



## A PROLOGUE IN PRAGUE

SNOW IS FALLING on the city of Prague.

Soft white against a sharp black skyline, it dances around the castle spires and wisps past the patient statues of the church of St. Nicholas. It flurries over fast-food restaurants' glowing signs, drifts down on cobblestones, tarmac and tram-lines. Old women in headscarves shiver and street vendors selling hot sausages stamp their feet in Wenceslas Square. Bleary young tourists' teeth chatter outside bars in the Old Town.

A tall man and a small girl stalk through the snow. The man wears a long black coat and a homburg hat. He clutches a cane. The girl's black coat reaches her ankles, where purple-and-black-striped socks disappear inside heavy black boots. She looks nine or ten, with a pale, round face framed by long black hair.

They cut briskly across the Old Town Square: past grumbling workmen struggling to erect a huge, eighty-foot Christmas

tree; past the house where a famous writer lived an unhappy life long ago; past an ancient cemetery crammed with graves like a smashed mouth filled with broken teeth.

For each of the man's long strides, the girl must take three, yet she easily matches his angry pace. The city grows older around them as they walk. The light is fading, the day turning blue beneath a heavy slate sky. The snow is beginning to lie. It crumps under their feet. It frosts her hair like icing sugar. It gathers in the nooks and crannies of the strange metal straps that encase each of his boot-heels like heavy surgical supports.

They come eventually to a narrow street, barely more than an alley between ageing buildings, dark, save for a single yellowy light burning in a shop window bearing a sign painted in cheerful red:

BECKMAN'S TOYS

Behind the words, heavy red curtains frame a dusty display. Monkeys wearing fez hats brandish cymbals. Ventriloquists' dummies leer secret smiles at blushing Victorian dolls. Black bats hang from black threads alongside ducks with propellers on their heads and wooden policemen with bright red noses. Machine guns and ray guns, farting cushions, furry spiders and fake bloody fingers.

A line of robots marches through this chaos. Tiny cowboys

and cavalrymen battle rubber dinosaurs at the feet of fat tin spaceships.

The man in the long black coat pushes open the door, ushering the girl in ahead. A bell actually rings, a pleasing old sound of polished brass in the musty dim as they step inside. Around them, the little shop is a cluttered cosmos of toys. Squadrons of fighter planes and hot air balloons swarm the ceiling. Sailboats and rocket ships patrol shelves. Teddy bears are crammed into corners with rocking horses and dogs on wheels. Bright things new and old, of plastic, lead and wood, fake fur and cheap metal.

When they are certain there is no one else in the shop, the girl flips the sign from OPEN to CLOSED. Snapping the lock, she stands with her back to the door and folds her arms.

The man strides to the counter, heading on towards the back room, when a figure emerges from in there, pushing through the rattling hanging beads holding scissors and a roll of brown tape. A small man with severely cropped grey hair and big, round glasses, thick lenses reflecting the light, shabbily dressed but for an incongruously bright-yellow-with-black-polka-dots silk scarf knotted at his throat. A torn-off strip of brown tape hangs from the end of his nose.

“Snow is falling,” this little Beckman sings in a high burble, still frowning down at the tape in his hands. “Christmas is coming—”

Looking up to blink happily at his visitors, he stops abruptly.

The roll of tape drops from his hands. He swallows with difficulty.

“Eh . . .” He licks his lips. “Did you get him?”

The girl solemnly shakes her head. Pouting a frown that mockingly mirrors Beckman’s own, she twists her knuckles at the corners of her eyes in a *boo-hoo* pantomime, before refolding her arms.

Beckman swallows again as the tall man leans across the counter.

“You had it.”

“No. Please. I-I can explain,” Beckman begins, backing away.

The man looms further over him, reaching out a sharp, pale hand. Beckman flinches, grabs protectively at the scarf around his neck and lets out a girlish shriek – it could be the word *no* – as the man rips the tape from his nose. Beckman laughs, a nervous and treacly too-loud giggle. He pretends to relax as the tall man rubs the tape into a ball between his slender grey fingers and lets it drop.

