

Chapter 3

The antique shop

'Mrs Marshall!' I called.

I was standing on a flower pot in our back garden, looking over the fence. On the other side of the fence Mrs Marshall was digging in a flower bed. She looked up but kept digging. I grinned at her. 'I've found something,' I said.

I told her about the table box. I also told her that Emma and I were going to the antique shop after school the next day.

I moved my feet on the flower pot. 'If we had the address on the letter, it could help. Do you think you could get it for us?' I asked.

Mrs Marshall stopped digging and stood up.

'Danny, you know that we only keep twenty per cent of the mail that comes through the Dead Letter Office. And in the end only half of that gets delivered. That's usually because there's a clue inside the letter. There's only a very small chance that you will find out who owns this key. You and your friend are wasting your time.'

'A small chance is better than no chance, Mrs Marshall.' I grinned at her again and waited, hanging on to the fence.

'Well, all right. If I can't stop you...,' she said.

'Oh, thanks, Mrs Marshall. That's wonderful,' I said. Then I fell off the flower pot.

'Danny? Are you okay?'

'Yes, Mrs Marshall. Thanks, Mrs Marshall. I'll see you tomorrow, okay?'

'Okay, Danny. Good night.'

'Good night, Mrs Marshall,' I called, and ran inside for dinner.

That night I lay on my back in bed and thought about the day.

It had been very strange. This morning I had thought looking for the owner of the key was silly. Now I really wanted to find another clue. And Emma was helping me! That was the strangest part. Then suddenly I thought about Ben and Mark and Peter. *Oh no! They'll fall on the ground laughing when they find out Emma and I are working on this together.* Ben's grinning face danced in front of me. *Maybe Emma won't say anything,* I thought. *She doesn't usually talk very much.* I turned over onto my side. *But they are my friends. I ought to say something.* I saw Ben's laughing face again. I turned onto my other side and closed my eyes. *Maybe Emma won't say anything. Maybe.*

But I needn't have lost sleep thinking about it. The next morning I was late for the bus to school. I had to run to catch it and I jumped in just before the door closed. My face was red from running. Emma was already sitting in one of the seats at the front. I looked at her. Then Ben and the others called to me from the back of the bus.

I walked past Emma. I threw my bag at Ben and fell into my usual seat. Peter began talking about something funny on television. So I knew Emma hadn't said anything. I sat back and laughed with the others.

'What happened to you this morning?' Emma said to me at lunchtime.

'I was phoning the bus company. I was trying to find out the number of the bus that goes to the antique shop. I forgot the time.'

Emma smiled. 'So where do we go?'

'Meet me after school at the bus stop down the hill and across the road,' I said. 'We'll catch the number 204 bus.'

'Okay,' she said. 'I'll see you there.'

The antique shop was in an old stone house with a dark red roof. There were some old chairs and a table near the front door.

'This is it,' I said.

I pushed open the door of the shop and we walked inside. I stopped. It was dark. After the sunshine outside, it was hard to see. But slowly the dark shapes in front of me formed into cupboards and tables, chairs and boxes, old bottles and spoons.

Emma reached out her hand. 'Oh, what a beautiful lamp,' she said.

Suddenly a tall, thin man appeared from behind a cupboard. 'Don't touch that, please,' he said.

Quickly, I pulled the picture of the key out of my pocket and showed it to him. 'Hello. Can you help us? We're trying to find out something about this key. Have you seen one like it before?'

The man took the picture and looked at it. 'I'll just get my glasses,' he said and he went to the back of the shop and disappeared.

Emma pointed at the price on the lamp.

'Nine dollars eighty,' I said. 'That's not bad.'

'Danny!' she said. 'It's nine hundred and eighty dollars!'

I took a step back.

Emma picked up a cup.

Suddenly the man was beside us again, his glasses sitting on the end of his nose. He took the cup from Emma and put it down.

