



Apple Pie Small Stories

Published: 2009

Tag(s): "young adult fiction" "teenage fiction" teenage teeneager teen
"coming of age" death beareavement dark comedy kidult "micro novel"
adventure novella tale childhood magic experience

Chapter 1

I didn't know what to feel as the coffin lowered into the ground. I felt envious of the people around me. It was okay for them. They could go home back to their lives like nothing had happened. But for me something had changed. My father had gone and the rest of my life would never be the same.

*

That evening I stared through the bedroom window.

'Mark,' my mother called.

I looked blankly through the window.

'Mark!'

I was thinking about my father and the way he died. I couldn't get it out of my head. He'd been killed by a bomb. Someone had planted it in the medical compound where he worked. He was an eye surgeon working for a medical charity. His mobile hospital helped blind people see by having a simple operation. Why would anyone murder someone who was doing that?

The door creaked open and my mother looked in.

'Sweetheart ... are you all right?'

'I'm okay,' I said.

She walked across the room and hugged me. 'I need time to work things through ... time to sort myself out. I know it's difficult, but I need your help.'

I looked at her.

'I'm sorry sweetheart ... '

I frowned.

'It's only for a week or so,' she said.

'What is?'

She stroked my hair. 'I'm asking your Uncle to look after you for a week or two.'

'Who?'

'Zak,' she said.

'... Zak?'

'It'll be good for both of you. He's your father's brother, remember?'

'But I want to stay here.'

'Sweetheart ... Please do this for me.'

'I want to stay here!'

'You can't,' she said.

'I thought Zak lived in Alaska?' I said. 'Doesn't he live in a log cabin or something?'

'So you do remember?'

'He's a musician, isn't he?'

'He's an artist.' She smiled. 'He's back in England.'

'I haven't seen him since I was a baby.'

'Give it a try, for me?'

I nodded.

'He'll collect you tomorrow,' she said.

I closed my eyes, wishing I could go back in time. If only that bomb hadn't gone off. When I opened my eyes I half-expected to see my father in the room, but he wasn't there.

Chapter 2

I was eating breakfast when I heard a car pull up outside the house.

'Mum!' I shouted. 'I think it's him.'

'You get it,' she called.

I opened the door. Standing in front of me was a giant. He had bright red hair, a camouflage jacket, boots and a blue hat. He glared at me, like I'd done something wrong. I was sure I'd seen that face in a police wanted photo. I couldn't believe this freak was related to me. There was no similarity between him and Dad.

My mouth fell open. I didn't know what to say.

No way, I thought. This guy was in the wrong place. No thanks!

I wanted to shut the door but he'd wedged his foot in.

'You must be the boy,' he growled in a thick Irish accent.

I couldn't believe he called me 'the boy'!

'Who are you?'

'I'm Zak,' he said.

I blinked at him.

'I'm your uncle,' he explained.

His handshake nearly crushed me.

'That's a funny name?' I said, exercising my fingers to get the circulation back.

'It's short for Zachariah. It's from the bible. You have read the bible, haven't you?'

I shrugged.

He ignored me, made a big deal of wiping his boots on the doormat and stepped inside the house.

'Zak ... is that you?' My mother rushed over and put her arms around him. 'It's great to see you.'

'Sorry I couldn't be there ... '

'Don't apologise. You were on the other side of the world.' She stood back and took a close look at him. 'I know this is going to be good for both of you.'

Zak glanced around the living room. 'Daniel did well for himself. He was always smarter than me. I guess there's only room for one brain surgeon in the family.'

'Eye surgeon,' she corrected him.

I wasn't sure I liked Zak, even if he was Dad's brother. Why was he dressed up in army camouflage and wearing that stupid hat? I mean, come on. That's embarrassing.

'Yeah ... ' He looked down at the floor. 'Terrible thing ... '

'How's your work?' she asked.

'Fine.' He perked up. 'I'm selling a lot of sculpture these days.'

The room was silent. I went upstairs to get my rucksack and came down to give Mum a goodbye hug.

*

When I saw it I couldn't believe it - Zak's car was a total wreck. Even my mother looked worried. Not only was the bonnet all rusted up but there was a huge dent down the side. He opened up the back and helped me lift the rucksack in. The rear window was decorated with a cartoon sticker, a man making a peace sign. It said 'Nature's way' underneath. Next to this was another sticker, the Irish flag.

I sat in the front seat listening to the music. It sounded like some old rock band before I was born. The car was a mess. The floor was littered with old paper cups and pizza boxes. I didn't want to touch anything.

'What's up with you?'

'Don't you ever clean your car?' I asked.

He frowned. I could tell from his expression that he didn't have a clue what I was on about. Being tidy wasn't something that occurred to him. He probably never tidied his house either. I was dreading staying with him even more now.

We waved goodbye and drove off. Soon we were out of London. The scenery was changing from concrete to countryside. It was strange

seeing so much green. Coming from the city, I didn't really like the idea of the countryside.

Then I got my first shock. I checked my mobile to see if anyone had sent me a message, but I had no network signal.

'Where are we going?'

'Apple Pie,' he said.

'What?'

'Apple Pie,' he repeated. 'I've got a cottage down there. You'll love it.'

I shook my head.

'Why's it got such a stupid name?'

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'Something to do with apple orchards, I guess?'

Great, I thought, my Uncle was taking me to Weirdville Central. Some place in the middle of nowhere.

'It's a country town,' Zak explained. 'There's not much there, but I know you'll like it.' He glanced at me and must have noticed my expression. 'This wasn't my idea, believe me. Your mother thought this one up.' He pointed at the glove compartment. 'Fancy something to eat?'

The door to the glove compartment almost fell off when I opened it. Inside there was a pack of mints.

'Help yourself.'

'Nah.'

He shrugged. 'Suit yourself.'

When we got to Apple Pie there wasn't much to see. It was like one of those towns in a horror film where people married their cousins and it turned out they were all a bunch of blood-sucking zombies anyway. As we drove through I spotted Larson's supermarket - I'd never heard of that one before - a petrol station, a pub, shops, a hardware store and a town hall. It was the sort of place you'd never remember, and even if you did you'd want to forget it pretty soon.

I looked up at the sky and sighed. If only we'd driven through.

Suddenly this guy who could hardly walk stumbled in front of the car and banged on the bonnet with his fist.

'Who the hell do you think you are?' he shouted, pointing at us through the window.

'Ignore the fool,' Zak said pressing down sharply on the accelerator.

I glanced at the man, shocked. 'What's up with him?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Maybe they don't like strangers around here or something?'

Like I hadn't worked that one out for myself. I rolled my eyes. Things were bad and if I stayed in Apple Pie they would get worse.

Chapter 3

Barry Lumber, Assistant Manager of Drekker's bookshop, Apple Pie, sucked in his huge stomach and glanced at himself in the mirror. Yes, he thought, this was the face of a man destined for greatness.

'What are you doing in there?' his wife barked. 'Get me a cup of tea, will you?'

She was lying in bed watching television. She yawned and pressed the remote control. 'This was Sarah before the makeover ... ' a female voice said. She switched channels. 'Need new car insurance? Call us now ... '

She turned off the television.

'Barry!' his wife called. 'Where's my tea?'

He ignored her. The stupid woman didn't know how lucky she was married to a hunk like him.

'Barry?' she shrieked.

He couldn't resist another glance at the bathroom mirror. How could a man be so handsome? He slapped his belly and launched into a King Fu pose. One day the world would know his name - nothing would get in his way.

'Barry!' his wife yelled. 'I'm not going to ask again.'

'Cow,' he snarled.

'What was that?' she replied.

'Nothing, dear.'

He strolled through the bedroom without looking at her and went into the guest room. This was where he did his writing.

'Come on!' he said as the computer booted up. Two button clicks on the mouse later and a document had opened: 'Adventure at the Pond'. It was his entry for this year's writing competition. Apple Pie held an annual short story competition as part of the Summer Festival. The whole town closed down for the afternoon. The winner was published in the

Apple Pie Gazette, and there was a prize giving ceremony at the town hall lead by the Mayor and other local dignitaries. Barry turned from the computer screen and leafed through the printout. This would be the winner. He could feel it. It was about a man saving his neighbour's Yorkshire Terrier from drowning in a local pond. So far, the world had failed to appreciate his genius - this would change.

'One day ... ' he whispered. 'I'll show you.'

Barry imagined the applause of a large studio audience. He pictured himself as the star guest on a talk show.

'Thank you,' he said waving his hand in the air. 'That's most kind.'

He was good. No - he was better than good. He was brilliant. Talent flowed in his veins like ... he wasn't sure what. Like something precious. Like something you couldn't buy in Apple Pie.

A voice boomed from the bedroom. 'Barry!' his wife shouted. 'Where are you?'

'Coming dear!' he called, clenching his fist.

He went downstairs and checked the post. Nothing.

'Barry!' his wife said.

The hallway dimmed, as if the sun had been eclipsed. He craned his head to see what was happening. It was his wife, her huge frame resting against the banisters, cutting off the light from the window.

'I want my cup of tea.'

'Yes dear. I'll get it.'

He walked into the kitchen and filled the kettle. He made her tea with seven spoons of sugar instead of the usual three. He flinched as he heard the morning's post hit the carpet and went to investigate - an electricity bill, a brochure for a garden centre and ... a letter from Crestfield Publishing (Apple Pie's local publisher). Barry ripped open the envelope and pulled out the contents. Inside, there was a single sheet of A4 paper emblazoned with the Crestfield logo. There were three paragraphs printed across the strangely familiar ivory weave paper.

Dear Mr Barry Lumber

I have been taking a keen interest in your work through the years via your entries to the Summer Festival writing competition. I am pleased to inform you that we wish to publish a selection of your short stories. In this regard, I am eager to meet.

Please contact me or my PA. I will be delighted to show you our contract.

Many thanks for your prompt response. We are keen to get this to market in time for Christmas!

Nigel O. Body
Director of New Commissions.

Barry blinked in awe. This was his moment of triumph. Finally, after twenty-two years of hard sweat his time had come. His career, which began with the decision to work at Drekker's - the first of the five shop chain - was about to take off. Now, at the age of forty-three, the letter he had yearned for had been written, the stamp stuck and the envelope licked. Here it was in his hand, the final proof. He propped himself against a kitchen stool and grinned with delight.

Suddenly the joyful expression slipped. His eyelids flickered and he began to shake in disbelief.

No! This couldn't be?

The paper had a large 'D' watermark in the middle. There was only one place which had that logo. 'D' stood for Drekker's. He blinked at it. Why had the letter been written on Drekker's stationery?

He scratched his head. How could Crestfield Publishing get hold of official Drekker's paper?

And then he realised. It was a prank by one of those numbskulls at the shop. The letter was signed 'nobody'.

A terrible fury swept through him. Whoever had done this would pay. He didn't care who it was. They would suffer.

Barry heard the thump of footsteps from the bedroom.

'Where's my tea?' his wife screamed.

'Coming dearest,' he replied, clenching his fist as he trundled into the kitchen.

Chapter 4

My first day at Apple Pie - I wanted to stay in bed. Zak was downstairs preparing breakfast. It seemed strange being out of London. The window was open but I couldn't hear any traffic. I checked my mobile and there was no signal.

The bedroom was nothing special. It didn't look like it had been used much. Zak obviously didn't have too many people staying over. The rest of the house was decorated with sculpture. He carved them from driftwood, which he collected from beaches on the South Coast. He sculpted realistic figures from them. They looked creepy to me.

I had toast for breakfast. He made a big fuss that the jam was organic.

'You should take a walk around town,' he said.

'And do what?'

'Just look around.'

I wasn't keen. There was nothing to see. London was a million times better than this dump. Still, he was supposed to be 'looking after me' - even if I didn't want him to. I wished I was back in London, but I knew Mum needed to be on her own. She was more upset than she'd let on. As for me, I didn't know what I was feeling. It was strange how things had worked out. Dad had always talked about going to my graduation and then my wedding. He saw me following in his footsteps. I'd always had that feeling it was never going to happen somehow. And I was right.

The more it hurt, the more I tried to forget it. Suddenly I needed to get out of the house. I had to get away from Zak.

'I'm going into town,' I said.

'Changed your mind, huh?' he said. 'I'm going to be here all morning. Take as long as you want. Who knows, you might meet some people?' He wrote something down on a piece of paper and gave it to me. 'That's my phone number.' He smiled. 'Call me if you need a lift back.' He gave me some money.

I took it reluctantly.

'You should think about getting a summer job,' he suggested. 'You'd earn some money and meet people your own age.'

As I walked along the country road a 'summer job' was the last thing on my mind. I was thinking about an ice-cream and a Coke to keep the summer heat at bay.

It took me a little over ten minutes to walk into town. I was pretty impressed with myself that I'd found the way. Everywhere around Apple Pie looked the same. If I'd walked faster I would have got there sooner, but there was no rush. It wasn't like there was anything to do. All I could hear was insects from the roadside grass.

Zak told me that Apple Pie had originally been surrounded by huge apple orchards. A thick belt of protected woodland had cut the town off from the surrounding towns.

When I got to the edge of town it seemed deserted. A woman strolled by pushing a squeaky pram. When I peered into it I couldn't see a baby. She gave me a suspicious look.

An old man stopped to have a look at me. I stared at him and he moved along. This wasn't exactly what I'd call a friendly place.

It was a hot day. The sun was beaming down like the whole of summer had been condensed into a single day. My mouth was dry and I was thinking about that ice-cream. I walked on wondering what flavour I'd get. So many options - all of them good. The thought of ice-cream had put me in a good mood.

The High Street featured Larson's supermarket, a mini post office, a hardware store, some women's clothes shops and a sports shop that sold kites. A couple of the shops had junk in the window. There was no one around. This place was like a ghost town. London seemed like a million miles away.

I went into Larson's and bought an ice-cream and a Coke. There was a cute girl at the checkout. She smiled when I paid the money. I racked my brains for something funny to say but my mind was blank. I wanted to say something funny with a cheeky 'see you later' grin tacked on the end. Instead, I stood there holding my ice-cream and Coke, speechless.

'That's my favourite too,' she said, gesturing to the ice-cream.

I smiled at her and left. I had to find a reason to do more shopping at Larson's. Definitely.

