

ALFIE BLOOM

and the

Secrets of Hexbridge Castle

Gabrielle Kent

 SCHOLASTIC

Scholastic Children's Books
An imprint of Scholastic Ltd
Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London, NW1 1DB, UK
Registered office: Westfield Road, Southam, Warwickshire, CV47 0RA
SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or
registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

First published in the UK by Scholastic Ltd, 2015

Text copyright © Gabrielle Kent

The right of Gabrielle Kent to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by her.

ISBN 978 1407 15579 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of Scholastic Limited.

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
Papers used by Scholastic Children's Books are made
from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, incidents and dialogues are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

www.scholastic.co.uk



Prologue



Mrs Emmett's Visitor

There were many things Nora Emmett disapproved of. These included whistling, tropical fruit, sandals, children who didn't hold doors open for her, children who assumed she *needed* doors opening for her – in fact she pretty much disapproved of children altogether. However, at this moment as she sat up in bed listening to the darkness, the thing she disapproved of most of all was whatever had woken her at three o'clock in the morning.

She didn't have long to wait before the sheep started bleating again. Reaching out into the darkness, she struck a match and lit the oil lamp





on the night stand with an uncanny accuracy that came from years of practice. Mrs Emmett didn't quite trust electricity yet.

The brass bedstead creaked as she got up, wriggled into her tartan slippers and shuffled downstairs to investigate.

Setting the oil lamp down next to the stove, she pulled the kitchen nets aside and peered out into the night. The bleating had died down to an occasional terrified *baa*. Whatever had frightened the sheep was still out there. It was probably the same rustlers that had taken two cows from the Merryweather farm last month. Well, they weren't going to get any of *her* flock. She pulled on her overcoat and wellies, grabbed her shotgun from the pantry and filled her pockets with cartridges from the biscuit tin next to the teabags.



The kitchen door clicked shut behind her as she stepped outside. Tucking the shotgun under her arm, she hitched up her nightie and crept through the orchard, silently weaving between the twisted plum trees towards the sheep pen. The new moon cast only a little light on to the farm, which was shrouded in the kind of darkness that makes it impossible to see your own feet. The dark didn't bother her. She didn't approve of the kind of skies where the glow of street

lights was always present and you couldn't see the stars. This was night as it should be.

The bleating had stopped and the sheep were eerily silent now. Nearing the pen, she could make out wet crunching noises punctuated with deep grunts. Something was in with the sheep and it wasn't human. Could it be wolves? She hadn't heard of wolves in Hexbridge, not for many years.

Her eyes adjusted to the blackness and she could just about make out a mass of sheep huddled together in one corner of the pen. The whole flock was constantly in motion as each animal clambered over the others, trying to get as far as possible from whatever was in there with them. Mrs Emmett crept forwards to investigate.

The crunching stopped and the frantic bleating started again as a huge, dark shape reared up between her and the pen. She had never heard sheep make noises like that before, not even in the slaughterhouse. Instinctively she raised the shotgun and fired two shots directly into the shadowy mass.

The recoil threw her to the ground and she was nearly deafened by a loud bellow, like an elephant and lion roaring at the same time. Tearing her nightie from the grip of the brambles, she

clambered to her feet, only to reel back from the hot, stinking breath of the thing that towered above her.

She looked up.

Two pairs of yellow eyes as large as saucers glared down at her. The stench of sulphur filled her nostrils as the creatures began to hiss softly. As the noise became louder she took a long deep breath. With amazing speed she reloaded, snapped the barrel shut, jammed the butt to her shoulder and aimed right between the eyes of the closest creature. Squeezing the trigger, she shouted louder than she ever had in all her eighty-two years,

“SHOOOOO!”

The hammer clicked feebly as the gun failed to fire. The eyes seemed to half close into a smile as her mighty roar dwindled into silence. The hiss was now like a pressure cooker at full steam. A scorching gust of wind hit her, blowing off her nightcap and sending her hair and nightie billowing. With eyes closed tight, Mrs Emmett shielded her face from the searing wind as a white-hot flash ended her worries about sheep for ever. As the gun dropped from her hands, she just had time for one final entry on the list of things she disapproved of.



1



The Raven

As Alfie Bloom rocked back on his chair and enjoyed the lively chatter that filled the classroom, he had the strange sensation he was being watched.

