of the engines and feel the grinding of heavy tyres on Tarmac.

“What are they?” asked Craig.

“Trucks, I think,” replied Robin, turning his bike around. “Like I said they brought the whole town here on the back of trucks. Let’s hide and watch.”

They quickly wheeled their bikes off the road and pushed them a little way up the hill. Having hidden their bikes behind a thick bush they got down on their bellies, crawled up to the edge and peered over the side. Robin was right, the vehicles were trucks — hundreds of them — all driving towards town, one behind the other like elephants parading at a circus. Each truck had been painted matt black and its cargo was covered with black tarpaulin. They looked very mysterious indeed — if not downright scary.

“They might be military,” whispered Corinne.

“I don’t think they are,” said Craig, shaking his head.

“Whatever they are they look mighty suspicious to me,” said Robin.

“I wonder what they’re carrying?” wondered Craig.

For a full hour the children spied on the convoy from their hiding place. Craig tried to count them, but just like when he counted sheep at bedtime, it began to make him feel sleepy, so he stopped before Corinne got the chance to pinch him. The time was nearing half past eight by the time the last truck rumbled past. Night had fallen and the road was quiet once more. Certain that they wouldn’t be seen the children stood up. In the distance they could see the trucks’ red brake lights filing into town. Some parked along the high street while others turned off to the left and

right and drove out of sight. People – from such a distance no more than stick figures – climbed out of the trucks’ cabs and began untying the tarpaulins and hauling them off. Underneath the covers there were boxes, thousands of boxes. Some were small while others were almost as big as the trucks themselves. Into the middle of the hubbub strode the strange policeman, shouting orders to the men and pointing first this way and then that. He seemed to be irritated by their slow progress.

Behind the children there was the crackling sound of pebbles tumbling down the hill.

“*What was that?*” hissed Craig, looking around sharply.

In a shot Robin pulled Corinne and Craig behind the bush. He put a finger to his lips. *Ssssh*.

None of them dared to breath, watching the hill above them with huge unblinking eyes. Up in the sky milky clouds floated across a sky simply bursting with stars. Someone had taken a big bite out of the moon. “Robin, what’s going...?” Corinne began, only for him to put a hand over her mouth.

Someway up the hill a man stood up. He was holding something to his eyes, something that he was aiming at the town. The children crouched even lower, hoping that he wouldn’t notice them. The man brought down his hands – he was holding a pair of binoculars – then nimbly ran to the top. He glanced back once more and then disappeared over the crest.

Three trapped breaths were released explosively. *Phew!* “That was close!” exclaimed Craig, rolling his eyes.

“I wonder who it was?” gasped Corinne.

Robin, however, could guess. “It was the man staying at the motel.”

“And how do you know that, clever-clogs?”

Robin didn’t know for sure, but he knew he was right. The question was why was the man so interested in the town. He was determined to find out the answer, one way or the other.

Chapter 5: Strangers in Town.

The next morning Robin was up bright and early. He and his family went to church where the lady vicar told the story of the Good Samaritan. All through the sermon Robin couldn't sit still: the mystery of Riddlington was nibbling away at his body like a school of hungry piranha. He wanted to be up and away, discovering the truth of this new town, uncovering its secrets.

"For goodness sake, Robin, stop fidgeting!" his mother whispered into his ear. "Everyone's looking!"

Once the service was over he practically burst from the church like a cannonball fired from a cannon. Meeting up with Craig by the lych gate they grabbed their bikes and cycled up to the old castle so fast the wind blew their neatly combed hair all over the place. When they met Corinne she asked them if they'd been fighting. Both boys smoothed down their hair, which had become like brown mops.

"I think we should go to the police," she said. "We have to tell them what we saw in Hamble's Valley."

"Saw *what*?" asked Craig. "We haven't seen anything, or at least anything criminal. Now if those people in the trucks were taking stuff *away*, then maybe we'd have a case, but they were putting things *in* the shops. That's not stealing, that's called stocking the shelves!"

But Corinne wasn't having any of it. "When me and Robin went to Riddlington in the afternoon all the shelves were already filled. Those things they were taking off the trucks weren't clothes and toys and stuff, they were something else. I say we go to the police and let them investigate."

Craig shook his head at this. "Without any evidence they'll just laugh at us, pat us on the head and tell us not to watch so much TV."