“Tape,” Beckman babbles. “On my nose. Always I’m putting it there. Forgetting. Packaging up a gift. A horse. Going to a little girl in Germany. Near my old hometown. A lovely little horsey. For a lovely little girl.”

He tries a grin on the girl. It curdles and dies as she glares back. She picks a toy revolver from a shelf. Still unsmiling, she aims at him, pulls the trigger. Without a sound, a tiny flag unfurls from the snout bearing a single word: BANG.

“Now,” Beckman stumbles on, faster. “Please. I can explain. Yes, you just have to believe me . . .” He trails off. In the toy shop silence, he has heard a small, distinct *click*.

Now the girl starts smiling.

“You *had* it,” the tall man in black says once more. “And you let it *go*.” He raises his arm again and there is something small and sharp, silvery and slivery in his hand, arcing down through the warm reddish air as all the monkeys and cowboys and ducks and dogs and dolls look on with their glass and painted eyes.

For the next few seconds, the sounds inside this toy shop are muffled and breathy, desperate, wet and horrid.

Outside, snow is falling on the city of Prague.

Lights are flickering on in the streets and squares and up in the mysterious windows of the high castle. White globe lamps glow along black bridges over the river, reflections restless in the cold, dark water.

The snow falls.

People hurry through the streets and it covers all their tracks.

# I.

## THE GIFT

“THIS ONE IS special,” his grandfather had told him. And it was.

Alex sat at his desk, alone in his bedroom, gazing at the old toy robot that stood beside his laptop, when he should have been looking at the screen.

The cursor blinked impatiently at him from his unfinished composition on the symbolism of the novel they were reading in English. He had started to write about decaying teeth, then given up. He didn't know what decaying teeth were supposed to symbolise, except maybe decay. He couldn't stretch that to eight hundred words.

The computer's clock showed 11:34 p.m. He leaned and pulled back the curtain. Outside, snow fell from a low and heavy British sky, grey clouds stained orange by drab suburban streetlights. A thin, grey-looking fox ran into the small back garden, something white in its mouth. The animal stopped,

dropped whatever it was carrying, then lifted its head and barked out its harsh and awful cry.

As always, whenever he heard that shriek, Alex felt a chill crawl up his spine, over his scalp. The loneliest sound in the world.

The fox stood, head cocked. It screeched again. Faintly, Alex heard another, higher, answering bark. The fox picked up its food and trotted off. The friendless sound was not so friendless after all.

His computer chimed and his phone vibrated. On each, eight new messages. From eight different people. All saying the same thing:

#### YOUR GETTING IT PATHETIC FREAK

He deleted them, looked at his essay, typed some words, deleted them. He leaned back heavily in his chair.

His eyes settled on the photograph of his father on the wall above his desk. The only photograph he had ever seen of him. “Never liked anyone taking his picture,” his mum always said when she looked at it, in the same sad, apologetic tone.

It showed the two of them, his dad and mum, caught in a red-black party haze. His mum young and happy, with bad hair. His dad behind, half turned away, blurring in the shadows. A vague, tall man, black hair pushed back from a high forehead. For the millionth time, Alex found himself squinting

at the picture, trying almost to will it into focus. For the millionth time, the man refused to become any clearer.

His gaze returned to the robot. A small, bright army of these things lined three shelves above his desk, tin and plastic toy robots of all shapes and sizes, from all corners of the world. Battery-operated and clockwork, some new, the majority decades old. Many still in their deliriously illustrated boxes, or standing proudly beside them.

A few he had found himself, in charity shops and online auctions. Most, though, the oldest and strangest, the most fantastic, had come from his grandfather, his father's father, who had started his collection and his fascination.

