

amazement at the falling snow. 'Beautiful. I couldn't have planned it better if I'd arranged it myself.'

He signalled them to stop halfway along a row of red-brick houses, clasped his hands together and grinned at the two boys.

'Here we are so. Number ten is the abode we require. Remember what we practised, Jack.'

'Yes, Mr Absalom.'

'Christopher.'

'Yes, Mr Absalom?'

'Stand up straight, look smart. Remember, you're assistant to the greatest engineer in all of Britain.'

'Yes, Mr Absalom.'

The door they faced was dark green with a dull brass knocker. Absalom straightened himself up, took the knocker and gave it three confident raps. He spoke to the boys without looking at them:

'Smile, lads.'

There were a few moments of silence broken only by the soft fizz of falling snow, then the sound of a bolt being thrown back. The door opened, and Absalom smiled his broadest smile.

A man in his thirties with a curly mop of hair poked his head out.

'Yes?' he said.

Absalom gave a small bow.

'Mr Chapman, allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr Gregory Absalom, a creator of rudimentaries,

mannequins, mechanicals and machines of varying sentience, variety and vivacity.'

He snapped his wrist and a business card appeared in his hand. Before Mr Chapman knew what was happening, he'd taken the card and was looking at it with a dazed expression. He looked up, his head bobbing, eyes blinking, as if he'd just been punched.

'I'm . . . I'm sorry, what's this about?'

Absalom clasped his hands together in a gesture of prayer, and took on a sombre cast.

'Word has reached me, sir, of your personal tragedy. Please accept my sincerest condolences, late though they may be.'

The man's face whitened. 'Who told you? How is that any of your . . . who told you?' he demanded.

Christopher felt suddenly nervous. He tried to catch Absalom's eye, but the engineer was too busy fixing the man with a look that was both sympathetic and predatory.

'I have friends in the village, Mr Chapman. They came to me out of the kindness of their hearts, and they told me of your predicament.'

Mr Chapman looked at him with wide eyes, resting his hand on the frame of the door as if he was trying to steady himself.

'How long has it been, Mr Chapman?' asked Absalom, his head tilted, eyes soft and moist with well-practised compassion.

Mr Chapman trembled for a moment. 'Six weeks,' he said, his voice suddenly hoarse with grief.

'And he was your only child.'

Mr Chapman nodded.

Christopher felt blazing hot spots on his forehead and cheeks. He'd presumed that this was just a normal sale. He hadn't realized what the circumstances were, and now he was furious with Absalom for trying to take advantage of this man. He was about to step forward and say something, but Absalom, without even looking at him, deftly raised his right hand and put just enough pressure on his chest to halt him in his tracks.

'Very sad, very sad indeed,' said Absalom, sighing and shaking his head – Christopher saw the sly glimmer in his eyes. 'What would you say, sir, if I told you I could alleviate your pain and grief in some small measure?'

Mr Chapman's eyes grew wide and defenceless. Christopher knew the poor man was now right where Absalom wanted him.

Absalom flourished theatrically in Jack's direction.

'May I present a top-of-the-range model. One of my finest creations, if I may be so bold.'

Jack stepped forward and smiled at Mr Chapman. He tilted his head, just as Absalom had taught him, and gave Mr Chapman a hopeful, humble look. Christopher felt sick.

'Jack, we call him, but of course his appellation is a movable feast, should you make the decision to purchase. He comes complete with all the attributes of a boy of his

apparent age. A sense of fun . . .’

Jack smiled and gave a little jig, while he rocked his elbows back and forth like a music hall comedian.

‘. . . an intelligence far beyond that of his contemporaries . . .’

Jack put his hand to his chin and squinted sagely into the sky. ‘Three hundred and ninety-five times six hundred and seventy-two is two hundred and sixty-five thousand four hundred and forty.’

‘. . . along with splendid mobility and articulation.’

Jack did a cartwheel followed by a handstand. His joints squeaked, and Absalom took the opportunity to give Christopher a sour look. Christopher glared back at him, and Absalom’s expression disappeared as he once again turned and smiled at a stunned Mr Chapman.

‘As you can see, sir, he is a most estimable model, a miracle of engineering, and I can assure you, a most affordable price should you make the decision to purchase.’

‘Thomas, who is that?’ A voice drifted from inside the house. ‘Who’s at the door?’

There was a long wintry silence before a woman appeared from behind Mr Chapman, her hair straggly, her eyes vacant and shadowed with lines of sleeplessness.

‘Who is it, Thomas? What do they want?’

Mr Chapman looked anxious. ‘Nothing, Ruth. Go back inside. It’s no one.’

Absalom moved with the whiplash speed of a rattlesnake. ‘Mrs Chapman,’ he said, as he moved towards the

threshold. 'I was just offering your husband my most sincere condolences. From what I've heard from our mutual friends, your son William –' Christopher saw Mr Chapman flinch; his wife's hand went to her mouth – 'was a most eminent and decent young man.'

Absalom finished the sentence with a crack in his voice and dabbed at his eyes with his hanky before continuing.

'I was just showing your husband our latest model, one that I hope might offer a suitable approximation of your son, one indeed that might give some small measure of emotional fulfilment and sense of family at this most auspicious time of year.'

Jack was walking around on his hands. Mrs Chapman looked at him with a kind of nervous astonishment. She bent down to have a closer look.

Jack flipped back on to his feet and looked at Mrs Chapman for the first time. He walked towards her, a look of genuine sincerity on his face.

'This is Jack, Mrs Chapman,' Absalom said gently. He ushered Jack forward by the shoulders.

A great hush descended again. In the background, Christopher could hear the low murmur of a mournful wind.

'Ruth . . .' said Mr Chapman.

His wife didn't seem to hear him. Her head was quivering, and she bent even lower as Jack approached.

'One of my finest creations, Mrs Chapman. A very

subtle mechanical approximation of humanity both in form and content. Jack can be a worker, a friend, a companion . . .'

Absalom paused as Mrs Chapman's eyes widened.

' . . . a son.'

She gave the smallest of whimpers. Mr Chapman lowered his head and let out a plaintive, 'Ruth, please . . .'

Jack stepped closer, and Christopher's heart lurched when he saw the look of agonized hope in her eyes. Absalom spread his arms wide:

'As the snow falls, think on this; how good and proper and right it would be to have a family together at Christmas. The putting up of the tree, the smiles, the anticipation, the scent of orange and spices in the air, the melodious comfort of carols. And who better to share all of this with than one's own progeny, to be together as a family unit, bound by love, by joy, and the anticipation of a visit from Father Christmas himself.'

Absalom began to casually fire off his prices, outlining various options for renting or buying. Christopher tried to dampen the hot, sickening anger he felt. He looked at Mrs Chapman's eyes brimming with tears and hope and pain. Mr Chapman had his head bowed, as if he'd already surrendered to the inevitable. Absalom's voice was becoming more high-pitched, as if he couldn't quite believe what was about to happen. His nostrils were flaring as if he could smell money about to change hands. The sight filled Christopher with disgust.

It took one word to bring it all crashing down.

Jack stepped forward and smiled hopefully.

Just one word.

'Mummy?' he said.

It was as if the snow around Mr Chapman had suddenly turned into a violent spinning vortex. Christopher had never seen rage like it.

'No!' Mr Chapman screamed.

He kicked Jack full in the chest, and Jack hurtled backwards into the snow, hitting the ground with a metallic clatter.

Mr Chapman pulled his wife inside and slammed the door in Absalom's face. In the silence, the snow hissed down around them.