In the meantime Robin was thinking hard. "I agree with both of you," he said, surprising them. "Yes, we should go to the police — something very strange is going on in that town, of that I'm certain — but as Craig said, we don't have any evidence."

"So?" asked Corinne. "What do we do?"

"We get the evidence, and then — and only then — do we go to the police."

Corinne nodded but Craig wasn't so sure. "And how are we going to get this

evidence, Einstein?" he asked, knowing that he wasn't going to like the answer one bit.

"It's simple," replied Robin excitedly. "Do you both have cameras?" His friends nodded. "Okay then, we go back to Riddlington tomorrow after school and we get the evidence! It's as simple as that."

There was no argument, the plan (what little there was of it) was agreed upon in a sort of halfhearted manner. The friends played war for an hour, ducking in and out of the castle's ruins, pretending to shoot each other with guns made out of fallen branches, making "POW!" and "BANG! BANG!" noises until midday when, tired, dirty and hungry, they jumped back on their bikes and rode home. Robin and Craig were looking forward to Sunday lunch and Corinne's parents had promised to take her out for dim sum.

Just as they were crossing over the bridge they were forced to brake hard when two men crossed the road in front of them. The first man was black and startlingly tall, he wore a long charcoal grey duster that swept the ground and had a wide brimmed hat – very much like a cowboy's hat – pulled down over his ever-way eyes. "That's the man staying in the hotel!" whispered Robin.

"How do you know?" asked Corinne.

"Because I do... *and keep your voice down, for goodness sake!*"

The second man was Japanese. He was dressed in strange blue clothes and his huge explosion of black hair had a red streak dyed into it. His eyes were emerald green and he carried a very long, straight box over one shoulder.

"What do you think he's got in there?" said Craig, eyeing the box nervously. He didn't like the look of the two strangers one bit. "A fishing rod?"

"Maybe it's a snooker cue?" said Robin.

"Or it could be a sword," added Corinne darkly. "It's just about the right size for a samurai sword."

"Well, we can hardly walk over and ask him, can we?" said Robin, and then he grinned mischievously. "So let's follow them instead!"

They pretended to read the names on the war memorial as the two strange men passed the green and entered the pub on the corner, The Royal Hussar. A few minutes later they emerged holding pints of the locally brewed beer, The Hussar's Kneecap, sat down on a bench and whispered together as they sipped the beer. Neither of them took any notice of the three children who seemed to be taking an extraordinary amount of time examining the war memorial. "Wait here," said

Robin, glancing at the two men out of the corner of his eye. "I'll be back in a moment."

"Where are you going?" asked Corinne, but the only reply she got was a wink.

Leaving his bike with his friends Robin dashed across the green and disappeared between two houses.

"What do you think he's going to do?" wondered Craig.

"Knowing him," said Corinne, shaking her head, "I'd say something stupid."

In fact Robin was walking down an alley behind the pub. He entered the beer garden by the gate and slipped through the pub's back door. The Royal Hussar smelt of spilt beer and stale hotdogs. Neither the furnishings nor the decoration had changed in over two-hundred years: everything was made of the same old dark oak and black iron. In one corner stood a rather shabby mermaid, carved out of a single piece of mahogany, which had once graced the prow of a great battleship that had fought at Trafalgar and above the bar hung the propeller of a Spitfire. Old Bill was standing behind the bar as usual, cleaning pint glasses while tunelessly whistling a pop song he'd heard on the radio. When he saw Robin he was unsure if he should smile or frown.

"Hello, Robin," he said, "You know you shouldn't be in here. This place isn't for kids. But if you'd like a lemonade?"

Robin shook his head. He only wanted information. "Those two men who were just in here, did they say who they were and what they're doing?"

Bill scratched his short grey beard. "Yes, very strange customers indeed. The Japanese chap didn't speak at all, but his eyes were all over the place like a hawk, as if he was checking where the exits were. The other man had an American accent; he said they were tourists come to see the sights... but to tell you the truth, Robin, I don't think they were tourists at all. Tourists don't look like that, they wear bright Bermuda shorts and have cameras hanging around their necks and they actually smile now and then and say 'sir' and 'have a nice day' as if they might be enjoying themselves, even when they're not."

"So what do you think they want?"

