**The magical and mysterious Madame Mistral by Paul Delaney**

**ONE**

CRASH. Herbert’s fingers slipped through the climbing frame’s bars. BANG. His knees thumped into the cold, solid metal. WOLLOP. His body dropped through the air, plunging into the crash-mats below. Stars spun around Herbert’s head.

‘How many fingers am I holding up?’ Mr Skelhorn asked.

‘Err, three,’ Herbert groaned.

‘That’s right,’ Mr Skelhorn replied, looking into Herbert’s eyes.

‘Sorry, Sir,’ Herbert said. ‘I’ve been afraid of heights ever since I fell out of my pram when I was a baby.’

‘Oh come on, Herbert,’ Mr Skelhorn chuckled, shaking his head. ‘You’re not exactly climbing up Blackpool tower, are you?’

The children in Herbert’s group launched laughter bombs.

‘Come on Herb,’ Joe shouted, pointing at the climbing frame. ‘Anybody can climb to the top of that thing!’

‘It’s great if you’re Spiderman,’ Herbert shouted back, rubbing his knees.

‘You’ll have to face your fear of heights, Herbert,’ Mr Skelhorn whispered into his pupil’s ear. ‘You never know what’s around the corner!’

‘Well I’m not exactly planning on scaling the Empire State building just yet, Sir,’ Herbert remarked, jumping to his feet. ‘I’ll leave that one to King Kong thanks!’

‘Try taking the elevator,’ Skelhorn chuckled. ‘It’s a lot easier.’

The school bell sounded. Another school day ended. Marching across the playground, Herbert and his best friends Joe and Jack, giggled together.

‘You’ve got to laugh though, Herb,’ Joe said, kicking a football across the tarmac. ‘A kid from the nursery could probably climb higher than you.’

‘Funny!’ Herbert replied, spreading his lips into a smile. ‘I’ll show you all one day, when I’m at the top of Mount Everest, especially Skelhorn!’

‘Yeah, in your dreams, Herb,’ Jack said.

Herbert pushed his hand through his thick, brown hair. He stopped, looking towards the school gates. ‘Oh no, looks like that Trevor’s picking me up again,’ he said, puffing out a long blow.

‘Who’s he?’ Joe asked, his green eyes sinking into his face.

‘Mum’s new boyfriend,’ Herbert replied, dragging his bag across the playground. ‘She’s only been with him for a few weeks and he’s already staying most weekends.’

‘Looks ok to me,’ Jack said.

‘Yeah but look at him,’ Herbert snapped. ‘He’s a gorilla! His jeans and t-shirt are about three sizes too small and he’s covered in that spray tan stuff. How sad’s that?’

‘Well he’s only trying his best,’ Joe said. ‘I walk home on my own every day, Herb. I’d love it if my dad picked me up but he’s always in work.’

‘My dad picked me up once,’ Jack chuckled, flashing his teeth. ‘When I fell over ice skating!’

Laughter rang out as Joe and Jack sprinted away. ‘See you on Monday, Herb!’ they both shouted, throwing their backpacks over their shoulders.

**TWO**

‘Good day today, mate?’ Trevor asked, ruffling up Herbert’s hair with a big, fat hand. Herbert moved away, dragging his feet on the pavement. ‘Not bad,’ he snapped, looking the other way. ‘And by the way, I’m not your mate!’

‘Do anything interesting?’ Trevor asked, ignoring Herbert’s razor sharp reply.

‘No!’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘No!’

‘Come on, you must have done something.’

‘I did nothing!’ Herbert barked, his jaws snapping up and down. ‘I’ve told you, haven’t I?’

‘All right,’ Trevor said, shaking his head. ‘Keep your hair on.’

Hardly a word was spoken all the way home. ‘Fancy a bar of chocolate?’ Trevor asked as they passed the corner shop. ‘No thanks,’ Herbert replied, increasing his pace.

‘What about a play around in the park then?’

‘No thanks; I’ve got tonnes of homework to do! And anyway, we don’t have a ball, so what’s the point?’

‘I can easily whizz home and get the rugby ball,’ Trevor said. ‘Or the football.’

‘I’ve told you Trevor, I don’t want to play anything,’ Herbert said, his voice rising into a half shout. ‘So just leave me alone.’

Puffing out a long, loud breath of air, Trevor pushed his hands deep into his jeans’ pockets. ‘Ok I get the picture. Calm down mate!’

‘I’m not your mate, Trevor!’ Herbert bawled, his words as sharp as porcupine spines. ‘And I never will be, so just leave me alone.’

