



Keeping a tight grip on Spud's lead, George steeled himself and turned round.

Jarvis stood in front of him, his whiskery face tight with rage. 'And just where d'yer think yer off to, City Boy?'

'I-I thought I'd take him for a walk.' George nodded at Spud.

Jarvis's eyes flicked to the dog then to George's knapsack. 'What kind of a fool d'yer take me fer? Get in the cart.'

George stood his ground, fists clenched.

'Disobey me, would yer? Well, let's see if I can't change yer mind.' Quick as a flash, Jarvis wrenched the rope from George's grasp. Yanking Spud to him, he snatched up a broken bit of tree branch and rammed it against the side of the dog's skull. Spud gave a terrified whimper.

George's heart jolted. 'Don't hurt him. Please!'

'Well, do as I say then.' Jarvis drew back the branch. Spud struggled against him, but it was no use. Jarvis had him reined in good and proper.

George held up his hands. 'All right, all right.' He turned and stumbled back up the track. As he reached the cart, the pony lifted its head and gave a quick whicker of recognition. He gritted his teeth and hauled himself up on to the hard wooden seat.

Jarvis strode past him to the rear of the cart, dragging the cringing dog at his heels.

George's heart did another flip. 'It'll be OK, boy. I promise.'

'Stop yer blitheren!' Jarvis flung down the tailgate. Grabbing Spud round the middle, he lifted him up and threw him inside. The dog gave a sharp yelp as he hit the wooden boards, then fell silent.

Jarvis slid the end of the rope through a hook and tied it tight. Slamming the tailgate shut again, he stalked round to the front of the cart and swung himself up next to George. 'Now.' He snatched up the whip and thrust the butt of the worn leather handle against his chest. 'Where's my letter?'

George felt the blood drain from his face. How did he know? If he found out he'd opened it... He swallowed hard and forced himself to look his tormentor square in the eyes. 'Wh-what letter?'

Jarvis dug the whip handle deeper. 'Don't mess with me, City Boy. That old fool of a postman passed me a while back. He said he'd given it yer. Now hand it over, or else.'

He tugged the whip handle free and stroked a grimy finger along the snake of black leather that dangled from it.

A sour flush of liquid spiked the back of George's throat. Clenching his jaw, he reached in his pocket and pulled out the crumpled grey envelope.

Jarvis seized it and flipped it over. His eyes flashed with fresh anger. 'Why, yer little—' He pushed open the flap and plucked the letter free. His expression changed at the sight of the ten-bob note. Pocketing it with a greedy smirk, he turned back to the letter, bunched up his forehead and began to read. When he'd finished, he screwed it into a ball, tossed it to the ground and fixed George with a knife-sharp stare.

'So yer precious brother's finally taken to the skies, has he? Well, let's hope Lady Luck's smilin' on him, because the way I heard it, those Jerry planes are shooten' the new boys down ten-a-penny.'

George's throat tightened. 'Charlie'll be all right. I know he will.'

Jarvis gave a hard-sounding laugh. 'Yer do, do yer? Sounds like old Charlie-boy might not be quite so sure.' He pulled the ten-bob note from his pocket and waved it in George's face. 'And what about this? Thought yer'd rob me and hightrail it out of here, did yer?'

A spurt of anger shot up inside George. 'Give it back. It ain't yours!' He scrambled to his feet and made a swipe for the money. The cart rocked from side to side, sending Spud into a frenzy of barking. The pony whinnied and pitched forwards.

Jarvis yanked George down and dragged on the reins. 'Whoa! Steady boy!' He glared at him, then, swivelling round in his seat, he drew the whip back and cracked it down an inch from Spud's nose. The dog gave another yelp and jammed himself trembling against the railgate. 'Let that be a lesson to yer.'

George's eyes filled with tears. 'Spud. No!' He reached out to him, but Jarvis clamped a muscled arm across his chest.

'Spud? What kind of a stupid name is that?' He puckered his lips and shot a glistening goblet of spit into the back of the cart.

George struggled against him.

'Leave him!' Jarvis jerked George round to face the front. 'And if yer try runnin' away again'—he narrowed his eyes and tipped his head at the back of the cart—'I promise yer this, old Spud's life won't be worth livin'.'

George shivered. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder, but Spud had buried himself beneath a pile of old sacks and only the dusty white tip of his tail was visible. He slumped his shoulders and fixed his eyes on his boots. The cart lurched forwards. A few moments later he felt it swing round, and when he looked up again, they were rattling up the track in the direction of the farm.

When they arrived, Jarvis bundled Spud out of the cart and dragged him back into the barn. Then he marched George to the potting shed and set him to work on a crate-load of mouldy potatoes with an order not to come indoors until he'd 'tidied' the lot of them.

As he dug the green shoots from the potatoes' leathery skins, George did his level best not to think about what Jarvis had said about Charlie. What did *he* know anyway? Besides, he had the ring, didn't he? His thoughts turned back to Spud again. There was no way of going to check on him, not with that rotten bully on the prowl. But one thing was for sure, the minute he got the chance he'd rescue him and they'd be out of here faster than you could say 'Spitfire'. He heaved a sigh and shovelled another load of potatoes on to the workbench.

The sun was going down when he finally finished. Slinging his knapsack over his shoulder, he opened the door and peered out into the yard. There was no sign of Jarvis. Maybe this was his chance? He darted across to the barn. But when he reached it, his heart sank. The mean so-and-so had gone and fixed a rusty great padlock to the door. He went to call Spud's name, then thought better of it. If Jarvis heard him, it would only make things worse for both of them. Best wait till later.

He clutched his stomach. It was griping something awful. He'd have to go and face him if he wanted any supper. As he rounded the barn, he shivered. An oil lamp was shining at the kitchen window. Jarvis hadn't bothered putting up blackout curtains. Said the ARP wardens were too lazy to come and check this far out of town. George steeled himself and pushed open the door.

But he was in luck. When he got inside, Jarvis was lying face down on the kitchen table fast asleep, his right hand curled round an empty bottle of his favourite home-made

'tarter' vodka. George's mouth watered at the sight of the half-eaten plate of sausage 'n' mash in front of the man. Snatching up what was left of a sausage, he hurried back outside.

As he drew closer to the barn he heard the rattle of a chain. He squatted down. 'Here we are, boy.' He pushed a bit of the leftover sausage through a gap in the planks. There was a snuffling sound followed by a low whimper. George's chest tightened. 'I know, Spud. I'm sorry. He's gone and put a padlock on. But I'm going to get you out of there soon, I promise.'

His stomach rumbled again. He looked down at the other bit of sausage and hesitated, then shoved it through the gap quickly before he had a chance to change his mind. 'Try and get some kip, boy. I'll come back in the morning.' Trailing a hand across the gap, he got to his feet and set off back to the cottage.

Bill Jarvis was where he'd left him, slumped across the table and snoring loud enough to raise the dead. Tiptoeing over to the cupboard, George helped himself to a slice of dry bread. He crammed it into his mouth and crept up the stairs to his room. Changing into his pyjamas, he slid Charlie's album out of his knapsack and leafed through it for a bit in the shadows, before tucking it under his pillow and climbing into bed.

In spite of the scratchy blanket and the lumpiness of the mattress, it didn't take long for him to drift into sleep. And with sleep came the dream. The one he'd been dreaming on and off ever since he got here . . .

*

Him and Charlie were building the Anderson shelter in Mrs Jenkins's back yard to keep her and George safe from old Hitler and his bombs. They'd already dug out the pit and were busy fixing the corrugated metal walls and roof in place. When Charlie had finished tightening the last bolt, he climbed down inside to inspect their work. But as he turned round to give George the thumbs up, something strange happened: something that hadn't happened before.

A tide of grey mist slid up over the top of the shelter. As it snaked across the roof and walls, they melted away, leaving Charlie standing on his own in the middle of the pit, a blank look on his face. And then the ground beneath him shuddered and the sides of the pit began to collapse.

George tried to shout a warning, but his mouth was blocked and no sound came. He made to jump forwards, but his feet were stuck too. He twisted and turned, trying to break free, but it was no use. When he looked up again, Charlie had gone – and in his place there was nothing. Nothing but a black gaping hole and a mound of thick, dark earth.

And then he heard the voice. Faint and faraway, *Charlie!* Dashing to the edge of the hole, he flung himself down and peered in.

At first all he saw was a swirling pool of mist. Then a faint golden glow rippled up beneath it and a dark shape snaked into view. He watched open-mouthed as the shape curled itself around the light, squeezing its shadowy coils about it until no more than a pinprick was visible. The

ground rocked again and the mound began to tremble, sliding forwards and shooting a torrent of black earth into the hole.

Charlie! No!

George jolted awake, gasping for breath. He peered about him. A finger of moonlight shone through a hole in the tattered curtains. He blinked and blew out his cheeks. A bad dream, that was all. He snatched up his trousers from the end of the bed and reached inside the pocket for the ring. He puffed out another breath. Still safe.

He pulled it out and ran a fingertip across the inscription. Then, slipping it on to his right thumb, he lay down again and sank back into sleep.