

So, you're standing in the bookshop reading this, right? Or maybe you've just unwrapped this book for your birthday in front of all of your friends and you've quickly flicked to the first page to see what kind of story you're in for. Well, can you do me a favour before we get started? I need you to look over your shoulder. Your right shoulder or your left shoulder, it doesn't really matter which one. But I need you to look over one of them and double-check that nobody is behind you. If there's one thing I know about people, it's that they are all very curious, and by that, I mean they don't know how to mind their own business.

Okay, so the coast is clear? Good, because I'm about to tell you some of my most secret secrets and I don't want

just anybody reading them. But, before I tell you my secrets, you have to PROMISE not to tell anybody else. Not one single soul. I mean it! This has to stay between us, okay? Also, it's probably best that your parents don't know you're reading this book. I don't want them to think that I'm giving you any bad ideas. This book is a little adventure, sure, but I don't want you getting in trouble.

I'm Archie by the way. Archie Albright. I would tell you my middle name but I'm not sure I trust you *that* much just yet. Maybe later.

Right, so the first secret. I'm actually four feet seven inches tall. Yes, I told Amber Patel that I was four feet nine inches tall and yes that was a lie. But I didn't think she would be my friend if I said I was four feet seven inches tall because Caveman Kyle is exactly five feet tall and everybody wants to be his friend. To be honest, I'm not quite sure why the first thing I ever said to Amber Patel was 'Hi, I'm four feet nine inches tall' but I can't take it back now.

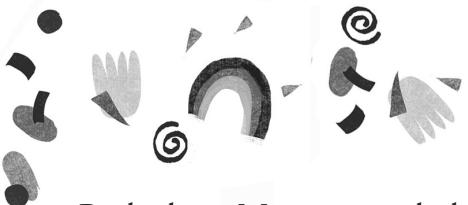
Fortunately, my two best friends in the world, Seb and Bell, know my true height and don't hold it against me. In fact, they know all my secrets, even the ones I can barely admit to myself. The three of us have been best friends for a year now, since Bell joined our school from one 'up North'

as Dad puts it. Before she came to Vale Gate High, it was just me and Seb, blundering through life together. I'm glad there's three of us now.

The second secret is pretty much why I'm telling you all of this in the first place. It's important to the story but it makes me cringe to think about, even now. You see, my mum and dad kind of hate each other. They try to pretend that they don't when I'm in the room, but they're not very good at hiding it. Adults love to think that us kids are dumb, but half the time we know way more than they give us credit for.

Mum and Dad haven't always hated each other. In fact, they used to be in love, not that you would know it now. According to my gran, they met on Dad's twenty-first birthday, when Dad still had a giant afro that he cared for more than anything in the world. When he tried to say hello, he tripped over and poured his drink, which was blood red, down Mum's dress, which was white and brand new. If you ask me, that sounds exactly like something Dad would do. He can be really clumsy.

Mum is a foot or so shorter than Dad, even when she's up on her tiptoes. But in all the photos they've collected over the years, she looks even smaller thanks to Dad's afro.



Back then, Mum wore clothes that made her shoulders look bigger than they were, and her hair was blown out into these dark brown curls that fell all around her face, framing it like a picture. Now, it's always tied back because Mum thinks it just gets in her way otherwise.

While Mum still looks something like the pictures she has saved in the family photo albums, Dad couldn't look more different. He shaved off his hair the same year I was born. He used to say that it fell out from the stress, a joke that made Mum laugh no matter how many times he told it. He wears glasses now too, although only when he reads and not all the time like he should, which Mum nags him about because his eyesight will only get worse. She used to nag him about it, anyway. She doesn't so much any more.

Anyway, they were in love and now they're not. Even though Dad moved out and they rarely talk unless it's about me, Gran says they still love each other deep, deep down and I think that's true. I'm still getting used to this weird new normal, even if it sometimes feels like a storm cloud is floating over my head. I see Dad all the time for our weekly arcade trips and video game nights, but it still makes my heart jump when he drops me off at home and drives away to his new house.

The final secret I have to tell you is something really important, so I hope I can trust you to keep it to yourself.

What happened next, it was all my fault.

Sure, Seb and Bell had their say in the matter, but the whole idea was mine and I dragged them into it. They just came along because they're my best friends and that's what best friends do. It wasn't even Oscar's or Dean's fault, though Mum and Dad would disagree on that specific point. If I have one criticism of them both, it's that they really should have been paying more attention. But I guess I dragged them into this whole mess too. So yeah, I take the blame for everything. Well, almost everything. I just needed to get that off my chest.

You're probably wondering what I'm talking about and, to be honest, I'm not sure if I'm even telling this story very well. So I think I'd better go back to the point where this all started, because that seems like the obvious place to begin a story. It was the middle of the night – no really, it was, I'm not just saying that for dramatic effect – and it suddenly hit me that things were starting to get a little weird.