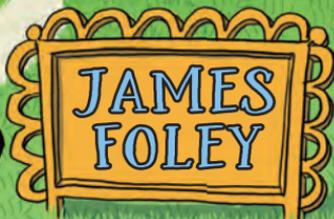
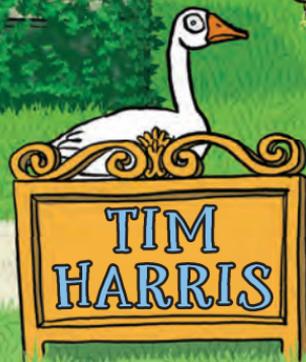


TOFFLE TOWERS

Fully Booked





Chegwin put down the phone and shrugged his shoulders. The number he had dialled – copied exactly from the email – failed to connect him with Derek Tiddlepop. It had instead put him through to the Zhou family in southern Oklahoma. He apologised for calling the wrong number, but encouraged the Zhous to visit Toffle Towers all the same. Mrs Zhou sounded quite enthusiastic about the idea, but her husband had to dash off before Chegwin could confirm a booking.

The businessman had to meet with a candy manufacturer and he couldn't be late.

Chegwinn began dreaming about lollies. Perhaps he could turn one of the guest rooms into a real-life candy land. He could line the walls with musk sticks and create beds out of marshmallows. Milkshake baths would become a permanent fixture and –



‘Master Chegwin, there are guests waiting in the lobby. Would you like to personally welcome them?’ Lawrence stood in the office doorway.

The candy dream would have to wait. ‘I’d love to,’ said Chegwin.

The guests were newlyweds. Chegwin could tell because the groom was holding the bride in his arms, and she was still wearing her wedding dress.

‘I promised I’d carry her,’ puffed the groom, his cheeks turning red.

‘You must be Mr and Mrs Turner,’ said Chegwin, standing on Lawrence’s back behind the counter. ‘Welcome to Toffle Towers. We’ve been looking forward to having you as our guests.’

‘Let me correct you,’ said the groom. ‘I *was* Mr Turner and my wife *was* Miss Round . . . We decided to join our surnames.’

‘So . . . that would make you,’ said Chegwin, pausing, ‘Mr and Mrs . . . Turner-Round.’

The groom spun in a circle. ‘What? Which way?’

‘Turner-Round,’ repeated Chegwin.

He twisted the other way. ‘Why? What is it?’

‘Turner-Round,’ said Lawrence, who, despite being confined to all fours, was rather enjoying the moment and keen to join in. He could just see around the corner of the counter and make out the groom’s shoes shuffling this way and that.

Mr Turner-Round twirled back to the front.

‘I’m getting dizzy!’ cried the bride.

Chegwin winked down at Lawrence. The pair had had their fun.

Lawrence called for Mikey, who popped up from the other side of the reception desk.

He was wearing his brightest Hawaiian shirt yet.

‘How does he do that so quickly?’ Chegwin wondered aloud. ‘And without being seen beforehand . . .’

‘Mikey, kindly take Mr and Mrs Turner-Round’s suitcases to room four,’ said Lawrence.

The gofer whisked the luggage up the staircase with Mr Turner-Round struggling to follow after him, still carrying his wife in his arms.

All the while, Terrence Toffle watched the commotion from his portrait at the top of the stairs, the cheeky sparkle in his eyes shining brightly.

Chegwin’s flying shuttle bus and milkshake baths had both done wonders for bookings. Though the dairy supply wouldn’t last much longer, there was now a small stream of income flowing into the hotel’s accounts. It wasn’t quite enough to add money to the

budget, but it was helping to fund Chegwin's restaurant idea.

The truth was he still needed more guests. With expensive renovations underway, the money could run out at any moment. But it was a risk he *had* to take. He just couldn't tell anyone about it. The last thing he wanted was a group of angry staff members shouting at him for wasting money. It had been a long time since anyone yelled at him, and he didn't want it to start again now. Chegwin walked outside to clear his head, but the sight of his parents only muddled it further.

'Chegwin, son,' said Mr Toffle, walking over. He was wearing a vintage T-shirt by the group Waxed Backs and the Hackney Axe, who he had managed several years earlier. 'We were just heading out for the afternoon, but we wanted to tell you how proud we are of the success you're having. You're making

a real difference here. Skeep-beep diddly-bop-bop-ba-do.'

Every muscle in the boy's body tightened. He didn't even notice his father hopping up and down to get a better look at the wheelbarrow in the main tower.

'It truly would make a wonderful band name . . . Orange Wheelbarrow in a Belltower . . .'

Chegwin's mother detected the boy's unease. 'Are you okay, sugarplum?'

The logical side of Chegwin's brain told him that all he had to do was be honest and ask about the conversation he had overheard. His parents were reasonable people. They were not the sort to shy away from a sensible discussion. They might even be able to give him some advice about the hotel's finances.

The other side of Chegwin's brain was so rattled it was doing backflips and playing heavy metal music. He couldn't tame the

confusion and he needed more time to think. 'Everything's fine . . . I'm just busy.'

'You know where to find us if you need help with anything,' said Mrs Toffle. 'We love you, sweetie.'

