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PROLOGUE

THE ROBIN AND THE ROBOT

(BLUE HILLS: SATURDAY 7TH AUGUST 1976)

Shielding her eyes against the intense afternoon sunlight, the young girl stared in astonishment at the mayor and wondered why no one had noticed the ghost standing behind him.

A crowd of sixty or seventy people – couples with young children, mainly – had gathered in the small park to see the mayor open the new playground. Beside a gleaming set of swings, a tall

metal slide and a gaudily painted roundabout, the mayor was reading a long, dreary speech into a microphone in his flat, plodding voice, his amplified words echoing away, dreamlike, into the hazy summer air. And, it seemed, not one person in the crowd was taking the slightest interest in the white, wraithlike form looming over his right shoulder. It was extremely odd, thought the girl.

The girl was eight years old, with a cascade of bright orange curls, and wore a faded set of tomboyish dungarees. Her name was Fleur Abbott. Wrinkling her freckly nose, she tugged at the sagging sleeve of her mother's dress. 'Look, Mum!' she hissed. 'There's a ghost! Can you see it?'

Mrs Abbott didn't respond. Her attention was focused entirely on the small silvery object in her hands. She was turning it over repeatedly, feeling every centimetre of its surface for some crack or seam like a hungry monkey trying to prise open a particularly tricky nut. She was frowning intensely,

the tip of her tongue poking out through her teeth.

Fleur tugged at her sleeve again, without success. She let out a frustrated whine.

Fleur's father puffed on his pipe and snorted with laughter. Whitish smoke curled from his nostrils. 'Can't you put it down for ten seconds, my dear?' he said to his wife. 'I do believe our daughter is asking you a question.'

'I'm so close,' muttered Mrs Abbott, without looking up. 'I swear I felt the two halves come apart for a second. I bet there's some very simple trick to the locking mechanism And it's not like *you* could ever open it, with your big sausagey fingers.'

'How dare you!' gasped Mr Abbott in mock horror. 'I'll have you know I've got the fingers of a watchmaker.'

'Yes, a watchmaker with Cumberland sausages instead of normal fingers.'

Fleur giggled. Her dad's clumsy sausagelike fingers were a running joke in the Abbott family.

'I know you're fond of a puzzle, my sweet,' said Mr Abbot, 'but this is turning into an obsession. You've been fiddling with that thing non-stop since yesterday. Take a little break. It'll help clear your mind.' He took the object – a lozenge-shaped silver locket on a long silver chain – from her hands and slid it into the pocket of his cardigan. Mrs Abbott stuck out her tongue at him but said nothing. 'And anyway,' Mr Abbott continued, 'Fleur's found us a new mystery to investigate.' He winked at his daughter. 'Tell your mother what you've found, Fleur.'

Fleur pointed at the strange figure behind the mayor. 'Can you see it, Mum? The ghost?'

Mrs Abbott frowned. She raised her sunglasses and nestled them into her thick auburn hair. The figure was about five feet tall. It was draped in a white sheet and held its arms raised in a

threatening stance like some evil phantom in a picture book or cartoon. 'Ah! I see it!' she announced 'But I don't think we'll need the services of an exorcist, after all.'

Fleur wrinkled her nose again. 'Does that mean it's not a ghost?'

'Afraid not, dear,' said Mr Abbott, patting his daughter on the shoulder.

'It's the statue that's been built to celebrate the new playground,' said Mrs Abbott. 'It's just covered by a sheet so the mayor can unveil it when he declares the playground open. Do you see now?'

Fleur looked at the white-draped figure again and pursed her lips. 'I suppose so,' she sighed. 'Pity. I'd like to see a real ghost one day.'

'Maybe you will, dear, one day,' said Mr Abbott, his pipe clenched between his teeth. 'The world is full of wonders. Your mother and I know that better than most people.'

Mrs Abbott nudged her husband. 'Tell Fleur about the mysterious presence we investigated in that guesthouse in Scotland the year before she was born. That's our best candidate for a real-life ghost.'

