



It was early morning and Arthur was already running late for school when the gnomes exploded.

Racing past his neighbours' houses, he'd just cornered a road on Peacepoint Estate when he came to the old cottage at Number Twenty-Seven. Without warning, there was a loud *bang!* and a barrage of brightly coloured missiles came whizzing out of the front garden in all directions.

"What the—?!" Shielding himself with his school blazer, Arthur ducked behind Twenty-Seven's garden fence and peeked through a gap to try to see what was going on.

And there it was. For some bizarre reason, the owner's large collection of grinning, ruddy-cheeked garden gnomes – whether sitting on toadstools, pushing wheelbarrows or fishing from ponds – was spontaneously exploding, one by one. Arthur could only guess they were part of some malfunctioning pest-deterrent system, but before he had a chance to investigate, pressure built inside his ears and with an almighty ground-trembling *BOOM!*,

all the windows in the building shattered, and the front door shot off its hinges and spun across the lawn.

There wasn't time to run. A shock wave with the force of a swinging punch bag walloped Arthur in the chest, knocking all the air from his lungs. He flew backwards and tumbled into the street, wincing as the contents of his rucksack jabbed him in the ribs. "Oomph! Ow!"

He landed on his side with his cheek pressed against a cold metal drain cover and the taste of blood filling his mouth. "Erg..." Pain shot through his jaw. Slowly, he moved his hand up and gave it a rub. At least his limbs were all working.

Despite a worrying ringing in his ears, he got to his feet. Most of his neighbours' driveways were empty so he assumed they'd gone to work. He wiped his grazed hands clean on the bottom of his shirt and took a closer look at Number Twenty-Seven. The cottage had the same red-brick walls and mossy roof tiles as all the others on the estate, but was separated by an overgrown hedge on one side and a dingy alleyway on the other.

*Strange.* The building showed no signs of fire damage or smoke. Arthur tried to remember if he'd covered the topic of shock waves in his physics lessons last term. Science was his favourite subject at school, so he normally paid attention.

"Hello?" called a well-spoken voice, making Arthur jump. "Did you see that?"

A tall girl with braided turquoise hair stood waving at Arthur from the alleyway at the side of the house. Her school uniform was accessorized with a cross-body leather handbag and lace-trimmed socks that poked above the edges of her brogues. Arthur recognized her instantly, although he didn't know what she was doing there. Cecily Madaki didn't live on Peacepoint Estate; none of the popular kids did.

"Are you all right?" she asked, striding towards him. "What just happened?"

"Err..." Arthur shuffled his feet against the pavement; he'd never spoken to Cecily before and talking to new people always made him feel nervous. He watched as she turned the corner of the fence, her pleated grey skirt swishing around her knees. All he really knew about her was that her parents were celebrity hairdressers, which was probably why she changed her hairstyle all the time – last week she'd had a candyfloss pink Afro Mohawk.

"I asked, are you all right?" she repeated, coming to a stop next to him. "You fell over."

"You saw that?"

"No, but it says *sanitary* backwards on the side of your face, in the same writing as it does down there." She signalled to the drain cover at the edge of the road.

*Great.* He hastily rubbed his cheek.

"You don't look hurt," she decided, surveying his uniform. "Are you sure you're OK?"

Arthur straightened his shoulders to make his second-hand blazer appear better fitted. He was average height for his age but scrawnier than most of the boys in his class, which didn't help when he had to wear clothes that were already too big. Just once he wished he could start the school year with a new uniform like everyone else, and not feel so self-conscious. "I'm fine." He glanced back at the house. "I'm not sure what happened. Some sort of explosion?"

"That much is *obvious*," commented a third voice.

A petite girl in oil-splattered school trousers and combat boots emerged from behind a couple of wheelie bins. Her long jet-black hair was worn in a high ponytail, with a chunky fringe covering one half of her face. "Number Twenty-Seven is abandoned," she told them bluntly, brushing dirt off her knees. "The blast was probably triggered by a burst water pipe."

"Abandoned?" Arthur had seen the girl sitting alone at the back of his geography class a few times, but didn't know who she was. "Where did you hear that?"

"Nowhere. My garden backs onto Number Twenty-Seven's." She walked over to the gate and surveyed the gnome remains. Her wide hazel eyes were outlined with kohl, giving her an intense gaze. "There are never any lights on inside and the garden looks like a jungle. It's been like that ever since we moved in last summer, but I don't know how long the place was empty before that."