Chegwin left his parents standing on the lawn and made his way around to the other side of the hotel towards the workshop. He wanted to clear his head and he was keen to see how Barry and Dean were getting on with the restaurant project.

Phunk!

'Uh-oh. I'm stuck again.'

'Your clumsiness is off the charts.'

Honk!

Chegwin did a double take. The same skinny red-haired boy was stuck in another garden pot. His friend was trying to pull him free, but she kept losing her balance and falling on top of him. The white goose was pecking away at the pot, honking loudly.

‘You’d be best to kick the side of the pot,’ said Chegwin. ‘It worked last time.’

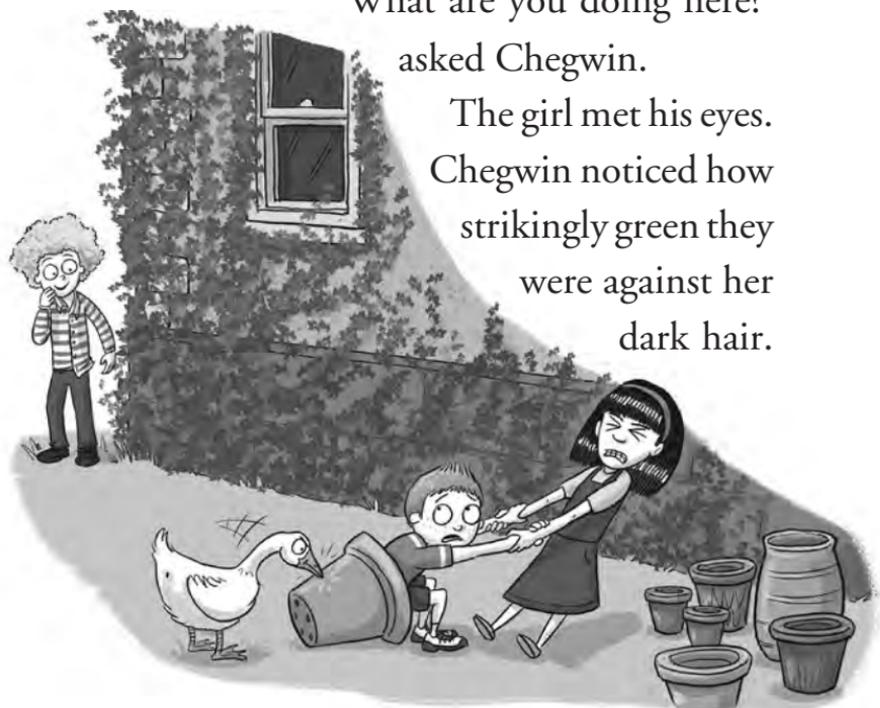
The girl jumped. She hadn’t seen him approaching.

‘Honk!’

The boy was so surprised he managed to tip the pot over. He landed on his hands and knees, the bowl exaggerating the size of his bottom. He looked like a snail.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Chegwin.

The girl met his eyes. Chegwin noticed how strikingly green they were against her dark hair.



They looked like oval-cut garnets, blinking widely in the afternoon sun.

‘No point lying, I guess,’ she said with a shrug. ‘We came to say sorry for laughing at you. But Rufus Corkindrop here made sure we botched even that up.’

‘Hi,’ said Rufus, waving from his turtle position on the ground.

The girl kicked the pot, breaking him free.

‘Honk!’

‘It’s okay, Doc,’ said the boy, rubbing his hip. ‘I’m free now.’

‘Sorry about the pot,’ said the girl.

‘That’s okay. What’s your name?’ said Chegwin. He found it hard to take his eyes off the girl’s face. There was a sharpness in her gaze that he liked, and something about it told him she was a deep thinker. People like that usually pointed out his untucked shirt or extra buttonhole, but this girl didn’t.

‘I’m Amy,’ she said. ‘Amy Silverlight.’

‘My name is Chegwin Toffle. I’m the —’

‘Manager. Yeah, I know. I’m sorry for not believing you,’ she said. ‘It was pretty cool how you ordered the flying bus to pick you up.’

‘I’m sorry too,’ said Rufus. ‘And I’m sorry for falling into the garden pot. Again. And just to let you know, I’m not really a fish.’

Chegwin helped Rufus off the ground. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘Honk! Honk!’

‘Doc says sorry too,’ said Rufus. ‘He’s my pet goose. He always wanders off and he can be a bit noisy, but I love him all the same. I found him when he was just an egg.’

The goose rubbed its neck against Rufus’s leg.

‘What are you doing wandering around, anyway?’ said Amy. ‘Shouldn’t you be in your office doing important manager things?’

Chegwin pointed to the corrugated work shed. ‘I was just on my way to check up on a project.’

‘Do you get to boss everyone around?’ asked Rufus.

‘In a way,’ said Chegwin. ‘But it doesn’t work how you might imagine. There are protocols and systems.’

Amy nodded, impressed. This boy was clever, just like her.

‘Do you get free food?’ said Rufus. ‘I love free food.’

Chegwin laughed. ‘Well, I still have to pay for it out of the hotel’s budget.’