"I have no..." Suddenly the barman stopped and smiled sheepishly.

Robin felt a cold breeze on the back of his neck and shivered all over. He knew that the tall American man was standing right beside him. He didn't dare look around.

"Give me a sarsaparilla," said the American in a voice so deep it could have

been used to blast rock into rubble at quarries.

“Sorry but we don’t serve sarsaparilla here, whatever sarsaparilla is,” said the barman snottily.

“A ginger beer then. And make sure there’s ice in it.”

“Right you are, sir,” said Bill smartly. “Coming right up.”

While Bill busied himself fixing the strange man’s drink, Robin felt his skin crawl and knew instinctively that the big man was staring at him. He gulped and looked up slowly. The American’s eyes were like two black diamonds shining underneath the brim of his wide hat.

“Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?” asked the man. Robin’s mouth was suddenly as dry as a packet of peanuts. “I don’t think so,” he squeaked.

“Really?” His eyes could have been lasers the way they seemed to be able to look straight through Robin. “Are you sure you weren’t up at the motel last night, *spying?*”

“Er... no... yes... It wasn’t me.”

The man’s brow furrowed. “That’s strange, there was a boy who looked just like you there. In fact I’d say he looked *exactly* like you.” “Oh you must have seen my twin brother... er... Tommy. Everybody mistakes me for Tommy... but I’m not, you know.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

The barman returned with a glass full of ginger beer. “There you go sir.”

The American paid him with cash from a roll of bills almost as fat as his fist, all held together with a rubber band. “It’s for the kid,” he said. “Now get me another for his twin brother, Tommy.”

“Twin brother?” exclaimed Bill in surprise. “Robin doesn’t have a twin brother, sir. Or if he has they must have locked him in the attic when he was a baby, or something.”

For the first time the American smiled; a rugged, lopsided smile. He pushed the glass over to Robin. “Give ‘Tommy’ my compliments,” he said, touching the edge of his hat with a finger. Turning he strode from of the pub, his brown duster flapping behind him.

Bill gulped so loudly the glasses tinkled. “If I was you I’d drink that ginger beer down quick,” he said. “I don’t think you want to go upsetting that man. I

don't think you want to go upsetting him one little bit!"

Chapter 6: An Unwelcome Visitor.

When Robin got home for lunch he noticed that four places had been laid out on the dining table instead of the usual three.

“Who’s visiting?” he asked with a sinking feeling in his stomach. He could guess who it was going to turn out to be.

“Mrs Baker,” said his father as he carved the roast beef into thick, uneven slices.

Robin rolled his eyes and groaned out loud. Eunice Mabel Baker was the village busybody, which wasn’t a very accurate description of her, because she never actually got busy herself— she made others get busy *for* her! What was worse was that Mrs Baker took in all the local stray cats and never went anywhere without at least one flea-bitten moggie tucked up inside her knitting bag.

“Now, Robin, don’t be rude!” said his mother as she dished out the roast potatoes. “You know Mrs Baker has helped your father out a lot over the last few months, what with all the work he’s been doing at her bungalow. It’s only polite that we invite her around for a meal every now and then.”

“But did that ‘now and then’ have to be right *now*?”

The front doorbell rang.

“Be a good boy now and let Mrs Baker in,” said Roger, indicating to the door with the carving knife.

“Do I have to?” moaned Robin woefully.

“Yes you do! Now hurry!”

Robin shuffled his way to the front door. When Mrs Baker saw Robin she contorted her cherry-red lips into a horrible smile that wouldn’t have fooled anyone. He knew that she hated him. In fact Eunice Mabel Baker hated all children unconditionally, and adults too – in fact she hated *everyone*, but only the children seemed to realise it. Grown-ups thought she was just a charming and harmless old lady who liked cats too much.

“Well, well,” chuckled Mrs Baker, pinching Robin’s cheek with just enough force to make tears spring into his eyes. “Little Master Robin. My, how you’ve grown! I’m sure that the last time I saw you you were a good foot shorter, if not two!” She adjusted her spectacles on her blobby pink nose. “No, my mistake. Oh

my, you haven't grown so much as a millimetre, have you?"

She breezed past Robin as he ground his teeth together. When he went into the dining room his father was helping Mrs Baker off with her coat and asking her if she'd like a sweet sherry before dinner. She replied that she would have "just a tiny wee little baby one", which meant that she wouldn't accept anything less than a full pint glass.

