



GRAVE MATTER

Juno Dawson

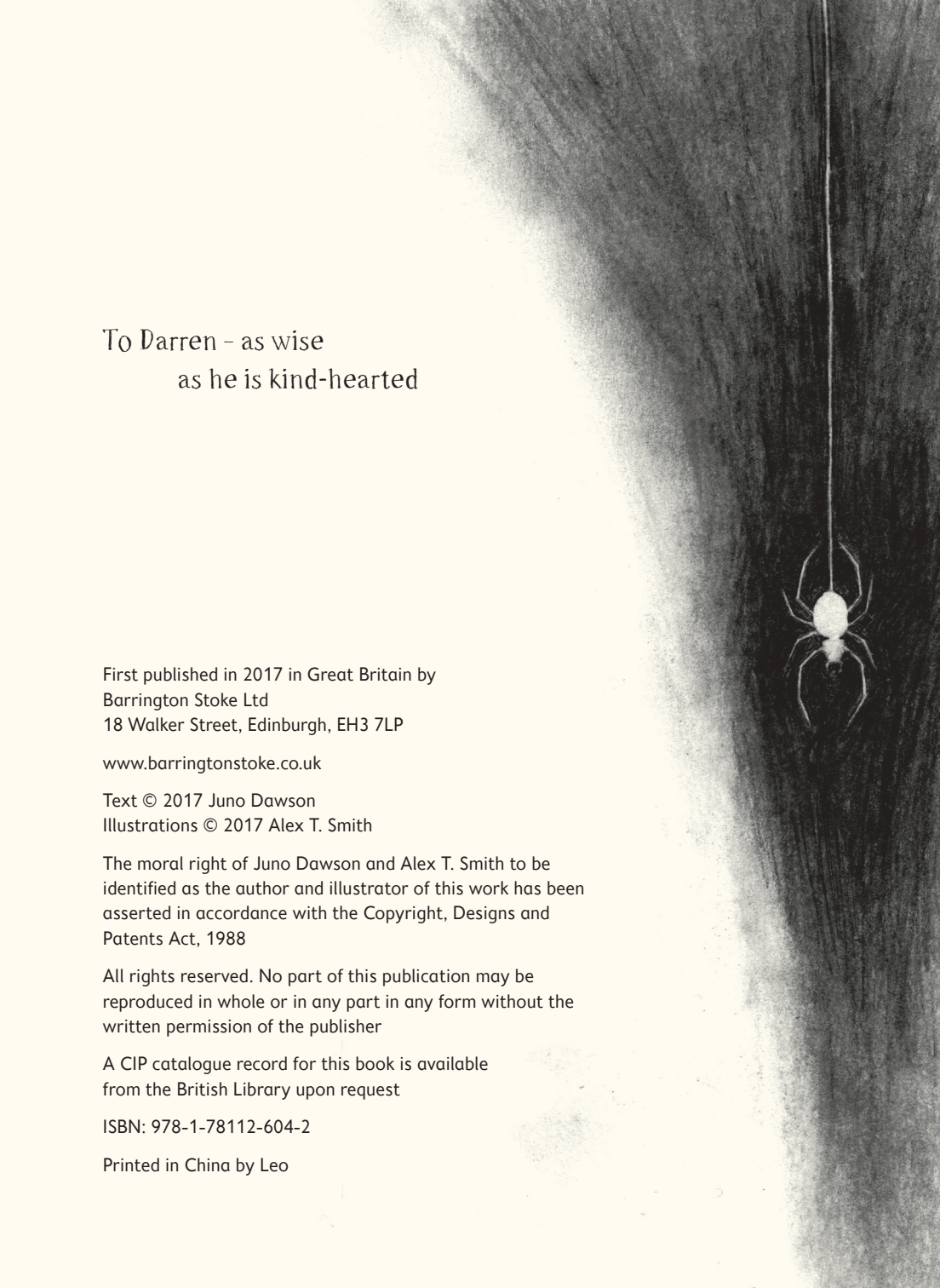
GRAVE MATTER

With illustrations by
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Barrington Stoke

To Darren – as wise
as he is kind-hearted



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"The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?"

EDGAR ALLAN POE – *THE PREMATURE BURIAL*



1

There is still snow on the ground when they lower her into it. The same snow, I suppose, as the night she died.

I'm drunk. Everything is fuzzy at the edges. My eyelids are sore and swollen, my blinking sluggish. A vodka filter. The snowy graveyard swims in and out of focus. If I squint, grey stick-men cluster around her grave.

