

A Bowl of Keys

“Whose crazy idea was this?”

“I think it’s fun; gives us a chance to look over the allotment site, meet people as you walk around. Better than just drawing names out of a hat.”

“I guess so, but pulling keys out of a bowl makes me think of eighties swingers parties, not being allocated a space to grow vegetables! And how did they get the sheds again?”

“They were paid for partly by a local building firm, and partly from a council grant that the management committee applied for.”

“That’s amazing. I didn’t even know those kind of grants were available.”

We arrived in front of the committee chairman and drew out a key each. Lucy went off with hers to start at one end of the field and work her way across. I decided to go straight to the best sites and try my luck.

Unfortunately, as I tried to force my key into the unyielding lock of the shed on the allotment on which I’d had my eye, I realised that luck wasn’t with me. Damn! I swung quickly around to go and see if it would work on the next patch along, and slammed into a solid wall. At least, that’s what it felt like, but it immediately resolved itself into a wall of muscle around six feet tall, as I stumbled backwards, dropping my key as I did.

“Oh hell’s bells!”

“I’m so sorry, are you alright? If I’d known you were going to launch yourself at me, I’d have been better prepared.” His grin almost dissipated my anger.

“I’m fine, thank you. I just have to retrieve my key from the mud.”

“Me too.”

Apparently he’d also lost his key during our altercation. So I knelt down and scabbled around in the area I thought I’d seen mine drop. Nothing – rats!

“Wait, here they are.” He indicated a spot a bit further over towards his feet, where the two keys lay. “Here, let me”, he said, as he bent down to grab them with one hand, then took my arm and pulled me up from the ground with the other.

“Thank you.” A few seconds passed. “Erm, you can let go of my hand now”, I said, endeavouring to release it from his firm grip. He let go and said “I’m Mike”.

“Sandra. My key, please?” He passed it to me and I turned to go.

“Don’t you want to try it in the lock?” What, and let **him** witness my failure this time?

“Go on, you never know ...” and he grabbed the hand in which I held the key and pulled me towards the lock.

“No, it’s okay ... I’ll just try the next ...” but he seemed determined to wait until I’d given it a go before he’d relinquish my wrist, so I thought ‘what the heck’ and pushed the key into the hole. With a shock, I realised that it fit! The key moved smoothly in, turned the tumblers, and the lock opened.

“Congratulations. This is a great site, you should do well here”, and off he went.

I stood still for a moment, thinking – then realised he must have given me his key when he picked them both up. I had the wrong one, and it had worked. I had to tell him. Didn’t I? Or maybe ... no, that wouldn’t be fair. Oh, but it was really the best place on the allotment and he was right, I could do so well here. And maybe he wasn’t really that bothered about growing anything, just wanted somewhere to get

away for a few hours from time to time, sit in the shed and listen to the radio or something. Men did that in sheds, didn't they? Time passed as I talked myself into keeping the plot and eventually I realised that I'd now left it too long to tell him of his mistake. Just as I'd decided this, Lucy came over.

"Ooh, is this yours? Well done, it's a brilliant plot. Mine's just a couple of rows down from here. I can't wait to start, can you?"

"No, can't wait ..."

Of course, the key I had actually picked from the bowl fitted the lock on the shed with the worst position on the allotment. I watched over the next weeks as Mike struggled to prepare and sow on the steep incline at the edge of the field, where all the stones in the area seemed to congregate, and water drained straight through every time it rained. In my guilt I tried to make some reparation, as he frequently came to me for suggestions when things went wrong and crops wouldn't grow. My father had passed on to me his wide experience of gardening, and I did my best to remember as much of it as possible to try and help Mike, but with very little success.

By the end of the summer I had a wonderful array of vegetables and soft fruit, of which I should have been extremely proud, if only I thought I deserved to be. When the end-of-season produce show took place, I had entries in the cabbage, carrots, strawberries, potatoes, lettuce and radish categories, many of which won prizes. My triumph – and angst – were about equal! As I accepted a red rosette on a first for my carrots, I knew what I had to do. After the prize-giving ceremony had been completed, I sought out Mike, who was sitting on a folding chair in the afternoon sunshine outside his – my – shed.

"Mike, I need to speak to you."

"Hi Sandy. Congratulations, you did great. Well done!"

"Yes ... er, thank you, but I need to say something."

"Okay." I'd grown used to his broad grin over the months, and really didn't want to do anything to make it disappear, but I just couldn't keep it to myself any longer.

"You see, it's like this. When you first met me outside my shed ..."

"And you threw yourself at me?"

"Y...yes. Well, I'd already tried my key in the lock and it didn't fit, so when you picked both keys up from the ground and handed one to me ..."

"I gave you mine, instead of yours," he said, looking more serious than I'd ever seen him.

"Yes." I looked down at the floor, blushing wildly. After a few seconds of silence I glanced back up at Mike. He was grinning, as usual!

"You're not mad at me?"

"Of course not."

"Why not?"

"Because my plan worked perfectly. In fact, even better than I could have hoped."

I was gobsmacked.

"What do you mean? What plan?"

"Well, I'd already watched you unsuccessfully try the lock on that shed, and wondered if my key might fit. It was a long-shot, but one that came through brilliantly. You got one of the best plots, and – let's face it – I got the worst."

“But why? I don’t understand why you’d deliberately give away such a perfectly positioned plot, then take that awful one for yourself, and have to keep coming to me time and time again for ... Oh!” As I saw the glint in his eyes, I realised what had been going on. At least ... I hoped I did. “You mean ...?”

“Yes! Having an allotment where nothing would grow, and you feeling so guilty about it, gave me the perfect excuse to come and chat to you whenever I wanted. And I really wanted. So, now that’s out of the way, how about coming over to my shed for once. I’ve got a lovely brew of peapod wine just about ready – courtesy of the generosity of our other allotment partners – with which we can celebrate your horticultural success.”

As he placed his arm around my shoulders and led me up the path, I realised that the bowl of keys system had resulted in a very successful year for me. However, if we had to do the same thing next Spring, I was going to make sure that Mike didn’t feel the need to ‘bump’ into anyone else! Vicky Bagley December 2015