It was the last day before the summer holidays. The sun streamed through the windows promising six weeks of glorious freedom, and Mrs Harris had declared a free afternoon. Most of the pupils had brought in board games and were arguing loudly over who was winning and who was cheating. The arty students were drawing and painting pictures or scribbling biro tattoos on to each other's arms.

Alfie had been happily daydreaming about





nothing in particular when the feeling hit. It was beginning to irritate him. He glanced around the classroom suspiciously. Everyone seemed to be minding his or her own business, or each other's. He turned his attention to the playground, briefly catching his reflection in the window, a red-brown mop of hair falling across green eyes. Gazing beyond, he realized who was spying on him. It was a large raven on the school field.



The raven gave a little hop then strode from side to side, looking back at the classroom window over hunched shoulders. Alfie could swear that it was trying to act casual after being caught out. There wasn't another bird in sight and he began to feel a little sorry for the solitary creature. Alfie knew what it was like to feel alone. The last day of term always seemed so exciting, but tomorrow he would face being stuck on his own all summer while his best friend, Amy Sui, went on holiday with her gran. His dad was always so busy with his inventions and part-time jobs that Alfie knew he would hardly see him.



Forfeiting the staring contest, he stretched and turned to watch the card game at the next table. Amy seemed to be winning. Glancing back at the field, he froze. In place of the raven, a tall man in a

Victorian suit and cape was looking directly at him through a small brass telescope. Alfie nearly fell off his chair.

“Amy! AMY!” he called, waving frantically at his friend. When he looked back at the field, the man had vanished and the raven was back.

“What’s up, Al?” asked Amy, joining him. “This had better be good. I was just about to win Phil’s pen – the one that writes in space.”

“There! See that raven?” Alfie eyed the bird warily as it pecked nonchalantly at the feathers under its wing. “Does it look . . . *normal* to you?”

“Let’s see.” Amy leaned over his shoulder and gave the raven a good, hard squint. “Well, it’s got all the usual bits – feathers, wings, beak – so yep, that’s a normal bird all right. Is that all you called me for?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” Alfie started to feel a little embarrassed. “It’s just that . . . well, it looked *different* for a second.”

“O-kaaay.” Amy patted him on the head and went back to her game.

The classroom was still as noisy as ever. Mrs Harris was trying to get everyone to put away their paints and games. No one else seemed to have noticed anything peculiar happening outside.

Alfie was still staring at the raven, wondering

if he had just imagined the strange man, when the school bell sounded. Everyone jumped to their feet as a resounding cheer went round the classroom. He looked back at the field just in time to see the raven run a few steps before taking flight.

“Settle down, everyone,” shouted Mrs Harris. “Well, your junior years have come to an end. I hope that you all work hard at Hillston High after the holidays and that *some* of you take the opportunity of starting a new school to turn over a new leaf.” Alfie noticed her glance at a couple of students in particular as she said this, but they were too busy inching closer to the door to take in the hint. “Please put your chairs on your tables QUIETLY and—” The rest was drowned out under the roar of chairs being dragged across the floor and plonked on to tables, some of them falling off as everyone shoved to get out of the door first. Mrs Harris tried to shout a few more words of farewell over the din, then flopped into her chair with a sigh of relief that yet another year was over. Alfie pulled off his tie, slung his bag across his shoulders and threw himself into the midst of the wild, whooping mob flowing out of the school.

He passed Amy just as she was getting into her gran’s car.

“Gran says to come over on Sunday for lunch, Al. WOO! No more school!”

Alfie dallied more than usual on the way home, enjoying the raven mystery and the warm weather.

His daydreams ended abruptly as an empty Coke can hit the back of his head.

“Oi, Bloomers!”

Alfie groaned and mentally kicked himself. He had been too preoccupied to notice class troublemakers Vinnie and Weggis trailing along behind him.

“So, what you doing for the holidays?” asked Vinnie as they caught up. “Is your weirdo dad taking you to dig up dinosaurs or something?”

“He’s an inventor, not an archaeologist.”

“Whatever, he’s still a nut-job. Anyways, we thought we’d walk you home as we won’t see you till September. Can’t wait though. I hear the toilets at Hillston flush for ages. Your hair could use a wash.”