Amy looked up at the tall limestone walls. ‘There must be a thousand rooms inside.’

Chegwin stepped towards the nearest door. ‘Forty-nine, actually. There are supposed to be fifty rooms but we kind of lost one.’

‘Lost one! How do you lose an entire room?’

‘It’s that sort of hotel,’ said Chegwin. ‘Would you like to take a look inside?’

‘Okay!’ Amy and Rufus chorused.

'Honk!'

'Sorry, Doc,' said Rufus. 'You'll have to stay outside.'

As it turned out, the entrance led to one of the storerooms in the right wing. Because Chegwin had spent most of his time in the busy left wing, this side of the hotel was still somewhat of a mystery to him, particularly the lower floors. It reminded him to ask Lawrence about the key for room 49.

The storeroom was home to various odds and ends – broken chairs, wobbly tables, spare lightbulbs, piles of old newspapers and shelves stacked with gadgets of yesteryear.

'Check out this old slide projector,' said Amy. 'My dad told me about these. They were how people used to share holiday photos. They'd turn off all the lights and project the pictures against a wall.' She took out one of the slides and lifted it up against the daylight outside. 'Looks like a photo of the river.'

‘Check out the vintage cars in this one.’
Rufus had picked up a slide too.

Chegwin ran his fingers over the circular projector and selected a photo. He held it up to the light. ‘Oh my!’

He stumbled backwards into a stack of chairs, dropping the slide on the floor.

‘What is it?’ said Amy. She picked up the photo and held it against the light. ‘Oh . . .’

Rufus snatched it to take a look. ‘Whoa! Is that your twin?’



It might well have been. The boy in the picture – standing in a rowboat on the edge of the Gladberry River – had curly blond hair, styled in the same dramatic way as Chegwin’s. His striped-blue shirt was untucked on one side and the buttons weren’t aligned with the holes. The boy’s chocolate-brown eyes told Chegwin this was not his great-uncle Terrence. It was someone else.

‘Who is it?’ said Amy.

‘I . . . I don’t know,’ said Chegwin. He took the photo out of Rufus’s hand and put it in his pocket, trying to ignore the uneasy feeling in his gut.

‘Where does this lead?’ Amy was tugging on the handle of a small door in the corner of the storeroom.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Chegwin.

Rufus flicked on a light switch to brighten the room.

Chegwin tried a few of his keys in the door, but none of them would unlock it.

‘I have some other keys in my office. I’ll try them later.’

Amy pushed open another door on the opposite side of the storeroom. It led to the main corridor on the ground floor. She took a few hesitant steps forward. ‘It’s a hallway.’

Chegwin and Rufus followed her out to the red-carpeted corridor. Even though the doors at the far end were closed, Chegwin could hear Lawrence speaking with guests in the lobby.

‘Welcome to Toffle Towers. I trust you and your children enjoy your stay with us, Mr Evans. Your luggage will be taken to your room.’

‘Thank you for the positive feedback, Miss Rodrigues. I’ll be sure to let the manager know.’

‘The restaurant is closed until further notice, Mr Turner-Round. Would you like some ice for your back?’

Amy walked along the corridor, away from the voices in the lobby. She turned the

handle of the last door – number 17. ‘Check out the size of *this* room.’

Chegwin hadn’t been into the king-sized suites yet. He lifted an enormous cover off the bed, revealing a frilly purple quilt. It looked too soft not to jump on, which all three children did until their legs got sore.

‘That was fun but now I’m hungry,’ said Rufus, panting as he flopped on the lounge. ‘Got any food?’

Chegwin picked up the phone and called the kitchen. ‘Pepper, could you have Mikey deliver snacks to room seventeen, please? Thank you.’

‘You *really* can do anything you want,’ said Amy.

Chegwin was honest with his reply. ‘It’s not all games. I have to do a good job so nobody else loses theirs. It’s complicated.’

Amy’s green eyes flashed. ‘Hang on, isn’t

the restaurant closed until further notice? I heard that posh voice mention it when we were in the hallway.'

'The restaurant, yes, but the kitchen, no,' replied Chegwin. 'Our chef still needs to feed the live-in staff while the upgrades are happening.'

A few minutes later, Mikey arrived carrying a large tray piled high with goodies. There were party pies, hot chips, dipping sauces, cake selections, icy drinks and a small tub of raspberry yoghurt just for Chegwin. There was also a small space on the edge of the plate where a pie had once sat.

'Don't tell Pepper, please,' said Mikey, wiping a crumb from his chin. 'She'll kill me. I just couldn't resist.'

'Your secret is safe with us,' said Chegwin with a wink.

Mikey sighed with relief, before turning for the door. 'I owe you one, boss.'

‘Two, four, six, eight, bog in and don’t wait!’ said Rufus, picking up the biggest pie.

Amy grabbed a handful of hot chips.

If it wasn’t for the fact that Chegwin could hear footsteps two floors up, he would have quite enjoyed the afternoon feast. Amy and Rufus – chomping into their snacks – assumed the ruckus was part of the restaurant renovation. But Chegwin knew the layout of the hotel better. The noise was coming from the far end of the top floor.

It was coming from room 49.