

CHAPTER 1

*in which we find out what a bandit van is like
and about Wild Karl's spur-of-the-moment hold-up*

I was stolen during the second week in June – which was just as well, because this summer was turning out to be a joke. We were meant to go on a cycling trip, but then it started to drizzle, so we ended up staying at home. Then we were meant to go camping, but somebody landed my dad with some extra work, so that was cancelled too.

“It’s nice for the whole family to do something together,” Dad would always say when he was planning something, but he never asked us what we fancied doing. And his plans never came to anything. I had stopped believing in his promises of summer activities because of all the times they had been called off.

On that boiling hot day, the four of us were packed into Dad’s new car on our way to visit Grandma. It was the most

boring of all the summer's plans, at least as far as Primrose and I were concerned. The two of us were already in a foul mood and we were quarrelling in the back seat over a bag of pick 'n' mix sweets. As the older sister, Primrose always claimed the liquorice cars, even though she knew they were the only ones I wanted. But she just *had* to annoy me, the way she always did. That's what it was like in the car.

"Stop that racket back there right now, otherwise you're both going to be out of this car," Dad threatened.

Primrose stuck her tongue out at me. There was a liquorice car on it.

"That's right – you two listen to your father," Mum added, but nobody was listening. Mum didn't look at us. She had to keep her eyes on the road in front, otherwise she'd get travel-sick. "Maisie, you mustn't steal. It's rude and a nasty thing to do."

As usual, I got blamed for everything. Primrose always came out on top.

"Thief," said Primrose.

"Two-faced snitch," I said when nobody took my side.

We were totally unprepared for the attack when it came. We were just spending a summer's day arguing.

And then the bandit van struck.

Much later, after I'd been on many hold-ups, I could easily imagine what had been going on in the van...

The target – our car – was under careful observation

from behind a bend in the road. Then the van accelerated up to attack-speed. A pirate flag was hoisted on a mast through the sunroof and started to flap furiously. Hilda Robberson rounded the curve without braking. Of all the careless drivers in the world, Hilda was certainly the most reckless. She usually wore a bikini or a sleeveless top when she drove because she always steered with terrific force, causing her to work up a sweat.

The other Robbersons in the van were poised for action. Wild Karl, the chief bandit, was grasping one Flinger – a homemade metal bar that swung out of the van – ready to launch himself out of the vehicle, as his long braids flew in the wind. Golden Pete, a friend of the Robbersons, hung on to the other Flinger, practising his fierce robber grimace.

“I’m big enough to go robbing now too! I am!” Nine-year-old Charlie pestered. “I’ve already got this knife here.”

“Oh, that’s where the potato peeler got to,” his mother Hilda said, keeping her eyes fixed on the road.

“If you were out there and had to say, ‘Put your hands up’, you’d probably start to cry,” Hellie declared. Ignoring the van’s mad speed, she carried on painting her toenails – each one a different colour. Hellie was twelve years old and super talented at everything, which made her the most dangerous bandit in the Robberson family. She was so wild she wasn’t allowed to be a part of the hold-ups unless they wanted to cause real terror. Hellie sat in the back seat with

her toes in the air, perfectly balanced, even though the van was skidding round as their bandit mum accelerated even more.

“Listen to yer dad now. He knows what’s best,” Golden Pete declared. His gold front teeth glinted as he tried to smile in Charlie’s direction while still hanging on to his Flinger. To those who didn’t know him, it would have looked less like a smile and more like a tiger baring its fangs. That is, a tiger with two golden teeth. “When yer dad says you’re ready, you’ll be ready.”

“Yeah, right,” said Charlie. “Probably some time after he’s retired.”

Wild Karl swung round on his Flinger, right up to Charlie’s nose. “Listen here,” he snarled. “I. Am. NEVERRR. Going. To. Retire. Say it!”

Charlie was frightened but laughing at the same time. “Erm... You. Are. NEVERRR. Going. To. Retire. Ever. OK, OK.”

“I am sleek, fierce and sharp as steel!”