The old man picked up these toys on his travels around the globe and this newest robot – or rather, this oldest, for Alex sensed it was very old indeed – had just arrived out of the blue a few days earlier: a brick-shaped package in the post, brown paper tied with string, his grandfather's spidery scribble across the front. The parcel bore stamps and postmarks Alex didn't recognise at first – *Praha, Česká Republika* – and when he tore it open, he discovered newspaper scrunched up as wrapping inside, printed in a language that made no sense to him.

There was a plain white postcard, too, with his grandfather's scrawl, elegant yet somehow hasty:

*Greetings from sunny Prague!*

*What do you say to this ugly little brute?*

*This one is special. Take good care!*

*See you soon.*

*I hope.*

The toy stood about five inches tall and was wonderfully grotesque. Angry and pathetic-looking, it was made from a cheap, thin grey-green tin, with a bulky torso resembling an ancient boiler, held together with tiny rivets. Little dials were painted on its chest, as if it ran on steam. It grimaced with a mouth like a tiny letterbox, filled with a jagged nightmare of ferocious metal teeth. Its eyes were two holes, framing a hollow interior blackness.

Alex picked it up and brought it into the light from his desk lamp. Angling the lamp, he turned the robot, carefully.

Not carefully enough.

“Ow.”

In places, the rough edges of old tin were sharp enough to draw blood. Dark red pulsed in a sticky stream from a scratch on his thumb.

Setting down the toy, he hissed and sucked at the cut while he hunted for tissues, wrapping one around the bleeding finger. He noticed he had left a thick red smear on the robot. Blood formed a bubble-like skin over one of its eyes. He poked another tissue in there, hoping not too much had leaked inside.

“If you only had a key,” he murmured, rubbing more blood

away from the hole where the key to wind the clockwork mechanism would go. Often, keys from one old toy would fit another, but none in his collection had worked. He squinted into the inky eyeholes. In the space where the robot's head was welded to its hollow body, the tiniest dark edge of something was just visible. Part of the clockworks, he guessed, but when he tried to look directly at it, it faded from his sight.

Looking deeper, he was seized by something like the same icy, tingling sensation he had felt when he heard the fox crying. The room got heavy and cold. The robot's empty eyes stared up. At the periphery of his vision, Alex sensed the room beginning to dim, beginning to flicker, beginning to change, becoming like a room in some old, scratched sepia film.

Frozen, eyes wide, he saw himself now as if from above, saw himself sitting in this strange, changed room, saw things moving in the shadows. The world grew woozy. A dim figure, enormous and misshapen, stepped from a dark corner down there, stood hulking, unmoving, right behind him.

A cold white glow shone now from the toy robot's eyeholes, growing starker as the light around began to fade, until blackness and the glowing white eyeholes were all there was.

And then, there was only black.

## II.

### THE UNEXPECTED GUEST

“ALEX.”

A voice, gentle.

Then not so gentle: “Alex!”

He woke with a start, lifted his head too fast, sat dazed, surprised to find himself still at his desk, stiff from a night spent sleeping slumped over the computer keyboard. A small puddle of drool shone by the space bar.

His mother stood over him, trying to smooth down the strange quiff of hair that stuck up where he had been sleeping on it. In the other hand, she held a bowl of cereal.

“I’ve been calling you for half an hour. I keep telling you: get your homework done when you get in, then you won’t have to stay up all night. Here.” She handed him the bowl. “That, then shower. You’ve got about ten minutes before the bus.”

After she left, Alex sat blinking, still stunned by sleep. He began to spoon cereal automatically into his mouth, then

stopped, frowning, as half-caught memories started playing at the edges of his mind. His mother's voice from downstairs brought him back.

"Nine minutes!"

He shook his head, spooned faster.

His mother's shout halted him again as he was halfway down the street. Looking back, he could see her in her dressing gown, leaning over the gate, waving sheets of paper at him.

"You stay up half the night writing it," she said as he ran back, "then you leave it lying in the printer."

"What?" Alex puffed, reaching to take the pages. "What's this?"