I sat on a bench eating my ice-cream. Apple Pie was just as empty as before. A farmer was loading up a Land Rover. Maybe this was how I'd spend the rest of the summer? I could see it now - two slices of Zak's burnt toast with that hideous organic jam and a boring walk to Larson's to kick myself every time for not saying hello to the checkout girl. It was like that old film my dad liked, *Groundhog Day*, where every day repeats itself. At least something happened in that town.

I finished the ice-cream and walked back. I guessed I'd have to spend the rest of the day at the house. Zak didn't even have a television. I walked past a bookshop. The entrance had a large sign that said, 'Drekker's'.

Chapter 5

Earlier that day, Barry Lumber stood on that very same pavement to admire the shop. One of the display books had fallen over during the night and no one had spotted it. His mind turned to the prank letter. This was his priority. As soon as he found out who it was he'd make them pay. Ridiculing a senior manager was an insult to the whole company, a slur on the Drekker's brand.

Barry pulled out the letter. Was it Tabitha, the shy girl with the pierced nose and the black painted fingernails? Perhaps it was her revenge for him being too hard on her when she started. He doubted it - she wasn't the type. He moved on to the next suspect, the German student, what was his name? The skeletal thin boy studying Latin American Economics and Politics. Hmm ... Unlikely. He was completely brain dead. How about Lorna, the thirty-nine year old Senior Bookseller? He shuddered at the thought. Could treachery run that high up the Drekker's command chain? The truth was it could have been any of them. The shop assistants were all a bunch of traitors. After all the things he'd done for them, this was how they paid him back.

He needed to come up with a master plan. One day the world would listen to him. They would walk down Apple Pie's High Street and beg him for his autograph. He would be that important.

His fortune had started when he'd snatched the position of Assistant Manager from his better qualified competition. He had achieved this by slipping laxative in his opponent's coffee. His victim had never recovered from the embarrassment of having diarrhoea at their job interview and had hastily withdrawn his application. Barry felt no remorse. Why should he? The man had deserved it. He'd made the mistake of applying for Barry Lumber's job.

He glanced at the letter and promised himself that he would find out who had done this deed. The culprit would be apprehended. He folded the letter into the envelope and marched into the shop. As usual he

didn't say good morning to the staff. He ignored them and went to the men's toilets. He left fifteen minutes later leaving a stink behind him.

The manager's office was a drab box with stacks of paper files and dog-eared copies of 'The Bookseller'. The manager, Vicki Hardiss, liked to boast about her reputation as a party-goer. Thankfully her wild youth was now over and the world could move on.

She stood in front of a David Beckham calendar adjusting her fake pearl necklace and tweaking her upturned shirt collar. Her hair was quaffed with hair spray that smelt like cheap air freshener. That hairstyle had been in fashion once although no one in the shop knew when exactly. She greeted Barry with a thin smile.

'I've interviewed a young man about the part-time job,' she said. 'He was rather good I thought, and he's very enthusiastic. He wants to be a writer.'

'A what?'

'He writes short stories,' she continued. 'I thought we could take him under our wing. It's only for the summer.'

Barry immediately disliked this 'young man'. He didn't want anyone stealing his limelight. Apple Pie already had a great writer - Barry Lumber. It didn't need another.

'Shouldn't I have been consulted?'

Vicki gave him one of her annoyed looks. 'Whatever for?'

'I just thought you might appreciate my input?'

'There's no need for your involvement,' she snapped. 'No need whatsoever!'

'Oh.' He frowned. 'I thought HR is handled by the Deputy Store Manager?'

'When I was ...' Vicki cleared her throat. '... moved from the flagship store to work here, I became your boss, did I not?'

'Yes,' he mumbled.

'Well then.' She looked him in the eye. 'There's your answer.'

'By the way, I found some more forms for the Summer Festival writing competition.'

'What!'

'I gave one to Mark. It's wonderful to have some fresh blood around here.'

Barry's eyes popped open. 'You gave him an entry form?'

She nodded.

'Without asking me?' His voice suddenly went high pitch.

'Is that a problem?'

'Well ... I ... ' Barry was shaking. 'That's my responsibility. I'm in charge of those forms.'

She cocked her head. 'How many times have you won it? Isn't it time you let someone else have a chance?'

'I win because I'm the best writer in Apple Pie. I can't help being talented.' His arm twitched. 'Are you sure we should employ him?'

'Absolutely,' she replied. 'I've already offered him a week's trial.'

Barry turned very pale. 'I have to go to the stockroom,' he said limply. He grimaced and made his escape.

The way to the basement was via a badly lit concrete staircase. Barry listened to the echo of his footsteps as he descended.

How could Vicki describe a boy as a 'writer'? The thought infuriated him. How could a child like that have the maturity to write? He prayed that Mark wouldn't be so stupid as to enter his competition. Barry had won it eighteen years in a row by 'influencing' the results. One year he'd swayed the judging committee by giving them a handful of Drekker's vouchers. Another year he'd 'persuaded' a judge by complaining about his pet dog. Barry claimed it had bitten him outside the shop and threatened to have the pooch taken away for causing a public menace. The man had suddenly become more amicable. Also, someone - so the rumour went - had carelessly elbowed last year's competition applications into the document shredder.

Barry didn't like the sound of Mark. The last thing he needed was a stranger turning up on his patch and challenging his genius. But then again, even if Mark did get the job he could make things uncomfortable.

Chapter 6

As I walked into Drekker's that afternoon I had no idea what would happen next. I thought I was going to waste time before heading back to Zak's.

I went to the fiction section. I love reading but whenever I go into a bookshop I can't find anything I want to read. I always have this weird feeling that the books I want to read haven't been written yet. I'm not sure why. I suppose someone will get around to writing them one day. Anyway, this woman appeared and said, 'Can I help? Are you looking for something?'

I wasn't expecting that kind of attention in a sleepy place like Apple Pie.

'I'm looking for a part time summer job,' I said. 'I was wondering if you have a vacancy?'

She smiled. 'My name is Vicki. I'm the Store Manager. Come through to my office.'

Vicki asked me a few questions about what books I liked and how good I was with my alphabet and numbers. She seemed to enjoy chatting to me, which was kind of surprising. The next thing I knew she had invited me to work there.

'If we're happy with you after your trial period you can work here for the rest of the summer,' she said.

'How long is the trial period?'

'One week.'

I had a week to prove myself. Even though I'd never worked in a bookshop before I was looking forward to it. It meant spending less time with Zak. It would keep my mind occupied too. I might even meet people my own age like he'd said and, best of all, earn some cash.

'Come back tomorrow at nine thirty,' she said.

When I got back to the house Zak was in the garden dressed in overalls and a helmet. He was hard at work with a chainsaw sculpting a large tree stump into shape.

'Ah, you're back.' He removed the helmet and goggles and wiped his forehead. 'How about a cold drink?'

I nodded.

Zak's idea of a cold drink was homemade lemonade. My idea of a cold drink came in a can from a shop and tasted sweet and fizzy. Zak made everything from scratch. I watched him squeeze a couple of lemons, pour the juice into a jug and fill it with ice, water and sugar.

'I do everything organically,' he said. 'Everything I eat, everything I do ... it's all natural.'

We went into the garden to admire his work.

'What's this one going to be?' I asked.

'It's a man rising out of a tree trunk. I want it to look as if he's the spirit of the tree, know what I mean?'

I didn't but I nodded anyway. 'Are you going to paint it?'

He shook his head. 'It's perfect as it is.' He took off his overalls. Underneath he was wearing a pair of shorts and an 'I love Ireland' t-shirt.

'Oh,' I said, nearly forgetting. 'I've got some news.'

He looked at me.

'I've got a job.'

He clapped his hands. 'Good on you!'

*

The next morning I waited outside the bookshop ready to start work. I wasn't as nervous as I thought I would be. I hadn't slept much during the night and I was tired. I did my best to look awake.

I rang the bell and waited.

A woman came to the door. 'Good morning, I'm Lorna.'

'Hi,' I said, 'I'm Mark.'

She showed me to the staff room.

'Put your coat on one of these hooks,' she suggested.

She gave me a locker to put my things in and showed me around the building.

'The doors open using a four digit code,' she said. 'The men's toilets are over there.'

We went into the cash office. 'While I set up the tills you can go downstairs and put stock out.'

There wasn't much to it. All I had to do was put a trolley load of books on the shelves in alphabetical order.

The door bell rang and a guy with blond hair waved at me through the glass.

I called Lorna. She came down and let him in.

He introduced himself with a German accent, 'My name is Otto. How are you?'

'Hi, I'm good thanks,' I said.

I went back to the trolley. Just as I was about to start shelving the door bell went again.

This time it was an Asian looking girl.

'Otto,' I called. 'There's someone at the door.'

'That's Jaswinder,' he replied.

He went over and opened it.

'Hello!' she said.

'This is Mark,' Otto said. 'Please, Mark, meet Jaswinder.'

'Hey.'

'Hi,' she answered.

'I'm glad there are some young people working here,' I said.

'Not enough.' Jaswinder smiled.

'And we work twice as hard,' Otto added.

I was beginning to think my first day couldn't start any better when the door bell went again. It was the cute girl from the supermarket.

'Who's that?' I asked.

'That's Tina,' Jaswinder said.

'What's she doing here?'

'Starting work like the rest of us.'

'I'm not impressed,' Vicky snapped. She threw a piece of paper at Barry.

His hand trembled as he picked it from the floor.

'What's this?' she said.

'It's our sales figures,' he replied.

Vicki peered at him, toying with her fake pearl necklace. 'Don't be stupid! Why are we not on target?'

'Umm ...'

'You blithering oaf,' she shouted. 'Why has this store slipped into fourth position?'

'We're not at the bottom.'

'We're one from last,' she replied. 'I suppose you think that's okay?'

He shook his head.

She glared at him.

'We are a winning store and this result is not acceptable.'

Barry dipped his head. 'It hasn't been a good week.'

'I'm tired of your pathetic excuses, Barry.'

He glanced at her, unsure what to say.

'I was away last week only to come back and discover we're down twenty-three per cent on last year!'

'It's the front of the shop,' Barry replied. 'Lorna is letting us down. You know how she is? She couldn't catch a fish if it landed in her lap.' He pulled his shoulders back and gave Vicki his serious look. 'We have to move her along. Can we offload her onto one of the other stores?'

'No we can't.' Vicki sniffed. 'She's been with the company too long. Anyway ... It's your job to make sure she's got the support she deserves. We're a team. Teamwork, that's the Drekker's way.'

Barry nodded.

'That's all,' she said. 'You can go now.'

Barry stomped onto the shop floor.

'Morning, Barry,' Lorna chirped. 'What's up with Vicky? She's in a right old mood. If Mr Johnson manages to unpack some stock we might be able to put something on the shelves.'

'It's not Mr Johnson,' Barry replied sharply. 'All the new stock was unpacked yesterday so let's not bring him into this. I'm sorry to have to be so blunt with you Lorna, seeing that you do such a great job and all that, but Vicki has been complaining about you.'

'I thought she liked me?'

'It's not about like or dislike, Lorna.' He looked at her solemnly. 'We're all professionals here. We have always got along nicely, you and me, but I have to be honest and say that Vicki has a problem with you.'

'What?'

'Listen.' Barry paused thoughtfully. 'She's considering moving you from the front of shop down to the basement, to take over from Mr Johnson when he retires.'

Lorna expression fell. 'That's ... that's impossible. I can't do that. He does tons of manual labour. I can't lift heavy things with my iffy back. Doesn't she know I'm partly disabled?'

'Vicki is moulding the new boy, Mark, to take over from you. He's only a kid but she says he's going to be fast-tracked into becoming a supervisor.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'That's insane!'

'I hear on the grapevine he's considering a career in the book trade.'

A tear fell from Lorna's right eye. She wiped her face. 'I never thought it would come to this.'

'I understand exactly how you feel.' Barry scratched his head. 'I want you to know that I'm backing you all the way.'

'Really?'

'Absolutely, Lorna. You can count on me.'

'Thanks, Barry.' She took a paper handkerchief from her pocket. 'I've been doing this for nineteen years. It's all I know. The front of the shop is like my home. Please, Barry ... say something to her. I'll do anything, just don't let her put me in the Dungeon.' She gestured around them. 'This is where I belong.'

'You know how Vicki is when she gets one of her clever ideas? I suppose your only chance is if the boy doesn't like it here and ... ' Barry made a sad face. 'If he doesn't fit in with the rest of us he'll probably want to work elsewhere,' Barry said. 'Lets assume he isn't working here ... then there's only one other person fit for the job, isn't there?'

'Me!'

'Precisely.' Barry grinned. 'And I promise I'll do everything to keep you here. Raymond Drekker started this great company selling second hand books at Apple Pie's market. His spirit lives on is us. We've got to pull together for the sake of Drekker's. There's talk of a large book chain sniffing around for a vacant property in town. There's even talk of other things ... '

'Other things?' Lorna inquired.

'A take-over.'

'But Apple Pie is too small for a big chain, isn't it?'

'Our town is the crucible of the book-selling world. It's a premium quality shopping zone,' he said earnestly.

Lorna listed, open mouthed.

'Everyone is watching what's happening here.'

'What do you suggest I do?' Lorna said.

'Honesty. That's what keeps teamwork running smoothly. You should apologise to Vicki for the condition of the shop front, which frankly isn't up to scratch. Tell her that you've seen less people browsing because of the mess and she might reconsider moving you downstairs.'

'But the front of shop has been spotless. The only thing that hurt sales was you forgetting to put up the new promotion posters.'

'There's a reason for that,' Barry lied. 'I got an email from head office explicitly asking me to hold back - something about legal reasons head office said.'

'I'm confused!'

'Look Lorna. Just apologise for the mess and be done with it. Anything else and you'll be working downstairs.'

Lorna burst into tears again.

'And remember, Vicki doesn't like people who talk back so whatever happens don't mention this conversation. It's strictly between me and you. Understand?'

'Yes.' Lorna forced a smile. 'Thank you, Barry.'

He winked. 'Don't say I'm not looking after you.'

As soon as she was gone Barry phoned the Dungeon. He let it ring for a while but it didn't pick up. Where was Mr Johnson? He slammed the phone down and stared at the wall. What was that old fool up to? Just because it was his leaving drinks tonight didn't mean he could slacken off.

Barry went to investigate. He whistled as he went down the stairs.

The stockroom door was locked.

'Mr Johnson,' he called. 'Are you in there? Open up!'

Of all the people in the shop Mr Johnson was the one he disliked most. It was his attitude problem.

'Mr Johnson ... Hello?'

There was no reply.