Hilda steered the bandit van into view of our BMW, then brought it to a stop in the middle of the road and started the countdown to launch. This countdown was vital to ensure that everybody would act at the same time. “Halt – check. Contact – check. Five–four–three–two... Flingers ready... Launch!”

During the countdown, the following things happened:

On ‘Halt’, the brakes squealed and the van jerked to a stop. On ‘Contact’, the front doors clattered open. Wild Karl and Golden Pete got a good foothold and focused on using the Flingers to propel themselves in front of the target vehicle in a single leap. They leaped at exactly the same time, on the ‘Launch’ command.

“Don’t leave any witnesses,” Hellie shouted as Wild Karl and Golden Pete hurled themselves into the best possible position for attack.

Which was right in front of us.

It was all over in a flash. Primrose thought she was on a reality TV show, and when Wild Karl grabbed the bag of sweets – and me – from the back seat, she actually sounded disappointed. “Hey, don’t take Maisie!” she protested. “I’d be a much better competitor!”

I only had time to do one thing. As a big, hairy hand neared me, I seized my most treasured possession – my pink diary, which I never go anywhere without.

As there was no resistance during the hold-up, the bandits cleared out our car lightning fast. Dad was only worried about the car getting scratched and whether he might lose his no-claims bonus. It was only after the Robbersons’ van had zoomed away that my parents realized I wasn’t there any more.

“Well, well!” Wild Karl said with satisfaction once he’d swung back into the van with their loot.

Swinging on the Flinger had made my stomach churn. I've never liked amusement-park rides.

"Flingers inside – now!" Hilda ordered. "Doors – now!" There were two slams. "Gas – now!"

With screeching tyres, the bandit van left the scene. It was only when the van started off that it hit me – I was in the wrong vehicle, on my way to an unknown destination.

"Ahh... Liquorice cars, my fellow robbers," Golden Pete shouted as he chucked the pick 'n' mix bag on the back seat. "Somebody's got good taste in sweets."

"What have we got here?" Hellie asked, her eyes burning fiercely as she looked at me.

As they moved me into the back seat I clawed at them with my fingernails and yelled. Anybody who gets stolen ought to make some noise about it. But none of them took any notice. They were all going through the loot from the hold-up. Dad's cargo shorts were there, as well as his dog-eared copy of the *Guide to Finnish Wild Berries*. Mum's favourite bikini, which Hilda was modelling. Primrose's glittery nail varnish and her nail decorations, which Hellie declared to be useful and put in her locker. Mum's first-aid kit, containing everything from anti-itch cream to eye-wrinkle cream. Poor Mum, the mosquito bites would drive her mad without her anti-itch cream. I noticed they hadn't stolen much of mine. The only familiar thing I saw was my grey fleece hoodie, which was declared to be just right for Charlie.

“Hel-lo,” I said, trying to attract their attention.

Only Charlie, who was around my age, looked at me with some curiosity. He put the hoodie down, as if he felt guilty about the stolen loot. I tried to look as if I didn’t care.

“Hey, listen to me.” My voice was a teeny-tiny crackle in my throat.

The van swerved some more as Hilda attempted to drive at full speed while looking back at us, rather than at the road.

“Karl. What. Is. That?” she asked in a tone that made the van feel colder than the inside of a fridge.

“What? What d’you mean?” Wild Karl tried to look innocent.

“That child. Explain! This instant!”

There was only one person fiercer than Hellie – Hilda when she lost her temper. And she was pretty close to losing it then.

“You’re always saying I never make any quick decisions,” Wild Karl said, sounding hurt. “You say I’m not a good problem-solver; that I need to take action. Trust my instinct. Well, now I’ve done it! For once I acted on the spur of the moment! I made an executive decision. And besides –” Wild Karl gave a secret grin to Charlie – “before we retire, all of us should be entitled to do some spur-of-the-moment hold-ups.”

The van continued at breakneck speed. One minute we were still on the asphalt road that was familiar to me from our trips to Grandma's place, the next the van made a handbrake turn and raced off down a dirt track that I didn't know. What I *did* know was at that point we would have disappeared from Dad's sight – if he had even tried to follow us, that is. Now I was well and truly on my own in a van with this scary bunch.