Those words plunged into Trevor’s chest, deflating his mood.

Trevor cast his eyes over the little, jagged cracks in the pavement. *You* *can only try your best,* he thought, his mind clouded by a hazy mist.

Herbert increased his pace, trotting away. Trevor followed, several steps behind. He glanced up at Herbert, asking him to slow down. But Herbert took no notice.

After a cold, silent walk home, Herbert bounced on the top of his bed. Holding his iPad above his face, he clicked onto a game and buried his thoughts.

‘Fancy a drink, Herbert?’ Trevor shouted, his voice drifting up the stairs.

‘No thanks!’ Herbert replied. *And do me a favour will you?* he thought. *Go and get lost!*

‘Are you sure?’ Trevor asked. ‘Mum’s bought that strawberry smoothie you like.’

‘No I’m fine, thanks,’ Herbert replied. ‘I’m not thirsty!’

*And I’ll be even finer if you stay where you are,* he thought.

Trevor climbed the stairs. ‘Room for another player?’ he asked, appearing at Herbert’s bedroom door. ‘Yes, but I’ve just finished,’ Herbert said, not pulling his eyes away from his game’s colourful graphics.

Leaning over, Trevor grabbed Herbert’s iPad and switched it off. ‘What on earth do you think you’re doing?’ Herbert yelled. ‘You’re not my dad!’

‘I’ll never be your dad, Herbert,’ Trevor said, raising his blonde eyebrows. ‘And to be honest, I’m not trying to be.’

‘Well it certainly feels like it to me,’ Herbert replied, punching his duvet with two hard, clenched fists. Trevor stared into Herbert’s face, his big eyes widening. ‘Just remember, eh?’ he said. ‘This is hard for me too.’

Herbert’s mum pushed open the front door. ‘Hi everybody!’ she shouted. ‘I’m home!’

Springing off his bed, Herbert rushed downstairs. Throwing his arms around her, he squeezed into his mum’s blouse, hugging her warm body. ‘Where’ve you been, Mum?’

‘Oh you know what school’s like,’ his mum replied, rubbing her son’s back. ‘Sometimes, you just can’t get away! Anyway, was Trevor waiting for you?’

‘Yes he was,’ Herbert answered, screwing up his face. ‘And he was embarrassing me as usual, in front of all my mates!’

‘Oh don’t start all that again,’ Mum said, looking into a mirror.

She peered at her reflection. Moving closer, she touched her face with her long, manicured nails. A pleasing image looked out at her. She stared into her bright blue eyes, massaging the delicate skin under them.

She had a striking, oval face and a full head of long, blonde hair. A thin film of flesh coloured make-up and a layer of bright red lipstick completed the picture.

‘If you had your way, Herbert,’ she said, ‘I’d be on my own for the rest of my life.’

‘I know but Dad…’

‘Dad died five years ago,’ Mum said. ’And I know it’s really hard, Herbert, but, well, we just have to try to get on with it.’

‘I know but we’ve not been to Dad’s grave for weeks now,’ Herbert said, folding his arms tight. ‘Well I’ve been busy with school and anyway, Dad always said it’s best to have his picture around the house. And the place is full of them!’

‘Can we go tomorrow?’ Herbert asked.

‘We’ll go to the cemetery at the weekend; Promise you,’ Mum said, stroking her son’s face. ‘How about Sunday afternoon?’

‘Well as long as that Trevor doesn’t come,’ Herbert said. ‘I mean Dad would hate it if he turned up – he’s boring and he thinks he’s cool and - ’

‘Hey now, don’t say that,’ Mum snapped, interrupting her son’s flow. ‘Trevor’s alright you know, you just have to get used to him.’

‘Yes but it’s like getting used to a hole in your head,’ Herbert said, following his mum into the warm, spacious lounge. ‘And I still miss Dad!’

Tears spilled out of Herbert’s eyes. ‘Hey now, stop it,’ his mum said, wrapping her long arms around him. Squeezing into his body, she soothed Herbert’s sadness like a guardian angel.

‘And I miss him too, love,’ Mum said, her own tears welling up in those bright, blue eyes of hers. ‘And I think of him every single day,’ she added, her quivering voice fragile and faint.

‘I see his face and hear his laugh. I can even smell his aftershave sometimes but it’s only in my dreams, because Rob’s in heaven now, love. So I suppose it’s time to move on.’

‘Yes but what would Dad say about that Trevor though?’ Herbert asked. ‘I reckon he’d hate it if he knew he was here.’