Arthur assessed the cottage again. The lawn was over-

grown with weeds and the doorstep was black with grime. Now he thought about it, he'd never actually seen *anyone* inside...

"It's Ren, isn't it?" Cecily asked, scrutinizing the girl's face. "Ren Williams? I showed you around school last term; it was your first day."

Ren folded her arms, looking unimpressed. "That's right. You're Cecily."

*Ren Williams, the new girl...*

Arthur did know who she was after all. He'd heard two rumours about Ren: one, that she'd been expelled from her last school for riding a motorbike through the canteen; and two, that she'd recently had her knuckles tattooed for her thirteenth birthday. He covertly glanced at her hands to see if it was true. Her nails were bitten short and coated in chipped black varnish. Sure enough, there were four dark brown symbols – a heart, club, spade and diamond – staining her skin.

"And you are?" Ren asked, glaring at Arthur.

He grinned nervously. "Arthur Gillespie. I'm in your geography class." It was just his luck to get stuck talking to two of the most intimidating students at school. Normally, he did his best to avoid everyone and keep himself to himself. That way there were fewer questions about his uniform and less chance he'd make a fool of himself.

"Well," Cecily said, zipping open her bag, "seeing as no one else is here yet, I suppose one of us should ring the

police.” She withdrew a phone with a manga-decorated case and tapped at the screen. As she lifted it to her ear, a sad howl drifted over from somewhere inside Number Twenty-Seven.

Arthur tensed. It sounded like the cry of a dog. “Have you seen any animals near the house?” he asked Ren.

“There was a little white dog running around the garden this morning,” she admitted, her brows drawing together. “I assumed it was another neighbour’s pet. Do you think it’s been hurt in the blast?”

Cecily lowered her phone. “The operator’s putting me...” Her voice tailed off as she heard the howling. “There’s something trapped inside! Quick, we have to help it.” Without hesitation, she opened the garden gate and began navigating a path through the gnome debris towards the house.

“Wait!” Arthur hurried after her. “You can’t go inside; it’s too dangerous. What if another explosion goes off?”

“That’s why we need to be quick.”

“Yes, but—” Arthur’s neck stiffened as the dog wailed again, more feebly. The sound tugged on his heart; he couldn’t ignore it. He glanced back at Ren, her arms crossed. “Are you coming?”

Muttering irritably under her breath, she marched after them.

As they made their way over the grass, Cecily talked loudly into her phone. Her voice was so full of confidence she reminded Arthur of their head teacher. “Yes, we’re fine...”

No, OK... We're not sure about that... Right, thank you." She put her phone away. "The police have our location. They're en route."

Arthur wondered if she'd been advised to stay a safe distance from the building. Probably. He looked around to see if any of his neighbours had ventured outside, and spotted an elderly man talking with a heavily pregnant woman in a dressing gown. Both were pointing at Number Twenty-Seven, but neither came any closer.

"So how far is your house from here?" Cecily questioned, hurdling the remains of the front door.

Copying her steps, Arthur tried not to focus on any decapitated gnome bodies. "Just at the end of the next road. The estate isn't that big." He shot her a sidelong glance, wondering again what she was doing there. "I haven't seen you around Peacepoint before. I thought you lived on the other side of town."

She sighed. "I do, but my aunt lives here. I have to stay with her when my parents go away on business." She hurried the last few paces to the house and stepped through the hole where the front door had been. Arthur and Ren followed.

Number Twenty-Seven's hallway looked like it had last been decorated in the 1970s. Patterned orange-and-yellow paper lined the walls and a cobwebbed bamboo ceiling fan rattled overhead. The air smelled musty and stale, as if the windows hadn't been opened for decades.

“Hello?” Cecily called loudly. “Can anyone hear me?”

Other than the dog’s whimpering, there was no response.

Arthur’s footsteps crackled over the broken glass as he shuffled around a fallen coat stand. You couldn’t see much of the shaggy avocado-green carpet as the floor was coated in dust. “Looks like you were right,” he told Ren. “No one’s lived here for ages.”

She threw him a scowl and shoved her hands into her trouser pockets.

They passed the doorway to the front room, turned a corner and came to a set of dusty hardwood stairs that led up to the first floor. The dog’s pitiful whining sounded louder than ever and Arthur began to worry whether they’d have the skills to help it. If the animal was seriously hurt, it would need a vet.

“The poor thing’s in distress,” Cecily said, as they started to climb. “We’d better hurry.”

The stairs creaked loudly, reminding Arthur that the explosion had probably weakened the structure of the building. He pictured the roof caving in on them, and fought a strong desire to flee.

