

## CHAPTER ONE

### PACIFISM IS WEIRD

**I**t was only meant to be a small explosion. Not exactly a nuclear bomb. Mr Mayfield can't take a joke, that's his problem.

He said I did it because I'm bad. He said I did it for attention, but why would I do that? I get enough attention. People are always watching me; in the street, at school, down the shops. That's what happens when you're a Pritchard.

I did it for a laugh. Because it was funny to see

Mr Mayfield go that special shade of red he keeps for his top-level fury. And I did it to get a round of applause from the whole class. Well, almost the whole class; the swots were horrified. And terrified.

Suppose that's why I'm suspended. Because of the terror.

Or because the broken glass flew everywhere and *could have seriously injured someone* (key words: could have).

Or that *science equipment is expensive*.

Or that I *spoil things for my fellow pupils who really want to learn*.

I head home to face the music, but Mam and Dad won't care about the suspension, just about the money to replace the broken equipment. Because, to them, I really am bad.

Which is just how they want me.

That stupid peace protest is still on the corner, outside the council building. Look at them – waving their banners and chanting. At least they aren't singing today. Swaying to the chorus of 'Give Peace a Chance'

over and over isn't going to make one speck of difference if some maniac presses the button.

BOOM!

Nuclear war. Everything and everyone gone.

But, yeah, wave a placard, shout some slogans, have a sing-song; see how far that gets you. We're not even *at war*. Not really, not like with invasions and tanks and prisoners. This a *Cold War*, which, as far as I can tell, means world leaders make threats about pushing their nuclear buttons, but no one will. They just want us to *think* they will. And this lot have fallen for it.

Most of the protesters are the same old locals, but there's a couple of new faces. That's not unusual. They travel around, some of these people. Dad says they're a bunch of freeloading hippies who wouldn't know hard work if it bit them on the – Oh!

There's that floppy-fringe girl from the year above me at school. The one who moved here last year. Why's *she* not in lessons?

'Take a leaflet, son.' One of the new men holds out a piece of paper. He wouldn't do that if he knew me.

It says: *Refuse Cruise*. They mean cruise missiles, not sailing about on a big boat. I take it with a smile. I stand back to scan all the placards, then scrunch the flyer into a ball, toss it into the air and kick it – it smacks right into the middle of *BAN THE BOMB*.

*Score!*

The protesters look shocked, but calm. The girl scowls at me from under her fringe, but that's as aggro as they get. What I don't understand is, if they care so much, why don't they get angry?

Pacifism is weird.

## CHAPTER TWO

### YOU CAN'T TRUST A PRITCHARD

**T**he Brae's the biggest mountain in our valley and my house is about halfway up; it's not a big climb if you're used to it. I'm walking down our road when squeaking, trundling sounds make me turn round. Mick Rowlands, the old bloke from the last house, is pushing a wheelbarrow down the pavement. The planks balanced on it are so long he's having a job not to tip the whole thing over.

'Well, don't just stand there,' he calls. 'Give us a

hand, boy, will you?’

*Why would I want to do that?*

Mick Rowlands isn’t like everyone else. He never goes down the pub with the other old blokes, and he’s always busy but no one knows what he does. Some people call him a loner, others call him a nutcase. Jezza likes to frighten the little kids by saying Mick catches local cats and stews them to make cawl, but I know that one’s a lie.

There’s a cat in the house next door to him and she’s perfectly healthy.

People avoid him mostly, which is what I’m doing now.

‘Can’t stop,’ I say.

I’d love to put off getting home, but Mick Rowlands is not the way to do it.

‘There’s a slice of Battenberg in it for you.’

I wave my hand in the air, without looking back. ‘You’re all right, thanks.’

A woman’s rushing down the pavement towards me, calling out over my head to Mick. ‘You want to be careful, you do – asking that one for help.’

I know her face; she lives further up the hill. I see her sometimes on a Sunday, going to or coming back from church. She wears a purple hat. Looks like she has a Liquorice Allsort on her head. The bobbly, hundreds-and-thousands one no one likes.

When she passes, she fires a sideways look at me so full of spite it could sting my face.

‘Mind your business, Vera,’ Mick shouts back. ‘The boy’s all right.’

I stop and turn. What’s going on? Is Mick ... *sticking up for me?*

They’re facing each other off, like boxers before a match. It’s kind of funny. I walk up to them and she doesn’t bother with a frown, goes straight into a scowl.

Mick folds his arms. ‘It’s my garden, not yours.’

Vera puffs herself up. ‘Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you if things start to go missing ...’

Mick takes his hat off and scratches his head. ‘Why would anything go missing?’