Robin was still sulking in the hall when his mother bustled past, carry two plates.

"Come and sit down at the table, Robin," she said. "I've put you specially next to Mrs Baker. You can help her cut up her food."

"Wonderful," Robin grumbled under his breath. "Maybe I can chew it for her as well?"

"Pardon? What was that you said?"

"Nothing," he said innocently.

Robin sat as far away from Mrs Baker as the chair would allow, with one buttock hanging into thin air. His dad began dishing out the meat, giving all the choicest bits to the old lady.

"Now isn't this lovely," said Mrs Baker in a voice that was like warm chocolate cake. "I haven't had a proper Sunday lunch in such a long time I'd almost forgotten how wonderful it is." She took shreds of beef and offered them to the cat in her knitting bag, whose name was Pickles. "I hope you've locked that rotten dog of yours up nice and securely?"

"Molly's upstairs," replied Tina, "Shut in Robin's room."

"There, did you hear that, miss *pickelsy-wickelsy!*" cooed the old woman, tickling the cat under the chin. "No horrible smelly dogsy-pogsies to chase you around and bark at you. There, don't look so alarmed, my little baby."

Pickles the cat sniffed the meat and turned up her nose. She was only interested in fresh tuna steak and the finest sirloin steak. Mrs Baker fed her cats very well indeed — in fact they were the best-fed cats in the whole of England. On Sundays they got real caviar; Russian if they could get it.

"Poor Molly," muttered Robin. He thought he could hear the dog scratching at his bedroom door and whining. She could smell the roast beef and it was driving her crazy.

"So, Mrs Baker —" Tina asked her guest, "— how's the work at the bungalow

coming along?”

Mrs Baker held up two very small hands. “Oh, you’re husband is such a *wonder!* It seems that there’s nothing he can’t fix. And while he’s fixing the plumbing in the bathroom or mending the broken roofslates we have such lovely chats. As you know I’ve only been here in Little Shapley a few years, but Roger seems to have been here *forever* — the things he knows about this little village! It really does make the mind boggle.” She turned to Robin and spoke to him through a mouthful of food, treating him to the sight of well-chewed beef and vegetables tumbling about between her false teeth. “And you, my little man, what mischief have you been up to today?”

Robin’s mother laughed. “Oh really, Mrs Baker, Robin doesn’t get up to *mischief!*” “Oh no?” the old woman shot back with a scowl. “I know little boys very well and I can tell you they’re ninety percent mischief, nine percent trouble and one percent pure malice!” She prodded Robin in the ribs with a knobbly finger. “Well?”

Robin sighed wearily. “I was talking with my friends about the new town in Hamble’s Valley.”

Roger Dawson looked up sharply. “Robin, what did I tell you about lying! There *is* no town in Hamble’s Valley!”

“Oh, I’m sorry but you’re quite wrong there,” said Mrs Baker. “There *is* a town. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Riddlington is very real indeed.”

“Real?” echoed Roger, somewhat taken aback.

Mrs Baker tapped the side of the mustard jar with a knife. “That’s right, it’s brand new! In fact it’s so new it hasn’t opened yet. Can you believe that?”

Tina shook her head. “But I was there only last...”

“I know dear!” Mrs Baker interrupted her rudely. “Isn’t it just amazing what they can do these days? The way Riddlington sprang up overnight you’d think they’d grown it in a pot. I think I heard that the grand opening is tonight, at six o’clock on the dot, to be precise. It’ll be very exciting, and apparently everything will be half price.” She nudged Robin with a bony elbow. “Toys at half price, can you imagine? Computer games, cheap. Free sweets!”

Roger was stunned. “Well, if the grand opening’s tonight and there’s a sale on, then I don’t think we can afford to miss it.”

“No, you can’t afford to miss it,” chuckled the old woman, shovelling spring greens into her mouth with vigour. “Maybe you can give me a lif? I’ve heard

there's a giant wool shop there and I want to knit my cats some new mittens for the winter."

Pickles mewed. His mittens were rather old and tatty and it was about time.

Chapter 7: Toy Explosion!

