



BREAKOUT

Somewhere between five and eight. That was how many bones Alfie was sure he was about to break as he lost his grip on the drainpipe, fell ten feet and landed bum-first in the flower bed outside the Prison walls.

Alfie was fourteen years old and skinny, with thick mousy-brown hair that always seemed to curl down over his face no matter how much gel he put in it. His eyes were a deep sea green which hit you more in person than they did in photos. Everyone

said he got them from his grandmother. Alfie wiggled his toes and was happy to discover that he could still feel his legs. He sat up, rubbed the back of his neck and wiped the mud from his watch. It was a little after 9:30 p.m. *Right on schedule.* He had planned this breakout down to the minute. If his calculations were correct then he wouldn't even be missed for—

“STAY WHERE YOU ARE!”

Then again, Alfie's plans had a habit of going wrong. The gruff voice boomed down from the window he'd just climbed, well, *fallen* from. By the time Alfie had scrambled to his feet, he could hear heavy footsteps somewhere inside the cell block, coming his way.

The Man in Black, thought Alfie. *There's no way he's stopping me this time. No way.*

Alfie sprinted across the lawn towards the street. Vaulting over a low brick wall, he caught a glimpse of the huge arch of Wembley Stadium glowing in the distance. As much as he hated the Prison, he had to admit its position on a hill just outside London gave it some spectacular views. Alfie risked a look back just in time to see the dark-

suited, broad-shouldered man with neatly clipped hair hurdle the wall and tear after him.

“STOP!”

Alfie sped up, legs already on fire with the effort as he flashed past cars parked along the narrow, tree-lined street. But the Man in Black was closing on him, fast.

“I SAID, ‘STOP!’”

Alfie skidded on a patch of leaves and veered into a park that had appeared to his left. He might not be as fast as his pursuer, but the night was on his side. Alfie pushed through some bushes and crouched behind an oak tree. Pressing his face against the cold, wet bark, he ignored his desperate need to gasp down air.

Branches snapped nearby as the Man in Black bulldozed his way through the scrub. Alfie stayed still and watched him barrel out of the trees the other side, grumbling and cursing with every sapling that whipped across his face. Finally free of the trees’ grasp, the Man in Black spun around three hundred and sixty degrees in a desperate search for his prey, and then ran on in the opposite direction.

Alfie finally sucked in a super-sized lungful of air. *That was too close.*

A few minutes later, Alfie, double-checking no one was on his trail, crossed over the Station Road bridge. A train thundered below him on its way out of the city. Every night he would lie awake in his cell listening to the distant rumble from the tracks and dream about hopping on to a carriage one day and just seeing where it took him. Mountains would be good, or a forest or lonely moorland. Alfie had always liked the wilderness. Somewhere remote where he could be himself and—

A bus trundled past, a few faces gazing blankly from the windows. Alfie snapped out of it. What was he thinking? There were too many cameras on the station, too many people. Besides, he had his mission. It was decided. He needed to focus.

Alfie picked up the pace, fished a crumpled baseball cap out of his jacket pocket and pulled it over his head. The one thing that he'd learned about disguises over the years was that less is more. Forget false beards and noses, the trick was not to draw too much attention to yourself. Blend in; be *inconspicuous*. It was Alfie's favourite word.

He hurried across the bridge and onto the bustling high street. It was a world away from his usual surroundings, but he loved it. It was just so good to be out. Alfie broke into a jog, sticking as much as he could to the shadows, avoiding the late-night shoppers that passed him by without a glance. And then suddenly, there it was in front of him: a modest little building with a bright neon sign in the window. His goal – the end to his quest. Alfie reached for the door and stopped in his tracks.

Snipers.

Half a dozen of them, sitting inside. They were dug in around a table, idly adjusting their telescopic lenses, no doubt swapping war stories as they waited for their target. For *him*. Alfie realized his mistake, but it was too late. He shouldn't have stopped walking; he should have just breezed past, not gawped like a dumb kid straight at the enemy. As bad luck would have it, one of the snipers, bearded and craggy, with all manner of equipment draped over his shoulders and shoved into a utility belt, glanced up and locked eyes with Alfie. He couldn't hear him through the glass of the door,

but Alfie could read his lips well enough.

“THERE HE IS!”

Mission aborted.

