

GARGOYLES

gone A.W.O.L.



To a . . .

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by
Clémentine Beauvais

illustrated by
Sarah Horne

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CAMBRIDGE





CHRIST'S COLLEGE



I

It all began in a history lesson.

It all began with a buzz.

Buzz buzz!

Buzz buzz!

"*Who*," hiccupped Mr. Halitosis (Mr. Halitosis is our teacher), "*who—who* among you—*who*—against all the school rules—*who*—exposing himself or herself to the risk of being severely punished—*who* could possibly have brought a vibrating device—which, I can only conclude, is a *mobile phone*—to this classroom? *Who? Who? Who?*"

I must explain that "who" is not a good word for Mr. Halitosis to pronounce. Being endowed with the toxic breath of a nuclear power station,



Mr. Halitosis produces the deadliest *whos* on Earth. In this particular case, no less than nine of those powerful stink bombs were fired at us. By the time our eyes had stopped watering, it appeared that Mr. Halitosis had located the criminal, and planted himself in front of her.

And she was me.

"Sophie Seade!"

"Yes, Mr. Barnes?"

"You are buzzing."

"Do you mean buzzing with excitement at the thought of studying the Victorian era?"

"I do *not* mean that, and you know it. You have brought your mobile phone with you, and it has buzzed."

The other kids started sniggering a little bit, because my mobile phone is legendarily awful. While everyone else has a phone with a touch screen and a camera, my parents bought me one



that looks like I won it in a Christmas cracker.

"Give me your bag!" ordered Mr. Halitosis.

"No, Mr. Barnes, listen," I said. "It's not my phone. It's my pet hornet."

"Give me your bag."

"Honestly, it's Herbert the hornet. Sometimes he gets a bit bored and buzzes a lullaby or two."

"Sophie Seade, if you don't give me your bag . . ." said Mr. Halitosis. He reached down, which had the effect of squashing his beer belly like a space hopper ball, and he bounced up again, clutching my bag. "Right," he said, "where's that phone?"

"Nowhere. I'm telling you, it's Herbert."

"A likely story. Oh, surprise, surprise—look what I've found!"

And he fished out of my bag a red metal tin, shaped like a phone box, on which was written PHONE BOX.

In the manner of a coal miner who's found a diamond, he slowly twirled around with it so the whole class could see it properly and gape.



Gemma interrupted the general gaping. "If I were you, Mr. Barnes, I wouldn't open it. Herbert isn't the friendliest of Sesame's pets. I preferred Dinah the dormouse, but she got gobbled up by Peter Mortimer."

That brought a tear to my eye, because as much as I love my cat, I hadn't quite forgiven him for leaving Dinah's cleanly licked skull on my pillow a week earlier as if he thought I collected rodent skeletons.

Mr. Halitosis said, "Not very clever of you, Sophie, to carry your phone around in a tin marked PHONE BOX. It will be confiscated immediately and you can count yourself lucky I'm not sending you straight to the Head."

"It's Herbert that's going to go straight to *your* head if you open that box," warned Toby next to me.

But Mr. Halitosis didn't listen. Instead, he fiddled with the little lock, and suddenly the tin opened. I think he should have listened, because Herbert clearly wasn't chuffed to be woken up



by the poisonous stench of Mr. Halitosis's "Oh!
A hornet!"



"Like I said," I said, and we all dived under our tables as if an earthquake had struck. Mr. Halitosis, unprepared, dropped the tin and rushed out of the classroom surprisingly fast for someone who doesn't eat any of his five a day.

Herbert, having run out of prey, swirled around the ceiling light for a while, then aimed for the window, crashed comically against the glass, and spent a good minute crashing into it again and again and again and increasingly angrily, before he found the next windowpane, which was open, and escaped into the sunny afternoon.

We emerged from our makeshift fallout shelters and Emerald crossed the classroom to open the door, revealing a Mr. Halitosis who looked just as furious as Herbert, though less stripy.

"That's it," he bellowed, "I've had enough! Sophie Seade, I am writing a note to your parents."

Everyone gasped with terror, for my parents have topped the Petrifying Parents list every year since school began. I have to admit I paled a little bit. Mr. Halitosis's ruthless pen had already started dancing the fandango on a piece of paper.