It’s obvious he’s acting dull to wind her up, which is *brilliant*.

In some ways I can’t blame the old bat. Things have

‘gone missing’ around me all my life. I’ve always known how to slip things into pockets, hide them up my jumper or inside my coat. Gavin told me Gran used to hide things in our prams because no one would ever think to look under a baby blanket. I asked her about it once and she gave me a clip round the ear. Gavin laughed. She never said it wasn’t true though.

Because you can’t trust a Pritchard. Everyone knows that.

For no other reason than to annoy Vera, I say I’ll help after all.

‘Tidy.’ Mick grins, turning his back to her and saying over his shoulder. ‘Off you go then, Vera. Haven’t you got someone else to judge?’

Vera looks like she’s been slapped in the face with a wet kipper. I laugh and it comes out like a snort. She takes a second to look disgusted, then storms off.

‘Get your hands out of your pockets then,’ Mick says to me. ‘Hold them out. Then I can lay the wood across them, see.’

I do as he says and he puts the planks in the crook of my arms. They’re heavier than I thought they’d be,



but feel balanced enough that I don't think I'll drop them. I turn slowly and we set off towards what people say is the weirdest place in Pentre Mawr. It's not the house that's weird, although I've never been in so it could be. It's the garden. It backs on to some scrubby woodland that everyone calls the Tiny Woods. But people reckon that, on Mick's side, there's something you'd never expect. A nuclear bunker. A proper, actual, honest-to-God fallout shelter. In a South Wales valley.

So people say.

People also say Mick Rowlands is crackers, but what's so crackers about trying to stay alive? Bunkers make much more sense than banners.

Susie, the black cat from next door to him, appears from nowhere, weaving round my ankles, wanting a stroke. 'I can't,' I say to her. 'Got my hands full, haven't I?'

I go to step over her and one end of the planks jams into the hedge, I lose my grip and drop them with a clatter. Susie darts away. Thankfully I didn't hurt her.

'Careful!' Mick says.

I pull a face. 'Not my fault the cat loves me, is it? Just pass them back, will you? We're nearly there now.'

You can hear the music blaring out of Gavin's window as we pass my house, even though his bedroom's at the back. It's The Jam. Funny how it's OK for him to nick my LPs but if I even dare to touch his ... That's the trouble with having him for a big brother though. Gavin's not someone I want to mess with.

We get to Mick's house. He opens the gate and wheels his barrow through. I drop the planks on to the path.

His eyebrows go up. 'Not leaving them there, are you?'

I rub the inside of my elbows. 'Give me a chance, mun, my arms are killing me!'

He laughs and trundles off. I suppose I'm meant to follow him. I manage to pick the planks up again. The path leads round the side of the house to the right. He stops next to a pile of bricks and upends the wheelbarrow. Smaller pieces of wood, more bricks and some plasterboard spill out. I put the planks on the ground next to them.

Mick pats me on the shoulder. 'Good boy, you are. No matter what anyone says.'

I think that's his idea of a compliment.

'Where's all this from anyway?' I ask.

'You know where they're building the new pensioner bungalows, up on Temple Row?'

I nod. *He hasn't nicked them, has he?*

'The foreman lets me have what's going spare, like. Off-cuts and so on.'

That makes more sense. He's always scavenging something – anyone would think he lived in a shack on the mountain, not a council house semi.

I look around. 'What do you need them for?'

'This and that.'

The garden looks like any other garden; there's a shed, one of those spinning, spider-web washing lines (I try not to look at the underwear flapping about), a lawn and flowerbeds. Typical old-person stuff. No nuclear bunker.

Disappointing.

God, people round here will make anything up for a bit of gossip. I mean, it's probably just a coal bunker,

we still have one in our garden, even though we've gone electric.

But when my eyes get back to Mick, he's smiling.

'Can't see it, can you?' He folds his arms. 'That's part of the point. The more cover the better.'

I look at the Tiny Woods and the Brae rising up behind. 'You mean it's true, you really have a ... ?'

'Might do. Anyway, boy, how about that Battenberg? As long as your mam won't be miffed I've spoilt your tea.' He looks at his watch. 'Oh. It's only half two – why aren't you in school?'

The question is so direct I feel a bit under fire.

'Lessons were cancelled,' I say. 'Teacher's ill.'

It's a stupid lie, and I can tell he doesn't believe a word of it.

'You're right though, better not spoil my tea,' I say, backing away.

He frowns. 'All right, boy.'

*Why'd he have to go and spoil things, asking nosy flipping questions? I really fancied some Battenburg.*