For the second time that night, Alfie ran for his life. But this time there was nowhere to hide; the parade of shops was too well lit. And he was still tired from his foot race with the Man in Black.

Behind him, the snipers piled out of the building, readying their weapons, unhooking tripods, bringing scopes to their eyes as they gave chase.

Alfie plunged across the road, threading the needle between a bus and a cab. Horns blared and air brakes hissed. He couldn't afford to give them a clear shot. These were pros – all they needed was one split-second chance and he was history. On the other side of the road, Alfie spotted an alleyway between a pub and a mobile phone shop. He ducked down it, but there was no telling where it led and he could hear the snipers' shouts not far behind. Then he saw it: large, square and green, with a hinged rubber lid.

No choice.

Alfie hauled himself up and into the bin,

slamming the lid down behind him. It stank of rotten food, and Alfie tried to pretend it didn't smell like someone had been sick into it that night as well. He froze as the heavy footfalls and breathless yells of the snipers approached. He closed his eyes and prayed. *Walk past, walk past.*

Footsteps came and went. Then ... silence. They'd gone.

Alfie was desperate to get out of the foul bin, but he forced himself to wait another full minute before he eased the lid up and peeked out.

FLASH!

Light exploded all around him as the bearded sniper took a clean head shot. Alfie screamed and flew back, a thousand supernovas in his eyes. He looked up, dazed, as the sniper leaned in for another shot, fully tearing back the bin's lid and pushing the long lens of his camera into Alfie's face.

"Say cheese, Your Highness!"

Prince Alfred Henry Alexander Louis, Prince of Wales and heir to the throne of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, stared up from the depths of the bin and gave the

paparazzi photographer a big, sarcastic thumbs up.

“Happy now?” Alfie couldn’t even summon up much anger. This photographer was just doing his job.

“What do you think?” said the rat-faced little man. “Who wants a photo of the future King of England hiding in a bin? That’ll be ten thousand quid, thank you very much.” The photographer got a whiff of the bin’s interior and recoiled. “Phwoar. Have you been sick in there, Your Majesty?”

Suddenly the photographer was hauled off his feet. It was the Man in Black, otherwise known as Brian, Alfie’s Royal Protection officer. For once, Alfie was pleased to see him.

Brian manhandled the indignant “sniper” away with one shove of his mighty palm. “That’s enough – you’ve had your fun.”

The photographer didn’t put up much of a fight – one glance at Alfie’s bodyguard told him that he was ex-Special Forces. But then, why bother? He’d got what he came for. He holstered his camera and sauntered off, getting out his phone, no doubt to start the bidding for his exclusive snap of the

prince in the bin.

Satisfied that the threat was gone, Brian turned back to Alfie and fixed him with a weary stare.

“OK, Brian, you found me. Your turn to hide. Shall I count to twenty?”

Brian sighed. He wasn't in the mood for Alfie's jokes tonight. “What were you popping out for this time? Curry? Fish and chips?”

“Pizza, actually. Ambrogio's does the best pepperoni in town.”

“It also happens to be where all the paps go to eat every Thursday night.” Brian snorted.

“You're annoyed with me, aren't you? Making you run around like that,” said Alfie.

“I was. Till I saw you hiding in a bin – that's cheered me right up.”

“Suppose it's back to Prison then, is it?” Alfie extended his hand. But Brian backed off, holding his nose.

“If you're talking about school, then yeah, it is. Can't wait to see how you explain this one to the headmaster tomorrow,” Brian laughed.

Alfie tried to clamber out of the bin but Brian pushed him back again.

“Hold up. You’re not getting in my car smelling like that.”

“I can’t walk back like this,” Alfie pleaded. “They’ll be snipers everywhere by now.”

Brian furrowed his brow and looked up and down the alleyway. “Good point. Hold your breath.”

“Why?”

Alfie ducked as Brian slammed the lid back down over him.

“BRIAN!” Alfie yelled from the darkness.

“Put a sock in it, there’s a good lad. You never know, you might get lucky and find some pizza in there.” The bodyguard grinned as he heaved the bin over and wheeled it off down the alleyway, whistling “God Save the King”.



2

THE CEREMONY OF THE KEYS

If this was the best the Tower of London could do, then she wanted her money back.