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Seade," he said out loud.

"It's *Reverend* and *Professor*," I pointed out politely. "They don't go by *Mr.* and *Mrs.*"

"I couldn't care less if they're the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Empress of Mount Popocatepetl," thundered Mr. Halitosis. *"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Seade, I regret to inform you that your daughter Sophie is an ambulant menace to the peace and quiet of Goodall School. When*



she is not setting fire to her eraser or cutting her friend's bangs with nail scissors . . . "

"I'd asked her to do it!" pleaded Gemma.

". . . she thinks it is acceptable to smuggle phone boxes full of live wild beasts into the classroom."

"Wait a minute," I said, "that's not the clearest way of explaining it. . . ."

But Mr. Halitosis ranted on, *"I am sorry to say I believe it necessary for you to have a serious talk with Sophie—and I have underlined "serious"—in order to make her understand that being a gifted and intelligent young girl is no excuse for bringing chaos and desolation to the classroom. Yours sincerely, Joel Barnes."*

He crossly crossed the classroom and slammed the piece of paper on to my desk. "Get this note back to me tomorrow, signed by both your parents."

"Yes, Mr. Barnes."

"And if I have any reason to suspect that you have forged their signatures, I will call them myself."



I had to admit he'd won that battle. I was one hornet down, and a few hours from a very unpleasant conversation with Professor and Reverend Seade. Distraught, I slouched on to my desk and prepared for dark thoughts to invade my brain, but just then Gemma passed me a little note in red felt-tip that said:

So, why was your phone buzzing?

Only then did I remember that it had *actually* been my phone buzzing, not Herbert the hornet. I discreetly squeezed my ridiculous mobile out of my skirt pocket and clicked VIEW MESSAGE.

And this message cheered me up to no end, because it was from Jeremy Hopkins, and it said:

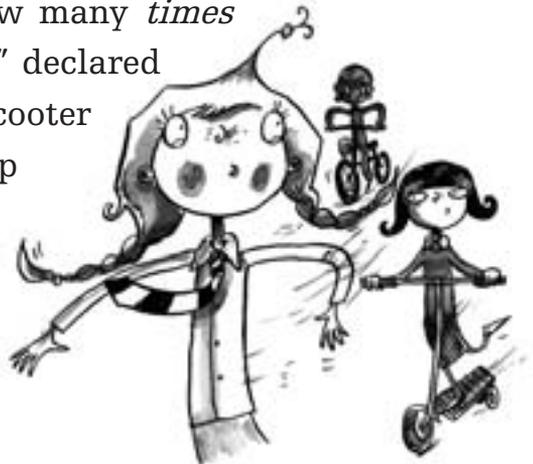
Mystery disappearance at Gonville & Caius. Meet me there at three thirty. J.



II

As soon as the school bell rang, I switched to supersleuth mode and squeezed my feet into my purple roller skates. Jeremy Hopkins, Editor-in-Chief of *UniGossip*—the most sizzling-hot tabloid newspaper in the University of Cambridge—required the help of my extremely efficient brain. Have I mentioned that there are as many connections in my brain as there are stars in the universe?

“I don’t know how many *times* you’ve told us that,” declared Gemma on her scooter as we whooshed up the street to the city center.



"It's nothing special, you know. Everyone's got as many as that."

"But not everyone uses them to save the galaxy as regularly as I do," I pointed out. "By the by, what are you two doing, escorting me to town like this?"

"What do you think?" asked Toby, sitting up on his bike. "We're going to investigate with you!"

"What cheek! You can't just march into my mission like it's your birthright."

"If you don't let us," said Gemma, her pearl earrings shining in the sunlight, "I'll send an anonymous letter to your parents. I'm sure they'd be very interested to hear that you're the secret Chief Investigator of *UniGossip*."

"And what with Halitosis's note as well, they'll probably try to detach your head from your neck with an electric screwdriver," added Toby.

I have to admit I shuddered, even though my parents wouldn't have a clue how to use an electric screwdriver. Second battle lost today: I had to let them come with me.



"Is this another mission, then?" asked Gemma. "I thought you were already investigating something else."

"No, Jeremy shelved the case. There had been strange noises heard in Clare College Cellars, but we didn't find anything interesting. It was probably just a ghost or two having a night-time game of ghost rounders. What are you doing, Toby? You're cycling like you've entered a giant slalom contest."