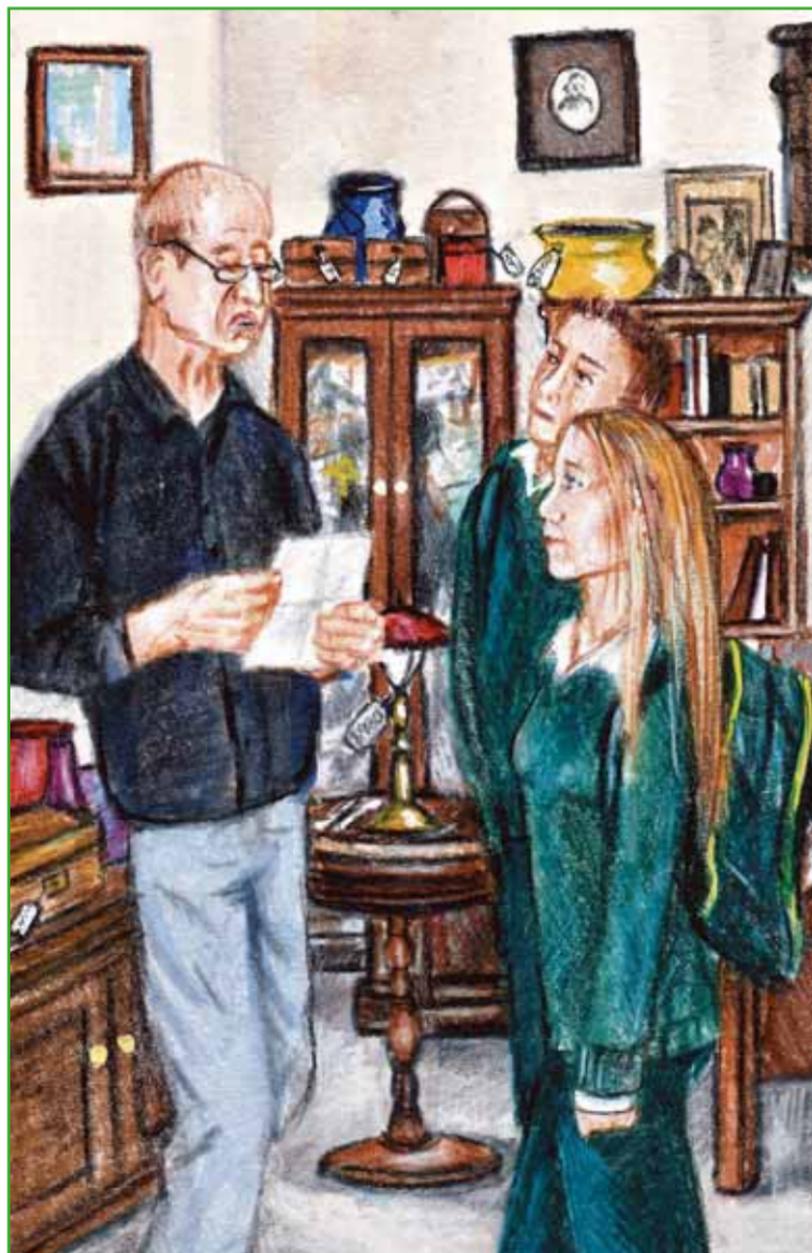
'The key is from the late 1800s,' he said. 'I have sold several jewellery boxes with keys like this. You can see some here.' He pointed to some small boxes made of wood behind him. 'Other answers are possible, of course. I can't be certain.'

'Have you sold any jewellery boxes in the last few weeks or months?' I asked.

'No, nothing,' he answered.

'Has anyone come in to say they've lost a key?' Emma opened one of the boxes.

The man's thin fingers reached out to close the box. He



looked at us over his glasses and his eyes narrowed. 'Have you found one?' he asked.

I didn't want to explain the story to this man. I didn't like him.

'Thanks for your help,' I said, taking the picture back from him. 'Come on, Emma.' And we left.