‘Oh I don’t think so,’ Mum replied. ‘And will you stop calling Trevor ‘That Trevor’ please? It’s awfully bad manners.’

‘Yes but surely - ’

‘Surely your dad would be happy for me?’ Mum said, completing her son’s sentence. ‘And you of course.’

‘Yes but when Dad was alive it was so much fun and we used to go to the park and play cricket and go ice skating and - ’

‘We can still do all that,’ Mum said, her eyes sparking up. ‘With Trevor! In fact only yesterday he mentioned something about an international rugby match!’

‘But it’s always better if it’s just us, Mum,’ Herbert said, cracking a knuckle. ‘And who wants to go to a rugby match anyway? That Trevor’s a loser!’

‘Hey now, don’t you say that!’ Mum shouted, crinkling up her forehead. ‘It’s mean and as I’ve said, stop saying ‘That Trevor’ – it’s horrible.’

‘What’s going on?’ Trevor asked, trotting down the stairs. ‘Sorry, I got delayed on the toilet. I couldn’t get my aim right, if you know what I mean!’

‘Yes, great, let’s call the newspapers,’ Herbert barked, clenching his fists into tight little balls. Turning around, he sprinted out of the room, disappearing up the stairs.

‘What’ve I done now?’ Trevor asked, kissing Mum on the lips.

‘Oh don’t worry, he’ll be fine,’ Mum said, pressing into Trevor’s round, muscular body. ‘You know what he’s like and anyway, these things take time. He still misses Rob, even after all these years.’

‘I suppose he will do,’ Trevor said, his lips breaking into a tiny smile. ‘He’s been through a lot, poor kid.’

**THREE**

After tea, Herbert, his mum and Trevor watched their favourite T.V. programme, Celebrity in the attic. ‘What would you do if you were famous, Herbert?’ Trevor asked, shoving an enormous biscuit into his mouth.

*I’d banish you to Jupiter,* Herbert thought, glancing at Trevor’s fat, unshaven face.

‘Come on, Herb,’ Trevor repeated.

‘Err, I don’t know,’ Herbert replied, shrugging his shoulders.

‘I’d have my hair done by Derek Boyles, that top stylist in London,’ Mum said, caressing her blonde locks. ‘And I’d buy a Range Rover Sport and I’d have my teeth whitened and - ’

‘I’ve got a tin of white paint in my garage,’ Trevor exclaimed. ‘I could whiten your teeth for nothing!’

A wild, hearty laugh escaped from his mouth. His fat body rattled up and down on the sofa, almost sliding off the edge. Mum couldn’t stop herself. She joined in with Trevor’s rib-tickling laughter.

Herbert clamped his lips shut, pressing them together. *You’re about as funny as a broken* *leg,* he thought. But Trevor wouldn’t stop.

‘Come on Herbert,’ he shouted, drawing a glass of red wine to his lips. ‘You still haven’t said anything!’

‘Well let’s face it,’ Herbert said, folding his arms into a tight knot. ‘I’m never going to be famous am I?’

‘Why not?’ Trevor asked.

‘Because I’m not very good at anything, that’s why.’

‘Hey, don’t say that,’ Mum said, pursing her lips into a smile. ‘Trevor said you played well in goals last week. And you’ve got your guitar! Well, when you remember to take it out of its case!’

‘And you only let in seventeen goals,’ Trevor shouted as a cheeky grin sprouted onto his lips. ‘Very funny!’ Herbert replied, staring at the carpet.

‘You’d probably save more shots blindfolded, Herb!’ Trevor said, rising to his feet. ‘Anyway, target practice for me now - on the toilet! And if I don’t score a bulls-eye this time, there’ll be trouble!’

Mum laughed, shaking her thin head. Herbert remained tight lipped. ‘He thinks he’s so funny but obviously he’s not,’ Herbert said as Trevor climbed the stairs. ‘He’s just a born loser.’

‘Oh just give him a chance, love,’ Mum said, holding out her palms. ‘And could you please stop calling him a loser? He’s not all that bad.’

Jumping onto the floor, Herbert climbed onto his mum’s cosy armchair, cuddling into her. He closed his eyes, burying his head into her pink pyjamas. ‘Yes he is, Mum,’ he said. ‘He’s about as funny as a car crash. Why can’t he just crawl into a hole and disappear forever or even better, be *in* a car crash?’

Mum peeled her son away from her. ‘That’s a horrible thing to say!’ she barked, grabbing hold of his wrists. ‘Don’t you *ever* talk like that again about Trevor, got it?’