"I'm practicing hands-free riding," he explained. "It's extremely cool: all the girls fall for it."

And sure enough, a thin, black-haired young woman on high heels who was just crossing the street found herself in the swerving path of extremely cool Toby, tried to avoid him, twisted her ankle on a cobble, and tumbled down to the pavement.

"Oh, well done," sighed Gemma, jumping off her scooter. She helped up the distressed victim of Toby's incapable cycling and asked, "Are you okay?"

"I have been better," said the girl with a slight foreign accent, glaring at Toby.

"Did you see your whole life flash by before your eyes?" I asked.

"No, just a couple of bike reflectors." She looked at me and frowned. "Have I seen you before?"

"It wouldn't be surprising," I said, "since this city is the size of my little finger. And not even as interesting." Which was true, as I'd just had a verruca removed from my pinky with liquid nitrogen.

"No," she murmured, staring into emptiness like a Greek oracle. And then the eureka moment came: "That's it! I remember. I saw a picture of you this very morning. With plaits, a little pink blouse, and no front teeth."

I started to tremble like a leaf that's seen a caterpillar. "Horror, how can that be? I thought there was only one copy of that shameful picture, and that it was safely stored on my parents' mantelpiece."

"Don't fret, it's still there," she said. "I had

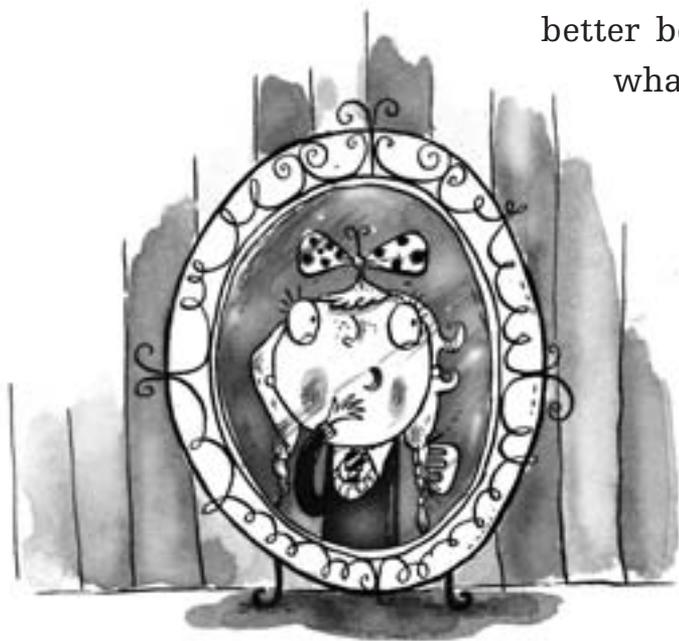


tea at your parents' this morning. My name's Anthi Georgiades. I arrived at Christ's College a week and a half ago. I'm a visiting scholar from Athens. Your parents told me a lot about you . . . Sophie, is that right?"

"Not at all; don't believe a word they say. I'm Sesame. And these are Gemma and Toby."

We all shook hands—hers was unusually rough for someone who has tea with my parents—and Toby said, "I'm sorry for running you over. If I'd known you were pals with Sesame's mum and dad, I would have avoided you like the plague."

"Wish you had," declared Anthi. "Right, I'd better be going—
what are you
up to?"



Something urgent, judging by the speed."

"Just going to Gonville & Caius College," said Toby, and before I could rugby-tackle him and stick a huge piece of black Sellotape on his mouth, he blurted out, "to investigate a mysterious disappearance."

"Toby!" hissed Gemma indignantly.

Looking a little intrigued, Anthi threw glances at the three of us and said, "A mysterious disappearance indeed? Well, that does sound interesting. I guess I'll catch up with you soon, Sesame. You can tell me more about it then." And she was gone.

"Quick," said Toby, "let's go, or Jeremy will think you've abandoned him."

Following his own order, he sped up the street like he was being chased by a troop of velociraptors. "I can't believe this," I sighed. "He went and told her that we were investigating a mysterious disappearance, knowing full well that she's in direct contact with my parents!"

"Definitely hide all sharp objects tonight," said Gemma.