“Get lost,” Alfie muttered under his breath, walking faster to leave them behind. Their insults and taunts about his dad had been chipping away at him for months, but he hadn’t dared say a word back to them for fear of making things worse.

“What was that, Bloomers? Did you really just tell us to get lost? Get his bag, Weggis!”

Alfie tried to yank his bag away as Weggis lunged for it, but he was too slow.

Vinnie began rummaging through it, throwing out Alfie's sports kit.

"Hmm, lame trainers."

"They're OK." Weggis let go of Alfie and joined in. "My dog'll 'ave 'em." He pulled out an exercise book and flicked through it before tossing it aside and grabbing another.

Alfie sighed. He knew this routine – he'd seen it so many times in the playground. They would go through everything in his bag then throw it to each other if he tried to take it back. He sat down on a garden wall and tried his hardest to look bored despite the blood pounding through his veins.

"Don't you want yer bag?" spat Weggis, clearly annoyed that Alfie wasn't making any effort to get it.

"You seem to want it more than me," said Alfie, hoping his voice wasn't shaking. He got up and began walking away. "Keep it."

"Oi, we don't want your stinking stuff!" shouted Vinnie, running over and shoving him in the back. Alfie stumbled forwards then span around to face him. "At least we can afford decent trainers." Vinnie slammed his palm into Alfie's shoulder this time. Alfie felt as though someone had lit a fire in

his chest, and it was melting away his cold fear of Vinnie. “Bet your freak of a dad couldn’t afford to buy another pair if you lost these.” Alfie curled his fingers into fists. Another push.

Alfie snapped. He shoulder-charged the two boys, catching them completely by surprise. The bag slipped out of Vinnie’s hand as Weggis fell on top of him. It sailed over Alfie’s head to land in the road. He raced to pick up his things before they untangled themselves to chase him.

His eyes felt hot and blurry as he grabbed his books and trainers. He shoved them quickly into his bag while checking over his shoulder for Vinnie. A woman’s voice called out sharply from behind him.

“Look out!”

He turned and froze on the spot. A car was speeding towards him. The driver spotted him and slammed on his brakes, but it was too late. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. The woman stood helplessly on the kerb with her dog, her arm stretched out towards him. The car was so close Alfie could see the face of the driver in great detail – a middle-aged man with glasses and a moustache, his hands gripping the wheel as his mouth opened into a silent scream.

Unable to force his legs to move, Alfie closed his eyes and half crouched in terror, waiting for the impact as the car screeched towards him.

Then . . . nothing.

There was an eerie stillness. After a few seconds, he realized that all sounds in the street had stopped. No voices, no birds, no traffic. The air felt different too: colder, with an earthy smell, like old leaves.

When he opened his eyes he was astonished to see that the street had gone, replaced by a cool greyish mist. The adrenaline flowed out of his veins as he uncurled. Why wasn't he hurting anywhere? His clothes were starting to feel damp. He held out his hand, and tiny droplets of rain splashed on to his palm. *Could you get wet if you were dead?*

A pigeon cooed somewhere above, breaking the stillness. The ground squelched under his feet as he stepped back to look up into the ghostly trees that surrounded him. Another noise cut through the air – a distant axe chopping wood. As he strained to hear more clearly, it began to fade along with the earthy smell and the mist. The familiar shapes and colours of the street began to reappear like coloured paint spreading across wet paper.

Voices were shouting and a scream grew louder as if someone was turning up the volume.

“Where did he go?”

“Is he under the car?”

Alfie blinked and looked around in surprise. He was back in the street at the side of the road. The car had stopped over the exact spot where he had been moments before. The driver was sitting with his hands on the wheel, shaking with shock.

“There he is!” cried the woman who had tried to warn him. She was staring in amazement, her dog barking wildly as it strained against its lead.

Barely able to believe he hadn't been hurt, Alfie slowly picked up his bag and began walking away. He passed the two bullies who were frozen like statues and picked up speed as they began to call after him. He wanted to get as far away as possible from whatever had just happened.

The blood started to pound in his ears as he broke into a run. By the time he turned into Abernathy Terrace, his side hurt and his breath was coming in gasps. The row of grey Victorian terraced houses seemed to stretch out for miles in front of him. His side hurt but he kept running – past the house with the purple door, past gossipy Mrs O' Riley's, past the tree he had fallen out of and broken his arm four years ago, past the window with the yappy white dog that always leapt up to bark at him.

