

ALEX RIDER

NIGHTSHADE REVENGE

ALTERNATE ENDING

(corresponding to the last two chapters)

M.B. Elpis

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A note to readers from M.B. Elpis:

This unofficial alternate ending consists of a combination of my own writing and re-arranged/modified excerpts from *Nightshade Revenge*. I hope it brings a smile to the faces of *Alex Rider* fans who, like me, find themselves deeply disappointed with the conclusion of *Nightshade Revenge*. It made no sense to me why the Numbers, who had medical training for treating bullet wounds, didn't provide aid or call attention to Freddy's condition earlier on the train instead of waiting till everyone got off. Both Alex himself and Paul Drevin suffered more serious bullet wounds in previous books and survived, so why not Freddy? And why was Alex suddenly so interested in Sabina again? That was so last year ... he ought to have been more excited about his new friends – the former Numbers – who are very similar to him. Of course, you don't have to agree with everything here – this is just the way I personally would have wanted the story to end. You can come up with your own alternate endings too, letting your imagination decide what's right for you. That's the beauty of fiction, after all.

SHOOTOUT

[Continued from the middle of the original chapter]

...The train picked up speed and plunged into the tunnel as the first missiles found their target, utterly destroying the town of El Dorado and laying waste to the countryside for a mile around.

A tap on his back made Alex spin around. It was William Jones. Looking at him, Alex knew at once that he was about to hear bad news.

It came. One word.

"Freddy..."

Alex's heart skipped a beat. "Go tell Ben," he said, gesturing towards the front of the train. He himself rushed to the back compartment. Freddy was sitting in a corner, not speaking. Alex had assumed he was exhausted. Now he saw it was much worse than that. Freddy's shirt and the seat around him were both covered with blood. Three of the Numbers – Twenty-Two, Fifteen, and another boy whose number Alex couldn't recall – had torn off their shirts and

were using them to apply pressure to Freddy's side and staunch the bleeding. Number Thirteen was checking Freddy's pulse and muttering rapid instructions to Number Eight, who was standing ready to assist. Alex remembered the moment outside the courthouse when Freddy had twitched as if something had stung him. That was when he must have been hit by a bullet. Freddy had pretended he hadn't been hurt. But the wound was a vicious one. Without help, Freddy wouldn't live long.

Alex felt a hand on his shoulder. Ben had followed William back and quickly examined Freddy. When he straightened up, his face was grave. He took out a medical pack from his backpack and handed it to William. "There are bandages in there. I've already called an ambulance," he said. "You stay with him. I'll be right back..."

He hurried back to the front of the train. Alex was left with Freddy and the Numbers.

"I'm sorry..." Freddy muttered.

"You're going to be fine," Alex said. There was a tightness in his throat that made it hard to speak the

words. He hoped his face wasn't giving away what he was thinking.

"You don't need to lie to me, Alex." Freddy said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"No, Freddy. We've called for help. You just need to hang on..."

Freddy smiled. "Brother Mike came to see me last night," he said. He was finding it difficult to talk, but he went on without pausing. "He wanted me to come back into Nightshade. He said there was no chance I could ever have a normal life in the real world."

"He was lying."

"He was right. I've done too many bad things, Alex. I know it wasn't my fault and I would never do any of it again. I hope the others will manage ... the Numbers. They're going to need a lot of help ... to become human again."

"Freddy..."

Freddy held up a hand to stop Alex interrupting. "It's too late for me. But I'm not sorry. That's what I want you to know. I'm glad you were my friend. You know, in my

whole life, I never had a proper friend. That only changed when I met you and all that time we spent together – escaping from prison, Greece, even Tidworth Camp – I liked being with you. I think that was the only time I was ever alive."

He coughed and Alex saw him struggling to hold his head up. The other Numbers gently helped him lie down.

