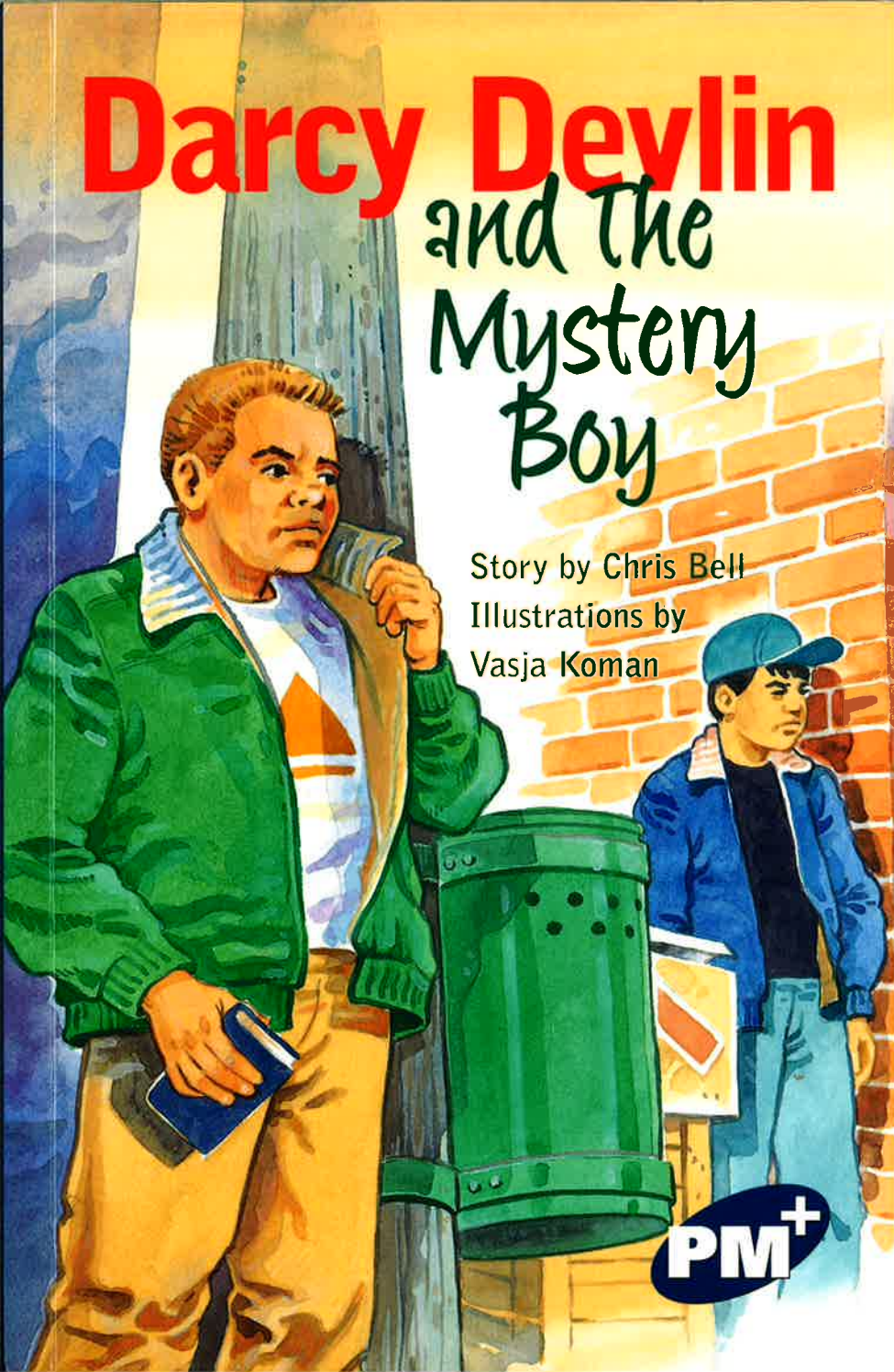
Darcy Devlin and The Mystery Boy

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Chapter One

Something to Hide



"What's he up to?" Darcy wondered aloud as he manoeuvred himself into a better position. Concealed behind the bus shelter, he could watch the boy's strange behaviour without being observed himself.

Darcy Devlin had always wanted to be a private investigator. He considered himself an amateur sleuth already. After all, who had solved the case of the disappearing letterboxes in Clyde Street?

He always kept his eyes and ears open, and his notebook handy, just in case something strange caught his eye — like now.

