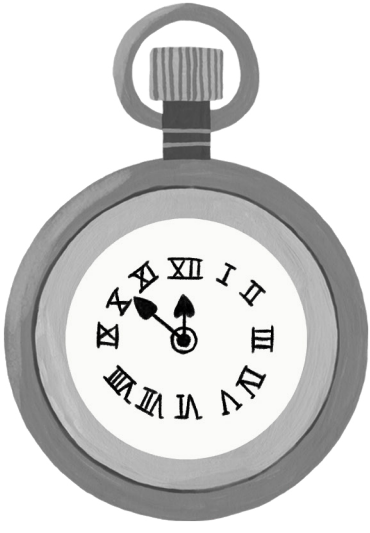

You need to leave that house of clocks.

Right now.

Don't wait for the clocks to stop...

For Jeremy, Jack and Ed

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The House of One Hundred Clocks

A. M. Howell

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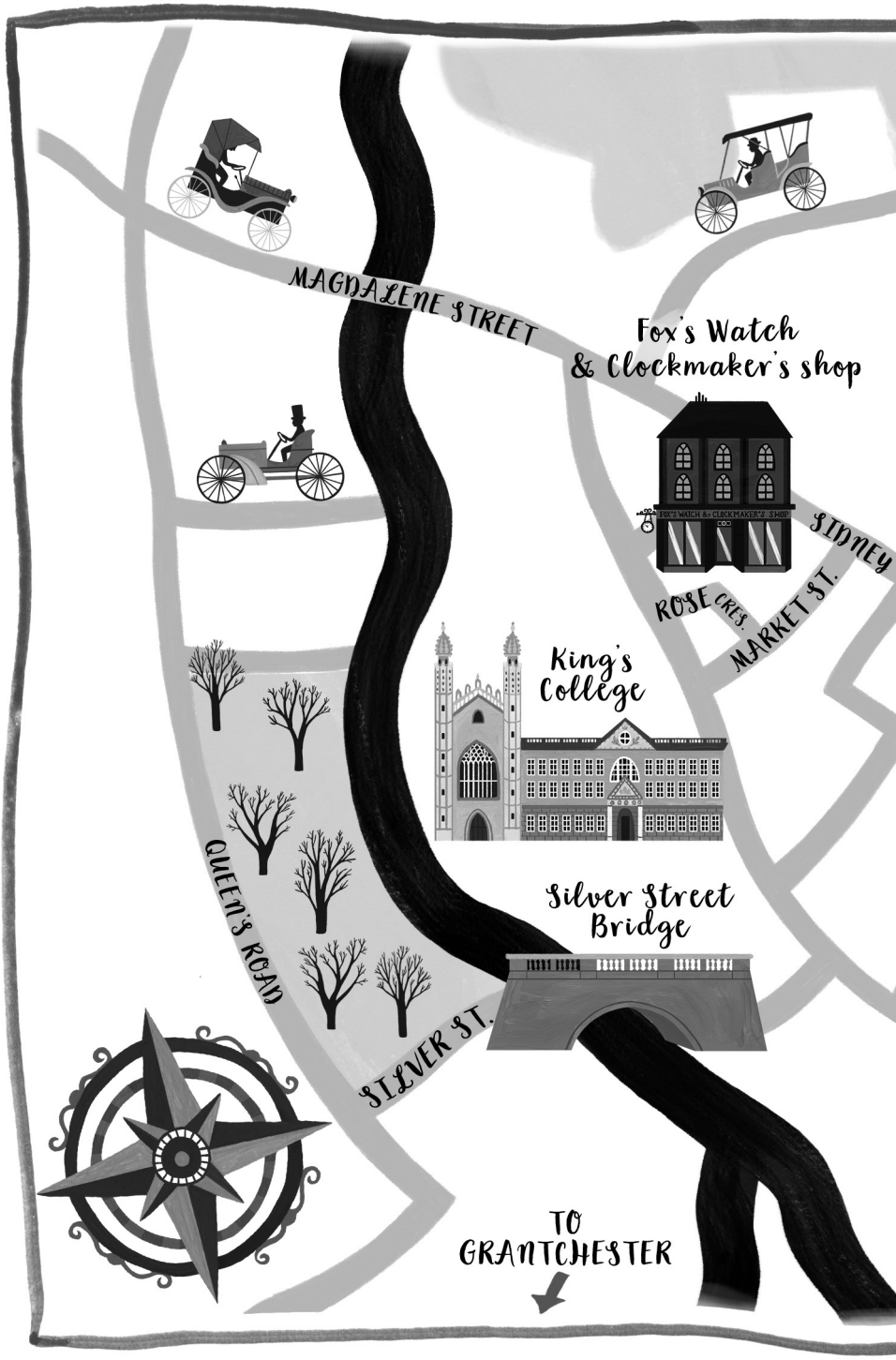
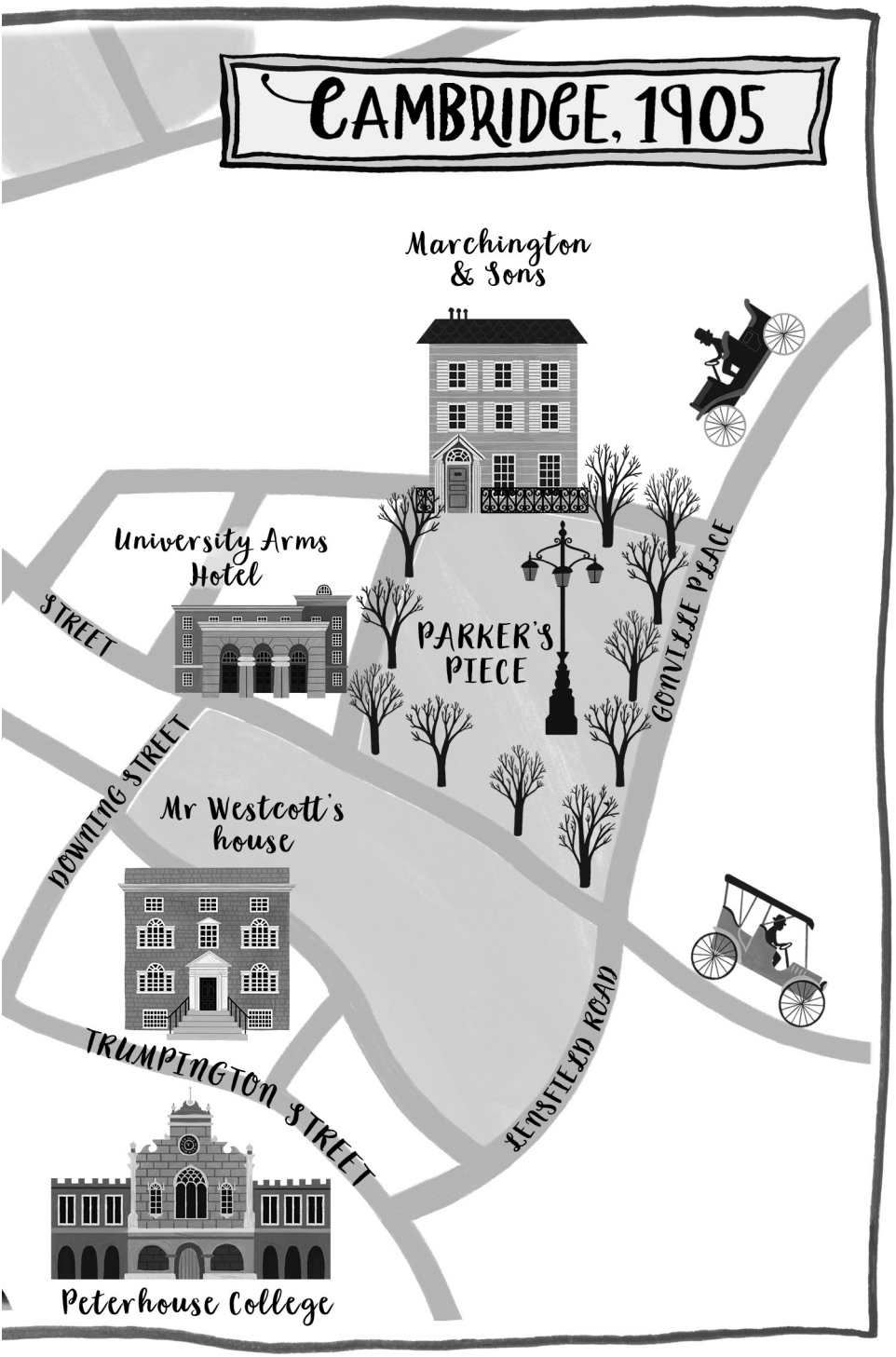

MAGDALENE STREET
Fox's Watch
& Clockmaker's shop
FOX'S WATCH & CLOCKMAKER'S SHOP
SIDNEY
ROSE CRES.
MARKET ST.
King's
College
QUEEN'S ROAD
Silver Street
Bridge
SILVER ST.
TO
GRANTCHESTER