"Can you say sorry to my mother and father? They thought I was dead for all those years and now they're going to have to get used to it again. But tell them that I wasn't sad at the end. You were here. We beat the Teachers. We saved all those people when we shut down the game. You and me together. We did it!"

Ben Daniels appeared in the doorway of the carriage, holding something that looked like a radio transmitter. "I've spoken to the paramedics again and given them a better idea of where the train is heading," he said. "They'll be ten minutes, They're on their way."

"Let's hope they're not too late," Alex said.

Freddy Grey, Number Nine, had closed his eyes.

10.51 a.m. – California State Highway 169

The train took a total of fifteen minutes to reach its destination. It was a long, wooden construction standing next to a hillside, surrounded by dense woodland. The train slowed and stopped automatically and most of the Numbers hurried out into the fresh air. There was a river beyond and another hill covered in pine and redwood.

Anyone driving past would have been surprised to see so many people pouring out of what looked like a deserted barn. It had been cleverly designed, making it impossible to guess that it was actually the exit from a tunnel that burrowed deep into the rocks behind. They might also have been puzzled by the plume of smoke rising into the sky in the far distance. Later, the news would report that a local ranch had caught fire at the same time as a training exercise had been taking place at the Edwards Air Force Base. The two events were, of course, unconnected.

Alex and Ben Daniels had been the first off the train. They wanted to be sure that none of the guards had been sent ahead to ambush them. But the area was clear. A gravel path led down to the highway and Alex guessed that

Lucas would have used this “back door” as a way to slip in and out of El Dorado without being seen. It felt strange to be surrounded by the Numbers who, only a short while ago, would have been happy to kill him. Twenty and Twenty-Three – both of them unharmed – were actually smiling at him ... in a non-lethal way.

He didn't know if he wanted to talk to them or not, but suddenly he heard the whirring of a helicopter and soon an air ambulance had landed a short distance from them. Two paramedics brought out a stretcher and followed Ben into the barn. They came out in a few minutes with Freddy, followed by the Numbers who had stayed on the train with their wounded companion. A ground ambulance pulled up for those who had been injured less severely. As Alex watched the helicopter take off, William Jones walked over and stood next to him. Alex saw that the front of William's shirt was streaked with blood – Freddy's. The boy's face was sombre and he said nothing, but he reached out and gave Alex's shoulder a squeeze. The sound of the helicopter grew fainter. Alex put his hand over William's, not knowing if he should dare to hope for another miracle.

BEGINNINGS

Alex walked up to the reception desk in the main lobby of the San Francisco Children's Hospital, where he had his picture taken and printed on a visitor badge. He took the lift – the elevator, as it was called here – to the seventh floor and found himself walking down a long corridor to the general surgery inpatient unit. He pressed the buzzer, gave the name of the patient he was visiting, and was promptly allowed in. It was as different from Delhi Station as one could imagine – no guards, no guns, no metal detectors. A normal hospital for normal people.

Alex followed the signs and found Room 718 at one end of the unit. The door was ajar, and a dark-haired nurse came out into the corridor just at that moment. Her eyes rested momentarily on Alex's visitor badge before her face broke into a wide grin. "Ah, so you're Alex! Frederick's right in here," she said, gesturing to the room behind her. "He'll be so glad to see you. He's been talking about you constantly. You know, his nurse from the intensive care unit

told me that when he woke up after surgery, the very first thing he asked was where you were and if you were safe. He's been making very good progress every day, and I'm sure seeing you will help speed up his recovery even more!"

Alex smiled and thanked the nurse. Stepping inside the room, he saw a boy hooked up to an IV drip and propped up with pillows on the bed. A stuffed monkey in blue pyjamas sat next to him. There was a vase of fresh flowers on the window sill. The boy hadn't noticed Alex coming in – he was engrossed in reading *Tintin in Tibet*, and there was a hint of a smile on his lips. Alex paused for a moment, his heart overflowing with gratitude at the peaceful sight. Truth be told, he hadn't thought Freddy would make it, but luck had been on his side.