Hayley Hicks tucked a stray frizz of hair behind her ear and flipped her jacket collar up against the icy drizzle. She had no idea that in a matter of a few minutes, her life was going to change for ever.

Hayley had been watching a soldier in a red tunic and tall bearskin cap holding a rifle and doing a whole lot of nothing for what felt like *decades*. Well, not exactly nothing: he was standing still, guarding

a big oak gate beneath a hulking old tower. Hayley wasn't even sure the guy was blinking, and she spent a minute or two pretending she was in a staring contest with him before giving up. *All right, you win*, she thought and sighed. This was no way for any self-respecting fourteen-year-old to spend a Tuesday night, stuck with a bunch of tourists outside a mouldy old castle, getting cold and wet. She wiggled her toes to make sure they hadn't dropped off, then stamped her feet for good measure.

"Stop fussing, child. It'll be worth it, you'll see." Hayley's grandmother scowled up from her wheelchair, pretending to be annoyed.

"It's all right for you in your little cocoon on wheels. I'm dying of hypothermia here, Gran," Hayley shot back, but she was smiling.

She'd made sure the wheelchair was packed with blankets before they'd set off for her gran's seventy-seventh birthday treat: a trip to the Tower of London to see the Crown Jewels. There was even a thermos, a spare pair of socks and an extra-woolly hat in her backpack. Not to mention her gran's medication, all in neatly labelled pots. It had taken Hayley the best part of three months to save up for today – lunch,

tickets and taxis that could take a wheelchair didn't come cheaply in London, but she was glad she'd done it. Hayley hadn't seen her gran so perky in years – she hadn't stopped her commentary about all things royal (her favourite subject of all time) and historic (second-favourite subject of all time) for the entire day.

But the best part of the trip was still to come. Hayley had secretly booked tickets for something called the Ceremony of the Keys. Tonight they would have the honour of being in the select group of tourists permitted to watch as the Crown Jewels were locked safely inside for the night. Hayley had never heard of the ceremony before she started doing her research, but her gran had practically leapt out of her chair when Hayley surprised her with the tickets.

“Seven hundred years, Hales! They've been stomping around locking this place up in the same way for seven hundred years, every night, come wind, shine, snow or blow.” Her gran had a weird saying for pretty much everything.

“Wow, really?” Hayley was only pretending to be interested, but her gran didn't notice.

“Tell a lie – they did miss one night in the war when a bomb landed here.”

Hayley figured it would take more than a bomb to scare her gran. She’d emigrated from Jamaica in the 1950s, married a white man when everyone still thought that was somehow wrong, became one of the first woman Tube drivers, got a degree in history from the Open University at the same time and generally packed more into her life than most people would ever manage. She was not a woman afraid to speak her mind, and Hayley just prayed they’d make it through the ceremony without her gran shouting out something “helpful” to the soldiers. She’d already made eyes at the guard at the doorway and said, “Hey, handsome, give us a twirl!” He’d stared back without blinking.

In fact, talking of ceremonies, when was this thing going to kick off? Hayley glanced at her watch and—

“HALT!”

The sentry whipped his rifle from his shoulder, the bayonet glistening wet from the drizzle, and pointed it squarely at five new soldiers who were marching up to the gate. They stopped, as one. Three

of the soldiers held their own rifles, while a fourth carried a lantern that cast an eerie glow up the high stone walls. The man they were escorting was short and tubby with a bushy ginger beard. Hayley would have called him a befeater, but her gran whispered that he was actually the Chief Yeoman Warder and that, no, he wasn't wearing a dress, it was a tunic. His dress (tunic, whatever) was black with red trim and the letters "HR" emblazoned on the front. Gran told her they stood for *Henry, Rex* – Latin for King Henry. The Chief Yeoman Warder carried a sword sheathed under his belt, and from one hand dangled a bunch of long iron keys.

"Who comes there?" barked the sentry.

"The keys!" came the reply from somewhere under the Chief Yeoman Warder's beard.

"Whose keys?"

"King Henry's keys!"

After seven hundred years, you'd think they'd know that! thought Hayley, but she kept her mouth shut and looked to her gran, who was entranced, gripping the wheelchair armrests with tight little hands.

Satisfied, the sentry shouldered his rifle and stood to attention. "Pass, King Henry's keys, and

all's well."