“Well done,” said Wild Karl.

I gave up watching the road behind us and looked around the van instead. There were two long seats in the back, facing each other. Between them was a small table, which was now leaning against the side of the van. The van was full of nooks and crannies, sagging storage bags and boxes under the seats, fold-up tables and mattresses on wheels hidden behind things. Yet everyone seemed to know exactly where everything was.

They chucked me on to the furthest seat at the back of the van, next to a window. I looked at the weird decorations in the windows: a whole row of Barbie dolls hanging by their necks, each one with a backcombed hairdo and a totally customized bandit look. Every single thing in the van seemed to emphasize how normal I was, and what a strange and hostile world I had been dragged into. I didn't dare to think what great danger I could be in.

“Perhaps we should...” Hilda began to say tentatively.

“We’ve got time to turn back...”

“We DEF-i-nite-ly should not,” Wild Karl snapped. “End of discussion. We’re not turning round. All spring I had to listen to you lot whingeing about how lonely you were. Well, here’s a friend for you.”

“But you’re not allowed to steal friends,” said Charlie. “That’s not how it works.”

I gave him a grateful look. If only he could get them to let me out of the van, I was sure I could find someone to help me.

“It’s how it works right now,” said Wild Karl. “That’s the boss’s rule.”

To my disappointment, they all nodded and that was the end of the discussion. The Robbersons employed a robber chain of command. That was the first lesson I learned with them, and with that I gave up any hope of them letting me go.

On that long journey, I had plenty of time to observe the Robberson family. I wasn’t tied up, and they hadn’t put a blindfold on me like in the movies either. They didn’t seem to be aware that they had brought a keen investigator into their midst. I observed Wild Karl’s large, sweeping gestures; Hilda, who always seemed to be one step ahead of her husband – when Wild Karl flopped down on a chair after lunch, it had been placed there just a moment before. Golden Pete shuttled back and forth between the others as

if he was the thread that held everything together: a tall, skinny thread with gold teeth, whose speech took me ages to figure out.

I observed the kids closest of all. Charlie, who tried to watch me secretly, and Hellie, who was dressed in camouflage clothing. She was the only one in the family who seemed to notice that I was observing them.

“Go ahead and look, it’s free,” Hellie said matter-of-factly. Not in a nasty way, just bluntly, which was a habit of hers. “But if I catch you taking notes, I’ll read them.”

She fixed me with a gaze the way a shark watches swimmers on the surface of the water.



Later that afternoon, the bandit van stopped at a peaceful spot near a lake, next to some trees. Hellie said she wanted to go for a swim to cool off. So that’s what she did. We actually stopped our escape to go for a swim, as if we were normal people. Nobody thought to tie me up.

“You really ought to give me back. You’ll get a good ransom,” I said for at least the tenth time.

“Nope, we can’t do that,” Wild Karl said. He was rummaging around in an old holdall for some swimming trunks. “Huh, these have shrunk around the waist since last summer. I’ll have to steal some new ones.”

The others looked amused. Wild Karl was not a slim

man, and the trunks looked at least two sizes too small.

“Stealing, stealing,” Hilda said, struggling to maintain a serious tone.

“But why can’t you give me back?” I insisted.

Hellie raced into the water and began swimming front crawl perfectly, almost noiselessly.

“Giving back’s not our thing,” Wild Karl said. “Robbing’s our thing. That’s what we know how to do.” He picked up a pair of scissors and cut the legs off an enormous pair of long johns. “Ta-daa! Swimming trunks!” Then he turned to me and said in a low tone, “Now you wouldn’t AC-tually know this, but we’ve got a name to uphold. And with that reputation comes responsibility.”

“It’ll cause quite a buzz at the Summer Shindig when we rock up with a prisoner,” added Golden Pete from his beach chair. “Folks will know for sure they’ve seen summat new,” he said with a sigh of satisfaction. “It puts some feeling back in this business, ya know. We’re doin’ things by the book, old-school style. Like the Great Farnaby.”