"Hi Freddy," he called out gently.

The boy lowered his book and looked up. His face instantly lit up at the sight of his visitor.

"Alex!"

Alex approached the bed, taking in the sight of his friend more closely. Freddy was looking thinner and paler than Alex had ever seen him, but the doctors were

confident that he would be back to his usual self in no time. Alex's mind flashed back to the chaotic moments just before the air ambulance had arrived. Freddy had lost a great deal of blood and had become completely unresponsive. Although hope had been ebbing away with every second, the timely efforts of the other Numbers had ultimately paid off. Ironically, it was the extensive medical training they had received through Nightshade that had saved Freddy's life, sustaining him until the paramedics came. The last scene Alex had witnessed on the train was vividly etched in his memory – William Jones bending over an unconscious Freddy to administer CPR while the other Numbers dressed the wound and applied compression nonstop. A true family, working together to save one of their own. Alex remembered the trepidation he had felt watching Freddy being airlifted away -- would he ever see his brave, faithful friend again?

But his prayers had been answered, and here was Freddy, beaming at him. Alex had a sudden urge to scoop Freddy up in his arms and hold him tight and never let go, but he knew he mustn't do anything that might get in the

way of his friend's recovery. He remembered his own time at St Dominic's Hospital after he had been shot by a Scorpio sniper. He reached out to take Freddy's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"How are you?" Alex asked, sitting down on the chair next to Freddy's bed.

"I'm feeling a lot better now, Alex. The doctors finally took out that horrid tube yesterday and now I can eat real food again! Mind you, I'm only allowed bland and mushy stuff right now, but I got Ellie – that's my nurse – to bring me some ice cream after lunch today," replied Freddy cheerfully.

Alex had never felt so many emotions swelling up inside him. "Oh Freddy," he said softly. "When the ambulance took you away, I was afraid I might have lost you forever. I can't tell you how relieved I was when Ben told us that the doctors had operated on you, and you were going to be all right!"

"I really didn't think I was going to make it either," said Freddy. "I should have trusted you, Alex, when you told me I was going to be fine. You were right...Brother Mike

was lying. I don't know what came over me to make me believe him!"

"You're going to have a fantastic life, Freddy, trust me. We'll have so much fun together this summer once you've fully recovered and I'm done with my GCSEs. And maybe you'll be allowed to start going to school too. You'll make loads of new friends, and with all your incredible skills, I bet you'll be very popular right away! Of course you'll always be different from most people – so am I for that matter – but that doesn't mean you won't get along well with others, you know."

Freddy smiled. "Yeah, I'll just have to come up with a good story to tell everyone when they ask what school I went to before or how I met you. I doubt anyone would believe the truth!"

"You never know, Freddy. Some friends might. Tom believed me at once when I first told him about working for MI6. Oh, speaking of Tom, he sent a video message for you. He wanted to talk to you in real-time but I told him I'd be seeing you when it's the middle of the night for him."

Alex held out his phone to Freddy. Tom Harris' face popped up on the screen and his voice blared awkwardly from the speaker:

Freddy, mate, I never got a chance to thank you properly. For saving my life, I mean. You were totally brilliant, mate. Alex told me about everything that happened in California. I'm so glad you pulled through, and I hope you get better soon and can come home. It's only because of me that you risked everything and nearly got killed, and I want to make it up to you in any way I can. I know I'm not as cool as Alex, but I hope you'll still like me and maybe we could hang out sometimes. You could meet my brother Jerry too. He's into all kinds of extreme sports. I already told him about you, and he knows he'd also be dead thanks to that killer game if it weren't for you. Anyway, get well soon, mate. And let me know if I can help with anything!

Freddy grinned and handed back the phone. He had already taken a liking to Alex's best friend at Lower Wick Airfield after seeing how brave and loyal the boy was in his own way.