Barry shook his head and banged on the door. 'Open this door!'

Silence.

He bent down and squinted through the keyhole. The key was in the lock and he couldn't see a thing.

Why was the door locked? And why was Mr Johnson not answering? There was no logical reason unless he was taking a knap or something? Then Barry got an idea. Was Mr Johnson stealing books? The old fool didn't look the book-wrangling type. But anything was possible. All these years he could have been stealing dribs and drabs from the deliveries. A book here, a book there. It all added up. Perhaps he was falsely listing items as damaged in transit? Anger welled up inside Barry. Even if this was Mr Johnson's last week, even if he had given decades of loyal service to Drekker's, he was ready to do his duty as a manager and dismiss the man for theft. Mr Johnson had always been - he wasn't sure how to describe it - an odd ball. And - even worse - he'd made negative comments about Barry's creative writing. Perhaps he'd sent the prank letter?

Barry heard footsteps. The lights flickered on and off.

'Hello?' he said. 'Who's that?'

'It's me,' a tiny voice replied.

'Who's me?'

'Jaswinder.'

'What are you doing?'

'Lorna told me to get some till rolls. We're running low.'

'You'd better go back upstairs,' he said. 'Mr Johnson has locked himself in the stockroom.'

'He's not in there,' Jaswinder said. 'I saw him walking past the shop a couple of minutes ago.'

'That's impossible.' Barry lent against the wall. 'He's got to be in there!'

'I saw him with my own eyes.'

Barry scratched his head. 'Something strange is going on.'

Chapter 8

The day was going fine, but then it was only 10.18 am. I'd almost finished the shelving when Lorna appeared. She didn't look happy.

I gestured to the almost empty trolley. 'Nearly finished.'

'You should have done that ages ago,' she huffed. 'What took you so long?'

Her outburst surprised me. She'd been friendly and now, all of a sudden, she was stressed.

'Do you want me to put the trolley away?'

'Leave it there,' she said. 'It's not going to hurt anyone.'

I shrugged. 'Whatever.'

'Excuse me?'

'What?' I replied.

'There's no need for that!'

I glanced at her. 'For what?'

'Answering back so rudely.' She took a step towards me. 'That's unacceptable.'

I took a step away. What was the matter with her? I hadn't said it with any attitude. I didn't want to say anything else because she was so wound up. It was obviously a misunderstanding. It was one of those situations when not saying anything was the best plan.

She waved her hands in the air. 'That's it! I've had enough of you!'

'I've done everything you asked,' I said.

Lorna stared at me. I could tell she hadn't expected me to stand up for myself. There was something about her manner that seemed like she wasn't comfortable. Although I'd only just started to work in the shop I had a gut feeling I'd done a good job. She didn't have a reason to be annoyed.

'You were supposed to do the other trolley,' she said. 'You've done the wrong one. I specifically didn't want this one touched.' She shook her head. 'The first thing I ask you to do and you go and mess it up. Do you ever listen?'

I looked at her blankly.

'Are you stupid or something?' She trudged away dragging her shoes on the carpet, and mumbled, 'I need to have a word with the management about this.'

Otto came over. 'What did you say?'

'Nothing,' I replied. 'She reckons I've shelved the wrong trolley. I'm sure I did the right one.'

Otto scanned the remaining books. 'They're new stock. This is the right trolley.'

'What's the matter with her?'

'I don't know,' Otto said. 'You must have done something to upset her.'

'I've hardly said a word.' I checked my watch. 'I've been here less than an hour.'

'Did you comment about her hair?'

'Her hair?'

'Yeah, she's sensitive about that.'

'Like I'd do something that stupid?'

Otto bit his lower lip thoughtfully.

'It's my first day,' I said, 'and already someone hates me.'

Otto laughed. 'Just stay away from her.'

Tina walked past. I tried not to stare. I couldn't help noticing that she was looking at me. I smiled.

She smiled back.

'Oh,' Otto said. 'Tina is having a good day.'

'So am I all of a sudden,' I said.

'You know her?'

I grinned. 'Not yet.'

'She never usually smiles like that.'

I shrugged.

Otto turned to me. 'I think you like her?'

'She's all right.'

'Ah!' he said. 'This is love at first sight.'

'Shut up!'

'So you don't like her?'

'I didn't say that,' I said.

'Okay.' Otto shook his head. 'It's a bit early but you can go for your break.'

The staff room was a cold box room, which someone had attempted to brighten up with a tin of yellow paint and some fake flowers.

I got a cup of water and sat down. It was just me and Tina.

'Hi,' she said, like she hadn't seen me a few seconds earlier. 'Pretty glamorous in here, huh?'

'Yeah.' I gestured across the room. 'It's the flowers. They really make a difference.'

She laughed. 'They've been here since I started. Have you seen all the dust on them? It's disgusting.'

'Hey,' I said, changing the subject, 'it's pretty cool you working here.'

'I'm saving up to study art,' she said. 'What about you?'

'It's just a summer job.'

'You're not from Apple Pie. Where are you from?'

'London.'

'Nice!'

'Yeah ... ' I smiled, not sure what to say. 'What's there to do around here?'

'Not much.' She laughed. 'Save up to buy a car, pass your test and get out of here as soon as you can.'

'That's an idea.'

'Fancy a picnic?'

I grinned.

'I'm serious,' she said. 'There's nothing else to do. It's cheap too and it's fun.'

'That sounds great. When?'

Barry marched into the room. 'Why are you two having your break now?'

'Otto said it was okay to go early because it was quiet,' Tina said.

Barry scowled at her. 'I'm in charge here. I say when people can go on their breaks or not. And as for you ... ' He turned to me. 'Lorna's got something to keep you busy.'

Chapter 9

Barry sat at his desk happy that Mark's next task was unpeeling stickers from incorrectly labelled books - a job everyone hated. Now he had to turn his attention to the other problem: Mr Johnson. He closed his eyes and thought for a moment.

Lorna peeked around the door.

'Have you seen Mr Johnson?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'It's not going well ... Everyone seems to like Mark.'

'Huh?'

'Tina thinks he really cute.'

'How do you know that?' Barry said.

'I overheard her talking to Otto.'

'We don't want that.' He scratched his chin. 'We need to keep her away from that monster. I heard he's got a reputation, treats girls badly.'

'Really?'

'Just a rumour I heard.' Barry coughed. 'I mean, I'm always one to give the benefit of the doubt and all that to newcomers, but bragging about not turning up for a date is pretty shameless, don't you think?'

Lorna nodded.

'We need to protect our staff from people like that.' Barry looked at her innocently. 'Of course we don't want to overreact but the truth needs to be told.'

'Definitely.'

'Some people never change. That's how they're made, just like your ex.'

'Don't remind me.' She breathed in deeply, and exhaled. 'I want to forget that.'

'Relax,' Barry said. 'He's behind bars, isn't he?'

'Yes ... for bank robbery.'

'A nasty character,' Barry agreed.

'He was a trickster. I don't think he ever cared about me.'

'A loathsome creature.' Barry put on an expression of sympathy. 'But you were brave.'

'Thanks.'

'Good people like us need to stick together and stand up for what we believe. We need to keep Mark away from the others.'

'I'll put him at the back of the shop,' she suggested.

Barry rubbed his hands together. 'Are you sure?'

'We have to do what's right.' Lorna was shaking. 'I think it is necessary, for the sake of staff morale.' She stared at him. 'We don't want him having negative influence.'

'Yes.' Barry smiled. 'I think you're right, Lorna. I give in to your intuition in this matter.'

'By the way?' she said. 'What's that disgusting smell in here?' She reached across and opened the window.

Barry shrugged. 'Smell? I can't smell a thing.'

He glanced around the office awkwardly. 'I'm going to check the shop floor.'

On his way over, Tabitha, the shy girl, came up to him. 'There's ... there's ...'

'Slow down,' he said.

'There's a phone call for you.'

'Who is it?'

'Oh ... She didn't say.'

'How many times do I have to remind you to get the person's name?' Barry sighed. 'I'm very busy. I don't have time to talk to insignificant people about trivial matters.'

'Sorry.'

'I should think so,' he said. He picked up the phone and bellowed out, 'Yes? Can I help you? This is Barry Lumber, Assistant Store manager of Drekker's, Apple Pie.'

'Barry, you haven't forgotten, have you?' a voice asked.

Barry flinched at the woman's tone. It was his wife. 'No dear, I haven't. Of course I haven't - Rosemarie's.'

His wife bought her clothes from Rosemarie's - 'the clothes shop for the fuller sized woman'.

'Yes dear,' Barry said meekly. 'I'll pop in and pick them up on my lunch break.'

'You'd better not forget!'

Barry lowered his voice so that no one could overhear. 'No really, that's fine, darling. Leave it with me. I won't forget.'

'We're having bubble and squeak tonight,' she said.

He knew what that meant. It was her way of telling him to cook bubble and squeak. 'Yes darling. We can have a nice meal together,' then he added dryly, 'as usual.'

'Good. And have you seen Vicki this morning?'

'Yes.' He wasn't sure what this had to do with bubble and squeak.

'I saw her the other day while I was in town ... Poor thing! She has really has put on weight. It doesn't look at all healthy.'

'Yes, Dear.'

'I'm so glad I'm on the Zorgoff-O'Brien diet. It's perfectly balanced for natural energy.'

'Yes, Dear.'

As soon as Barry hung up he glanced around to check that no one had been listening. To hell with her and her damned Zorgoff-O'Brien diet! All that cabbage in his food was giving him horrendous wind. Then he spotted the German - what-was-his-name? Fritz? No. Beethoven? Don't be silly. Otto - that was it. He was walking across the shop floor with Mark in tow. Barry watched the new member of staff. Mark was both popular and handsome, two qualities he detested. His fake smile dropped away. He couldn't disguise his anger.

'Good morning, Barry,' Otto said. 'I was showing Mark around.'

Barry eyed Otto suspiciously. 'He's only working here for the week. There's hardly any need to show him around. He can tidy the back of the shop for now.'

'He can't do that all day.' Otto frowned. 'I was going to suggest he does some till work?'

'Hmm ... Difficult.' Barry sucked his lip. 'I don't think it's a good idea. We haven't got time to train him up.'

'It's a quiet day. I'll do it,' Otto offered.

'Only a senior bookseller can train people and Lorna is too busy.'

'I trained Tabitha and Jaswinder.'

'No.' Barry cleared his throat. 'We don't do half-baked on-the-job training at Drekker's. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.' He clicked his fingers. 'Stop wasting my time now and move along.'

'I do have a name,' Otto reminded him. 'What about giving Mark his own area?'

'You're obviously drinking too much coffee or something,' Barry said. 'I think Luke will be perfectly happy at the back of the shop.'

'I'm Mark.'

'Luke ... Mark ... it all sounds the same.'

'I don't think this is right,' Otto said. 'We always give new staff their own area.'

'Yes, yes. If you really want to cause a stink about this and make a fuss then so be it.' Barry thought for a moment. 'Let's see then.'

'He's interested in writing,' Otto pointed out. 'How about giving him the fiction section?'

'Relax, will you! You're doing far too much thinking, Otto. That's a dangerous sign. Anyway, Tina does that section.'

'She's only part time. They could share it?'

'No. I've got other plans. In fact I've got the perfect place for Mark.'

Chapter 10

I walked to work the next morning for another half-day at the shop. Lorna mumbled 'good morning' as she let me in. I checked the rota to see if Tina was coming in. She wasn't.

I'd been put down for sticking up new '20% off' books. After that I was on the rota as, 'See Mr Johnson.'

Lorna appeared just as I opened the first box. 'Make sure you put the stickers on the lower left hand corner.'

Twenty-five minutes later I was working through the last box when Barry appeared.

He pointed his finger at me. 'This is totally unacceptable.'

I glanced at him quizzically.

'It's Drekker's policy,' he said, 'to put promotion stickers on the lower right hand corner.'

I looked down at ones I'd done. 'Lorna told me to do this.'

'I don't care what you think Lorna allegedly told you to do. Promotion stickers always go on the bottom right hand corner. That's the way it's always been at Drekker's and that's the way it will always be.'

'But I've nearly finished them.'

'That's a shame,' Barry said. 'It's looks like you'll just have to remove each one and put it where they're supposed to be. He checked his watch. 'Oh ... that shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes. After that you can report to the stockroom. You'll be giving Mr Johnson a hand.'

'Okay,' I said.

'Okay?'' Barry stared at me. 'There's nothing 'okay' about it.' He scratched his nose. "'Yes, Barry,' is the answer I expect. Do you understand?'

I looked at him but didn't reply.

'Good,' Barry said. 'I'm glad you get me.'

I tried not to be angry. Lorna had told me one thing - Barry had said another. Between them they'd made me look stupid. I kicked myself for not standing up for myself more. I thought about my father. He'd always told me to believe in myself. I knew I wasn't stupid. I didn't have to take that from anyone. I had to face the truth - Barry and Lorna had it in for me. Even though I was doing my best to get along they had some kind of hidden motive against me. As I changed the stickers I began to hate working at Drekker's. I was looking forward to leaving at the end of the week and never coming back to this crappy place. But the more I thought about it the more I wanted to know why it was they didn't like me. After all, I hadn't done anything wrong.

I had three options. I could ask to leave at the end of the week, even if Vicky wanted me to stay. My second option - however unlikely - was to get on Barry's good side. I could work harder and be polite ... No way! I wasn't going to suck up to them. The third option was to fight. I thought about it for a couple of seconds before coming to my senses. How would I fight? The best thing would be to keep a low profile. I could hear Dad's voice in my head, telling me, 'Be positive. Make the most of it.' There was a reason I was at Drekker's. Not only was the money useful and Tina worked there, but I felt sure it was part of my destiny in some weird way.

I tried to forget about Barry and Lorna. I hate it when stuff like this is in the back of my mind. It gets in the way of clear thinking.

After my break I went to see Mr Johnson. I tried the door handle but the stockroom was locked.

'Hello?'

I waited.

'Anyone in there?'

I listened for a reply.

'It's me ... Mark. Are you in there, Mr Johnson?'

I stood at the door for three or four minutes, I wasn't counting exactly.

Just as I took the first step back up the stairs I heard the lock rattle. The door opened with an eerie whine.

A skeletal thin man with white hair blinked at me. 'Ye-es?'

'I'm Mark,' I said. 'I'm supposed to be working with you.'

'Ah ... that so.' Mr Johnson said. 'You'd better come in then.'