"Honestly." She shivered, pulling her robe together at the neck. "About to turn thirteen, you'd think you'd be able to pack your own schoolbag. And now, if you don't mind, I'm going back in before I catch my death."

"But . . ." Alex stood staring at the pages. "But, I didn't," he tried again as the front door closed. He started reading. His English composition. Completed and spell-checked.

"But I didn't write this. At least, I don't think . . ."

A sharp rapping made him look up. His mother stood at the living room window, sipping tea from her Johnny Cash mug. She raised her eyebrows and made a shooing motion with her hand, turning it into a smile and a wave as he set off at a trot.

Slipping through snow, Alex reached the corner in time to see his bus signalling to pull away.

"No!"

He sprinted to the stop, where his right foot hit a patch of ice and skidded from under him. Going into a tumble, he landed hard in a sitting position, kept moving, sliding, watching in interested horror as his legs, splayed before him, headed directly into the path of the bus's very large back wheel as it started rolling forward.

The air under the bus was warmer, he noted. It smelled terribly of spent oil and rubber. He was about to watch his legs get crushed, he thought, weirdly calm.

The wheel stopped. He heard the hiss of brakes, the other hiss of the bus's door. Scrambling up, he walked shakily to the front of the vehicle, feeling his face flood red. The driver shook his head as he mounted the stairs.

"Honest to God, Alex. There'd have been another bus seven minutes from now. It's not worth it, mate, it's really not."

The doors hissed again as the bus lurched off.

"Loser," a girl named Alice Fenwick muttered as Alex passed up the aisle.

"Loser," her friend Patricia Babcock chorused.

"Thank you for your messages of last evening," Alex chirruped back, dusting snow from his trousers. "Your thoughts are always appreciated."

"Loser."

He swung into an empty seat and busied himself with the pages from his bag. His essay, just as he had started it and, he realised as he read, just as he would have *finished* it, had he been able to marshal all his vague thoughts. It was pretty good.

He thought back. He remembered sitting at the computer, fuggily deleting and retyping the same lines. He remembered looking at the clock. The fox. The toy robot. Then waking this morning, slumped over his desk.

He must have woken and finished the composition during the night without remembering. Either that, or he had typed it while he was asleep. That was a thought. That would be fantastic. Auto-homework. Maybe he could train himself to do it.

His reverie was interrupted by his friend David Anderson sliding onto the seat beside him, already chewing the bubble-gum he would keep working on for the rest of the day.

David leaned over, blew a green bubble, letting it pop before sucking it back in.

“God, did you get that done? I forgot until this morning. Let’s have a look.”

He lifted the pages easily from Alex’s hand, read them over, frowning, cracking gum.

“Yeah,” Alex began. “I’m not really sure about this, see—”

“Shut up,” David said. “Your stuff’s always brilliant. Miss Johnson loves you.” He read on, blew out an impressed puff. “Yeah, man. That’s brilliant. She’s going to love this all over the place. I can’t understand a word of it.”

Alex began to say something, decided not to, shoved the pages back into his bag. As he did, his fingers touched something cold. Peering in, he saw the toy robot gazing up from the darkness with its empty eyes.

“Hey, how did you get in there?” Pulling it out, he offered it for David’s inspection. “Check this dude out. This is the one I was telling you about.”

As he handed it over, Alex felt something cold creep across his scalp. For half a second, he recalled the weird, woozy sensation he had felt the night before. But this was a much more familiar, much more mundane feeling.

Looking up, he saw the potatoey face and porcupine hair of Kenzie Mitchell leaning over from the seat behind, Alice Fenwick and Patricia Babcock at his shoulders, giggling. Kenzie was in the process of letting a gob of spit dribble from his mouth into Alex’s hair. Across the aisle, the five other members of his little group sat sniggering, interchangeable boys whose names Alex had never bothered to remember.

“All right, toy boy?” Kenzie said, slurping what was left of his spit back in and wiping his mouth. “You and your girlfriend playing with your dolls again?” He lunged and plucked the robot from David’s hand, then swung back across the aisle.