"Can I call Tom back tomorrow morning? Mum said she's going to bring me an iPhone. She made me promise not to spend too much time playing games on it though."

"Sure, I'll text Tom's number to your Mum so she can save it to your new phone. He'll be so pleased to hear from you. Actually, he was also asking about Andrew and Emiko – that's Number Thirteen and Number Twenty-Two – when he sent me the video yesterday. I think he wants to see them again and get back at them for kidnapping him."

Freddy gave a snort of laughter. "Well, I'd be happy to help him with that!" Then his face grew more serious. "Have you seen the other Numbers, Alex? Are they still here in California?"

"Yes, I've been seeing them, and they're doing pretty well. Of course we have you and William to thank for that. All of them now realise what the Teachers did to them, and they're coping with a lot of shock and guilt. But the psychiatrists are being very gentle and helping them understand that none of it is their fault. We're all staying at a nice place arranged by the CIA, just outside the city. Mrs Jones and Mr Crawley are there too. William has

accepted that Mrs Jones is his mother. She wants to take him back to England as soon as possible to be with Sofia. In fact, she even wanted me to fly back tomorrow so I don't miss any more school before my GCSEs. But I told her that I'm not leaving before I've had a full week to spend time with you, now that you've come out of intensive care and are on the mend. If you'd like, I can ask if some of the other Numbers might be allowed to visit you too. MI6 and the CIA are trying to identify all of them and reunite them with their families."

"That would be great, Alex! I really wanted to see you first, but having more visitors here would be really nice too. This place is so different from Delhi Station, isn't it? Everything feels so relaxed and no one seems to think I'm even remotely dangerous!"

At the mention of Delhi Station, Alex hesitated for a second. No, he couldn't let there be any secrets between him and Freddy anymore.

"Freddy, there's something I've got to tell you."

"What is it, Alex?" A look of concern crossed Freddy's face. He reached out and took hold of Alex's hand.

"No, no, it's nothing serious...well...it's just that I'm so ashamed of myself, Freddy. I actually believed you had turned against me and become Number Nine again when you broke out of Tidworth Camp and then pretended to kill Tom. Your performance was so convincing, but I should have known better. I was such a fool and didn't trust you!"

Alex lowered his eyes, unsure how Freddy would receive this information. There was a silence of a few seconds, and then Alex felt gentle fingers brush his cheek. He looked up to see an amused smile on the face of the boy in front of him. Freddy gently took Alex's chin in his hand.

"Oh, Alex," he said softly. "You have no reason at all to be ashamed. Those moments were so terrible and scary for me too. I didn't even know if my plan was going to work. And you didn't see me put the disc in Tom's pocket. All you saw was poor Tom lying there looking dead. Any sane person would have thought I'd really killed him!"

Freddy took a deep breath, and paused.

"And it really *was* necessary that you should think I had turned against you...otherwise your reactions wouldn't have been genuine and Brother Mike would have found me

out a lot quicker. He would have killed all of us then and there, and we would never have been able to shut down that game or rescue all the other Numbers."

Alex smiled, relieved that Freddy hadn't been hurt by his words. He reached out with his right hand (Freddy still hadn't let go of his left) to touch his friend's cheek in return, and felt an overwhelming rush of love and comfort. Brave, sweet, wise Freddy! How did he, Alex, get so lucky to have such an incredible friend in his life?

"Freddy..."

Alex couldn't pull his gaze away from those clear blue eyes and that reassuring smile. An immeasurable warmth filled him top to toe, leaving him lost for words. But he knew Freddy would understand. Alex suddenly felt as though he were walking along an infinite corridor in his mind, with new doors flying open left and right along his path, welcoming him home to a future full of hope and promise, leaving the past far behind. His last meeting with Sabina seemed to have taken place aeons ago, little more than vague fragments of a nondescript dream. What did it matter whether she was going out with Blake or not, or

whether she stayed in San Francisco or returned to London? Alex had moved on. He was looking his own future in the eye, and it was going to be better and brighter than anything he had ever known before.