When they got to the top of the stairs, the dog was nowhere to be seen. Three doors led off from the landing. Two of them matched the ones downstairs in the hallway, but the third, which stood ajar, looked completely different. It was made of pale, gnarled driftwood and encrusted with barnacle shells, like it had been cut from the hull of an ancient ship.



But that wasn't the strangest thing about it.

Arthur felt the tiniest hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as he gazed upon the swirling sapphire-blue smoke around the slightly open door. Some sort of energy was radiating out from it; he could feel it reverberating inside his chest.

"What is *that*?" Ren asked, her voice cracking just enough to betray her nerves.

Before anyone could answer, a weak bark sounded behind the door and Cecily's brow wrinkled with concern. "The dog's in there. It needs our help." Angling herself away, she hooked her fingers around the edge of the door and pulled.

Arthur's skin prickled as a draught of cool, salty air brushed past them. The room beyond was dark. A stubby, unlit candle and a pile of old brandy-leather notebooks sat on a desk a few metres inside. Books lay scattered across the dusty floor and the hulking shapes of furniture loomed in the surrounding shadows. Wind whistled from somewhere – a vent, perhaps.

"Over there!" Cecily pointed to where a tiny, whimpering bundle of white fur was trying to wriggle free from under a toppled bookcase. "It'll take all of us to lift that," she said, rushing over.

Ren glared at Arthur as if this was all his fault. "Keep the door open," she grumbled, plodding after Cecily.

The blue whirlwind glittered ominously as Arthur

stepped through it. He had an instant feeling of brain freeze – that strange headache you get after eating ice cream too quickly – but it immediately faded. He scoured the floor for the heaviest-looking book he could find and carefully placed it in the threshold of the door, so it wouldn't blow closed.

“Arthur, you take that side,” Cecily ordered, gripping the top of the bookcase. “We lift on three.”

He hurried into position and bent his knees. Ren took a place opposite.

“OK,” Cecily said. “One, two ...”

Arthur clenched his jaw.

“... three!”

They all heaved. A few remaining books slid off the shelves and thudded to the floorboards as the bookcase tilted. Cecily arched her back in order to peer underneath and assess how they were doing. “Just a little higher...”

Without warning, the dog yelped and shot between Arthur's legs. It was all Arthur could do to not let go and drop the bookcase on everyone's toes. As the three of them rested it back down gently, the little dog raced over to the driftwood door and turned to face them. It had pointed ears, a stubby tail and scraggly white fur that grew in two arches over its dark eyes, giving it a permanently inquisitive expression.

Cecily crouched and extended her hand. “Don't be afraid. We're not going to hurt you.”

The dog growled uncertainly, like it was saying, *I'm not so sure*. Slowly, it padded over and sniffed her fingers with the end of its black nose.

“Can you see any injuries?” Arthur asked. He noticed a red collar hanging around the dog’s neck, but it wasn’t limping and there were no obvious wounds. Perhaps it wouldn’t need a vet after all. Maybe they could just hand the animal over to the police and make it to school before first period...

“I don’t think so,” Cecily replied. “It must still be a youngster; it’s really small.” She waited till the dog seemed relaxed before lifting it into her arms.

Arthur searched its collar for a tag and found a thumb-sized obsidian prism dangling beside an engraved metal disc. “*Cloud. West Highland Terrier. Male,*” Arthur read from the disc. Below the writing was a strange symbol made of three shapes: an equilateral triangle filled with a hexagon and a small plus-sign. The prism, Arthur noticed, had a hexagonal base etched with the initials: *HW*.

“So the Fuzzball is a *he*,” Ren concluded, scratching the dog between the ears. It was the friendliest thing Arthur had seen her do so far. “Nice to meet you, Cloud.”

Cloud yapped and turned his head between their three faces, wagging his tail.

“Come on,” Cecily said with a satisfied smile. “We’d better go. The police will get here soon.”

Cool, sweet relief washed over Arthur as they turned

to leave. All things considered, he felt oddly pleased with himself. Not only had they safely rescued Cloud, but if you didn't count him face-planting on the pavement, he hadn't made a total fool of himself in front of Ren or Cecily.

Too late, he realized the air was thrumming. He shot a look over at the driftwood door and saw that the book he'd placed in the door frame was gone and the blue smoke was whirling faster.

In the space of a heartbeat, the candle on the desk flickered into life and the door swung shut. There was a loud *click*.

And then the entire doorway disappeared.