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He might not have even noticed the boy huddled at the end of the alley except for two things. One: the boy wore an electric blue cap, just like the one Darcy had been eyeing in the sport's store window. And two: he acted weird.

All week, Darcy watched him standing in the alley, looking right and left, as if to check if anyone was watching him, then he'd step onto the street with a cocky gait like he didn't care who saw him.

Very suspicious, thought Darcy.



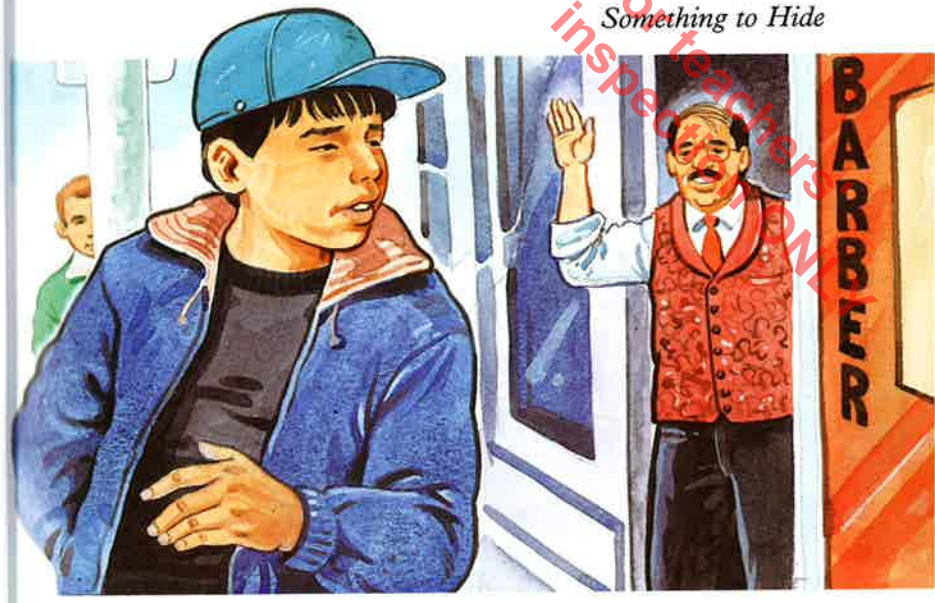
At first, Darcy had studied the boy only with curiosity. He'd appeared lost. But then he'd turned up in the same place again the next day and the day after – with the same strange behaviour! Coincidence?

Every now and then, the boy would glance up and down the street, and it was the look in his eyes that fascinated Darcy and kept him watching. Huge and dark, the boy's eyes reflected fear, reminding Darcy of a skittish colt ready to bolt at the first sign of danger.

Every day, before school, Darcy had watched in frustration, unable to follow. But today was Saturday and he was going to find out what the boy was up to – even if he had to follow him all day.



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The boy ambled slowly along, occasionally stopping to stare into a shopfront. When he looked back up the street, Darcy ducked behind a lamppost.

When he passed Costa's Barber Shop, Costa called out to him. "You ready for another haircut, Tai?" and he laughed heartily.

The boy gave a small smile. "Not yet, Costa!" he exclaimed, quickening his pace.

Aha! thought Darcy. His first breakthrough. A name! Tai.

Darcy quickly scribbled in his notebook.



Tai slouched beside the fruiterer's cart, watching the passing shoppers, who took no notice of him.

But Darcy noticed. He saw Tai pick up a ripe, juicy apple and roll it in his hand.

"Buy it or drop it," barked the fruiterer.

Tai sighed and replaced the apple. Suddenly a passing jogger jolted the cart sending apples, pears and tomatoes rolling away down the footpath.

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In a blink Tai snatched up a wayward apple and slipped it into his pocket. He did it so swiftly that Darcy wondered if he had seen it at all.

Tai hurried back up the street and ducked into a doorway. He chomped into the apple as though he hadn't eaten for a week, then glanced up and caught Darcy's eye.

Red-faced, Darcy looked away. Maybe the boy was homeless? Maybe he was a runaway? So many questions. Well, he decided, the best way to get answers was to ask questions.

Darcy started innocently. "That was a lucky save, that apple."

Those dark eyes darted up at him before the boy glanced quickly each way as if searching for an escape. He dodged past Darcy and broke into a run.

"Hey, I didn't mean anything," yelled Darcy, sprinting after him. "Come back!" But by the time he turned into the alley, the boy was gone.