I stepped inside.

The Dungeon was a windowless cavern lit by stuttering fluorescent tubes and filled with a labyrinth of metal shelves. Some of it was old stock and there was stationary and cleaning materials.

‘Well ... you’ve probably gathered that my name is Mr Johnson. You can call me Mr J if you like. You’ll be working down here from now on. We have our own rules in the stockroom. I vote we start with a cup of tea.’

‘Not for me thanks.’

‘Just one.’ He picked up a maroon teapot and filled a mug. ‘Nothing like a cup of Earl Grey.’ He winked. ‘Or do you like something stronger? Whisky perhaps?’

I laughed. ‘Er ... No thanks!’

‘I was joking,’ he muttered. ‘I do like Earl Grey though.’

‘I don’t drink tea.’

‘You must try this then. Go on!’

‘Thanks, but no thanks.’

He seemed disappointed.

I glanced around the stockroom, the piles of dusty books, the fluorescent lights blinking on and off. ‘Nice place,’ I said.

Mr J didn’t realise I was joking. ‘There’s more to this place than meets the eye.’

‘Yeah?’

He put his finger over his mouth. ‘Secrets, handed down through the ages.’ He chuckled. ‘Things only stockroom people are meant to know.’

He walked towards the far end. His right heel scraped on the concrete floor. I followed at a safe distance.

He turned around. ‘Shhh!’

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘I heard someone talking,’ Mr Johnson said.

‘I didn’t hear anything.’

‘Shhh!’ Mr Johnson pointed to a shadowy area where the wall was covered with wooden boards. ‘If you’re taking over from me you’ll need to know the secrets.’ He showed me a large key. ‘Behind this junk there’s a portal to another dimension.’

I laughed.

He gave me a fierce look. 'It's a doorway to another place in time and space.'

'Yeah ... right!'

'I'm telling you the truth,' he said.

'You mean it's like a wormhole or something?'

'Correct.' He passed me key. 'Take this with you. Don't let anyone see it.'

'I don't want it,' I said, thinking he was playing some sort of game.

'You must have it. If you work in the stockroom you become the Dungeon Master.'

Mr J was obviously crazy. No wonder they were pensioning him off for retirement.

'You don't have a choice,' he insisted. 'Take it and use it wisely.'

Chapter 11

Barry was almost in a good mood. But when he spotted Vicki he knew it wouldn't last. It was only 11.23 am and she had that look. Even her fake pearl necklace had lost its sparkle.

She waved her hands. 'What on earth has happened?'

Barry stared at her, flummoxed.

'I'll give you a clue,' she said. 'It's the beginning of the summer reading promotion.' She put her hands on her hips. 'Well?'

Barry had forgotten. He knew there was something he had forgotten to delegate.

'You're quite right,' he replied. 'That's out of order.' He scanned the shop. 'Where is she?'

'Who?'

'Tabitha,' Barry said. 'I told her to do it this morning. She must have been sidetracked by something.'

Vicki yawned.

'Had a late night?' he asked.

'Oh, nothing. Just a drinks party at the Lindsey-Hamilton's.'

'I've always found Mr Lindsey-Hamilton most unfriendly.'

'He's a busy man,' Vicki said. 'How was your evening, Barry?'

'I stayed in with the wife. We're doing the Zorgoff-O'Brien diet.'

'Oh really? I haven't heard about that one.'

'It uses a lot of cabbage.' Barry sniffed nervously.

'Fascinating,' Vicki said looking revolted. 'Changing the subject, I'm having a meeting with the senior management, so I'll be leaving you at the helm.'

'You weren't scheduled for a meeting' Barry said. 'What's this about?'

'It's nothing you need to concern yourself with,' she replied.

As she left the shop Barry mimicked her voice in a high pitch tone, 'It's nothing you need to concern yourself with.'

There was no justice in this world. He'd ended up with a bossy wife who forced him to cook cabbage soup every night while Vicki Hardiss, the store manager, was living the glamorous life and dining with local celebrities. He clenched his fists. Time would tell. One day he would be the one on the podium having dinner with the Lindsey-Hamilton's and drinking their fine wines. That day was coming. He could feel it in his bowels.

On his way back to the office he bumped into Tabitha. He eyed the meek mannered girl with an exhausted expression. 'Well, young woman?'

'Morning, Barry.'

'I've already seen you this morning,' he lied.

'Have you?' She frowned. 'I can't remember.'

'I told you to put up the new promotion posters. Did you forget?'

'I ... I don't remember you telling me that.'

'Do I have to repeat everything ten times? Is there something wrong with your hearing?'

'I'm partially deaf in my left ear,' she said. 'It's not my hearing. I'm certain you didn't tell me to do that.'

'I don't care what you believe you did or didn't hear.' Barry was almost shouting. 'Can you hear me? Maybe you should get new batteries for that hearing aid?'

'I don't wear one,' she said. 'It's only a minor impairment. I put it in my application form and Vicki is aware of it. She said it was nothing to worry about.'

'I suppose we let you in to satisfy our disabled quota!'

'I'm not registered deaf,' Tabitha said.

'I don't care,' Barry yelled. 'As long as you can hear me now.'

'I'm not feeling well.' She sniffed. 'Can I go home?'

'Pardon?' Barry said. He put his finger in his ear. 'I can't hear you.'

Tears formed in her eyes. 'There's no need to be so horrible.'

'I'm only joking! If you want to wander home to wash your ears out, that's fine by me.'

Barry shook his head as she sped away, a paper handkerchief clamped to her face. He couldn't believe it. Some people were so over sensitive.

He surveyed the shop and sighed contentedly. This was his world, his little empire. He was the boss and his word was the law. People obeyed him or they went through the door. No one challenged his authority. He saw himself as a merciful dictator, one who loved his people. It all came down to one thing - admiration. His staff respected him.

'Ah! Tina.'

'Yes?'

'What are you up to?'

'I'm on the front till.'

'Excellent,' Barry said. 'You're doing a splendid job.'

There was an awkward silence.

'I was thinking it's time for a chat. You know, one of those how are things going chats. It's good to keep up with our valued staff, that's what a good manager does. Do you have any problems you'd care to discuss. Please ... Feel free to air them to me, after all, I am the deputy manager and I take a close interest in the welfare of my subjects.'

'Thanks, but I can't think of anything right now,' Tina said.

'Great.' Barry gave her a fake smile. 'And I'm so pleased with Mark too. He's such a pleasant boy.'

She turned sheepish all of a sudden. 'Yeah ... he's all right.'

'I think he will be a fine addition to the staff. It's a shame he's got a girlfriend in London though.'

'What girlfriend?' Tina said.

'Oh, I don't know what you youngsters call it - a sweetheart? It's nice to see a young man making his way in the world.'

'I didn't know he had a girlfriend.'

'Oh dear. He must have forgotten to mention it.'

'Forget it.' Tina shrugged. 'I don't care anyway.'

Chapter 12

'I use only natural ingredients,' Zak boasted as we ate lunch in the garden. 'Better than that processed junk.'

'Umm ... '

'Do you like organic food?'

'Sort of,' I said.

'How are things at the shop?'

'Okay.'

I didn't want to tell him about Barry and Lorna.

'Are there any people your age?'

'Yeah.'

'I'm glad you got that job and you did it on your own initiative.'

'Thanks.'

'I know I haven't seen much of you over the years but I'd like to make up for that.'

'You're not my dad,' I said.

'That's true.' He looked at the sky. 'Are you feeling okay?'

'Yes.'

'Good.' He smiled. 'Oh ... I got a call from your mum. She's busy sorting things out. Look - I know you miss her but she needs time to get herself together.'

I nodded.

'Sorry,' he said, 'but you're going to be stuck with me a while longer.'

'I guess I'd better get used to this place,' I said.

'Looks like it.'

Zak went into his work shed. I walked into town.

The problems I was having with Barry and Lorna were getting to me. I needed some fun. There was only one person in Apple Pie I could have a laugh with - Tina. Thinking about her put me in a better mood. Even though I hardly knew her she was the closest thing I had to a friend in this place.

The town centre was quiet. I made my way to Larson's. I didn't know when Tina worked, I just hoped I'd strike lucky. I walked in and looked up and down the tills. An old woman was chatting to a customer. A skinny woman looked blankly into space. Tina wasn't there.

I went over to the skinny woman. 'Is Tina around?'

She didn't notice me.

'Hello?'

She eyed me strangely. 'Yes, darling?'

'Is Tina working today?'

'You've just missed her. She's gone home.'

'When?'

She checked her watch. 'Five minutes ago.'

I rushed outside hoping to catch her. She was nowhere to be seen.

I felt low. Everything in Apple Pie was crap.

I didn't know what to do so I stood around and waited. I didn't want to go back to Zak's and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life standing outside Larson's. I went inside to buy an ice-cream. As I was paying, Tina came through the staff door. I glanced across and smiled. She ignored me.

'Tina,' I called. 'Hey!'

'Hello,' she said.

'Fancy an ice-cream?'

There was a long pause before she said, 'Yeah.'

She picked one from the freezer. I paid and we went outside.

'What are you doing?' I said.

'Going home.' She looked at me with a weird expression, like she wanted to say something but couldn't.

'You sure you're all right?'

My question only seemed to annoy her. 'Yeah, of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?'

She was being really weird. 'Do you want to go somewhere else?'

'I know a place,' she said.

She took me down an alley by the side of Larson's. It led onto a patch of grass with a playground at the far end. We sat on the swings and finished off the ice-cream.

'I'm not a London girl,' she said. 'I don't spend loads of money on clothes and stuff and give off all that attitude and go clubbing.'

'Huh?'

'I suppose you hang out with girls like that?'

'Where has this suddenly come from?'

'I don't know,' she confessed.

'You don't know what?'

'You!'

I shrugged. 'What about me?'

'Yeah, exactly.'

'What are you talking about?' I said.

'See.'

'See what?'

She shook her head. 'Forget it!'

'Forget what?'

Tina got off the swing and sat on the see-saw. I followed her across.

'I used to play here when I was a kid,' she said.

'We moved around a lot when I was younger,' I said.

'You're lucky,' she said, 'it must be great having a change, getting away from the same boring people.'

'I never really got to know anyone. We were always travelling as part of Dad's work. It must be nice growing up with the same people.'

'Dull more like.' She smiled. 'No one goes anywhere around here.' She checked her watch. 'I've got to go!'

'I'll see you at work.'

'Yeah. See you later.'

I thought about Tina as I walked back to Zak's. I wondered why she'd been acting so strange. Something weird was going on.

When I got back Zak was working in the shed. I found some paper and a pen and went up to my room. I didn't get anything down for a while. I just sat there looking at the blank sheet wondering what to write. People always say it's best to 'write about what you know' so I decided to follow that advice. I started to write about Dad's funeral.

Chapter 13

The next morning I was disappointed to learn that Tina was coming in after lunch. That meant I wouldn't see her.

'The trolley next to the back door needs shelving,' Lorna said. She couldn't even look at me when she spoke.

I went to my locker to put my wallet away and saw the key Mr J had given me. I liked him even if he was a bit of a 'fruit cake' as Dad used to say. I mean, that whole nonsense about a time portal! He'd obviously watched too much Sci-fi channel and thought his life had turned into a Stargate episode.

I pocketed my locker key and put on my Drekker's badge. I didn't like wearing it because it said, 'Trainee'.

Soon after the shop opened a large woman marched in with a Tupperware box.

'You!' she shouted.

I turned around presuming she must be addressing someone else, but there was no one there except me.

'Yes?'

She thrust the box into my hands.

'Take this,' she said. 'Give it to Barry.'

'Erm ...'

'I'm his wife. It's his lunch,' she explained. 'Fried cabbage sandwiches.'

I stifled a laugh.

Her footsteps thundered across the wooden floor and out onto the street.

I was going into the office when I saw Barry hiding under a table. He stood up straight and tidied his hair.

'I was searching for a book,' he explained.

I gave him the box. 'Here's your fried cabbage sandwiches.'

'I don't like your tone,' he said.

I went to the stockroom in time to see Mr J making tea.

'Care to join me?' he asked.

I shook my head.

'Is the key in a safe place?'

'Yes.'

'Good.' He sipped his tea thoughtfully. 'I've got a feeling you'll need it.'

'What's the key for? Is it an antique?'

'It's for the door in the wall - the portal.'

I laughed. Not this again! 'Is that like your big joke or something?'

'You should feel privileged. You're the guardian of the portal now.'

The phone rang.

Mr J picked it up. 'Yes, Mrs Hardiss,' he said. 'No. The delivery hasn't arrived yet. Any time soon, I'd expect ... Will do.' He put the phone down.

'How come you call her Mrs Hardiss and everyone else calls her Vicki?' I said.

'I'm a stickler for doing things properly. She's a married woman, I'm using her correct title. The world used to be a better place. Inches are better than centimetres, a pint is better than half a litre. All these pesky computers everywhere and people using mobile phones. You can't get a moment's peace.'

'I'm going upstairs,' I said.

I went to my locker and collected my writing competition entry. Then I had an idea. It would be great to let Tina read it. I went into the office and photocopied it.

Barry walked up to me. 'What's that you've got there?' he said.

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?' he replied. 'That doesn't look like nothing to me.'

'It's for the writing competition.'

His body froze as if he'd turned into ice.

'You're too late,' he said. 'Yesterday was the closing day. You might as well give it to me. I'll put it in the bin for you.' He reached out to take it from me.

'I'm not throwing this away,' I said, 'it's the best thing I've ever written.'

He watched as I walked out of the room to go to Vicki's office.

She was working on the monthly report.

'Hello,' she said. 'How are things?'

'All right,' I said, 'I've got something for you.'

I gave her my short story.

'Excellent! I wish you the best of luck!'

Back in the stockroom the delivery had arrived. I helped Mr J unpack it. At 1.00 pm I sprinted upstairs to see Tina.

'Hi,' I said.

She finished off her drink.

I expected her to say something but she didn't even say hi. I was about to give her my short story when she chucked her drinks can in the bin and rushed out of the door.

Chapter 14

Barry waited for Mark to leave. Then he rushed into the manager's office.

Vicki was finishing up for lunch.

'Is something the matter?'

'No, no.' He gestured frantically. 'Everything's just perfect.'

'It doesn't look like everything's perfect.' She scrutinised him. 'What's the problem? Are you worried about something?'

'No, of course not.' Barry scratched his arm. 'What would I be worried about?'