All is black and white, with only the lilacs atop her coffin for colour. They were her favourite.

Don't let me go.

I won't.

She gripped my hand. Pale fingers, ebony nails.
Please, Samuel …
I promise I won't. I won't let you go.
Her grip went slack.

My father is sombre, professional, as stiff as his vicar's collar. It is his job to be solemn, but I wonder if today he means it. I think he must – everyone who met Eliza loved her.

"In the Name of God," my father begins, "the merciful Father, we commit the body of our daughter and friend Eliza Grey to the peace of the grave."

Mrs Grey is wailing, burying her face in the lapel of Mr Grey's coat. Her pained cries – animal somehow – soar and swoop through the naked winter trees, shaking crows from the branches. Tears stream down her chin. No one knows what to do to comfort her. Other mourners politely ignore her grief. They shift from foot to foot, unsure of what to do with their hands.

My limbs feel too long and limp, like over-done spaghetti.

The coffin is lowered into the earth. At the flick of a switch, the device cranks and wheezes to life and the coffin descends. It seems too small by far to contain Eliza. It's all wrong. To box her is grotesque, like caging a hummingbird.

Are you OK to drive in this weather?

Of course, it's not that bad.

I don't know, Sam, that snow is pretty seriously snowy.

It'll be fine, it's not even settling. Promise. We'll be home in ten.

Every time I close my eyes I see that moment play on a loop. Eliza looked out of the bay window at Fish's house, watching feathery flakes swirl under the street lights. That was the fork in the road. We could have spent the night at Fish's.

But we didn't. We took the other prong. I made her.

Father stands where the headstone will be. He goes on and on.

"Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. May the Lord bless her and keep her, the Lord make his face to shine upon her and be gracious unto her, the Lord lift up his face upon her and give her everlasting peace. Amen."

Amen.

My father throws the first dirt on top of Eliza's coffin. We must all play our part in burying her. The mud rains down on the lilacs, spoiling them. Next, Mr Grey steps forward, Mrs Grey still under his arm. He too throws dirt over his daughter.

It's all too much. We can't ... we can't smother Eliza like this. How ... how will she breathe down there? She doesn't belong in the dark and cold. She was scared of the dark.

I fall to my knees. I feel icy slush seep into my



trousers. "No!" I cry, and I reach for Eliza's coffin far below. I scramble to the edge of the grave. "No, you can't! Eliza!"

Burly hands grab my arms and drag me away. I kick and struggle, but strangers hold me back. Mrs Grey wails anew. Father looks so disappointed.



Mother's hand unfurls and I see that a tiny, pale blue pill rests in her palm. "Here," she says. "Take this. You'll feel better."

Her lips are taut, her eyes stern. She – Dr Beauvoir – knows best.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Just take it, Samuel. You need to rest. You haven't slept since the crash. I hear you pacing around."

"I don't want it."

"Just. Take. It."

Reluctant – because I worry I'll be stuck in the nightmare – I swallow the pill. Mother grips my face to check under my tongue. "Good boy. Now, I'd better get over to the Wake."

"I should be there."

"After your performance at the graveyard? I don't think so. Sleep. We'll be back to check on you in a few hours, but your father needs to be there."

She helps me out of my black blazer and I pull off my tie. My curtains – thick crimson velvet like all the others in our house, the rectory – are shut. They block out every drop of crisp winter light. "Now, lie down."

I do as I'm told and she pulls the patchwork quilt up over me. "Mum ..."

"Yes?"

"I don't ... I don't know what to do without her ... I can't live without –"

"Samuel, don't even say it." Mum perches on the edge of my bed and her pine green eyes soften. The same eyes as mine. Eliza told me she loved my weird

eyes. "I've seen this a million times," Mum goes on. "Don't tell your dad I took His name in vain, but oh God, the grief will hurt like hell but it won't last for long. I promise. Every day it'll get better as you forget –"

"I don't want to forget her!"

She strokes my hair. It's short, a number-two shave all over, and her touch comforts me. It reminds me of being a child. "That's not what I meant," Mother says. "You won't forget Eliza, you'll forget the pain. Eliza wouldn't want to see you like this and you know it."

I feel the sleeping pill start to take effect. My head feels like it's full of black water that's sloshing around my skull. I say nothing.

"Now sleep." Mother leans in and kisses my forehead. "Sweet dreams." She switches off the lamp and I don't even notice the darkness any more.