* * *

Two months later, Alex walked down Liverpool Street in the City of London and stopped outside the elegant, old-fashioned building that advertised itself as the home of the Royal and General Bank. It was nothing of the sort, of course. In fact, this was the main office of the Special Operations Division of MI6. Alex had been just fourteen years old when he had first come here following the sudden death of his uncle, Ian Rider. It felt like a lifetime ago. That was when he had been recruited by Alan Blunt, who had recognized that a fit and intelligent teenager who spoke several languages and who had learned judo and karate from the age of six could be incredibly useful to the organization. Alex had been sent to investigate a Lebanese billionaire called Herod Sayle and that had been the start of a series of adventures that had taken him all over the

world. Once they'd got hold of him, MI6 had been reluctant to let him go.

And here he still was, more than two years later. But things were different now. Alex went into the building, stopping in the reception area with its row of lifts, its multiple clocks and drab brown marble floor. There was a receptionist waiting for him, but before he could introduce himself, one of the lift doors opened and John Crawley stepped out. He came straight over and Alex guessed that he must have been watching Alex's arrival on CCTV.

"Good morning, Alex."

"Hello, Mr Crawley."

The last time the two of them had met had been at the CIA safe house near San Francisco, where Alex had voluntarily stayed with the Numbers after the destruction of Nightshade. Sabina hadn't been too happy, to put it mildly, when Alex had politely declined her invitation to stay at her house instead. She couldn't fathom why he would choose the company of a bunch of psycho killers over her, even after his mission with MI6 was complete. Hadn't he promised that this would be the last time? A few weeks

later, Sabina's Facebook profile picture had been updated to show her at her high school prom, locked in a passionate embrace with Blake. Alex couldn't help being very amused.

Back in London, Mrs Jones had told Alex that Dwain Garfield had been found in a Washington motel, sound asleep, with an empty bottle of whisky and half a million dollars stolen from the CIA concealed in his wheelchair. He had been suspended and was currently in jail. Alex had a shrewd suspicion that Crawley might have been involved.

"I'll take him up, Svetlana," Crawley called to the receptionist.

"Svetlana?" Alex was surprised.

"Yes, it's a Russian name, I think. A bit worrying..."

They got into the lift and Crawley pressed the button for the sixteenth floor. As always, Mrs Jones' deputy had the look of someone who had just got out of bed – and who hadn't slept well to begin with.

"I must congratulate you once again, Alex, on finishing off Nightshade. There really is no stopping you."

"I think I do want to stop, Mr Crawley," Alex said.

"Yes. I can understand that. And I think Mrs Jones feels the same."

"Why does she want to see me here?" Alex asked. Since his return from America, Mrs Jones had always spoken to Alex over phone or visited him at his house.

"That's for her to tell you." Crawley hesitated. "But it may be that there are some changes coming."

They came to the office that had once been occupied by Alan Blunt but which had been assigned to Mrs Jones when she took over as head of MI6 Special Operations. Crawley held out a hand. "She wants to see you alone," he said. "So I'll say goodbye for now. I do hope we meet again, Alex. You really are a remarkable young man and we owe you a great deal."

They shook hands. Alex knocked and went into the office alone.

He saw at once that things had changed. Mrs Jones was sitting behind a completely empty desk. The books had disappeared from her shelves. It was as if she no longer belonged here.

“Alex, it’s good to see you!” said Mrs Jones, waving him to a second chair. He sat down opposite her. She took a book out of her handbag and handed it to him. It was Alex’s own well-thumbed copy of *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson, the one that Ian Rider used to read to him when he was younger. “William said he really enjoyed this one, even more than *Treasure Island*. Although Sofia disagreed and said she liked Jim Hawkins more than David Balfour.”