'How should I know?' She sighed. 'Anyway ... I'm off.' She picked up her bag and made for the door.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Oh ... nowhere. Just going out for some fresh air.'

'Uh-huh.'

'By the way ... '

Barry squinted at her.

'I've heard there's going to be a literary agent from Thompson-Watkins coming down to read the winning competition entrants. Apparently he's bought a house in the area and he's keen to encourage local writing talent. Looks like the winner will get an agent too, if they play their cards right.'

'Really?' Barry edged closer. By local talent he knew that could only mean one thing - Barry Lumber. Winning this year's event was more important than ever. He'd put in the groundwork over the previous years but this year's competition would be the crowning glory. He could see himself up there on the podium giving his acceptance speech. He looped the scene in his head. He would be in front of a huge crowd, television cameras, reporters from The Apple Pie Gazette and the national

newspapers. 'Thank you very much for this fabulous prize,' he would begin. 'I know my story about a man saving an old woman's pet Yorkshire Terrier from drowning in a pond touched your hearts. That's because I write with my feelings. There's so much I want to say to you all ... ' At that point the crowd would get to their feet and cheer. Barry would raise his hands, begging them to stop. 'Thank you! Please ... let me start by acknowledging all the great work I've done. I have accomplished this wonderful achievement by using my unique talent.'

'Barry?'

He blinked.

'Yes, Vicki?'

'Are you sure you're all right?'

He was trembling with excitement. 'Oh,' he said. 'I'm perfect.'

'You're beginning to worry me.' She cleared her throat. 'I think I'll be heading off.'

As soon as the door closed Barry searched her desk for Mark's entry. It was vital he found it to ensure it could never enter the competition.

He played back the scene in his head, him on the podium shaking hands with the man from Thompson-Watkins. That would be the beginning of his future. His destiny rested on crushing any competition before it could pose a threat. His philosophy was simple: dig holes and people will fall into them. He was going to dig a lot of holes. He didn't feel guilty about it. Life was tough. This was the most important lesson he'd learnt - if you're going to play to win you have to play dirty. He'd won the writing competition every year since it had started and he wasn't about to let a stranger, a boy even, steal his final victory.

But where was Mark's entry?

He checked the desk. It wasn't in there. He rummaged through Vicky's in-tray. It wasn't there either. What had she done with it? He was getting frustrated. He picked up a pile of documents and threw them across the room. It could only be in one place - Vicki's handbag.

Barry was fuming as he left the manger's office. No one was going to put him in second place.

Lorna was in the corridor, facing the wall, tears streaming down her face.

Barry wasn't in the mood for all this feeble emotion. Not now. The world was full of problems and his were ten times worse than anyone else.

'What's the matter?'

'It's my ex,' she said. 'He's ... '

Barry put his arm around her. 'Shush! Breathe slowly and start from the beginning.'

'When we got divorced ... '

He sighed. 'Not from that beginning!'

'He's escaped from prison,' she said.

Barry's jaw dropped. 'Your Charlie ... You mean Crazy Charlie?'

She nodded. 'The police called me. They think he's on his way back to Apple Pie to get the bank job loot. He's coming to get me. He always said he would!'

'Don't be silly,' Barry said. 'He's not coming back here. That would be too risky.'

'Charlie said he would get revenge on me.' Lorna put her arms around him. 'He won't stop at anything ... '

Barry pushed her off him. This woman was intolerable. All she did was act like a failed drama student. Who cared if Crazy Charlie escaped? Then he remembered his responsibility as a Drekker's Manager. He was like a father to his staff. They were his family.

'There, there ... ' He patted her shoulder. 'Everything's all right.'

He tried to sound positive even though Crazy Charlie was a maniac who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. He was the kind of criminal the police told people never to approach.

'What am I going to do?'

'You'll be fine,' Barry said. He wished he had something better to say. 'I'm sure the police will get him before he gets anywhere near Apple Pie.'

Chapter 15

Mr Johnson's leaving drink was held at the Laughing Ferret pub.

I got there late. Everyone was in the beer garden getting into the swing of things. Barry was sweet talking Vicki. She wasn't quite herself because she was laughing at his lame jokes. I glanced around, checking for Tina. She spotted me as I saw her but she pretended not to notice.

'What are you drinking?' Vicki asked.

'A Coke,' I said.

As I looked around the pub I noticed that Lorna was upset. Mr J was consoling her. Tina was acting strange as well. She was staring into space, looking totally bored. Tabitha smiled at me. Tina saw her and gave me an evil look.

I shrugged.

She gave me another look.

What was her problem?

Otto waved me over. He gestured for me to sit between him and Tina.

There wasn't anywhere else to go.

Tina nudged up a little to make space.

'Thanks,' I said.

She didn't reply.

Otto pointed to Barry. Barry had his arm around Vicki.

'Maybe it's his lucky night?' he said.

'Or her unlucky one,' Tabitha said.

I laughed.

Tina glared at me.

She was beginning to annoy me. So she didn't like me talking to Tabitha but every time I tried to speak to her she blanked me. What did she expect?

Tabitha patted the seat. 'Come and sit here.'

'I'm all right here,' I said.

Tina cleared her throat loudly.

'What's bothering you?'

She turned to me with a startled expression. 'You.'

'Me?' I replied.

'Yeah ... You're bothering me.'

'What have I done?'

'Like you don't know.' She examined her nails. 'Don't play innocent with me.'

'I thought we were mates?'

'I bet you say that every time.'

Otto put his arm between us and pulled me away aside. 'Hey, take it easy guys.'

'It's her,' I said. 'Not me.'

'Mark's being an idiot,' she said.

'Perhaps you should sit next to Tabitha,' Otto suggested.

I got up and moved next across. She was usually quiet and hardly said a word but tonight she was different. I glanced at her glass. She was drinking cranberry juice and vodka.

She leaned in and whispered, 'You're cute.'

I wasn't sure I'd heard right. I sat back and acted like nothing had happened.

Tina was almost spitting at me.

'What's with the girls?' Otto smiled. 'Are you wearing a special deodorant?'

I shrugged. 'If I knew it was going to have that effect I wouldn't have put it on.'

He chuckled.

Tabitha moved in closer and gestured to my drink. 'Are you not drinking?'

'It's not really me.'

'I like an independent guy who does his own thing.' She played with her hair. 'What kind of music do you like?'

'Loads.'

'Like what?'

'Ah ... pretty random stuff.'

'Do you fancy Tina?'

I looking over at her. Tina was still glaring at me like I'd done something terrible.

'What makes you think that?' I said.

'Yeah, right!' Tabitha grinned. 'Like you don't know.'

'Huh?'

'Come on! It's obvious,' she said.

'What is?'

'Newsflash! Hello? Mr I'm so innocent!'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said.

'Shut up!'

'We're just friends.'

'Do you have an older brother?'

'Uh-uh.'

'That's such a shame.'

Tina leant across. 'That's blatantly not right. He's too young for you!' She got up and knocked Tabitha's glass over. The cranberry juice spilt on her skirt.

'What did you do that for?' Tabitha said. 'Bitch!'

'Don't call me a bitch, you tart.'

'Whoa!' I stood up. 'What's the matter with you?'

'Exactly,' Otto said.

Vicki peered across. 'Everything all right over there?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Just a spilt drink.'

Barry scowled at me. 'Mark causing trouble again, is he?'

'No,' Otto said. Then he turned to me. 'Do you think Barry knows?'

'Knows what?' I said.

'I sent him a joke letter from a publisher. He'll kill me if he finds out.'

'How will he find out?'

I got up to get a change of scenery.

Lorna followed me.

'Have you heard the news?' she said.

'No.'

'My ex, he's a convicted bank robber, he's broken out of prison. People call him Crazy Charlie. He's a psycho. I think he's coming after me. I'm might have to leave Apple Pie.'

I glanced at her, stunned, unsure what to say.

'There's more,' she said, lowering her voice. 'I'm a bit tipsy ... I really shouldn't tell you this ... '

'Yeah?'

'No ... I shouldn't, but ... ' She giggled. 'He's hidden the diamonds in a tunnel somewhere in the woods.'

Chapter 16

The sun was burning down on Apple Pie but I wasn't seeing any of it - I'd been sent to the Dungeon to unpack a delivery.

Tabitha walked in as I was opened a new box. I could tell something wasn't right.

'You okay?' I asked.

'Oh ... I'm good.' She seemed surprised I was talking to her. 'I ... '

'You were funny last night.'

'Sorry,' she said. 'I was tipsy.' She looked away, embarrassed.

I cleared my throat.

'It's not like I fancy you or anything.' She played with her hair. 'I just want to clear that up.'

I nodded.

I guessed that she was trying to figure out what I was thinking, but I wasn't thinking anything. At least if I was it was about Tina.

'I've got a lot of cool uni mates,' Tabitha said.

'Uh-huh.'

'It's amazing at uni.'

'Yeah.'

'I guess I miss being there.'

She swivelled in her boots and walked out.

Okay, I thought.

The rest of the morning was uneventful. As soon I finished I rushed over to Larson's. Tina was working at the checkout. There were no customers at her till, so I went over.

She didn't smile.

'Hey,' I said.

'Hey,' she replied.

'Love the outfit,' I said, poking fun at her uniform.

'I hate it.' She pulled a disgusted face. 'It's hideous.'

'Do you want to do something after?' I asked.

She hesitated. 'Maybe.'

'Have you eaten?'

She shook her head. 'We could go for that picnic?'

'Perfect.'

'I'll go into the changing room and get out of this. You can get us something to eat. I'll meet you outside in five.'

'What do you want?'

'A cheese and salad sandwich with a Coke. Oh, and a Twix.'

It didn't take long to get the stuff. Then I waited outside for her. Her idea of five minutes was more like twenty. I had no idea what she was doing in there.

Finally, when she came out she was wearing her home clothes.

She grinned.

There was something different about her. She'd put on make up.

I was slightly annoyed that I'd been waiting around for ages but didn't show it.

'Sorry,' she said.

'What for?'

'I've got a really bad sense of time.'

We walked to the playground and on past a cottage.

'Have you been to the woods?'

'No,' I said.

'I know a nice place there.'

'What's so good about it?'

'You'll see.'

The path snaked through the trees and took us into a shabby field. In the far corner there was a building of some sorts.

'I heard you've entered the writing competition,' she said, as we walked.

'I'd like to become a writer one day.'

'Seriously?'

I glanced at her. 'Why not?'

She laughed. 'I didn't know you were into that kind of thing?'

'What?' I said. 'Because I'm from London?'

'No.'

'What did you mean then?'

She didn't say.

We kept on walking. Neither of us spoke.

Tina pointed across the field. 'We can sit on top of that.'

The building - whatever it was - was made of concrete. There were small holes in each side, like square portholes. Creepers covered much of the structure.

'What is it?' I asked.

'An old army thing,' she said.

When we got to it I looked through one of the windows.

'What's it doing here?'

'It's really old,' she said. 'It's always been here.'

'It's an army bunker.'

I walked around the side. The window faced the sun. Keeping my head at a specific angle I could see inside. The walls were painted white. I could make out some wooden boxes and that was about it. Then I saw a gas mask. I'd seen one of those on a school trip to the Imperial War museum.

'It's a Second World War bunker,' I said.

'What was it used for?'

'A machine gun post or ammo dump or something.'

The entrance was blocked by a thick steel door. It didn't seem to open from the outside. Tina climbed up the metal rungs and looked down at me from the roof.

'What are you waiting for?' she said.

I went up and took in the scenery. The bunker had a perfect view along the edge of the field. To the far right, between the field and the woods, there was a small stream.

'Something's bugging me,' I said.

'What's that?'

'Why can't you open the door from the outside?'

'That's obvious,' she replied. 'To stop people getting in.'

'Yeah.' I sipped my Coke. 'But the soldiers stationed in there had to get in somehow.'

She shrugged and bit into her sandwich. We sat in silence for a couple of minutes. There were no clouds in the blue sky and the sun was hot.

'I'm sorry I was upset last night. I'm embarrassed about it.'

'Upset?' I said, playing innocent.

'Um.' She put her sandwich down. 'I don't know ... '

I looked at her. 'You don't know ... what?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?' I repeated.

'Us,' she said.

'What about us?'

'Do you always cheat on your girlfriend?'

'I haven't got one,' I said.

'Liar!'

'Honest.'

'You're such a cheater.' She shook her head. 'I bet you think you're some kind of a player?'

'What's this got to do with anything?'

'You're a cheater!' she said.

'Can't you get it into your head - I don't have a girlfriend.'

'Shut up!'

'No, you shut up. You're the one who started this,' I said.

'Whatever!'

We looked away from one another, and then burst out laughing.

'Who told you I had a girlfriend?'

'I can't tell you that.'

'Why not?' I said.

'Because.'

'You accuse me of being a liar and now you're not telling the truth.
That's so fake.'

'Huh?' She covered her face with her hands. 'This is so weird.'

'Too right it is.'

'Barry told me. I believed him ... I'm sorry.'

'That guy is such a jerk.'

'Yeah ... Totally.'

Chapter 17

The next morning I'd unpacked the latest delivery. It was twelve minutes to go before my break. I stood around for a while and then switched on the radio. The reception wasn't great so I turned it off. I saw something to read on the desk. 'Lifting and Carrying Procedure in the Workplace.'

I yawned.

Tina was in the staffroom. She smiled as I walked in.

'Hi,' she said.

'Hi.'

We kind of looked at one another, glad we were mates again.

'What's been happening upstairs?' I asked, going to my locker.

Lorna's been moaning about the shop being a mess.

'Same as usual then,' I said.

'Yup.' She glanced into my locker. 'What's that?'

It was the key Mr J had given to me. I handed it to her.

'It looks antique.'

'That's because it probably is,' I said. 'Mr Johnson said it leads to a time portal or something.'

Tina laughed.

I grinned. 'You know how he is?'

She nodded. 'A bit mental?'

'Totally.'

'What could it be for?'

'He says there's a secret door at the back of the stockroom. It's hidden by a load of old junk. I don't think anyone else knows it's even there.' I looked at her cheekily. 'We could check it out?'

'I'm supposed to be shelving.'

'Come on ... I need someone to talk to,' I pleaded. 'There's no one to talk to down there.'

'What if Barry finds out?'

'He won't find out.'

'Are you sure?'

'Definitely,' I said. 'I'll lock the stockroom door just in case he comes down.'

'I don't know.'

'Don't worry!'