“Look at this, boys,” he said, holding it aloft. “Little freak’s brought another freaky little toy to school.”

Alex stepped into the aisle. “Give me that back.”

“Whoa, look.” Kenzie sniggered. “It’s getting angry. What’s the matter, toy boy? Daddy never teach you to share? Oh, wait: don’t have a daddy, do you? Just mummy and her boyfriend.”

“Give me it.”

“Or what ... Jesus!” Kenzie stopped. The hand that held the

robot was running red. “Poxy thing’s dangerous,” he said. “Too dangerous for little toy boys like you. Not suitable for children under three. Reckon I’ll have to keep it out your reach. In fact,” he went on, rising and yanking open the window above his seat, “best thing would be to destroy it. Health and Safety.”

“No, you won’t. You’ll give it back.” Alex swallowed, mouth dry, copper-tasting, trying not to stutter. “Now.”

“Will I? Or what?” Kenzie held the robot out the window, dangling above the cars swishing through the slush in the other direction, enjoying it. “What you going to do about it, foetus?”

It was the eternal Kenzie question. Alex had been pondering it for years.

A couple of years ahead of him, Kenzie had been a leering cloud on his horizon since primary school. Alex retained the sharp memory of their first encounter, a jeer in the playground, a stubby finger pointing down: “Look! It’s a wittle *BABY*-boy!”

When Alex had started there, he was small and young-looking even for a five-year-old. *Closer to three*, one teacher had murmured to another above his head. As it happened, she was wrong. In the same album from which he’d lifted the photograph of his mum and dad, there was a picture Alex particularly hated: himself at three, balanced bewildered on his mother’s knee, a frail, pale, underdeveloped little creature, gazing out with owlish black eyes, oversized round head still bald, save for a few fragile wisps of downy baby hair.

Eventually, though, the puzzled prophecies of the endless doctors his mum had taken him to during those years proved

true. None could find anything wrong, all promised everything would be right in time and at around nine, his body had taken a sudden stretch and caught up with his classmates. His mother's constant worry gradually lifted and, with the older boy gone, his last two years at primary had been a happy, Kenzie-free zone.

But when he went to secondary school, he found Kenzie waiting. By now, the taunts – “It’s the Umbilical Kid!” – were meaningless. Nevertheless, Kenzie’s crew took it as gospel: he was a little freak. Whenever Kenzie rounded on him, Alex felt he was looking at that photograph of himself again. Or rather, still trapped *staring out* from that picture, still that strange, frozen little creature.

*What you going to do about it?*

Blood hammered in his ears. He felt his face burn, his hands tremble. He looked out at the spiteful staring faces swimming before him. Kenzie’s hand wagging the robot out the window.

“I’m not going to do anything, Kenzie,” he croaked. “All I’m saying is, I’d like you to give me that back, please.”

As he spoke, Alex dimly felt a small, odd sensation, like something shifting slightly in his mind. And something curious happened. Kenzie grew silent. Colour drained from his already pale face. He suddenly looked very young and very sad – lost, even. He pulled the robot back in and, to the bewilderment of his gang and everyone else watching, solemnly handed it to Alex, before sitting down without another word, staring at his knees.

Sitting, Alex pulled a tissue from his pocket and wiped Kenzie's blood from the robot. He put the old toy back in his bag and zipped it shut.

The seats around remained silent for a spell, but, as the bus rumbled towards school, the usual morning buzz gradually grew again, although Kenzie's seats remained uncharacteristically subdued. After a while, David leaned to Alex.

"What was that? Jedi mind magic?"

"I don't know," Alex replied.

"Big respect, man." David whistled. "You need to teach me that stuff."

"I don't know," Alex said again, looking out at the grimy white streets rolling past the window.



"TOLD YOU SHE'D love your essay, man." David cracked a triumphant pop on his gum.

"Yeah, well, I wish she hadn't loved it."

