



CHAPTER 1

Out for Delivery



Alfie Blackstack wasn't surprised to find himself an orphan.

His parents had always been careless.

His mother, Mrs Blackstack, was a zookeeper who made the mistake of teasing a hungry lion by dancing through his cage wrapped in a chain of sausages. She did it for a bet.

Grin. Crunch. Slobber. No more Mother.

At the time, little Alfie (oh, just five years old!) still had a father.

Alfie's father, Mr Blackstack, was an ornithologist: he studied birds. Mr Blackstack especially loved angry, sharp-beaked, flappy birds. Furious, vicious birds that hated ornithologists and lived in dangerous, remote places, like slippery cliff faces, scary sea caves and the top of very, very tall trees.

Alfie wasn't brave or daring like his parents. He was scared of lots of things but most especially big cats, vicious birds, high-up places and impatient fathers.

Which was unfortunate, as Mr Blackstack grew impatient around small, timid, trembling children.

Mr Blackstack stopped taking his son on expeditions.

Alfie was relieved. But he was also a bit sad because he knew the reason why his father left him behind. It was because he wasn't daring enough, or strong enough, or good enough. Alfie had, of course, no wish to go to *dangerous* places, but that didn't mean he wouldn't have liked to have seen some nice safe sights: a gentle waterfall perhaps, or calm and friendly monkeys.

On the fateful day that Alfie became an orphan, Mr Blackstack had gone off in a leaky boat, with binoculars, a loaf of bread and a notebook. He was going to a rocky island in the middle of a large choppy ocean to count the birds that lived there.

Mr Blackstack didn't come back.

Police officers, teachers, the local newsagent and neighbours all scratched their heads. What was to be done about Alfie? Orphaned at the start of the summer holidays?

They asked Clarice the childminder. Hadn't she looked after Alfie whenever his father was off on his bird-watching excursions? And didn't Alfie enjoy staying with her (apart from the fish-paste sandwiches she mistakenly thought he loved)? But sadly Clarice hadn't the time or the space to offer Alfie a forever home.

Mr Blackstack's solicitor had the answer. Mr Blackstack had two sisters who lived out in the country. Alfie had aunts.

The aunts were contacted: of course they would take Alfie! Pleasure! Honoured! Thrilled! Pack him up and send him down!

So, Alfie Blackstack was out for delivery:

ORPHAN: small for his age (nine), mouse-brown hair, spectacles, too-big shoes, too-short trousers and an anorak (bright orange). Always. Even in summer.

SUITCASE: filled with ORPHAN's belongings. Among them: his father's spare binoculars, a photograph of his mother with her arm around a panther, and a fish-paste sandwich for the journey.

Alfie looked out of the window as the car sped along. At rain, fields, trees, rain, bushes, cows, rain, farmhouse, wet hens, rain, sad horses, fields.

Clarice the childminder gripped the steering wheel and squinted at the road ahead. She'd forgotten her driving glasses and couldn't see past the end of her nose. Her long silver earrings bounced as the car rocked through potholes and ditches. There was a chicken nugget in the cup holder and jam smeared on the dashboard. Along the back seat there was a line of kids in baby seats cheerfully smacking each other on the head.

Alfie remembered riding in the back of Clarice's car when he was small. It was a warm fuzzy memory. Before

school came along and the jostling and jeering and the dread of the playground, because doesn't break time last a hundred years when you've no one to talk to?

Clarice had picked Alfie up from school too, of course. He'd walk out of the gate alone while the other kids raced out roaring or pottered along chatting. Clarice would give him a cheese straw and a sympathetic pat on the arm. She tried her best, really, but sometimes this made Alfie feel worse.

Today they had driven for what felt like a thousand miles. They had listened to *Rock Babies' Nursery Rhymes* for hours. One baby had been sick and Clarice had sworn twice.

Clarice smiled grimly. 'We're making good time; won't be long now. Your aunts will be so looking forward to seeing you!'

'I doubt that,' said Alfie.

'Oh, Alfie! What a thing to say!'

'Before last Thursday I didn't know I had aunts,' Alfie explained. 'I've never even met them. They obviously don't want to be bothered with a nephew.'

'I'm sure that's not the case!' Clarice exclaimed. 'And maybe you just forgot you had aunts?'

Alfie shook his head. 'Having aunts is the sort of thing I would remember.'

Then Alfie did remember: once upon a time, his parents whispering in the kitchen. His parents often whispered in the kitchen when they were alive.

Only this time his mother was doing more than

whispering; she was *hissing*, just like one of those lesser-spotted killer river geese his father was fond of.