'Hmm ... ' She shook her head. 'I'd better get back to work.'

'Come down to the stockroom. You know you want to!'

'I can't,' she insisted.

'No one is going to miss you.'

'Maybe.'

'Don't chicken out on me.'

She thought about it for a moment. 'Oh ... okay then.'

We went down to the stockroom. I locked the door. Tina looked for a torch while I moved the junk in front of the 'portal'. To our surprise there really was a door behind it. It was a heavy metal door with 'C 15' stencilled across it in faded white.

'What's C 15?' Tina asked.

'Contamination Unit 15,' I said. 'That's where they keep the mutants from the genetic research lab.'

She laughed. 'You first then.'

I showed her the key. 'You open it.'

'No way!'

I shrugged and then inserted the key into the lock. It made an ominous grating sound as it turned.

I glanced at her.

She looked anxiously at me. 'Are you sure we should do this?'

'Do you want to know what's behind it or not?'

'Of course I do.'

'Well then,' I said. 'There's only one way to find out.'

I pushed the door. It swung open slowly. All I could see was darkness ahead of us. The air smelt damp and musty.

Tina switched on the torch. The spotlight picked out a corridor. Some of it was concrete, some of the sections were lined with brick and wood.

'I'll go first, if you want?'

Tina gave me a determined look. 'I'm not scared. Girls are tougher than boys.'

'I didn't mean it like that?' I said.

'What did you mean it like?'

She stepped inside and I followed. The floor was covered in small objects; old matchboxes, cigarettes, candles and steel cups.

We walked to the end of the corridor. The way forward split into two separate directions.

'Left or right?' I asked.

'Left,' we both said at the same time.

'Left it is then,' I said.

She shone the torch to the left and then to the right. Both the corridors were damp. Water was dripping from the ceiling. The air reeked of rotting wood.

'This place is creepy,' she said. 'Let's take the right.'

'Make up your mind.'

The next step I took my foot brushed against something.

There was a loud crash.

Tina screamed.

'What's that?' I said. 'My leg feels wet.'

She pointed the torch to the ground. I'd knocked over a bucket of water.

Around the corner the corridor split again. There was light up ahead, coming in from the ceiling. Our footsteps echoed as we walked.

The light was coming from what appeared to be a vent in the roof. We stood under it and heard voices from above.

'Where does this come out?' Tina said.

'I've got no idea.'

Suddenly, there was a noise along the corridor - and it was closer. The torch picked out some sort of movement.

It was a huge rat and it was coming towards us.

Tina screamed.

'Run!' I shouted.

Chapter 18

Barry held his breath in the bushes outside the Mortimer's country house. The spot where Mr Mortimer's Mercedes should have been was filled with a rusting yellow Ford. Barry recognised the car immediately. Its owner was Apple Pie's notorious 'rough diamond', a rogue of sorts. Mack McGinty, or Happy Mack as his friends called him. Mack was a man of many talents. His multiple careers included: landscaping, grass mowing, hedge trimming, fence erecting, pond digging, glasshouse maintenance, house painting and window cleaning. But none of his 'handy man' skills compared to his legendary exploits with rich married women. His adventures were infamous, the source of infinite pub gossip. Barry had heard some of them. Even his wife had a soft spot for Apple Pie's charm merchant.

Today Happy Mack was doing some work for Mrs Mortimer. She was active in the local community - a member of APAALG, Apple Pie's Action Against Litter Group, as well as the annual Gardens in Bloom competition. But Barry wasn't there to remove chewing gum from the pavement or polish her windows. He was there because she was on the committee of another annual event, the Summer Festival's short story competition.

There were only two important things in Barry's life - being Assistant Store Manager at England's most prestigious bookshop chain - Drekker's - and winning that competition. Both of these, he hoped, would launch his literary career.

He looked up at the bedroom window. The angle wasn't brilliant, he couldn't even see in properly. He looked around and spotted a nearby tree. The branches came low to the ground. That would be easy to climb, he thought.

A few minutes later he was perched half way up the tree, his camera pointing directly into Mrs Mortimer's bedroom window. Barry snapped away contentedly.

Perfect!

A few hours later that very same day, Barry was standing on Mrs Mortimer's front porch. He was beaming a large, processed cheese smile. He pressed the door bell and waited.

'Good afternoon.'

Mrs Mortimer looked at him quizzically.

'Barry Lumber, ma'am.' He put out his hand and bowed slightly as she shook his hand.

'Yes?' she asked. 'Can't you read the window sticker. No door-to-door salesmen.'

'I'm not selling anything,' Barry reassured her.

'What is it you want then?'

'May I come in ... It's a rather sensitive matter that needs to be discussed in private.'

'In private?'

Barry cleared his throat and fished out his camera. 'Well, madam. You might wish to take a casual look at these photographs.'

She breathed in sharply and took a step back. 'Oh my.' She looked distraught. 'Oh dear me.'

'Yes,' Barry said. 'I thought you would understand how sensitive this is.'

'You'd better come in.'

'That's very gracious of you,' Barry said.

She led him into the conservatory at the back of the house and gestured for him to take a seat.

'Would you like a drink?'

'That's very hospitable of you,' he said. 'I wouldn't like to inconvenience you.'

'Don't be silly. It's absolutely no trouble at all.'

'Are you having something?' he asked.

'I was going to have some lemon tea with a slice of carrot cake. It's freshly baked. I made it myself.'

'My, oh, my,' he replied. 'You have been busy today.'

She glanced at him hesitantly.

He gave her his fake smile. 'Freshly baked - that sounds delicious.'

The room was filled with an assortment of bric-a-brac collected from various parts of the world.

Mrs Mortimer returned with a tray loaded with two china tea cups, a silver teapot and two plates with cake.

She used a pair of tongs to select the lemon slices and dropped one into each cup.

She sat back and watched him. 'There you go, Mr ...'

'The name's Barry, Barry Lumber,' he said.

'Well Mr Lumber ... how can I help?'

'You see ...' He stopped himself. 'You have a respected position in our community and I want to do everything to protect that reputation.'

She leant in. 'Go on, Mr Lumber.'

'Naturally, I'm disgusted by these images and I cannot tell you how they came to be in my hands.'

She nodded.

'I'm convinced,' he continued, 'that we can work together for the good of the community.' Barry bit into a slice of cake. 'Mmmm ... Lovely.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'What exactly needs to be done to protect this community from this sort of invasion of privacy?'

'Well, Mrs Mortimer.' Barry sat back in the chair and patted his stomach contentedly. 'We have to ensure that only one person wins this year's writing competition. It's as simple as that.'

'I see.' She brushed imaginary cake crumbs from her skirt. 'And there's no money involved?'

'Money?' Barry frowned. 'Money is not the concern ... Who wins the writing competition is.'

'And if this happens that would be the end of it?'

'Absolutely.'

'This has to be done carefully,' she said. 'We don't want to provoke suspicion.'

'Of course,' he replied. 'All that needs to happen is that a specific entry gets misplaced.'

'And what is the name of this entry?'

'Mark Logan.'

Chapter 19

Another day in the Dungeon. I glanced at the 'portal' door. What was down there? I had to find out.

I got the torch and unlocked the door. Then I went through the first section and took the right fork. I was careful to avoid the bucket I'd knocked before and waited at the roof vent to decide my next move. I could hear voices from above. I wasn't sure if it was from the vent or further down the corridor. One of the voices was familiar. It was Barry's. I stepped out of the light and switched off the torch. Apart from the shaft of light coming in from the vent it was totally dark.

I could hear talking again. This time it was closer and I could make out what was being said.

'I've done what you asked,' a woman's voice said. 'The committee are meeting in the town hall, in the long room. I got in there just in time. The door wasn't even locked. All I had to do was whip out his submission.'

'Excellent.'

'When do we do the swap?' the woman asked.

'After the prize giving.'

'Why not now?'

'You get the photos when after I win.'

'If that's how you want to do it.'

'Where's Mark's submission?'

'Don't worry.' She chuckled. 'It's in a safe place.'

I leant against the damp wall, swallowed by darkness. I couldn't believe that Barry was resorting to this. He would go to any length to stop me winning the competition. I remembered the moment when I'd finished writing the story and I'd decided to submit it as a tribute to Dad. Even if it didn't win, I'd written it as my mark of respect for him. It really hurt me that Barry was screwing that up. The writing competition was

important but this was about more than winning. It was about me being free to express my feelings and I wanted them recognised. I couldn't express them out any other way.

As I stood there in the dark I vowed I was going to fight. Barry always picked on people who were too scared to fight back. He was sly and manipulative - he needed to be stopped.

I thought about my options. I could talk to Vicki Hardis. But how could I prove anything? If I complained without any evidence I'd look stupid. It would be exactly what he wanted. He could sit back and laugh at me.

I felt ashamed, like I'd let Dad down.

Dad had told me that apart from marrying Mum the most important decision he'd ever made had been after medical school. He wasn't sure what to do with his future. Should he get a comfortable job or try and do something to help people? He went on to become an eye surgeon. He travelled as part of a charity team to different countries. His work saved people from blindness. He helped people who were too poor to pay for their own treatment. He had done what he felt was right. I had to do the same thing.

My chance at entering the writing competition was over.

I switched the torch on and walked down the corridor. The walls were covered in slime. The floor was uneven and sections of the passage were covered in pools of stagnant water. After a few minutes I came to a box-like room with a table and chairs. There was a door at the far end.

I tried the handle. It was open.

It swung ajar with a slight push. The room behind it was partly flooded. Playing cards floated in the water. The centre of the room was taken up by a long table. It was covered in maps and dusty folders. I pointed the torch at one of them. It was some kind of a technical log. Another folder listed ammunition stores. The date on it said, '1945'.

One of the chairs had a belt buckle draped over it. A metal filing cabinet stood against the wall. I spotted an oil lamp and searched for some matches. I didn't find any. I found some keys though. The filing cabinet was filled with maps. I removed one and spread it out across the table. The title at top said, 'Area S047. Apple Pie and District: Home Defence Network'. Underneath in red ink is said, 'Top Secret'.

It was only when I took a closer look I realised the map showed me exactly where I was. I was in the LECC, the Local Emergency Command

Centre. This was connected to what was now Drekker's. There were two more passages on the map. One of the tunnels went all the way from the High Street to an underground structure with the letters, 'O.P.' next to it. The second went under the High Street into a building marked 'Staff HQ'. While I was scrutinising it I realised that the 'Staff HQ' was the town hall.

This gave me an idea. I folded the map and slipped it into my pocket with the keys.

Chapter 20

The judges were deciding the competition winner that evening - the prize giving ceremony was tomorrow.

Time was running out.

I ran back along the tunnel. Upstairs, I heard Lorna's voice.

I rushed into the staff room and opened my locker. The photocopy I'd made for Tina was still in there. I grabbed it and sprinted back downstairs.

Once in the stockroom, I locked the door and entered the tunnel. My heart was thumping.

I shone the torch onto the map and double checked the route to the Town Hall. Satisfied that I was going in the right direction I patted my pocket to check I had the keys.

The passage leading to the Town Hall was longer than I expected and very wet. It didn't have a vent half way, like the other tunnel. The air smelt of mould and made me feel like puking. I pulled my shirt up over my mouth as a makeshift filter and hurried along.

I thought I was almost there when I shone the torch ahead of me to see that a section of the roof had fallen in. It looked too dangerous to go any further.

Something inside me told me not to give up. When I inspected the damage I saw a narrow way through. By swivelling sideways I was just about able to force myself through.

I'd done it.

Ahead of me there was a steel door similar to the one in the stockroom. I fished out the keys.

The first one didn't fit.

I tried the next one. That didn't work either.

The torch flickered and I started to panic. This place could end up becoming my coffin if I wasn't careful. If the torch went I'd might never find my way back. Terror built up inside me.

I banged the torch hoping that it was a loose connection and not the batteries.

Nothing happened. I switched it on and off and then banged it again.

The light came on.

Immediately, I reached for the next key. This one fitted into the lock but didn't turn. There were two more. My heart was beating like crazy. I tried to breathe slowly. The air smelt so bad.

The key fitted the lock but I could only get it to turn. I tried it again but it was the same. Had the lock rusted up?

I inserted the last key. It was a perfect fit.

The lock clicked. I pushed the door open.

I was in what appeared to be the Town Hall's basement. The space was being used to store old furniture. I found a light switch and flicked it on. As soon as I'd done that I switched the torch off to save the batteries.

A staircase with a wooden railing ran along the left wall. I walked to the top and listened. I couldn't hear anything outside.

I turned the handle.

Just as I turned it I heard talking.

I froze.

The voices moved away.

I waited a few seconds, just to be safe. Then I opened the door and crept along the corridor.

The inside of the Town Hall had wooden panelled walls. I spotted a plaque with an arrow pointing left to, 'The Long Room'. I walked down the corridor until I came to a door.

It was an impressive wooden door with a polished brass handle. I put my ear against the wood and listened.

All clear. I crept in.

The Long Room had already been prepared for the judging committee. A trolley had been set up with tea and coffee, bottles of mineral water and biscuits. I picked one of the chocolate biscuits and ate it.

The writing competition entries were stacked neatly at the end of the table. As I walked towards them I heard footsteps.

I looked around the room for a hiding place. The door handle turned.

Under the table? It wasn't wide enough.

Behind the curtains? They didn't go all the way down to the floor - my feet would show.

I hid behind the cupboard at the end of the room, pressing my body against the wall.

A man and a woman came into the room. I couldn't see them but I could tell by the voices.

'Is everything prepared for the committee?' the woman asked.

'We've got the usual hospitalities,' the man replied, 'and I'll make sure they won't be disturbed.'

'Excellent.' There was a slight pause before the woman spoke. 'I hope you didn't help yourself to the biscuits?'

'That's odd. It wasn't me.'

'Don't let me catch you doing that again,' the woman said.

'What's this?'

'What's what?' the woman replied.

'Muddy footsteps on the carpet! Someone came in here with dirty feet and pinched a biscuit.'

'Don't be stupid!' the woman said. 'Clean it up.'

As soon as they'd gone I came out of hiding. Luckily the carpet had cleaned my shoes and the muddy trail hadn't led to me.

It was too risky to go back where I came from. I went through the entries and slid my short story somewhere in the middle. Barry's submission was next to mine. For a split second I thought about taking his out but I didn't.

I left through the fire exit.

Otto saw me walk into the shop. He glanced across but didn't comment.

'Excuse me,' a voice said.