“Like the Great Farnaby,” Wild Karl echoed. He was towelling himself off thoroughly, even though he had only dipped his toes in the water and promptly declared it far too cold for executive-level persons such as himself.

“You know, ‘prisoner’ is such a terribly dull word,” Hilda said as she offered me a bag of pick ’n’ mix. The bag that used to belong to Primrose and me. Then she leaned over

to me in a motherly way. “Such a shame that there are hardly any liquorice cars left. You look like a liquorice sort of girl to me.”

“Hijacked person,” Wild Karl announced. He sat down and undid his braids. “We’ve got a huge advantage in having a hijacked person in our camp.”

I sucked listlessly on a fruit bomb as I concentrated on their discussion. I wanted to retain every crumb of information that might help me to escape. I’d already made up my mind to make a run for it if that old man robber didn’t agree to give me back. *So they’ve got some sort of summer festival*, I thought. That was good to know, even though I had no intention of being with them by then. The hustle and bustle of a big event would be the time to get away, if I hadn’t managed it before.

Finally, I worked up the courage to ask, “Don’t you want a big pile of money?”

But what would my stingy father actually be willing to pay if it came down to it? I bet not even half what he paid for his car. And they still had Primrose.

“What’s that?” Wild Karl asked. He chomped into the last liquorice car, which really annoyed me. Although not getting to eat my favourite sweets felt surprisingly familiar.

Golden Pete burst out laughing. “Mouse farts, Karl, the kid’s talking about mouse farts.”

This conversation had taken a very strange turn.

“And what would we do with mouse farts, kid?” Wild Karl said, waving the half-eaten liquorice car in his hand. At least Primrose never did that. “What use are they?”

“Well, what sort of things do you want?” I asked, confused.

“What, do you want a list?” Hellie asked lazily as she shook water from her ear. She flopped down on an empty sun lounger and began leafing through a pop-music magazine she’d nicked from Primrose’s bag.

“Why not?” I asked defiantly. I went to fetch my diary from the van, ignoring Hellie’s sneering laughter about its pink flowery cover. I grabbed a pen from the dashboard and held it expectantly over the page until the Robbersons realized I was actually serious.

THE ROBBERSON FAMILY’S PREFERRED LOOT TO STEAL

Compiled by Maisie

1. pick ‘n’ mix, especially raspberry jellies (Hilda), chocolate (Karl), liquorice (Charlie), extremely strong liquorice (Pete, Karl, Hellie)
2. biscuits, especially ones with sugar on top or jam in the middle
3. meat (for Karl’s robber roast)
4. mustard
5. other things to eat, especially new potatoes, strawberries

- and other berries, homemade baked goods and sandwiches,
pizza and other fast food
6. Barbie dolls (Hellie's collection)
 7. reading material - books and magazines
 8. full packs of playing cards (eight of spades missing from old one)
 9. a decent fishing rod and reel
 10. another camping tent to solve problems with sleeping arrangements

What they are looking for right now:

Croquet game (Charlie), small travel fridge and kettle that doesn't use much electricity (Hilda), fit boyfriend (Hellie)

"Nooo!" Hellie blurted. "Get rid of that last one. Charlie, you are soooo dead!"

Charlie cackled and ran away without looking where he was going, tripped over a tree root and went flying. I didn't need to watch sibling squabbles.

As soon as I had finished the list, it was snatched from my hands.

"This is good," said Hilda. "We'll keep this list at the front so the person who's riding shotgun can look at it just before our next hold-up."

"Verry good," said Golden Pete.

The grown-ups were completely transfixed.

"You know, we've gone an entire year without an eight

of spades,” Golden Pete continued. “Awful. We definitely ought to get those playing cards, innit.”

My idea with the list had been to make it clear that I wasn't their ordinary loot, so they'd agree to return me to my family. Unfortunately things didn't go that way.

“One more thing,” said Wild Karl.

“What's that, Boss?” Golden Pete piped up.

“This is good news for us, and bad news for you, girl,” Wild Karl said as he placed his hands under his belly, as he always did when he was pleased about something. “Now there's no chance we'd let you go. You're the best bit of loot we've got from a hold-up in a long time. You're a smart kid.”