By five o'clock everyone in Little Shapley (and many people from the neighbouring villages too) had heard the news of Riddlington's grand opening and had descended on the new town's bright and shiny mall like a plague of bargain-hungry locusts. In the middle of the mall a stage had been set up before a spluttering fountain. When the clock's hands reached six there was a loud BANG and glitter and streamers went everywhere as hundreds of balloons floated down on the heads of the eager shoppers. There was a great deal of cheering and clapping of hands. Robin finished his Super Pig-Out double cheeseburger and dumped the rubbish in the bin. He had noticed that both Corinne and Craig were also here with their families. Nobody wanted to be left out on such a big day.

A fat man in a tight yellow suit marched up onto the stage. His head was so small it could have been squeezed inside a tennis ball.

"Er... hello... hello?" the man said into the microphone. "Is this thing on?" He tapped the microphone with a knuckle, each tap sounded like a boom of thunder through the speakers. Everyone winced. "Oh yes, sorry. Er... hello, my names Terry Bunyon — I'm the Mayor of Riddlington — and I'd like to invite you all to the grand opening!"

Someone at the back cried *Hooray!*

Mayor Bunyon looked nervous. He fidgeted with his red kipper tie. "And just for tonight, STUFF'S FREE!"

At the mention of the word "free" wild horses couldn't have held the crowd back. In an instant people were hurrying towards the nearest shop as fast as their legs would carry them, determined to get their hands on all the best bargains before everyone else; a few scuffles even broke out as people fought to be the first through the doors. Mrs Eunice Mabel Baker was battling her way towards "Wool World", throwing people out of her way like a professional wrestler. She was much stronger than she looked.

"Now, now, people," appealed the Major, holding up two well manicured hands. "There's plenty of free stuff to go around, so just take it easy and don't push, okay? Let's be nice here."

Nobody took any notice of him and pushed and shoved all they wanted.

Robin's parents were no better than the rest; he found himself being dragged towards a furniture store as his mother was whispered *sofa bed... sofa bed... sofa bed... under her breath while his dad was repeating the mantra widescreen TV... widescreen TV... widescreen TV...!* Robin gave one great tug and was free.

"Robin, what on earth do you think you're doing?" demanded his mother, holding out a hand to him (but she didn't stop walking towards the shop for a moment). "Come back here at once!"

He shook his head. "I'm going to find Craig and Corinne," he called and ran off. "Well make sure you're back at the car by eight."

"Yes mum."

Robin dodged between the hurrying feet and soon saw Corinne being dragged towards a shop selling designer clothes. When she saw him she quickly wriggled out of her mother's mighty grip.

"Everyone's gone mad!" said Robin. "Wasting their time on clothes and furniture and silly decorations. None of them are bothered with the really important stuff. Let's check out the toy shop!"

The toyshop, which was called Toy Explosion, was so full of toys that Robin and Corinne felt momentarily dizzy with joy. They weren't surprised to see that Craig had beaten them to it. He already had his arms full of toys, each of which was marked with either: "Free!", "Half Price!" or "Two for the Price of One!"

"Look!" he cried. "I've got a 'Super-Racer', a dozen 'Warriors of Dimension X' figures and a giant 'Destructo Smash-Derby'! I heard there was a 'Junior Train-Wreck set' around here somewhere, but I think someone else might have nabbed it before me, the *fiend!*"

"*Men!*" exclaimed Corinne in disgust, taking down a baby doll from the shelf. "Now this is much better: Little Baby Tinkle Tears." She pressed the doll's belly. "Mummy, I've wet myself," said the doll and began to cry. Corinne's grin of delight would have impressed the Cheshire Cat.

Robin and Craig stuck out their tongues in revulsion.

"That's nothing!" Retorted Craig, taking down a box that was almost as big as he was. "Murdersaur – it eats buildings in a single bite!" There was a selection of small "edible" buildings in the box, along with assorted tiny human victims. Beside it was the pink 'Diet Murdersaur' (for girls) who only ate bungalows and vegetarians.

"Hello children," came a cheery voice.

They all turned to see a pleasant woman with the widest smile they had ever seen – it was even wider than Corinne’s — grinning at them. She was wearing a red Toy Explosion uniform and her arms were full of teddy bears. Her face was as sharp as a pin and it looked to Robin that she had borrowed her eyes from a goat. The name on her badge was Pixie Snarl.

What sort of name’s Pixie Snarl? he wondered.

