



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 farther 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?