"Escort to the keys, by the centre, quick march!" yelled the Sergeant.

And off they went, ferrying the Chief Yeoman Warder past the sentry.

Another beefeater had now appeared and was ushering the tourists under the arch of the nasty-sounding "Bloody Tower" and into Tower Green, where they would witness the conclusion of the ceremony. Its slick, wet cobbles lit only by a handful of lamps, the central courtyard looked quite different to the bustling square in which Hayley and her gran had eaten their sandwiches earlier that afternoon. An unseen raven croaked from the battlements. Hayley shivered. It was here, on the executioner's block, only yards away, roped off and marked with a plaque, that several important men and women had lost their heads. Hayley's gran told her that the ghost of one of them – Anne Boleyn – was said to still roam the courtyard at night, carrying her own head!

The rest of the Tower Guard were waiting on the wide central steps. Hayley wheeled her gran to the front so she could see. The Chief Yeoman Warder

held his hat in the air and bellowed to the sky, “God preserve King Henry!”

“Amen!” shouted the guards in unison.

“Amen!” added her gran enthusiastically, drawing a ripple of giggles from the group. Hayley smiled and tried not to go red.

High above them, the clock tower chimed the hour – ten o’clock. Hayley had to admit, the precision of the timing was impressive. A bugler started playing, the lonely notes echoing off the high walls around them. The Chief Yeoman Warder returned his hat to his head and hefted his big key ring as he took the last few steps towards the Jewel House door. *At least we’re nearly done here*, thought Hayley. She was mentally preparing herself for the long taxi and train ride back home to their flat.

“Wonderful isn’t it, Hales?” Hayley’s gran whispered. “Really makes history come alive.”

Hayley was just about to reply when things started to get monumentally strange.

A sound of rushing air, like the whine of a falling bomb, whistled across the courtyard, and a large, dark figure thumped on to the ground no more than twenty metres from where they were

standing. The impact was hard enough to make Hayley's teeth click together. Several soldiers dropped their rifles with a clatter. A middle-aged Japanese woman in the tour party shrieked and put her hand to her mouth.

Hayley peered at the figure that had just fallen to earth. It was crouched in the corner, unmoving. For a second she assumed a statue or some sort of hideous gargoyle must have come loose and fallen from one of the towers. A thought flashed through her mind: *Lucky no one was killed.*

Then the "gargoyle" moved. Rearing up to its full height, at least seven feet tall, it stood like a man, but it was covered in thick, smooth, black scales. Its face was pulled taut into a thin, cruel snout topped with a row of bony spikes. Its enormous hands and feet were tipped with vicious-looking claws. Everything about it looked somehow fresh and not yet fully formed: slick and glistening, like some newborn monster. Hayley's mind was doing flips trying to make sense of what she was seeing – *a black lizard man.*

A young, gangly American tourist flicked through his guidebook and gawped at Hayley, bewildered.

“Is this part of the show?”

The sergeant was the first to react – he stepped forward and levelled his rifle at the towering shape of the mysterious “Black Lizard”. “Who goes there?” His voice was neither as loud nor as confident as it had been only moments before.

The Black Lizard’s head snapped round towards the Sergeant, and for the first time, Hayley got a full view of its eyes. The irises were deep red, while the pupils were long and black, like the dark slit of night behind a half-drawn curtain. The creature’s intelligent, sinister gaze swept across her and the rest of the tourists like a searchlight. Hayley felt sick.

With an ear-splitting shriek, the beast leapt towards the soldiers. It was as if a button marked GO! had been pressed, as everyone scattered. Screams erupted from the tourists as they barged past each other to get away. Gunfire filled the air as the soldiers unloaded at the Black Lizard. Hayley’s head was spinning. *The guns are loaded!*

Sparks flew from the lizard man’s scale armour as bullets bounced harmlessly off it. With another screech, it jumped ten feet through the air and

smashed through the first-floor outer wall of the Jewel House, sending stone and splintered wood raining on to the ground outside.

Hayley grappled with her gran's wheelchair, trying to turn it towards the gate and safety, but the wet cobbles made it hard to manoeuvre at any speed.

"Get out, Hayley! Leave me here!" shouted her gran.

"Not a chance," replied Hayley.