'Have you forgotten the *turkey bewitchment*, Phineas?' Alfie's mother hissed to Alfie's father. 'Don't you remember, the boy's first Christmas, when your sisters came to visit?'

'Araminta,' said Alfie's father in a low, angry voice. 'If anything happens to us, my sisters will be the boy's only living relatives. I'm just as flummoxed by that fact as you are, but there it is. Unless you can produce any family members who might give a home to the boy in the unlikely event that we both meet with sticky ends?'

Alfie had hesitated at the doorway.

'That turkey, Phineas, had been roasting *for hours* in the oven!' Alfie's mother's face wore an expression of horror. 'Before it began to move . . .'

Mr Blackstack had looked at Alfie and coughed.

Mrs Blackstack, not noticing Alfie (why would she when he was four and small?), continued. 'Dead as a doornail, brought to life to hop – no – to *dance* across the lunch table—'

'Enough, dearest!' Mr Blackstack had growled, pointing at Alfie. 'The boy.'

Mrs Blackstack glanced at Alfie. Then she turned and glowered down her spoon-billed nose at Mr Blackstack.

'Perhaps he ought to meet his aunts,' she muttered. 'Then he'll know what sort of a *weirdo* family he belongs to.'

'I have aunts?' Alfie asked. The only relatives he knew of were Mum and Dad.

‘That’s none of your business,’ snapped his father.

‘But Mum just said . . .’

Mr Blackstack glared at Mrs Blackstack. ‘See what you’ve done.’

‘We’ll have no more talk of aunts, Alfie,’ said Mrs Blackstack coolly. ‘Not in this house.’

Then Alfie remembered *another* time when, having sneaked down for a late-night snack, he overheard this from the kitchen:

‘I worry about the boy!’ Mrs Blackstack was bleating. ‘Not to be brave or strong or daring – how will he protect himself out there in the big wide world?’

Alfie had just started school. He spent most days trying to hide from the teachers and other pupils, behind the coats in the cloakroom, or in the toilets, or huddled in an empty corridor. Alfie was always found and led back to class to the smirks and giggles of the other children.

‘Spells?’ suggested Mr Blackstack.

‘Don’t bring your family into this again! Your dreadful sisters! Witches the pair of them!’

‘I said spells. *You’re* the one bringing up my sisters!’ He let out a long sigh. ‘I left that life behind when I was not much older than Alfie, you know that!’

‘All right,’ came Mrs Blackstack’s reply. ‘So, let’s talk about Alfie – about how he would survive without bravery, strength or—’

‘Perhaps we should just let Alfie stay in his bedroom,’ interrupted Mr Blackstack. ‘If that’s what he really wants to do.’

'But what about *friends*? Ought Alfie not go out and make one at least?'

Mr Blackstack let out a long sigh. 'I think Alfie just likes to be alone.'

Motherless, fatherless, friendless Alfie watched the one lone chicken nugget jiggling in the cup holder with every bump in the road.

He felt just as small and adrift.

He might as well have a label on him. If he had, it would read:

Property of:
Miss Gertrude & Miss Zita Blackstack
Switherbroom Hall
The Back of Beyond

Clarice drove with her nose an inch from the windscreen. 'She sounded really nice on the phone, your Auntie Gertrude.'

Alfie pointed ahead. 'Sheep.'

'Good man.' Clarice swerved to avoid a muddy bundle of sheep by the side of the road. 'She told me that they live in a big draughty house with no electricity in the middle of a forest. Your aunts run a chemist's shop in a village where nothing much happens.'

'Great,' said Alfie, who didn't feel great about anything.

But when he thought about what Clarice had just told him, a hopeful thought glimmered. (There's always a

hopeful thought in there somewhere if you look hard enough.)

Alfie had been worried that his aunts would also enjoy dangerous living (slippery cliff faces and flappy fly-in-your-face birds, that sort of thing). But now he knew that they lived in a village where nothing much happened. They ran a chemist's shop. That didn't sound very dangerous.

Was it possible?

Could it be possible?

That his life would be *better* with his aunts?

Then Alfie felt bad. Life hadn't been *awful* at home in London. It was true that he hadn't seen much of his father, but Alfie didn't mind being left alone, not really.

'Aunt Gertrude is doing up a room for you,' Clarice said. 'She asked what you eat and I said mostly pizza and she said would rat casserole do? She sounds like a hoot!' The childminder laughed like a drain.

Alfie looked out of the window; the landscape was growing gloomier. The houses stood further and further apart, as if they didn't like each other. Trees stooped, bushes shivered, crows flew backwards in the blustery rain.

In the back of the car, the babies fell asleep one by one. They snored softly, lulled by the whirr of wet windscreen wipers.

Alfie watched the raindrops blur across the glass.