



ONE

On the night the clocks went back, Isaac Turner climbed Big Ben's tower to watch his father stop time.

There were three hundred and thirty-four steps inside the Elizabeth Tower, and as Isaac looked over the banister, the twisting staircase telescoped out beneath him, making him feel dizzy. He didn't like heights, but the difficult climb was always worth it for a glimpse of the glorious machine at the top.

'Come on, slowcoach,' his dad called from above. 'Not far now.'

Isaac's dad was a horologist – someone who looked after watches and clocks. And here, in the Palace of Westminster, he was Keeper of the Great Clock, the

most famous clock in the world, the one everyone thought was called Big Ben, but wasn't.

'I can keep up!' Isaac called out, hurrying up the last few steps. 'See?'

His dad winked as Isaac reached the landing. Diggory Turner was a short man with a round face like a dinner plate. Curly black hair frothed around the sides of his head, bald on top like a crop circle. A pair of wireframe glasses perched on his plump nose, above an unkempt beard and moustache. He wore dark blue overalls on top of a white shirt and waistcoat, and battered black leather shoes. 'You ready?' he asked.

'Of course.' Isaac grinned. He wouldn't have missed this for the world.

The clock room was a large, white-walled space in the heart of the tower, criss-crossed by iron beams. On a raised platform in the centre, a tangle of gleaming black machinery made Isaac's eyes light up with excitement.

This was the clock. This was the heart of it. This was the machine that measured time.

Levers and cogs as tall as Isaac locked into cylinders bound with wire. Four huge rods pierced each wall, linked to the towering glass faces that kept watch over the city below. The machine lay deathly still, like a

sleeping dragon, except for one small lever in the centre, which moved once every two seconds with a quiet *tick*.

‘Where do we start?’ asked Isaac, looking eagerly around.

‘Just a moment,’ said Diggory. He had pulled out a gleaming gold pocket watch, the size of a digestive biscuit, attached to his waistcoat by a thin gold chain. He snapped open the cover to check the time. ‘N-ow.’

The sleeping dragon woke. With a sudden *click*, gears and levers began to rapidly spin, wriggling their interlocking teeth. Cables that stretched through the ceiling tugged back and forth, and from the belfry above them, Isaac heard the chiming of the quarter-hour bells.

*BING bong bing BONG ... bing BONG BING bong ...
BING BONG bing BONG ...*

A metal fan spun round with a clatter, coming to a halt as the chimes faded. The mechanism quietened down again, the dragon falling silent once more.

‘Nine forty-five,’ said Diggory, tucking his watch into his overalls with a satisfied nod. ‘And you can’t even tell the G sharp’s been swapped out. We’ve got three minutes. Help me lay out the tools.’

He set down his bag and unrolled a canvas bundle, into which were tucked spanners, screwdrivers and pliers.

‘I wish you’d let me work on it before,’ Isaac said,

kneeling on the floorboards to help.

‘You were too little before,’ said Diggory.

‘No I wasn’t!’ Isaac protested. ‘I’ve known how this clock works since I was ten.’

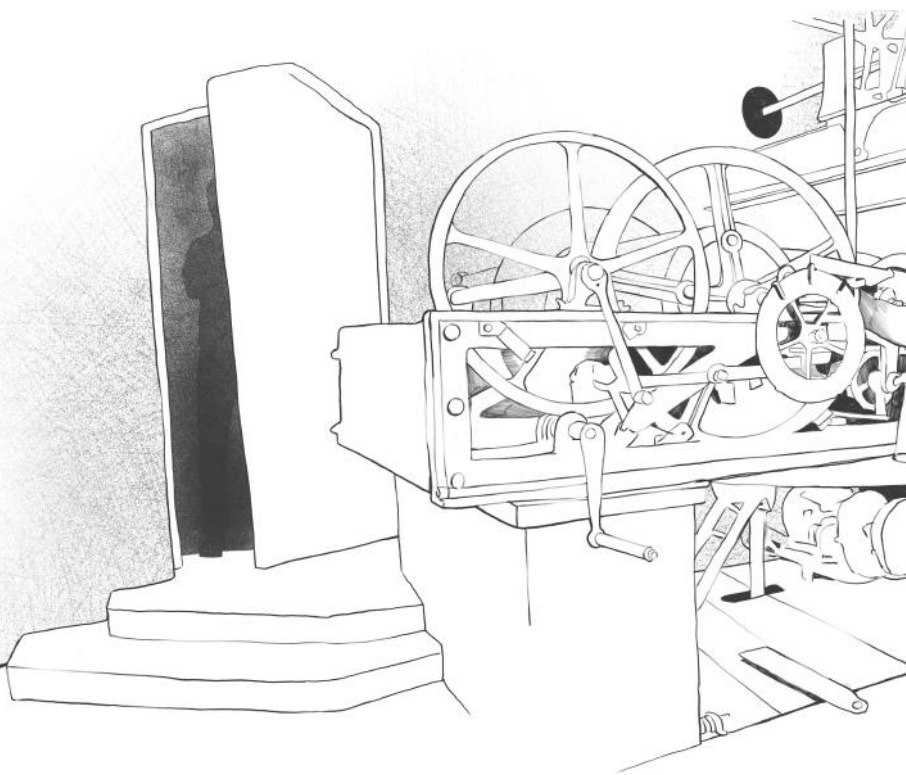
‘And when I first brought you up here, you got so excited you nearly crushed your fingers in the striking train.’

‘I was trying to clean the cogs!’

‘You were fiddling. That’s OK. I know you can’t resist tinkering with things – you’re the same as me.’

‘But I’m almost thirteen now,’ Isaac protested.

‘Which is why I’ve brought you here. I *had* to show you the clocks going back. In case ... well.’ He



grimaced. 'In case it's the last time it happens.'

Isaac saw his dad's face was fixed. It was the look he always wore when he was thinking about the New Time law.

'Should we stop the clock now?' he asked, trying to distract him.

'Yes,' said Diggory. He approached the machinery. 'First we undo this safety catch –' he used a spanner to twist out a black nut from a long screw – 'and disconnect the going train.' He removed the nut from the thread and placed it carefully on the floorboards, his fingertips smudged with grease. 'Now, give me your hand.'



Isaac held out his palm. His dad took it, and together they reached into the gears of the clock, finding a lever deep in the mechanism. Isaac's long fingers closed over it.

'What do I do?' he asked.

'Pull when I say so,' said Diggory. 'Tonight, you can stop her.'

Isaac's heart thudded, and his face lit up. 'Really?'

'*Exactly* when I say so.' Diggory put a hand on Isaac's shoulder. 'Nine forty-eight, and not a second later. Ready?'

Isaac nodded. He daredn't breathe, listening to the *tick*. In the quiet, he thought he heard someone cough.

'Did you hear that?' Isaac turned back to the stairwell.

'The wind.' Diggory was examining his pocket watch. 'Ready? Three, two, one, *now!*'

Isaac tugged the lever. It was heavy, and his biceps strained. Gears yawned deep in the machine, and the lever moved, locking into place with a *clunk*.

'Nine forty-eight,' said Diggory, patting him on the back. 'Nicely done.'

Isaac pulled his hand from the works.

'She's really stopped?' he asked.

'Listen.'

Isaac did. The *tick* had vanished.

Behind them, in the stairwell, someone moved.