A second almighty crash from the Jewel House made Hayley look back. The Black Lizard re-emerged through the hole in the wall and thumped to the ground again. It was holding a cluster of glittering objects in its huge claws – a golden sceptre, an ornate sword and a jewel-encrusted crown. Hayley recognized them – they had queued up to look at them through reinforced security glass earlier that day: the Crown Jewels.

Is that what this is – a heist? A smash-and-grab for the Crown Jewels? she wondered.

But then the Black Lizard did something very peculiar. It tossed the treasures aside as if they were junk. Hayley remembered her gran saying that some

people thought the Crown Jewels on display in the Tower were fakes, and that the originals were kept hidden away somewhere secret. Was that why it had discarded them? Could it tell, somehow?

A yell rang out and Hayley was astonished to see the Chief Yeoman Warder rushing at the monster, his sword held high. The Black Lizard turned and cocked its head ever so slightly. Maybe the thing wasn't expecting to see a short, round bearded guy in a red-and-black miniskirt square up to it, but that's what was happening. Hayley wanted to yell out, "Let it go! Don't be a hero!" but somehow her voice seemed to have stopped working.

The deflection, when it came, was savage and short. The Black Lizard didn't even move its feet. It simply backhanded its attacker in the chest. There was a sickening crunch as the brave beefeater was thrown high into the air, landing with a dull thud right next to Hayley and her gran. Gasping, Hayley watched as the man's eyes swam, seeking a focus they wouldn't find again. His bloodied lips parted as he exhaled his final words.

"God . . . save . . . the king."

This couldn't be real. Nothing about it made

sense. Next to Hayley, her gran was opening and closing her mouth wordlessly while the gangly American tourist filmed the scene on his phone, using the wheelchair as cover. Hayley was just about to snap at him to find another hiding place when things went up another level, into the realms of the truly weird.

The unmistakable whinnying of a horse echoed around the courtyard walls. Hayley was suddenly hopeful. *Has someone sent in the cavalry?* High above the battlements, a ghost horse was *hovering*. The horse didn't have wings or jets or any visible sign of what was keeping it in the air, but there it was, a translucent horse with plate armour covering its head and flanks, hanging in the night's sky high above her. As it dived towards the ground, Hayley saw that someone was riding it. A knight. His sleek armour was as gleaming white as the Black Lizard's scales were impenetrably dark.

Even though she didn't yet believe what she was seeing, Hayley knew who this was: the Defender. All she needed now was the Loch Ness Monster and the Yeti to join the party and she'd have the full set. The Defender was supposed to be one of those

way-out hoax stories, just like them. Once in a while a newspaper would run a headline like “BRITAIN’S VERY OWN SUPERHERO!” next to some photograph of the Defender that was so blurry it didn’t prove anything. But here he was – the very same knight in white armour, right here, right now.

Rather than wait for its master to dismount, the horse collapsed in on itself, disappearing in an instant into the Defender’s spurs as easily as a fold-away bicycle. The Black Lizard charged at him, claws bared, but the Defender merely raised his arm and a shimmering shield unfurled from his wrist, parrying the blows. Advancing, he pulled out a glowing sword and swung it at his opponent in one smooth movement. The startled lizard dodged the strike, but too late, and a glancing blow to its shoulder sent it spinning into the Tower wall with all the impact of a car crash.

One of its black scales, severed by the Defender’s strike, flew through the air and landed on the blanket covering Hayley’s gran’s lap. Without thinking, Hayley picked it up. It was almost too hot to hold. The sound of sirens wailed across the courtyard. Blue lights flashed through the archway.

The Defender turned to look. It was all the chance the Black Lizard needed. It hauled itself out of the rubble, scuttled up one of the outer walls of the Tower, as fast and agile as a gecko, and disappeared over the top.

The Defender marched over to the lifeless body of the Chief Yeoman Warder. Hayley and her gran watched in solemn silence as he knelt by the beefeater, head bowed as if in prayer. He spoke, his voice low but firm:

“May you never die a Yeoman Warder.”

The Defender stood. His spurs glowed and in a flash the ghostly horse unfurled itself between his legs, shook its mane and lifted him silently into the night’s sky and away. No one spoke; no one moved.

Her gran smiled weakly. “See, Hales – told you it would be worth it.”

Hayley looked down at the black scale in her hand and, without thinking, slipped it into her backpack.