

# THE KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

• G A R T H N I X •

• B O O K O N E •

M I S T E R  
M O N D A Y

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# To Anna and Thomas, and to all my family and friends

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“How many puffs?”

Arthur realized he hadn't answered. Weakly, he held out three fingers and was rewarded by two more clouds of medicine. It was already beginning to work. His shallow, wheezing breaths were actually getting some air into his lungs and, in turn, some oxygen into his blood and to his brain.

The closed-in, confused world he'd been experiencing started to open out again, like scenery unfolded on a stage. Instead of just the blue sky rimmed with darkness, he saw a couple of kids crouched near him. They were two of the walkers, the ones who refused to run. A girl and a boy, both defiantly not in school uniform or gym gear, wearing black jeans, T-shirts featuring bands Arthur didn't know, and sunglasses. They were either super-hip and ultra-cool, or the exact opposite. Arthur was too new to the school and the whole town to know.

The girl had short dyed hair that was so blond it was almost white. The boy had long, dyed-black hair. Despite this, they looked kind of the same. It took Arthur's confused mind a second to work out that they had to be twins, or at least brother and sister. Maybe one had to repeat a grade.

“Ed, call 911,” instructed the girl. She was the one who had given Arthur the inhaler.

“The Octopus confiscated my phone,” replied the boy. Ed.

“Okay, you run back to the gym,” said the girl. “I’ll go after Weightman.”

“What for?” asked Ed. “Shouldn’t you stay?”

“Nope, nothing we can do except get help,” said the girl. “Weightman’s got a phone. He’s probably already on his way back. You just lie here and keep breathing.”

The last words were directed at Arthur. He nodded feebly and waved his hand, telling them to go. Now that his brain was at least partially functioning again, he was terribly embarrassed. First day at a new school, and he hadn’t even made it to lunchtime. It would be even worse coming back. He would be seen as a total loser and, after a month of the new term, would have no chance of easily catching up or making any friends.

*At least I’m alive*, Arthur told himself. He had to be grateful for that. He still couldn’t get a proper breath, and he was incredibly weak, but he managed to prop himself up on one elbow and look around.

The two black-clad kids were showing that they could run when they wanted to. Arthur watched the girl sprint through the gaggle of walkers like a crow dive-bombing a flock of sparrows, and vanish into the tree line of the park. Looking the other way, Arthur saw Ed was

about to disappear around the high, blank brick wall of the gym, which blocked the rest of the school from view.

Help would be coming soon. Arthur willed himself to be calm. He forced himself up to a sitting position and concentrated on taking slow breaths, as deep as he could manage. With a bit of luck he would stay conscious. The main thing was not to panic. He'd been here before, and he'd come through. He had the inhaler in his hand. He'd just stay quiet and still, keeping panic and fear securely locked away.

A flash of light suddenly distracted Arthur from his slow, counted breaths. It hit the corner of his eye, and he swung around to see what it was. For a moment he thought he was blacking out again and was falling over and looking up at the sun. Then, through half-shut eyes, he realized that whatever the blinding light was, it was on the ground and very close.

In fact, it was moving, gliding across the grass towards him, the light losing its brilliance as it drew nearer. Arthur watched in stunned amazement as a dark outline became visible within the light. Then the light faded completely, to reveal a weirdly dressed man in a very strange sort of wheelchair being pushed across the grass by an equally odd-looking attendant.

The wheelchair was long and narrow, like a bath,

and it was made of woven wicker. It had one small wheel at the front and two big ones at the back. All three wheels had metal rims, without rubber tires, or any sort of tire, so the wheelchair — or wheel-bath, or bath-chair, or whatever it was — sank heavily into the grass.

The man lying back in the bath-chair was thin and pale, his skin like tissue paper. He looked quite young, though, no more than twenty, and was very handsome, with even features and blue eyes, though these were hooded, as if he was very tired. He had an odd round hat with a tassel on his blond head and was wearing what looked to Arthur like some sort of kung fu robe, of red silk with blue dragons all over it. He had a tartan blanket over his legs, but his slippers stuck out the end. They were red silk too, and shimmered in the sun with a pattern that Arthur couldn't quite focus on.

The man who was pushing the chair was even more out of place. Or out of time. He looked somewhat like a butler from an old movie, or Nestor from the Tintin comics, though he was nowhere near as neat. He had on an oversized black coat with ridiculously long tails that almost touched the ground, and his white shirtfront was stiff and very solid, as if it was made of plastic. He had knitted half gloves that were unravelling on his hands, and bits of loose wool hung over his fingers. Arthur no-

ted with distaste that his fingernails were very long and yellow, as were his teeth. He was much older than the man he pushed, his face lined and pitted with age, his white hair only growing on the back of his head, though it was very long. He had to be at least eighty, but he had no difficulty pushing the bath-chair straight towards Arthur.

The two men were talking as they approached. They seemed entirely unaware of Arthur, or uninterested in him.

“I don’t know why I keep you upstairs, Sneezer,” said the man in the bath-chair. “Or agree to your ridiculous plans.”

“Now, now, sir,” said the butler-type, who was obviously called Sneezer. Now that they were closer, Arthur noticed that his nose was rather red and had a patchwork of broken blood vessels shining under the skin. “It’s not a plan, but a precaution. We don’t want to be bothered by the Will, do we?”

“I s’pose not,” grumbled the young man. He yawned widely and closed his eyes. “You’re sure that we’ll find someone suitable here?”

“Sure as eggs is eggs,” replied Sneezer. “Surer even, eggs not always being what one might expect. I set the dials myself, to find someone suitably on the edge of in-

finity. You give him the Key, he dies, you get it back. Another ten thousand years without trouble, and the Will can't quibble cos you *did* give up the Key to one in the line of heredity, as it were."

"It's very annoying," said the young man, yawning again. "I'm quite exhausted with all this running around and answering those ridiculous inquiries from up top. How should I know how that bit of the Will got out? I'm not going to write a report, you know. I haven't the energy. In fact, I really need a nap —"

"Not now, sir, not now," said Sneezer urgently. He shaded his eyes with one dirty, half-gloved hand and looked around. Strangely, he still seemed unable to see Arthur, though he was right in front of him. "We're almost there."

"We are there," said the young man coldly. He pointed at Arthur as if the boy had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. "Is that it?"

Sneezer left the bath-chair and advanced on Arthur. His attempt at a smile revealed even more yellow teeth, some of them broken, but all too many of them sharp and doglike.

"Hello, my boy," he said. "Let's have a bow for Mister Monday."