I thought it was Barry about to ask why I'd been out of the store.

I turned around to see a tall slim man wearing a dark suit and a crumpled white shirt staring at me. His hair was unkempt and he wasn't wearing a tie.

'I wonder if you could give me a hand?'

'How can I help?' I said.

'I'm looking for a few books.' He glanced at his watch. 'I haven't got much time ... I'm supposed to be helping the judging committee.'

'Judging committee?'

'Yes' he said. 'Apple Pie's Summer Writing Competition.'

'I've entered that.'

He put out his hand. 'I'm from Thompson-Watkins Associates.'

I must have looked puzzled because he immediately added, 'The literary agents.'

Barry rushed over and elbowed me out of the way. 'Good day to you, Sir. My name is Barry Lumber. I'm the assistant store manager.'

'Oh?'

'Please forgive him. He's new. He's only a temp, not significant in any way. I would really like to extend our thanks to you for taking part in the Summer Festival and showing an interest in our very talented local writing scene. As a courtesy I'm honoured to offer you a third off the advertised price of any books you purchase in-store today. Let's call it a friendly discount for a fellow book lover.'

'That's ... That's very decent of you.'

'My pleasure.' Barry reached out and grabbed his hand. 'My name's Barry Lumber, I'm not sure if I mentioned that already? It's a name to remember.'

'Yes, you did mention it.'

'Did I?' Barry grinned. 'I've won a number of awards for my writing. Perhaps I should mention that I've entered this year's competition. I know you'll adore my work. Thompson-Watkins Associates is such a fine literary agency by the way.'

The agent glanced at me.

'Ignore him,' Barry said. 'He just works in the stockroom.'

Chapter 21

It was the day of the Summer Festival and the prize giving.

Barry had allowed everyone in the shop an hour and a half to attend the ceremony. He told Otto that Drekker's had to make a statement of support by attending, and that it would be good for staff morale to witness his triumph. Vicki, however, had told him to keep the store open. Barry had decided that Lorna and I would stay behind to 'man the ship'. It was obvious that he did not want me around at the Festival.

As soon as everyone had gone Lorna sat behind the till.

'You've got to stay with me, Mark,' she said.

'Why?'

'I'm scared.' She eyed the door. 'I've got a bad feeling that Crazy Charlie is back in town.'

'Your ex, the bank robber?'

'Shushhh!' She put her finger over her mouth. 'Don't say stuff like that.'

'There's no one around,' I said.

'That doesn't matter. I've already told you too much.' She glanced at the door again. 'If he knew I'd told you that he'd ...'

I sighed. 'I'm going to get a drink of water.'

'You can't!'

'I'm thirsty,' I said.

I strolled away thinking she must be paranoid. Maybe everyone who worked here was?

I went into the staff room and got myself a cup of water. It was nice and cold, just the thing for a hot summer afternoon.

I was about to refill the glass when I heard a noise. The staff door slamming shut and Lorna's screams.

I dropped the cup and ran to investigate.

Lorna was pressed against the door. First it was Mr Johnson with his nutty 'portal' and now it was Lorna with a stalker obsession.

'What's the matter?'

'Help me!' she screamed. 'Look through the glass. See if he's there ... he might have gone away.'

'Who?'

'Charlie,' she shouted. 'He's in the shop. I saw him. That's why I ran out here and shut the door.'

'Stay there.' I walked across, convinced she was a drama queen. 'If it makes you feel better ... '

'Thank you!'

I peered into the store through the safety glass. I couldn't see anything strange.

All the books were neatly arranged. The special offers table was nicely stocked. There was nothing to see.

A face suddenly pressed against the glass. The man had a shaved head and wild eyes. The kind of eyes that looked right into you.

He rubbed his face against the glass, spit dribbled down his chin and left a smear trail. He thrust a knife against the glass.

'Open the door!'

Holy crap, I thought.

I ducked and crouched beside Lorna. 'He's there!'

'We're dead if he catches us.'

'Charlie's convinced I'm a police mole, tipping them off - he's after revenge.'

'Tell me about it later,' I said.

Lorna was shaking.

'I'm phoning the Police.' I ran into the manager's office.

The line was dead.

Meanwhile, Crazy Charlie was smashing down the door.

'We can't hold him off much longer,' I said.

'What are we going to do?' Lorna screamed.

'The stockroom!'

'No, the manager's office.'

The door was almost off its hinges. Just a couple more kicks and he'd be through.

'The manager's office,' she repeated.

'The stockroom!' I said.

'We'll be trapped down there.'

'I've got a plan,' I said. 'Run to the far end of the stockroom. I'll see you there.'

'We'll be cornered down there.'

'Go! Now!' I pressed myself against the door. 'Trust me.'

She turned and ran.

I leapt into the office and grabbed a chair. It wedged against the door perfectly. Then I sprinted downstairs. I ran so fast I nearly fell over.

'We're going to be stuck down here,' Lorna said. 'Trapped!'

I moved the sheet of hardboard to one side to reveal the door.

Lorna watched, amazed.

Above us, Crazy Charlie broke the door off its hinges.

'Go!' I said.

Lorna ran into the tunnel.

The stockroom filled with Charlie's screams, 'I'm coming for you.'

I saw him waving the knife as I shut the door.

Chapter 22

The prize giving ceremony was scheduled to take place on the lawn behind the Town Hall.

Rows of plastic seating had been arranged in neat rows for the audience. A loudspeaker system had also been installed for the ceremony. Behind the seats, three tables, each one covered with white paper table cloths, had been loaded with light refreshments. It was destined to be a big occasion and all the local dignitaries would be there.

Barry was wearing a tuxedo. He marched back and forth grinning at everyone. In his mind he'd already won. Mark, his only competition, was out of the way and he was sure he'd sweetened the literary agents vote with that offer of a juicy discount.

He helped himself to a glass of white wine and pondered his speech. He figured it would go something like, 'Thank you ladies and gentlemen. This award is given to the best and that is why, once again, I have received it.'

He made his way past a group of women from APAALG, Apple Pie's Action Against Litter Group. They were discussing the threat to civilisation posed by discarded drinks cans. Mrs Mortimer was among them. He gave him a knowing smile as he passed.

'Fingers crossed,' she called.

'Thank you,' he replied.

He walked towards a group of Drekker's staff. There was the German boy whose name he could never remember, the strange girl with the black fingernails and weird earrings, and Tina. He was pleased he'd managed to keep Mark away from her. Thank the Lord for the Dungeon, he thought. That had been a genius move. As for the rest, he could see the future mapping out before him. After the prize giving he would resign from Drekker's and have his collection of short stories published. The Arts Council of England would give him a grant to write his autobiography. People would travel from London on day trips to see his house

(English Heritage would already have erected a round blue plaque that said, 'Barry Lumber wrote his Apple Pie Collection here'. He'd be busy doing interviews for Radio 4 and Newsnight's art review. And Vicki Hardiss would secretly admit that she'd fancied him all these years ...

He approached the waiting Drekker's staff with his impressive swagger. Today he would be crowned King of Apple Pie.

'Having a good time?' he asked.

'Is there any more wine?' Tabitha said.

'One glass,' Barry said. 'One glass is enough, didn't I say? You need to go back to work, remember?'

Tabitha peered at him. 'You're not really going to make us go back to the store? Everyone else is spending the afternoon here.'

'If you don't like it you can join Lorna and Mark now.'

'Just one more glass?'

'Oh, go on then. But if I see any inappropriate behaviour - '

Tabitha went off to refill her glass. The women from APAALG, Apple Pie's Action Against Litter Group eyed her suspiciously. Then couldn't help gossiping about her 'unconventional' appearance.

'Listen in,' Barry said to Otto and Tina. 'I want you to give me a hearty clap ... erm, I mean I want you to give the winner a hearty clap when he or goes on stage to collect the prize.'

Tina turned to Otto, and said, 'Look, that's Mark's uncle. It's got to be.'

She waved hello.

He waved back and came across. 'Hi, I'm Zak. Anyone seen Mark?'

'He's not here,' Tina said.

Barry couldn't bring himself to look at Zak. Just the thought of someone related to Mark made him feel very uncomfortable.

'Would you like another juice?' Tina offered.

'That would be nice.'

Otto, Tina and Zak made their way to the refreshments tables. Barry waited on his own.

Mrs Mortimer's odd job man, Happy Mack McGinty, was standing close by. He was giving Barry sour looks.

Barry enjoyed the moment.

'You think you're so clever, don't you?' Happy Mack said. 'You think you can have it all your way?'

Mrs Mortimer looked across, concern on her face. Barry put up his hand as if to say 'don't worry, let me handle this'.

'There's no need to be bitter,' he said to Happy Mack.

'It's sick what you did.'

Barry reached into his jacket pocket. 'I've got the photos on this memory card. I was going to give them to your boss after the event.'

'She's not my boss,' Happy Mack said. 'I'm in love with her. I've been in love with her for years and now you have to go and ruin everything.'

'Shush! Temper, temper.' Barry chuckled. 'She's a married woman, you should have more respect. I'm doing this for your own good.'

'I'm not ashamed of anything,' Happy Mack said. 'Mrs Mortimer and her husband have been legally separated for years. They get along for the kids and to keep up appearances. You know how people gossip around here. I'm in love with her!'

'Not any more.' Barry pulled the memory card. 'Perhaps I should email these out. People could see what a fabulous photographer I am. Mrs Mortimer would become a local celebrity, for the wrong reasons.'

'You're sick.'

'I've got morals,' Barry said. 'I know the difference between right and wrong and you're so wrong you haven't got a leg to stand on.'

'Don't you love anyone?' Happy Mack said.

'I love being the best.' Barry spun around. 'By the way,' he added, 'nice boxer shorts.'

Barry examined Happy Mack's and grinned. That was the face of a man who'd been beaten and couldn't do anything to stop it.

Chapter 23

As the door slammed shut I could hear the knife clank against steel.

'I haven't finished yet,' Charlie screamed.

'We're safe in here,' I said, 'as long as he doesn't figure a way to get in.'

'We've got to get some help,' Lorna said. We stood in the tunnel in the pitch dark. 'How are we going to find our way out? How did you know about this place?'

'I'll explain later,' I said. 'First, we need to get out of here.' I felt my way along the wall. Hold on to my shirt and follow close behind.'

I led her down the tunnel hoping, in the darkness, that we were going in the right direction.

Lorna started crying.

'Don't worry,' I tried to reassure her. 'We'll be out of here and then we'll call the police.'

'Did you see the look on his face?'

I had, but I didn't think talking about it would help either of us.

'How long have you been at Drekker's?' I said, hoping to distract her.

'What?'

'How long have you worked at the store?'

'Sixteen years,' she replied.

'That's like my whole life.'

'Probably.'

We went further down the tunnel. I could feel her hand shaking as she held on to me.

'I'm sorry about everything,' Lorna said.

'Forget it.'

'No really. I'm sorry. I'm very sorry.'

'What are you talking about?' I said.

'I got you all wrong ... ' She started crying again.

I stopped and put my arm around her.

'Barry made me ... ' She sniffed. 'It was his fault.'

'What was?'

'He hates you. He told me all kinds of lies about you and Tina. He wants to win the competition.'

It was a relief to hear her confession.

'He's an evil man,' Lorna said. 'Forgive me?'

I thought about how mean she'd been. How Barry and her had made my life in Apple Pie so difficult. And then I thought about Dad and about Crazy Charlie.

'I forgive you,' I said.

'Do you?'

Yes.'

'Do you really forgive me?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Thank you.' She gripped my shirt even tighter. 'Can we be friends now?'

'We can.'

The tunnel was getting lighter ahead. The only problem was, I didn't know where we were.

'Are we there?'

'Almost,' I lied. 'Just a little bit more.'

'How did you find out about this place?'

'Mr Johnson told me.'

'That explains it then.'

'Explains what?'

'How he used to sneak out of the stockroom and go to the pub for lunch. No one could figure out how he did it.'

We got to the patch of light with a ventilation hole. The tunnel widened and there was a small table and a chair. I picked up a lamp and shook it. 'It's still got fuel inside.'

'There's a box of matches,' Lorna said.

The matches had been dipped in wax. The first one worked.

'At least we can see where we were going,' I said.

I remembered the map in my pocket. I pulled it out and spread it on the table.

'Why does Barry hate me?' I asked.

'He knows you're going to get out of Apple Pie and do something worthwhile with your life. In ten years time he'll still be at Drekker's.'

'Is that all?' I said.

'Yes,' she replied. 'He's probably scared of you too.'

'Scared of what?'

'People finding out that he's got no real talent.' She paused for a second. 'Because everyone knows that he's got nothing to say.'

Further along the corridor I could see more light.

'There's a way out,' I said, excitedly. 'It's got to be.'

We were in a concrete box like construction, small square windows on each side.

'This feels familiar,' I said.

'B2' was stencilled on the wall in large letters. I pulled out the map to see where 'B2' was. We were at the 'OP', whatever that was. This was where Tina had taken me for the picnic on the roof.

'Wait,' Lorna called. 'I've found something!'

Chapter 24

'What have you got?'

Lorna showed me a heavy canvas sack. 'I think I know what it is.'

I thought for a moment - how could she know what was in there?

She opened it up carefully. I edged closer to see what was inside. She felt around with her hand and smiled.

'I was right,' she said.

'What?'

She put one hand on the bottom of the sack and showed me a hand full of sparking diamonds. I looked at her with my open.

'The bank robbery,' Lorna said, 'this is where he stashed it.'

'There's got to be a door in here somewhere,' I said.

I examined the walls. I couldn't see anything.

'We'll have to go back the way we came,' she suggested.

'There has to be a door.' I checked the far wall. It was overgrown with weeds and creepers. I pulled them off.

There was a steel door behind them.

I tried the keys. The first one didn't fit. The second one worked perfectly. We walked into the sunlight shielding our eyes. It was great to breathe fresh air again.

'Look at that,' I said pointing to a crowbar on the grass.

'He's been here, trying to get in,' Lorna said. 'He must have thrown the diamonds in through the window.'

'We need to get into town,' I said.

'I can't.'

'Someone needs to call the police.'

'Not me.' Lorna sat on the grass. 'I'm not going.'

'I'll go,' I said. 'I'll take the diamonds as proof. I'll send someone to get you.'

'Be careful!'

I lifted the rucksack onto my shoulder and ran across the field. I was nervous as I entered the woods. Every shadow seemed to be the perfect hiding place for Crazy Charlie. I imagined him leaping out at me from behind every tree.