"She went nuts! She was making classes two years above us read it this afternoon."

"And I wish she hadn't done that, either."

They were walking across the path worn into the grass toward the stop to catch the bus home.

"That bit about 'the bleached angst,'" David continued. "Awesome. What does that even mean? I'm going to use that. When I form my band, I'm going to call it the Bleached Angst." Then he said an odd thing. "Look out."

Alex looked at him, then the world lurched on its axis and grew dark.

His jacket had been pulled savagely over his head from behind. His bag pressed against his face. He couldn't see. Breathing was getting hard. He was pitching forward, hands tangled, helpless to break his fall. What felt like punches rained on his back on the way down. A muffled voice: ". . . bad enough we have to read Shakespeare, now she's got us reading *you*?"

Sprawled on the grass, Alex felt a few misaimed kicks glance off his leg. He braced himself for more but none came. He rose to his knees and pulled his head free from his jacket.

The first thing he saw was Kenzie. Kenzie lying on the ground. Kenzie lying on the ground with all his friends standing around him. All of Kenzie's friends looking up, looking angry but uncertain. And standing over Kenzie, a tall, elegant figure in a long dove-grey coat, a hand in a dove-grey glove holding a long black cane with a silver tip. The silver tip pressed hard to Kenzie's throat.

"Oh, God," Alex moaned. "Grandad."

"Hello, Alex," the old man said cheerily, ignoring the bulky fifteen-year-old gasping at his feet. "Just got into town, dropped in on your mother. Figured I'd come see if I could catch you, maybe have some fish and chips and a catch-up."

"Gttthhhhhhh," said Kenzie.

"Shall we do that?" Alex's grandfather went on. "Fish and chips? And a catch-up? With mushy peas? I've not had decent chips for months."

“Hssssttthhh.”

“Grandad, could you let him go?”

“Let him . . . ? Oh, you mean this?” He stepped back, lifting his cane. “There you go, young man, up you pop.”

Kenzie hauled himself to his feet, rubbing his red neck.

“Big mistake, Grandad,” he seethed in a strangled voice. His staring friends crowded forward. “Don’t go walking around on your own. And, you” – he pointed at Alex – “I’ll see *you* later.”

He turned and started to walk away, but then he was lying on his back again, having tripped somehow over the old man’s cane. Alex’s grandfather leaned over him, pressing the stick gently to his chest. But not so gently, apparently, that Kenzie could move it.

“That’s no way to talk.” He grinned.

“I’m going to have the cops on you!” Kenzie spluttered.

“Let you in on a little secret, old chap.” Alex’s grandfather bowed lower, voice suddenly cold. “I *am* the cops, son. And I’ll go walking anywhere I please, on my own or not. And you had better hope that I don’t see you later, or even hear about you.”

He stood back, let Kenzie to his feet and watched with a pleasant smile until he and his friends had sloped out of sight. “Now,” he said, “fish and chips?”

“Not for me,” David said, grinning, beginning a backward jog towards the bus stop. “*Serious* respect, man,” he called to Alex’s grandfather as he turned.

“Much appreciated.” The old man beamed.

“Why did you tell him you were a policeman?” Alex asked as

they trudged between snowdrifts in the direction of the chip shop.

“Did I say that?”

“You know you did.”

“I have no idea why I would say that.” His grandfather frowned. A meagre new snow had started, soft white flakes mingling with his crown of thick white hair. “What a strange thing to say.”

They walked in silence for a while.

“Uhm,” his grandfather said eventually. “Back there. Has that been happening a lot? Does your mother know?”

“It’s nothing,” Alex said, looking away. “Just a moron. Don’t have to worry Mum about it.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about Anne. Bravest person I know, your mother. Tougher than all of us put together.”

They trod on without speaking again, but Alex could sense the old man struggling to leave the subject alone.

“You know,” his grandad finally burst out, “people like that, you really should stand up to them. I mean, you were raised never to start a fight, I know that. But it doesn’t hurt to know how to finish one.”