Alex grinned. “I think I have to agree with William on this one.”

For the past few weeks, Alex’s GCSEs hadn’t allowed him to see Sofia and William often, but the three of them had still managed to keep up the book sharing routine they had started shortly after Mrs Jones and William’s return to England. Mrs Jones visited Tidworth Camp twice a week and was always happy to stop by Alex’s house to convey books, and sometimes games and other little treats, between him and her children. William now shared Sofia’s suite at Delhi Station. It had taken them exactly four days of bickering over who got which side of the bed, five days of fighting over the TV remote, and one argument over milkshake

flavours to acknowledge each other as brother and sister. Before his GCSEs, Alex had been visiting the Jones siblings every weekend, just as he had visited Freddy before. Now that Nightshade was no longer a threat, the children were allowed to spend time together without a guard present in the room. Sometimes Freddy would also come to see his friends at Delhi Station, and at other times he would join them via FaceTime from his Exeter home.

Alex had also visited the Greys in Exeter several times, going there directly from Tidworth Camp on Saturday evenings. He would spend the night and most of Sunday with Freddy before taking the evening train back to London. Sir Christopher and Lady Grey loved him dearly and treated him as a second son. Never before had Alex felt such a strong sense of naturally belonging to a family. It was the complete opposite of his experience living with the Pleasures in San Francisco. There, he had spent every single day feeling like an outsider, painfully aware that he just didn’t fit in with the family despite their efforts to make him feel welcome. With the Greys, on the other hand, Alex always felt at home. Whether he was getting Krav Maga

lessons from Freddy in the garden, relaxing on the sofa listening to Sir Christopher's stories about his army days, or helping Lady Grey explain government and politics to Freddy, Alex loved every minute of his time in Exeter and had quickly come to think of the Greys as his own family.

"How did your exams go?" Mrs Jones asked.

"They went OK, except for History. I'm fairly sure I mixed up the reigns of Richard II and Richard III and most of my answers were based on Shakespeare's plays rather than historical facts."

Mrs Jones smiled.

"I've got some good news to share with you. The psychiatrists at Delhi Station have decided that it's time for Sofia and William to come home, so they will be released next Thursday. I was wondering if you would like to spend the weekend with them at my flat. I think Sofia and William would really like that. You mean so much to them, Alex."

At the mention of Mrs Jones' flat, Alex had a fleeting image of two annoyed agents at the front desk passing him a bottle of Coke after he had stepped through the metal detector. Had that really been only two years ago?

"That's fantastic news, Mrs Jones! I'd love to spend the weekend with William and Sofia. I can go over to your place Friday afternoon, if that's all right with you."

"Wonderful. I'll send you the address in case you don't remember it. You'll find that there have been quite a few upgrades since your last visit." There was a note of friendly teasing in her voice.

Alex felt himself turning red. His last, and only, visit to Mrs Jones' flat had been in the guise of a pizza delivery boy sent by Scorpia to assassinate her. Mrs Jones rose from her chair to walk over to him, and put a reassuring arm around his shoulders.

"Oh, Alex," she said, kissing his forehead with maternal tenderness and smiling down at him. "How far we all have come!"

Looking up into Mrs Jones' eyes, Alex saw that they were moist with tears.

"I lost my two children a long, long time ago," Mrs Jones went on. "You know all about that. And now, thanks to you, I have both of them back. You have no idea how much that means to me, Alex. You have utterly changed my

life. Moving forward, you'll always be a big part of my life, and my children's too, no matter what." She looked around at her empty office and wiped her eyes.

"You're leaving," Alex said, getting up from his chair.