As he ran he noticed a raven flying above him. Was it the same one? It swooped down to glide alongside Alfie as he tore down the street, then flapped its wings and soared up and away over the rooftops.



2



A Strange Invitation

A loud *boom* wrenched Alfie from dreams of ravens and misty forests. He sat up with a jolt, then relaxed as he realized it had come from his dad's workshop. He was probably working on something involving chemicals again. Alfie grimaced; the flat still smelt like burnt cabbage from the last time. His dad had invented dozens of almost useful devices – a water-powered hairdryer, a toilet-roll holder that sounded a deafening alarm when running low and, most recently, a voice-activated front door that only seemed to understand Irish accents. None of these had made any money, so when Alfie's mum died two years ago, his dad had taken on a series of part-time jobs to make





ends meet. The little spare time he had was divided between Alfie and his inventions. Alfie didn't care that they didn't have much money – he didn't even mind the dank basement flat too much. He just missed the way things used to be when his mum was alive.

Sitting up, he blinked groggily against the sun shining through his window. For a minute he wondered why he was wearing his school clothes, but then he remembered flopping on to his bed in exhaustion after racing home. He must have slept right through the evening and night. His dad had been working late again. Just as well. Alfie hadn't wanted to talk about his last day at school. He knew his dad had enough worries without hearing that Alfie had been getting into fights and was nearly hit by a car.



Changing into scuffed jeans and a faded T-shirt, Alfie wondered what to do with the first day of the summer holidays. The long, lonely weeks seemed to stretch out in front of him like a prison sentence. He wished his dad didn't have to work so hard. He wished Amy wasn't going on holiday. He wished his life wasn't so . . . so *dull*. Searching through his drawer for a pair of socks without holes in them, he wondered if he was the only kid in the world who hated school holidays.

A scratching noise broke through his brief



moment of self-pity, alerting him to the arrival of a pale ginger tabby: Galileo. The cat nudged the door wide open and padded into the room purring. Alfie reached down to scratch behind his ears and noticed the cat was carrying something in his mouth. An envelope. Galileo dropped it on the threadbare rug then flopped down next to a pair of shoes and began lazily chewing the laces.

“Weirdo,” Alfie laughed. “Are you training to be a dog?”

He picked up the expensive-looking envelope. On the front, in beautifully neat handwriting, were the words:



For the attention of Alfred Bloom



He made a face. Only people like his headmaster, the landlady or angry old Mr Filbert upstairs assumed his name should be lengthened to Alfred. On the back was a large wax seal with two ravens perched on a pair of scales. He thought it a shame to break it, but within seconds it was lying in pieces and he was holding an official-looking letter. Alfie took a deep sniff of the thick cream paper – it smelt like old books. It was embossed with a gold crest that matched the seal and read:

Muninn and Bone Solicitors (Established 1086)

Dear Master Bloom,

An appointment has been arranged for you with one of our senior partners on Saturday 23rd July at 11.59 p.m. to discuss the transference of your substantial inheritance.

We are legally required to also request the presence of your father, Mr William Horatio Bloom.

Our carriage will call for you at 11.26 p.m. prompt.

Sincerely,

Emily Fortune

Senior Administrator

Substantial inheritance? Had someone left him something in a will? Alfie read the card again, his head spinning. It was the twenty-third today. He raced to his dad's workshop with the strange invitation.

"You're absolutely sure it isn't someone from school playing a joke on you?" said his dad as he read through the letter at the rickety kitchen table, scratching the back of his neck thoughtfully.

"Yes, I'm sure, Dad, for the fifth time!" Alfie

mumbled through a mouthful of tuna, sprout and pickled-egg sandwich. Breakfast was often a creative mix of whatever was left in the cupboards. “I don’t know anyone who could forge something that well.”

Alfie’s dad was a tall man with dark hair that tended to stick out all over the place. Alfie thought it was most probably because he spent so much time scratching his head. He was wearing his favourite cardigan – the green one with lots of pockets that his mum had knitted. Alfie noticed it was a lot baggier on him than it used to be. He risked another sandwich as he waited impatiently for his dad to finish analysing the letter. This one contained crisps, beetroot and gherkins. At long last his dad got up.

