

## PART ONE: THE NEAR FUTURE



## CHAPTER 1

Santa!  
Santa!

It should've been amazing, Santa himself appearing in Etta Baxter's living room.

'Ho ho ho!' he said, in his booming Santa voice.

'How are you, Etta?'

That *was* amazing, right? Santa knowing her name?

But for some reason, Etta – an eleven-year-old girl with glasses and dark hair, who was currently staring at Santa with fairly bored eyes – didn't seem that amazed. Her little brother Jonas, who was three and

a half: *he* was. He'd been shouting: 'Santa! Santa! Santa! Santa!' non-stop since Santa appeared.

'Have you been a good girl this year?' Santa continued. 'Your mum says you have. And I *know* you've been a great owner for Weech!'

Weech was Etta's kitten, so called because of the tiny high-pitched noise he made that wasn't quite a meow. That too – Santa knowing something so detailed about Etta's life – should've been amazing. But Etta's eyes didn't brighten. And Etta's eyes were normally very bright indeed.

'Santa! Santa!' said Jonas.

'Ho ho ho, Jonas,' said Santa. 'I'll come to you in a minute. But meanwhile . . . Etta, I know exactly what you want for Christmas this year. A new sparkly collar for Weech! One with green and red jewels all round it!'

'You do want that, don't you, E?' said Etta's mum, whose name was Bonny. Bonny was crouching down

next to Etta. She was pulling that face that grown-ups make when they want you to be pleased about something, but are not sure if you in fact are. You know the face.

Etta nodded. But it wasn't a very enthusiastic nod.

'And I will make sure you get it!' said Santa.

'Wow, Santa!' said her mum. 'Thank you!'

'Santa! Santa!' This wasn't Etta. It was Jonas. You probably knew that by now.

'No problem for me or my elves!' said Santa.

Etta continued just to stare coldly at Santa. This was getting a bit awkward.

'Etta . . . isn't it amazing that Santa has come to see us and that he knows exactly what you want for Christmas?' said Bonny, her voice becoming a bit pleading. 'Don't you want to thank him . . . at least?'

'OK,' said Etta, speaking at last. Her voice was deadpan. 'I'll tell you what . . .' she carried on, much

in the same tone, 'I'll give Santa a hug.'

'Um . . .' said her mum.

'Santa! Santa!'

'Come on, Santa,' said Etta, opening her arms.

'I'm not sure that's . . . allowed . . .?' said Bonny.

'Ho ho ho!' said Santa, but without moving towards her.

'What are you laughing at?' said Etta. 'I'm not suggesting a *funny* hug.'

'Well . . .' said Santa. 'It's kind of my catchphrase.'

*Ho ho ho.* I say it all the time.'

'But it is still you laughing, right?'

'Um . . . yes . . . I guess.'

'So why do it at something that isn't funny?'

Santa frowned. He turned to Bonny for help. She shrugged. He looked to Jonas.

'Santa!' shouted Jonas.

'Ho ho . . . ho?'

'Right,' said Etta. 'Anyway. About that hug . . .' She

opened her arms again and moved towards Santa.

Santa looked worried. Etta reached where he was standing, by the fireplace. She put her arms round him, and then . . . put her arms through him. Like he was a ghost. Like he wasn't, in fact, there.



'OK,' said Santa. 'Good hug. Lovely. Anyway, gotta rush. No rest for the . . . non-wicked!' And he vanished. Disappeared.

'Santa?' said Jonas.

Etta's mum looked at Etta.

'E!' she said. 'You've scared Santa off!'

'Well,' said Etta, 'it's not my fault he's a hologram.'

At which point Jonas burst into tears.



i. Gary?' said Bryan Leaf.

'Er . . . yes, sir. Gary Baxter.'

'No need to tell me your surname,' said Bryan. 'We go by first names here at Winterzone.'

'OK, sir.'

'And obviously, chuck that *sir* thing. Call me Bryan. Bry, in fact, is what I prefer. As I'm sure you know.'

Gary did know. He had worked for Winterzone