“Grandad.” Alex concentrated on staring at the snow under his feet. “A kid in my year got stabbed in a fight last month. He’s still in the hospital. I know what you’re saying, but things have changed. It’s not like when you were young any more. I can handle it. I just try to keep my head down. I’d rather not get involved.”

“Well, yes, but sometimes . . .” His grandfather stopped. “No. I suppose you’re right. Times have changed.” He smiled. “A wise old head on those young shoulders. Whereas I’m more the other way around.”

“That’s not such a bad way to be.” Alex smiled back, glad the subject was changing. “So long as I’m around to keep you out of trouble.”

In the restaurant, Alex munched on a small portion of chips and watched happily as his grandfather demolished the biggest plate of battered haddock and chips the waitress could bring, unbuttoning first the jacket, then waistcoat of his immaculate suit to accommodate extra peas and buttered bread, washed down with pots of stewed tea.

“This stuff,” the old man mumbled through a full mouth, holding up the remains of a slice he’d been using to wipe his plate, “is extremely bad for you. White bread and what’s worse, with butter. You should never, ever eat this. It’s far too late for me, of course. When I grew up, none of us knew any better. But you should take care of yourself. Never eat it.” He popped the morsel, dripping with pea juice and ketchup, into his mouth, making a contented noise that actually sounded like *yum*. “Quite ridiculously bad for you. Now, how’s your mother?”

“She’s doing okay.”

“Um-huh. And the Idiot?”

“Carl’s not that bad,” Alex replied.

“Ha! *You* were the one moaning about him to *me!*”

“That was months ago. That was the time he said, ‘Don’t you think you’re getting too old to be playing with toy robots?’”

“And what was it you said to him again?” His grandfather leaned in, grinning conspiratorially. Anticipation played about his face.

“I told him I didn’t play with them. And I told him a robot like one I bought for five pounds had sold for six hundred dollars on eBay. That seemed to change his mind about it.”

“No, no, that wasn’t it,” his grandfather said, petulant. “That wasn’t it at all. What was it you said when he said, ‘Don’t you think you’re getting too old . . .?’”

Alex sighed. “Okay, I said: ‘And don’t you think you’re getting too old to be wearing T-shirts of bands who are all half your age?’”

“Splendid!” his grandfather roared, clapping his hands. “Excellent!”

“Really, though. He’s okay. He’s okay to me and he makes Mum laugh and he looks out for her. You should give him a chance.”

“I know,” his grandfather said, quietly now, gazing down at his empty plate with eyes looking much further down than that. He smiled back up. “Wise head. Come on, let’s get home.”



“YOU OKAY?” ALEX said as they stepped from the bus. His grandfather stood glancing around the street.

“Hmm?” The old man was looking off over his shoulder. He turned and peered ahead again, flashed a grin and started walking. “Yes, fine. Oh, now tell me, how’s that new, well, that old robot I sent you?”

“See for yourself.” Alex rooted in his bag and held the thing up. His grandfather stopped, suddenly serious and cross.

“You had it *out*? You took it to *school*?”

“No. Well, yes, but—”

“Goodness’ sakes, Alex,” the old man snapped. “It’s not a toy. Well, of course, it is a toy, but you know what I mean.”

“No, but listen. I didn’t take it out with me. I mean, I didn’t mean to. It must have fallen into my bag, I just found it in there this morning.”

“Oh.” His grandfather pulled at his bottom lip as they resumed walking. “I see. I’m sorry. May I?” He held out a hand.

Alex gave him the robot and watched as he inspected it, turning it carefully, squinting as he held it up to the street-lights.

“Uh-huh. Well, no damage done.” He handed the toy back. “Maybe pay to have a look in your bag before you leave the house, though.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, pushing open the gate. “Mum was saying the same thing.”

“Clever woman, your mother.” His grandfather nodded, adding, as the door opened to reveal Carl wrestling out a bulging bag of recycling, “most of the time.”