“Cup of tea, son?” He rummaged around in the murky green cupboards above the sink for teabags and clean cups. Mrs Craddock the landlady hadn’t decorated the flat for about forty years. They had moved here a few years ago to save money to build their own house, but since Alfie’s mum died their savings had dwindled away. His dad didn’t talk about building a house anymore. Alfie understood why – even if they could afford it he didn’t want to live in Mum’s dream house without her either.

“Well, Alfie,” he said as he poured the tea. “I’ve never heard of this Muninn and Bone, but I have to admit, the letter does look genuine.”

“What do you think they mean by *substantial inheritance*?” asked Alfie. No one they knew had died – not recently – and they didn’t know anyone even remotely rich.

“I guess there’s only one way to find out.” His dad smiled and passed him one of the steaming cups.

At quarter past eleven, Alfie and his dad were already sitting on the wall outside their basement flat in Abernathy Terrace. It was a warm summer night and the scent of jasmine from the garden next door filled the air. The sweet smell began to give Alfie a headache as he sat uncomfortably straight, trying not to crease his clothes. They had spent the afternoon scouring charity shops for smart clothes. Alfie was quite pleased with his dark grey suit, but had to fasten his belt very tightly to stop the trousers dropping down around his ankles. He had managed to talk his dad out of buying a tartan blazer and into getting something quite smart and sensible, although the effect was rather spoiled by slightly short trousers, which showed his odd socks.



The minute hand on his watch drew nearer to eleven twenty-six. Alfie looked up and down the street anxiously. He began to feel silly. Maybe the letter really was a joke. What kind of solicitor would want to meet at midnight? Just as he was about to suggest they go back inside, there was a clatter of hooves on the street. He nearly toppled back over the wall in shock when he saw what was standing there.



Smack bang in front of him stood the grandest coach imaginable – bigger and better than all those in the Tower of London put together. The varnished ebony wood was so highly polished that it could have been mistaken for glass. Even the ornately framed windows were black. A shiny silver cap bearing the same crest as the invitation sat at the centre of each wheel. He looked up to see a man in a top hat and travelling cape sitting high at the front. The man held the reins to six huge black horses, which snorted and stamped the ground impatiently. Alfie couldn't believe he hadn't heard their approach before the sudden clatter.

The driver tipped his hat. "Johannes." He was a giant of a man with neat grey-flecked sideburns that framed his good-humoured face, and he introduced himself in a gravelly voice with a hint of



a German accent before nodding towards the coach door. It opened and two steps slid out of the frame. “Please take your seats, sirs.” Alfie felt a shiver of excitement as they climbed inside the coach and settled into the luxurious purple velvet seats.

“Fasten your seat belts.” Alfie jumped as the driver’s voice boomed through a brass funnel on the wall in front of them. “The boiled sweets provided will ease any discomfort you feel in your ears during the journey.”



Alfie gingerly helped himself to a sweet from a silver dish fixed to the wall as his dad admired the plush interior of the carriage. “I’ve never been in anything this fancy in my entire life,” he whispered as though half afraid the driver was listening to them. “Whatever they want to speak to you about must be very important.”



The steps folded back into a small compartment with a quiet whirring noise, and the door closed making barely a sound. With a tiny jerk, they were on their way.

Alfie could hear the horses snorting and the coachman half singing, half shouting to them as they galloped.

“Dad,” said Alfie. “We must be going very fast. You don’t think we’ll crash do you?”

“I’m sure the driver knows what he’s doing,” said his dad, although he didn’t look entirely convinced.

The coach began to travel faster and faster until Alfie was sitting right back in his seat, hands gripping the silver handles on the walls as he glanced worriedly at his dad. There was a sudden jolt and everything tilted backwards. Alfie felt as though an invisible hippopotamus was sitting on him. The feeling lasted for about a minute before the pressure eased, the carriage stopped juddering and he could move freely again.

“Whoa! That was weird,” he exclaimed, swallowing to pop his ears while gathering up the sweets that had slid into his lap.

“It gets stranger,” said his dad, sitting up and leaning his head towards the window. “Listen carefully. Tell me what you hear.”

Alfie strained to hear anything. “Nothing. Just a whistling noise.”

“Exactly. Why can’t we hear the horses galloping any more?” Alfie stared at his dad. Surely they couldn’t be . . . flying?