Mrs Jones nodded. "Yes. I have to give all my time to William and Sofia, and help them get over what was done to them. You know, from the very first day I met you, there was something about you that reminded me of them. It won't mean very much coming from me now, but I always knew it was wrong of us to use you the way we did and I worried about you more than you may believe. Anyway, I've resigned from MI6. Today is my last day. That's why I asked you to come here, for what I hope will be the last time. Of course we'll continue to see each other often – I hope even more frequently, now that my children are coming home. Nothing would make me happier than if you would think of me not as the head of MI6 Special Operations but simply as Sofia and William's mum from now on. I can never thank you enough for everything you've done for me, Alex. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"Sofia and William are more than enough payment for me, Mrs Jones. I really couldn't ask for better friends."

Alex found that his own eyes hadn't exactly managed to stay dry either. He put his arms around Mrs Jones, resting his head on her shoulder as she hugged him back tightly. In the past few months, he had come to know Mrs Jones not only as the stern, serious woman on whose shoulders rested the security of the entire nation, but also as the loving mother who snuggled with her children and told them stories, patiently answering all their questions and comforting them when they were upset about their terrible past. It was strange to think that only a year ago, Alex would have given anything to be permanently rid of Mrs Jones' presence in his life. But now he couldn't imagine his life without her, without the precious gift of friendship and family she had given him through Freddy, William, and Sofia. He wasn't going to tell her, but deep down inside, he had already forgiven her for using him.

"Is Mr Crawley taking over?" he asked.

"No. We're recruiting from outside. Should the new chief decide to contact you, Alex, I hope you won't take

the call. I'm sure your GCSE marks will be excellent, and you should follow your plans of sixth form and university. I think that's the best idea."

"I think so too."

"Speaking of sixth form," said Mrs Jones, "Sir Christopher and Lady Grey phoned me yesterday. They would like Freddy to start sixth form this autumn, just like you. They also informed me that Freddy has expressed a strong desire to live in London with you and attend Brookland. Actually, they think Freddy's feeling somewhat shy about asking you and Jack directly. If you ask me personally, I think Sir Christopher and Lady Grey are also feeling too shy to ask you directly, after everything you've already done for their son. But they fully support Freddy's idea – they know how much you mean to him and how very special your friendship is. Of course they would pay you and Jack for Freddy's room and board – if his living at your house isn't an inconvenience, that is. And you would always be welcome to spend weekends and school holidays with Freddy in Exeter."

Alex's heart was dancing in delight to hear the very thing that he himself had been secretly hoping for, but had also been feeling too shy to suggest to the Greys.

"Mrs Jones, I'd love nothing more than having Freddy live with me and go to school with me. His parents don't need to pay anything...Freddy's company will be more than enough. And Jack adores him. I've even caught the two of them talking and laughing over FaceTime without me!"

Mrs. Jones smiled. "Good, then I'll let Sir Christopher and Lady Grey know. Make sure you tell Jack too. I'm also thinking of sending Sofia and William to Brookland if they feel ready to start school by the end of summer. That way, all four of you can be together."

Alex's heart leapt again with joy. "That would be amazing."

"Well, that's all settled then. Don't forget about Friday! William and Sofia will be waiting for you."

"I'll be there, don't worry," replied Alex with a grin as he got ready to leave. "Maybe I could bring some pizza for dinner?" he asked with a deliberate air of innocence.

Mrs Jones caught on at once and laughed. "Yes, if you want to. But let's wait a bit longer before telling William and Sofia *that* story, all right?"

Alex nodded. He said goodbye to Mrs Jones and walked out of her office. As he emerged into Liverpool Street, he thought of all the previous times he had left this very building thinking he would never have to return, only to find himself dragged back again. But he knew in his heart that this time was truly different. He walked on and found the coffee shop where he had told Jack and Tom to meet him. He could see them through the window, sitting together, laughing. The summer holidays lay ahead, and Tom was already talking to Alex and Freddy about another trip to Italy, hiking and camping with Jerry. And now William and Sofia would be home in just a few days. Somewhere over the hum of London traffic, Alex could hear the merry chirp of a goldfinch, and the sky had never looked a brighter blue.

He opened the door and went in.