Apple Pie was deserted.

The whole place had closed down for the Summer Festival. I waited down an alley watching the high street for Charlie.

I ran across the street towards a phone box. It was one of the old style red ones that no one uses any more. I picked up the receiver and dialled.

There was no dial tone. The phone was broken.

I closed my eyes. Please, I thought. This isn't really happening.

When I opened my eyes I saw Crazy Charlie walking towards the phone box. He had a terrible menacing look in his eyes.

I dropped the handset and ran down the high street with the diamonds.

Charlie didn't move. He stood where he was, toying with his knife.

'Drop the rucksack,' he shouted.

I stood and faced him.

'Drop it. Now!'

I opened the sack and let a handful of diamonds fall onto the road.

'Drop it now!' he said again.

I should have been afraid. I had every reason to be.

I ran towards the Town Hall. I knew everyone was there and someone would help me if I made it. But if I didn't Crazy Charlie would get me. Him and that big knife of his.

Run!

I could hear him behind me. Suddenly the footsteps stopped. He was picking up the diamonds I'd scattered, just as I'd planned. He scoped them in his pocket.

I ran as fast as I could.

'You're dead!' he screamed.

I opened up the rucksack again and poured out another handful to slow him down.

As I turned the corner into Wellington Street I realised that hadn't fallen for me trick a second time.

I thought about dropping the rucksack but my hand wouldn't let go.

Charlie laughed, manically.

Sweat trickled down my face and into my eye.

I thought I was going to collapse. The sun was burning down. I needed water. I kept on running.

My foot went into a pothole and I fell over. The shoe came off my left foot. As I turned I saw Crazy Charlie.

He grabbed my leg. The knife flew through the air. I pulled my leg back. The knife missed, hit the tarmac and bounced down the road.

I tried to free myself but he wouldn't let go.

I hoisted the rucksack over my head and whacked him, like we were having a pillow fight.

I had to get away from him. He was too strong.

Then his grip went. His hands must have been sweaty.

I kicked my foot free and ran for my life.

Chapter 25

I sprinted through the ornamental gardens and past the pond. Crazy Charlie was close behind me.

I could hear his breathing.

My body couldn't take any more. I'd given it everything.

I was going to collapse and Crazy Charlie was going to get his hands on me.

For the first time I was terrified. It was only then I realised that I was in such danger.

It was like I was running in slow motion.

I could see the audience at the end of the road. I could see Mayor on the podium, with his gold chain.

A sharp pain tore through my right leg.

I screamed as I hit the ground.

Crazy Charlie grabbed the rucksack and his hand around my neck.

I was screaming.

I looked up for a fraction of a second and saw the crowd staring.

None of them moved.

Then from within them a figure emerged.

It was Zak.

'Mark!' he shouted.

I could hardly breathe.

Zak was like a whirlwind out of nowhere. He leapt on Crazy Charlie like an animal.

Crazy Charlie tumbled to the ground. Zak put him in an arm lock.

'Are you okay?'

'Yeah.' I rubbed my throat.

Zak smiled.

*

Three players from Apple Pie's Rugby team helped Zak hold Crazy Charlie down.

The police arrived shortly after. They handcuffed Crazy Charlie and took him away.

After the the buzz had died down. The Mayor got up on the podium to finish his speech.

'Ladies and Gentlemen ... I apologise for the interruption. Such an occurrence is unprecedented in the history of Apple Pie's Summer Festival. I want to extend my thanks to ... ' He leant to one side and tried to cover the microphone. 'What's that lad's name?'

The Mayor turned to the audience. 'Can someone help? Does anyone know his name?'

'Mark Logan,' Zak shouted. 'His name is Mark Logan.'

'Thank you,' the Mayor replied. 'I would like to extend my thanks to Mark Logan who is standing over there.'

Everyone in the audience turned to face me. Barry shook his fists at me. I could see Tina, Otto and Tabitha grinning.

Everyone started to clap and I felt incredibly embarrassed.

The Mayor continued, 'I big thank you to mark Logan for thwarting that criminal and returning valuable stolen diamonds to their rightful owner. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the gentleman who helped him.'

'Zak!' Tina shrieked.

'Thank you. Our special thanks to, Zak.'

I grinned, too excited to think.

'I'm proud of you,' Zak said, giving me a hug.

I looked at him, and said, 'I'm proud of you too. Thanks for saving me from that psycho.'

'Are you really proud?'

'Yes.'

'That means a lot,' Zak said. 'No one's ever been proud of me before.'

'They have ... '

He shook his head.

'Dad was proud of you,' I said.

'You think so?'

'You were different from him but he was still proud of you.'

'Well,' the Mayor said, 'it looks like it's that time of year again. It's time to open this envelope and announce the winner of this year's Summer Festival writing competition.'

Barry glanced at me, sneering.

'But before I do that,' the Mayor said, his voice echoing over the speaker system, 'I'm going to briefly hand over to Colin Peterson from Thompson-Watkins Associates literary agency. Colin ... '

The Mayor stood down.

Colin Peterson got to his feet and stepped onto the podium. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, rarely, but every so often ... once in a while, I come across something really special. And the winner of this year's competition has that special something. Little did I know, having agreed to help with this event, I would have the honour of reading such an honest story. This year's winner truly is an undiscovered talent and I will do everything I can to allow that talent to flourish.'

Barry grinned.

The Mayor returned to the podium. 'All right ... without further ado, I will open this envelope and announce this year's winner. I have absolutely no idea who this is going to be ... ' He tore the envelope open and pulled out a card. He surprised. 'Ladies and gentlemen ... The winner of this year's competition is Mark Logan.'

I couldn't believe it. I'd won.

Zak patted me on the back. 'Well done! Well done.'

Tina, Otto and Tabitha were cheering. The rest of the audience were clapping wildly.

'If Mark Logan would like to come to the front to say a few words and collect his prize.'

I got up and started walking towards the podium.

Suddenly Barry pushed through the seats and marched onto the podium ahead of me. He slammed into the Mayor, who fell back in his chair.

The audience watched in horror as he snatched the prize and waved it in the air. 'This is my award,' he shouted. 'I deserve this!'

Happy Mack McGinty - Mrs Mortimer's secret lover - leapt onto the podium and wrestled Barry to the ground.

'Everything balances out,' he said, slipping his hand into Barry's jacket pocket to take the photocard. 'Don't you dare threaten me or Mrs Mortimer again!'

Two of McGinty's friends pulled him away from Barry.

The Mayor picked himself off the floor. 'You should be ashamed of yourself. I've never seen anything like it before. Never in my entire life.' He wiped his face. 'In fact the whole afternoon has been quite mad.' He gestured for me to get on the podium and then he handed over the certificate. 'Congratulations, Mark.'

I smiled at the audience. There seemed to be thousands of them. For a moment I thought I might not have the guts to speak.

'Thank you,' I said. 'This is for my mother, for Zak and for Tina and most of all it's for my father. I wrote this story for him.'

Chapter 26

Barry reported for work the next day, the same time as usual. He was furious about the prize giving ceremony. It had been a disaster.

He was convinced that Mrs Mortimer had double crossed him. How else could he have lost? All his plans had gone wrong and he had been make a laughing stock in front of the whole town.

Vicki Hardiss greeted him at the door. 'I heard the news,' she said coldly. 'What on earth were you playing at?'

Barry couldn't look her in the eye. 'I got a bit carried away with things. It won't happen again,' he promised.

'It certainly won't.' She pointed to a circle of chairs at the back of the store. 'Take a seat. We're having a staff meeting.'

Barry walked across and sat down.

Three minutes later Otto arrived. A minute later Mark and Tabitha, Lorna and then finally Tina.

'Good Morning everyone,' Vicki said. 'It was an eventful day yesterday.' She glanced at Barry and then Mark. 'Eventful in more ways than one. Congratulations, Mark.' She glanced down at a sheet of paper. 'As you all know, I was at a meeting with the senior management yesterday. Unfortunately, I've got some bad news for all of you and I don't know how to break it softly, so I'm going to tell it to you straight. The Drekker's chain of five stores hasn't been performing as well as expected in the current climate. Consequentially, Raymond Drekker has decided to sell the chain to a larger company. This is going to bring a number of benefits to the company as a whole but, sadly, there will be a downside. And this is where it hurts. As part of the agreed takeover one of the shops will carry on as normal while we decide what to do, three will remain unaffected, and one will close immediately. I'm sorry to tell you that our branch has been selected for closure.'

No one spoke.

Vicki continued, 'I know you've all worked very hard but there's nothing I can do. I will be moving to manage another shop. The rest of you will have to be let go ...'

The atmosphere in the room suddenly became uncomfortable.

'I'm not going to accept that,' Barry said. 'I'm going to keep working here as normal. They can't do this to us. Drekker's is my life.'

'I'm sorry,' Vicki said. 'After this meeting I'll have ensure that you all leave and I have been instructed to lock the store and put up a 'closed' notice. The Drekker's name will continue for as long as it takes for the other shops to be refitted with new signs. I understand there will be a number of delivery lorries arriving tomorrow to remove stock. Staff have been drafted in from other shops to help carry out this task.'

'They don't even trust us to pack our own books?' Barry said.

'It just remains for me to thank you all for your effort and wish you the best of luck.'

*

Barry went home.

His wife was out. He didn't know what to do with himself. He was out of work

He thought yesterday. That seemed bad enough but this was unthinkable.

But he was a man of steel. He decided to take a walk through Apple Pie and see if there were any job vacancies.

There was nothing.

There he was, he thought, Barry Lumber, ex-Assistant Store Manager of Drekker's bookshop. Unemployed.

He had given his entire life to a company that wouldn't even exist in a matter of days.

What did it mean?

He wasn't sure.

What he did understand was that he would never be a store manager of a Drekker's bookshop and his writing career was over. The future wasn't looking great and Mrs Lumber had been in a terrible mood all week.

He'd done everything he could for Drekker's but nothing could hide the fact that his staff hadn't been up to the job. They had failed him and the company - he blamed them.

And yet he could continue his great journey.

As he strolled down the High Street, past Larson's, he saw a sign. It wasn't a burning bush or the voice of God. It was a white sign with the Larson's logo in the corner. It said, 'Staff Wanted.'

*

When Larson's store manager heard Barry's story he was naturally sympathetic.

'This isn't a managerial position,' he reminded Barry. 'It isn't even a supervisory role. You'll be working as a general assistant like any other.'

'I know that,' Barry said.

'You'll be working at our standard hourly pay rate.'

'What can I start,' Barry said.

'Right away, if you wish?' He pulled out a badge from his drawer and passed it across the table. It said 'Larson's Supermarket - Trainee.'

Barry pinned it onto his shirt.

'I hope you understand ... even though you were a manager at Drekker's that doesn't change anything here. I'll get someone to train you up.'

The Larson's store manager got to his feet. 'Follow me.'

He took Barry across the store to a row of tills. 'Forget everything you've learnt. At Larson's we do everything the Larson's way.'

Barry nodded.

'Tina!' the store manager called.

Barry couldn't believe it. It was the same Tina from Drekker's.

'Ah ... here's, Tina.'

'Yes,' she said, 'what's up?'

'We've got a new member of staff joining us today.'

Barry could feel himself going red.

'Welcome to Larson's,' Tina said, holding back a giggle.

The Manager addressed Tina, 'Your job is to act as his supervisor. I want you to train him up.'

Chapter **27**

It was my last day in Apple Pie.

Zak and Tina had arranged a goodbye lunch for me. It seemed strange to be leaving. Soon I'd be back in London.

Although I'd found the town pretty freaky, I'd grown used to it.

The meal was emotional and we had a good laugh about Tina being Barry's supervisor. But we also felt sorry for him. He was a selfish but Drekker's had been his life.

So many things had happened since I'd been in Apple Pie. I'd got to know my Uncle Zak. Tina had become an amazing new friend. I'd made friends with people I'd probably have never mixed with in London - but now I had to go.

I said goodbye to Otto and Tabitha in the car park. Then I said goodbye to Tina.

'Promise to stay in touch,' she said.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I've got your number and email.'

'I'll come up to London and visit you.'

'Definitely.'

She gave me a hug.

'I think I'll miss this place,' I said.

'You'll be the only one who does!'

We both laughed.

'I mean it.' I hugged her back. 'I'll miss you.'

'I know.'

Then she kissed me.

*

As the car pulled onto the road I felt a wave of sadness.

It seemed like I'd just got to know these people and now I was going.

Zak drove me down the High Street one last time. And then I saw the man who had caused me so much trouble. There he was, Barry Lumber.

He was walking towards the supermarket wearing his new Larson's uniform.

I leant out of the car window. 'Hey, Barry,' I shouted. 'Good Luck!'

I had no idea how he would react.

Barry waved.

Zak slowed the car down.

'How are you?' I asked.

'I've been given a managerial position at Larson's,' he said, hiding the badge.

'That's good,' I said, pretending I didn't know the truth.

'I might have lost this round but I'll bounce back,' he said. 'I always do ... that's the Barry Lumber way.'

'It wasn't about winning,' I told him.

'I suppose not. I'll miss Drekker's,' he confessed.

'So will I.'

I waved at one another for the last time and then our car sped away. I kept watching him until he was just a dot in the distance.

Zak drove towards London.

'Do you want to stop off and see your father?'

'I'd like that,' I said.

He pulled off at the exit.

The cemetery was exactly how I remembered it. I sat on the grass in front of Dad's grave. It seemed like the funeral had taken place only yesterday. That day had been the worst day of my life. I'd done the best I could but it still hurt.

I looked at the grave. Well, that was Apple Pie, Dad. I'm sorry if I can't explain it any better. I miss you.

Sometime later, I'd lost track of time, Zak put his hand on my shoulder.

'Are you ready?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Let's get going.'

Copyright & Credits

More information about Small Stories writing is available from <http://sites.google.com/site/smallstoriesproject/>

Cover design by Ryan Price (c) 2009 Ryan Price - ryanjaprice@gmail.com
- www.uselessdesires.co.uk

From the same author on Feedbooks:

- "*Small Stories*" (2008)
- "*Herman Marmaduke*" (2009)
- "*Eating Grass*" (2009)
- "*Uncollected Stories*" (2009)
- "*Bathrobe Guru*" (2009)
- "*10 X 10*" (2009)
- "*Wharfdean*" (2009)
- "*What It Means*" (2009)



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind