



Saturday 7 September

The rusty crowing of Bill Jarvis's vicious one-eyed cockerel woke George with a start. He scrunched his eyes against the light and groaned. What jobs had Jarvis got lined up for him today? More stone-picking? Or maybe he'd be back on dung duty again, cleaning out the pigs or shovelling up the pony's doings? Then he remembered the dream. He shivered. It wasn't real; he knew that. But it had spooked him good and proper. The sooner he and Spud got away from here and he got to see Charlie again, the better. If only he could find the key to the padlock...

A thud of boots sounded on the stairs below. He rolled over, pulling the moth-eaten blanket over his head, and

held his breath.

A few seconds later, the door banged open. 'Get dressed, City Boy! We're goen' into town.' A hand whipped the blanket back and yanked him up.

George twisted free and hugged his arms across his chest. 'Why?'

'To buy a Meccano set. Why d'yer think? Jarvis's blood-shot eyes darted to George's pillow. 'What've yer got stashed under there?' He bent over and snatched the album free.

'Give it back!' George made a grab for it, then drew back his hand. The ring was still on his thumb. He couldn't risk Jarvis taking that too. He slid it off and stuffed it in the waistband of his pyjamas.

Jarvis flicked through the pages of the album and gave a grunt. 'Fat lot of good all these fancy planes are goen' to be when the Jeries get to work on London.'

George's chest tightened. 'What d'you mean?'

'Rumour is Mister Hitler's proper filed up about our brave boys goen' off and bomben' Berlin the other day, so he's plannen' a little attack of his own.' Jarvis gave a sarcastic laugh.

'I don't believe you.'

Jarvis's eyes narrowed to two mean slits. 'Call me a liar, would yer? We'll see about that.' He flipped the album shut. Gripping the paper cover with both hands, he ripped it in half and let it fall to the floor.

'No!' George jumped off the bed and gathered up the pieces. He stared down at the torn cards and let out a

strangled sob. 'Just you wait till Charlie finds out...'

Jarvis turned down his mouth in a look of mock sorrow and shook his head. 'But yer big brother's not here to tell, is he? He grabbed George's clothes and threw them at him. Now hurry up and put these on.' He stomped over to the door. When he reached it, he whipped round and shot George a sneering look. 'And grow yerself some muscles while you're about it. Those taters aren't goen' to bag themselves.' He turned and clumped off down the stairs.

George's eyes filled with angry tears. He blinked them away and pressed the torn halves of the album together to make a ragged join. He could probably glue them, but it wouldn't be the same. He pushed them back under his pillow and changed into his clothes. Then, slipping the ring into his trouser pocket, he trudged downstairs. As he stepped round into the sun-bright yard, he glanced over at the barn door. His heart squeezed at the thought of Spud chained up in the dark all alone.

*I'll rescue you soon, boy, I promise.*

It was busy when they arrived in town. There were queues of shoppers outside the butcher's and grocer's, and a bunch of Boy Scouts and Girl Guides were traipsing around waving placards and shaking buckets of change in aid of the Spitfire Fund. As the cart rattled past a pair of gossiping women, they looked round and shot sharp looks at Bill Jarvis before turning their backs on him. A bit further on an old man shook his fist and made what sounded like a rude remark. But none of it seemed to bother Jarvis.

Steering the pony down a side street, he turfed George out with a first sack of potatoes and told him to get selling. But it was hard work going from door to door. Plenty of people were wise to Jarvis's tricks – stacking a few good taters on top of a bunch of the mouldy ones he'd forced George to 'tidy' – and sent George away with a flea in his ear. The only ones who bought off him were old folk who hadn't been able to grow any of their own. He hated being made to trick them, but if he refused to carry on, he knew he'd be in for a beating.

The sun was almost overhead when Jarvis glanced down at the battered pocket watch hanging from a fob on his grubby waistcoat. He swirled his fingers through the mound of coins in the collecting bag and gave a brown-toothed grin.

'Time fer a bit of refreshment.'

He signalled to George to climb up beside him, then with a tug of the reins steered the pony up the hill in the direction of the market square. With the shops shut for lunch, the place was a lot quieter than it'd been earlier. George wiped the sweat from his forehead. The sooner they got out of this heat the better.

As they trundled into the square, he spotted a small group of boys hunched over a game of marbles at the back of the old Shire Hall. One of the boys lifted his head as they passed and gave his neighbour a quick poke in the ribs. The second boy rose slowly to his feet and fixed George with a cold-eyed stare.

George's heart sank at the sight of his mean ratty face

and close-cropped black hair: Raymond Scroggins, the local police inspector's son – another reason why he hated this place. Scroggins had cornered George the day he'd first arrived, while he was waiting for Bill Jarvis to come and pick him up from the railway station. Asked him a whole bunch of questions. What was his name? Where was he from? What was he doing here? As soon as George mentioned Charlie and told Scroggins he was in the RAF, the other boy had seemed to bristle, and without understanding why, George knew that from here on in, he would be his enemy through and through.

Fortunately he'd only been back into town once since then, so he'd managed to keep out of his way. But it was clear from the look on Scroggins's face now that he hadn't forgotten him.

As the cart jolted by, Scroggins pointed at George, then turned and whispered something to the other boys. They fell about laughing, holding their bellies like he'd just told them the funniest joke ever. George curled his fingers into fists. What was his problem?

*Keep your cool, Georgie, keep your cool. They're not worth your trouble. A bunch of cowards, the lot of 'em.* It was Charlie's voice, clear and calm.

He sucked in a breath. Charlie was right. Best just ignore them. Gripping the cart seat with both hands, he set his eyes on the road ahead.

A few seconds later a stone whistled past him, clipping the side of his face. He clutched a hand to his cheek and cried out in pain.

'Whoa!' Bill Jarvis yanked on the reins and the pony clattered to a halt. 'What's wrong with yer?' He swivelled in his seat.

'Nothin'. I . . . er . . . ' George shot a look over his shoulder, but Scroggins and the other boys were nowhere to be seen.

Jarvis gave a low growl. 'Stop wasten' my val'able drinken' time.' He flicked the reins and the pony jerked forwards. When they reached the top of the square, he yanked the wooden brake on and jumped down from the cart.

'Wait here and guard what's left.' He jabbed a thumb at the remaining sacks of potatoes. 'Yer can flog the rest of 'em when I'm finished.'

'Wh-where are you going?'

'To the pub.' Jarvis jerked his head at a crooked old building behind him.

'But what about me?'

'There's a pump over there. Yer can fetch yerself and the nag a drink from that.' He looked at his pocket watch again. 'It's half past twelve now. I'll be out at two. And don't go getten' any ideas about runnen' off again – or else.' Hitching up his woollen farm breeches, he turned, pushed open the pub door and disappeared inside.

As the door banged shut, George glanced down the street. He could make a dash for it now; head back to the farm and work out a way of getting Spud free. But what if Jarvis came out to check on him? He'd soon catch him up. Unless he took the cart . . . He grabbed hold of the brake

with both hands and pulled on it, but try as he might, he couldn't make it budge.

He slumped his shoulders. It was no use. He'd just have to sit it out and wait. He glanced over at the pump and gave a dry swallow; might as well do as Jarvis said and get himself and the pony some water. He climbed down from the cart and trudged over to it.

There was a wooden bucket next to the pump. He filled it and was setting it in front of the pony when the sound of shouting echoed across the square. He spun round, frowning. The noise was coming from further down. Back behind the Shire Hall. Scroggins and his gang from the sound of it. And now a girl's voice too. High-pitched and quavering. Like she was trying her best not to burst into tears.

George licked his lips. He didn't want any trouble. Best ignore it. Someone else would come along soon and sort them out. But as he turned back to the pump to fetch himself a drink, the shouting grew louder. Suddenly an ear-piercing scream ricocheted round the square. He clenched his jaw. It was no use. He couldn't just stand here and pretend it wasn't happening.

Throwing a quick look back at the pub, he sucked in a breath and set off down the hill.