Mr Abbott chuckled delightedly. 'The Wandering Knight! Would you like to hear about that, Fleur? Some supernatural goings-on in the Highlands?'

Fleur's face brightened. 'Ooh, yes please! Tell me about a real ghost!'

Mr Abbott leaned forward and began to whisper into his daughter's ear. 'Once, about nine or ten years ago, your mother and I were staying in a guesthouse in a place in Scotland called Dufftown . . .'

Fleur shivered with pleasure. She loved spooky stories – and Mr Abbott loved to tell them. Mrs Abbott knew this, of course, and while her husband was breathlessly recounting the story of

the Wandering Knight to their daughter, she slipped her hand into the pocket of his cardigan and retrieved the locket without him noticing.

The mayor droned on. He thanked the company that had designed the new swings and slide and roundabout, which were, he assured the crowd, of the very latest and safest design. He thanked the council workers who had concreted over the three patches of grass for them to be placed on. He thanked a man called Bigglesby, who had lent him a pen when he first had the idea of building a new playground in the park and needed to make a note in case he forgot. And finally, he thanked a local artist by the name of Fiona Cress, who had made the delightful statue that he just knew children would love and which he was now about to unveil, declaring, as he did so, that this new playground was well and truly open.

With a flourish, he whipped the sheet away from the statue.

There was a second or two of silence while the crowd, a little numbed by the heat of the day and the length of the mayor's speech, realised that he had stopped speaking. This was filled promptly by a burst of grateful applause and even a few cheers.

'Look!' cried Fleur, jabbing an excited finger at the statue. 'Cluedroid! And that's Bobby Robin with him! It's *The Robin and the Robot* from the TV show!'

Annoyed at this interruption to his story (he had just been getting to the good bit about the axe), Mr Abbott frowned at the statue. In grey-speckled whitish granite, he saw a roughly human-shaped robot figure dressed in the traditional long overcoat and broad-brimmed hat of a private detective. Both the robot's arms were raised at shoulder height, its left hand open in a friendly wave. The palm of its right hand was flat and on it sat a plump granite robin, perky, with a mischievous look in its

tiny round eyes. The left leg of the robot was raised and resting on a large square sign – the kind that might hang outside a detective's office and into which the words *The Robin and the Robot* had been carved in space-age letters.

'I see,' said Mr Abbott. 'And what exactly do the Robin and the Robot do on their show? I suppose they solve all sorts of whimsical and unlikely mysteries together, eh?' grinned Mr Abbott. 'Am I right?'

Fleur winced. '*Well* . . . it's a *bit* more complicated than that . . .'

'Got it!' cried Mrs Abbott as the locket in her hands finally came open.

The sudden flash of white light caught everyone off guard. When the mayor later recalled it, he compared it to the time in 1954 when he had witnessed an atomic bomb test on a remote Pacific island. He had the same feeling then that the entire world was suddenly dissolving into

burning whiteness, as if plunged into the heart of the sun. Many said they remembered covering their eyes with their hands and being able to see the bones in their fingers as clear as an X-ray as the savage light blasted through them. For a few brief seconds, it was as if all life, all consciousness, was extinguished in the merciless glare. The only thing that existed was the white light.

Mr Abbott blinked, a procession of shapeless black after-images jigging before his eyes. What on Earth had just happened? Had a bomb gone off? There had been no sound of an explosion, only the overpowering light. Had he been deafened? No, he realised. He could hear the startled gasps and moans of those around him. In time his vision cleared and he saw his wife before him, open-mouthed in utter confusion.

'What the hell was that?' she groaned. Her voice was hoarse. She adjusted the sunglasses in her hair with trembling fingers.

Mr Abbott shrugged dumbly. Instinctively he went to place his hands on Fleur's shoulders. The pipe dropped from his mouth and landed softly on the grass. He looked around, suddenly wild-eyed, his heart thumping, his thick-fingered hands clasping and unclasping anxiously. 'Where's Fleur?' he asked his wife, a tiny tremor in his voice.