A little later, they all sat at the kitchen table. Alex watched his grandfather decimate a plate of biscuits and pretend to be interested in what his mother and Carl were telling him about their plans to extend the room by four feet when they got the money together. He could tell there was something on the old man's mind. When his grandad rubbed his chin, drummed his fingers and said, "Well, now, so," Alex knew he was getting around to it.

"I was thinking" – he beamed at Alex – "that old robot. It's rather a curiosity. I can't quite place it. Now, I have to pop over to France and I have a friend there – a dealer, in Paris – who might be able to help identify where and when it comes from. Would you mind terribly if I took it with me for him to have a look at? I'd be sure to take care of it, old chap.

"I mean," he continued, pulling at his ear, "ideally, I'd love for you to come along and see his place. He has wonderful pieces, has Harry, amazing old toys and gizmos. But, you know, can't have you missing school. But next time, for certain—"

"But we only have a couple of days of school left," Alex interrupted. "The holidays start next week. I could come with you. Couldn't I, Mum?"

He looked at his mother, who turned to his grandfather with the beginnings of a nod, a smile and a yes, all of which faded as she saw the worried look on the old man's face, the slight shake of his head.

"Well, no, son," she said, looking back to Alex. "You can't

just take days off school. And your grandfather won't want you in the way; he'll have his work to do."

"Next time, for definite." His grandfather smiled sadly.

"Yeah. Sure, okay." Alex knew he hadn't concealed his disappointment. "I should go up and do my homework."



BY 11:34 P.M. on the computer's clock, he had finally admitted to himself he had long given up on the last three maths questions. He would ask David about them on the bus tomorrow. David was miles better at maths.

Sitting chin in hands, staring idly at the old robot, Alex noticed a small black spot beside the hole where the key should go. Licking his finger, he rubbed at it, looked at the red smear. A little dried blood. He used his sleeve to polish it clean.

The bus tomorrow. He winced.

Things had taken on a more serious edge with Kenzie the past week. Alex's project "Like Clockwork: An Illustrated History of the Toy Robot, from Postwar Tin to Tomorrow's Tech" had been voted winner at the end-of-term Christmas exhibition, beating Kenzie's glossy, multiscreen presentation of "Football Stars' Sports Cars." Kenzie's father had paid a lot of money for a former football player to make an appearance and bring his car with him, but people had been more interested in winding up Alex's old toys and watching them walk.

There had been a hard punch to the back of his head in the

corridor the next day, the promise of more to come. After his run-in with Alex's grandfather, Kenzie would be out for serious revenge. Maybe that's why he'd felt so keen to get away on a trip with the old man.

Alex sighed and turned to the window. Pushing back the curtains, he was surprised to see his grandfather in the dim garden below. He stood silent and alone with his back to the house, leaning on his cane, watching the night. He looked almost as though he was on guard. A thin line of smoke rose from a cigarette in his right hand.

Alex pushed open the window, letting in the knifing air.

"I wish you'd stop," he called as the old man turned sharply at the sound.

"Huh? Oh." He waved the cigarette. "Quite right. Absolutely disgusting habit. What I'm doing here, Alex, is vile and stupid and unimaginably bad for you. You really must promise me that you will never, ever do it. Seriously. Of course, it's far, far too late for me. When I grew up, none of us knew any better. But never take this up. Or, if you do, wait until you're about seventy-four before you start. And take care of yourself until then."

"You could stop if you really wanted."

"Ha. Well, let's see." He puffed again at the cigarette, let it drop to the snow, snubbing it out with his cane.

"Well, look at that." He grinned. "True enough. I've stopped. Alex, you don't mind me not taking you with me, do you? You

know I'd love to have you along. It's high time we took a trip again. It's just that things will be a little hectic this time out."

"It's okay." Alex forced a smile. "Watch you don't get cold. I'll see you in the morning. Good night, Grandad."

"G'night, Alex."