Alfie pushed his face to the window, cupping his hands around his eyes like binoculars. It was dark outside and the thick, tinted glass made everything even darker. He could just about make out flashes

of colour and light. He spent much of the journey grinning at his dad who beamed back at him as though too full of anticipation to even talk. Alfie felt as though they were on a marvellous adventure together, and he wrapped his arms around his stomach to try to trap the warm feeling it gave him inside.

After about twenty minutes, the whole coach jarred with a loud thud. Alfie grabbed his seat again as they were bounced up and down. The whistling had stopped and he could hear the sharp sound of horses' hooves slowing to a trot as the coach rolled to a halt.

The door opened with a *pop*, and Alfie nearly fell out face first. His dad caught his arm as he half jumped, half toppled to the cobbles below. They were in an old coach house the size of a warehouse with vast oak doors that were now closed.

Steam rose from the horses as the driver placed a barrel of water in front of each one. He spoke to them gently in a horsey language full of neighs, nickers and snorts. In the dim light cast by the flickering torches on the walls, Alfie could see coaches of all shapes and sizes. He ran over to an enormous one that looked like a golden barge from Ancient Egypt, but with wheels.

“Look at this, Dad!” he shouted as he discovered a green-and-gold coach half his height and peered through the tiny windows. *Surely no one could fit into something so small.*

“It must be a toy.” His dad squatted down for a closer look. “Look at these tiny symbols around the sides.” He adjusted his glasses and leant forwards for a closer look.

“Ahem!” A huge hand landed on each of their shoulders and Alfie looked up to see Johannes towering over them. “This way, sirs. Mr Bone is waiting.”

He led them to a gigantic door made up of lots of other doors of decreasing size, one inside the other, like Russian nesting dolls. The smallest only came halfway up Alfie’s knee. “Just through there. Ms Fortune will sign you in.”

“Which door do we open?”

The coachman chuckled as he filled a nosebag for each horse. “Whichever one fits, Master Bloom, whichever one fits.”

Alfie stared in awe as he swung the human-sized door open to reveal a magnificent round room. The floor was made of marble with the now familiar Muninn and Bone crest set into a disc of polished brass in the centre. The walls were covered in dark

wooden panels and the stone arched ceiling was so high that he felt as if he was in a cathedral. At least twenty suits of armour in all shapes and sizes lined the panelled walls.

“Mister and Master Bloom?” said a bright little voice from behind them. “How do you do?”

Alfie span around in surprise. They had walked straight past a young woman behind the huge desk near the entrance. Her long dark hair flowed out behind her as she skipped over to shake hands.

“I’m sorry, we didn’t see you!” he stammered.

“Not a problem, not a problem at all. Everyone reacts like that when they first come here.” She span on the spot with her arms outstretched. “Such a grand old hall and such a little old me.”

Alfie liked this tiny woman with her sing-song voice, huge green eyes and pointy face. “You’re not old,” he said, unable to keep from blushing.

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not. It all depends on how you look at it.” She smiled. “I think I’m going to like you a whole bunch, Master Bloom. Now wherever did I leave my manners? I’m Emily – Emily Fortune – originally Amelia Fortuna but that sounds far too much like a frumpy old fish, so I tweaked the first name and swapped an A for an E. Much more modern now, isn’t it? Very classy, very sassy, very

now! One should always keep up with the times, don't you think?" Alfie didn't have time to reply as she ushered them over to her desk. "Anyhoo, chop-chop, let's get you signed in before you head on up to your meeting. If you like this room, just wait until you see Mr Bone's office. *Very swish.*"

Alfie finally exhaled as Emily finished talking and plonked a large book in front of them. He took a deep breath and noticed his dad do the same. He wondered how she found time to breathe.

"OK, just press your thumbs on this ink pad for me . . . good, now stick your thumbprint next to your name and the time . . . thank you. Now, if you could both shimmy on to the crest, please."

Alfie wasn't quite sure how to shimmy but followed his dad and stepped on to the brass disc in the centre of the room.

"Lovely, thank you. Now hold still and keep your feet away from the edges. This won't hurt a bit and you'll be there in a jiffy."

"Wait, what's going to happen?" asked Alfie apprehensively as he noticed a long brass cylinder descending from the ceiling like a telescope extending. "Ms Fortune?"

"Don't worry, it's perfectly safe," she assured them. "Well, as long as you don't touch the sides. . ."