“We’re giving away a teddy bear to every child today,” said Pixie, her grin twitching. “Lovely little children... with chocolate sauce and fudge...” Suddenly she licked her lips. Realising what she had just done she pulled in her tongue and grinned even harder. “Would any of you like a teddy bear? They’re free! Honestly they are!”

But Robin, Corinne and Craig were already backing away to the door. There was something about Pixie Snarl they did not like.

“No thank you,” said Robin hurriedly. “I’ve just remembered my parents are waiting for me outside.”

“Same goes for me,” added Craig.

“Ditto,” said Corinne.

Once they were all safely outside they ran around the corner and shivered so hard they looked like three dogs shaking themselves dry after a dip in a icy pond.

“That woman gave me the creeps!” said Craig. “I’m never going in that toyshop again... and I never thought I’d ever say that in my life! I’m addicted to toyshops, I am!”

“I thought she wanted to *eat me!*” gasped Corinne. “*With chocolate sauce and fudge...* and I hate fudge!”

But Robin wasn’t listening to her, someone had left a door open and he was looking down a long service corridor. Two men – neither of whom had seen him – were walking towards a lift at the end. Robin recognised the first man instantly, it was the suspicious policeman, but the second man looked like something out of a nightmare. He was tall and skeletally thin and dressed in a dark brown suit. His skull-like face was as grey as ash and his lips were as bloodless as a rubber band, his neck corded like a turtle’s. But what really made Robin go weak at the knees were the old man’s eyes: his left eye was small and bloodshot but the right eye was as big as a poached egg. It appeared to be made of mother-of-pearl and stuck out a good half-inch from his face. It looked like someone had slapped him on the back as he was peering through a telescope.

Quickly Robin grabbed Corinne and Craig and pulled them against the wall, putting a finger to his lips. They could just about hear the conversation the two men were having in the corridor.

“So, how’s everything going?” asked the old man. His voice was surprisingly strong, even hypnotic.

“Great!” replied the fake policeman. “They’re lapping it up, Professor, the greedy beggars!”

“Fools!” cackled the old man. “Scrabbling and fighting over shoddy bargains that aren’t worth a penny! They deserve everything they’ve got coming to them.”

Craig went to peek around the corner, but Robin grabbed him by his collar and pulled him back.

Professor Tyrone Tor made a humming sound at the back of his gangly throat. “And how’s the dig coming along? Have you found *him* yet?”

“No, sir. If *she’s* right then *he’s* buried very deep indeed. The caves under Hamble’s Valley are millennium old. A few more days and we should know whether *she* was telling the truth or not.”

“*She* had better be!” snapped the Professor irritably; “or this effort will have all been for nothing! Do you know how much all this cost me personally to set up, eh? If King Slade doesn’t exist then I am sure the Super Pig-Out burgers will have a new ingredient to go along with the stray dogs, sparrows and field mice.”

“Har har!” laughed the policeman. “What does your eye tell you, Professor Tor?”

There was a strange *sshurpp* sound that made Robin’s stomach churn. He couldn’t make out what had made it, but whatever it was it certainly sounded disgusting, like melting ice cream being licked up off the floor by a hungry St. Bernard.

Corinne’s face had turned bright green and she had put a hand over her mouth.

After a moment Professor Tor said: “I see that everything will be just as *she* promised.” There was a click and then the children heard doors slamming shut. The corridor was silent.

“What on earth was all that about?” asked Craig breathlessly.

“He said they were digging for something,” said Corinne. “Something about caves under Riddlington! I didn’t know that there were any caves in Hamble’s Valley?”

“There aren’t,” said Craig with authority beyond his years.

I wonder what it could be,” wondered Robin, knowing that he just had to find out.

Craig laughed suddenly. “Thank goodness I didn’t have any of those Super Pig-Out burgers! He said they were made from stray dogs, sparrows and field mice!”

“Me too!” said Corinne, breathing a huge sigh of relief “And I was going to have the double halfpounder super meal!”

Suddenly Robin didn’t feel too well. He rubbed his tummy with a hand and it gurgled like a drain. “I think I’m going to be sick!” he said. And he was.

Thank You.

Thank you for reading these sample chapters of Ten Thousand Heroes. I hope you enjoyed them?

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All the best - P.T. Mayes