‘But why can’t it just be the two of us?’ Herbert asked as his mum tightened her grip. Tears dampened his eyes as he struggled to break free. ‘It’s well better when it’s just us! We don’t need him around and you *know* it!’

The skin on Mum’s face lost its fresh, healthy glow. The sparkle in her eyes vanished. Her forehead creased up, its tight skin packed together like a closed concertina. Still holding onto Herbert’s wrists, she gazed into his eyes.

‘I’ve told you, Herbert!’ she said. ‘I don’t want to be on my own for the rest of my life! And anyway, without Trevor, you’d have been in that after school club today and you hate that!’

‘But - ’

‘Never mind your buts! Sometimes, you’re just unbelievably selfish. One day, you might realise just how lucky you are. And you’ll start to appreciate all the things that we BOTH do for you! Now go and sit over there, I’ve had enough of you. You’re a selfish little brat!’

She released her grip. Herbert’s body fell backwards, landing softly on the thick rug. Switching his ears off, Herbert trotted across the room. He climbed onto a leather chair in the corner.

Dropping his head, he closed his eyes, conjuring up an image. His dad’s face appeared in the dark but comforting blackness. Herbert’s mind transported him to the local park.

It was a warm, spring day. A gentle breeze was blowing, pushing lonely, dusty leaves along the path. Herbert clutched a plastic cricket bat. His dad bowled a ball to him. His mum, standing close, held out her arms, ready to catch it.

Together, his mum and dad laughed as Herbert missed the ball and toppled over. Herbert clambered to his feet. He dragged the bat behind him, giggling like a clown’s apprentice.

*I wish things were the way they used to be, Dad,* he thought. *I loved those days and if I could turn back the clock, I’d -*

*But you can’t, Son,* his dad whispered from a hidden, heavenly place. *You have to live in the present…*

*Can you do me a favour, Dad?* Herbert asked. *Can you get rid of that Trevor for me? Mum doesn’t really like him. He’s just a stupid, fat loser who thinks he’s so funny and -*

‘I’m calling the police!’ Trevor shouted out. He marched into the lounge, his slippers bouncing up and down. The images in Herbert’s mind suddenly disappeared. Herbert prized open his eyelids, wiping his eyes with his fingertips.

‘Why, what’s up?’ Mum asked.

‘Somebody’s stealing the toilet rolls,’ Trevor replied. ‘Or eating them! And it’s not me because I only ever use one piece, even for a number two.’

Two lonely tears dripped out of Herbert’s eyelids. He pulled himself up, wiping them away with his sleeve.

‘What’s wrong, Herb?’ Trevor asked. ‘Been looking in the mirror?’

Mum shot a sharp look of disapproval into Trevor’s direction. Her eyes narrowed into little slits. ‘He’s all right,’ she said, beckoning her son over. ‘He’s just missing his dad, aren’t you love?’

Herbert climbed onto his mum’s knee and once again, hugged into her.

Trevor disappeared into the kitchen. Soon, he returned, armed with a large glass, brimming over with sparkling lemonade. ‘This’ll do you the world of good, Herb,’ he said.

‘Thanks,’ Herbert said, as a tiny smile appeared on his lips. Herbert’s nose sniffled as he poured the cool liquid into his throat. Then, with one hand, he rubbed his eyes, his fingers prodding around his eyelids.

‘Hey and don’t you ever worry about being famous, Herbert,’ Mum said to her son. ‘Because I’ll still love you the same whether you end up famous or not!’

‘And your dad, of course,’ Trevor added. ‘I’m sure he’s looking down on you now, as we speak!’

Peering deep into his mum’s eyes, Herbert nodded.

‘I know he is,’ he said, hugging her body. ‘And one day, if I’m ever famous, I’ll - ’

‘You will be famous one day, though, Herb,’ Trevor shouted out, interrupting as usual. He slurped another mouthful of red wine from his glass before continuing.

‘You might be in that Guinness book of records, for wearing the world’s smelliest underpants!’

Trevor’s mouth rattled out a raucous laugh, his teeth popping over his thick lips. ‘At least my breath doesn’t stink like a hippo’s!’ Herbert snapped. Closing his eyes, he buried his head into his mum’s pyjamas once more.

Mum sent a razor sharp stare across the room. Her eyes turned into bright red lazer beams. ‘I thought you were supposed to be trying,’ she whispered.

Trevor rolled his eyes, puffing out a long blow. Raising his thick, muscular arms, he shrugged his shoulders. Then he tipped the remains of his wine into his mouth.