CAMBRIDGE, 1905
Marchington & Sons
University Arms Hotel
STREET
PARKER'S PIECE
GONVILLE PLACE
DOWNING STREET
Mr Westcott's house
TRUMPINGTON STREET
LENSFIELD ROAD
Peterhouse College

Chapter 1

The Contract

Helena grasped the bars of the domed birdcage resting on her lap until her fingers ached. Mr Westcott was staring into the cage with an odd kind of intent that danced a shiver across the back of her neck. His rake-thin frame leaned forward across the desk, his eyes narrowing. "You omitted to say in your acceptance letter that you were bringing…a…bird," he said, his sallow cheeks tightening as he glanced first at Helena's father, and then at Helena.

Mr Westcott's sister stood beside him in a high-waisted silk dress the colour of peaches, her gloved

hand resting on the back of his chair. They had the same small sapphire blue eyes. Miss Westcott's eyes were crinkling into a smile as they looked at Helena. Mr Westcott's were not.

Helena's skin bristled as she glanced at her father, who was sitting bolt upright in his chair, his shoulders taut.

"Jack and Jill went up the hill. Pail of water. *Snicker-squawk!*"

Mr Westcott's forehead furrowed at the bird.

"Shush," Helena murmured, reaching through the brass bars and running a finger down her parrot's shimmery green-blue tail feathers. Mr Westcott had called her mother's parrot "a bird". Except he wasn't just any old bird. Orbit was a Blue-fronted Amazon. It was important Mr Westcott knew that, but Helena sensed now was not quite the right time to give him a lesson on exotic creatures.

Miss Westcott's eyes twinkled. "What an amusing parrot," she said in a sing-song voice.

The knot in Helena's stomach unwound a little and she returned the woman's warm smile. Amongst the wood panelling, papers and books in the study, Miss Westcott's smile really was quite dazzling. When she

looked Helena in the eye, it made her wish she had worn her best navy coat, the one with the blue silk buttons. Helena tugged at the almost too-small sleeves of her beige cotton jacket, that her father had said would be more suitable for a stay in Cambridge during what was turning out to be a rather cool and disappointing June.

"My sincere apologies, Mr Westcott. And to you too, Miss Westcott," Helena's father said, throwing Helena a look which she interpreted to mean, *Keep that parrot quiet or else.* He pulled at his close-clipped beard. "There was so little time, and you made it clear in your correspondence that you were in urgent need of a timekeeper and clock conservator. Wherever my daughter Helena goes, her parrot goes too."

Mr Westcott stood up to turn and face a large window, which overlooked Trumpington Street and beyond, to a tapestry of colour blooming behind the railed gardens of a university college. He folded his arms and a small huff expelled from his mouth. Noises from outside carried through the glass. A horse and cart rumbling. The pounding of children's footsteps and peals of laughter. Bicycle bells clamouring. Helena closed her eyes for little more than a blink – long

enough to imagine herself outside in the fresh air and out of the oppressive wooden room, where everything seemed dull and dusty.

"Oh, brother dearest," Miss Westcott said lightly. "What harm will a parrot do?"

"I don't have quite the same…affinity with birds as you do, Katherine," said Mr Westcott, turning to give her a sharp look. There was something in the tone of his voice that implied his words meant something different to his sister. He paused. "Very well," he said curtly. "But the bird must stay in its cage. It must not be allowed to fly in the house or it will damage the clocks." His face had been pale when they had arrived. Now his skin was almost translucent, like a vampire or an animal which only ventured out at night.

Helena frowned. Mr Westcott did not seem too fond of birds, but at least his sister was a trifle more amenable. Memories of Orbit's arrival four years ago sprang into her head. Father had gladly spent more than a month's wages on the parrot as a birthday present for her mother, after she had become besotted with his chattering in the aviary of a local pet shop they used to pass on their way home from school. The shopkeeper had suggested a fancier (and more

expensive) parrot with golden plumage, but Mother would not be dissuaded. “Thank you, sir, but I do not desire this parrot for his looks, it is his voice and personality that amuses me. I have a feeling he will be the perfect addition to our small family,” her mother had said with a broad smile. And she had been right.

“My parrot’s name is Orbit,” Helena said. The words popped out of her mouth before she even had a chance to realize she was thinking them. Mother used to say that was one of her most endearing (and troublesome) qualities – her ability to speak without first thinking of the consequences. The narrowing of Mr Westcott’s eyes seemed to suggest he might not agree with the endearing part. Helena sank into her chair, its wooden engravings digging into her back.

“What an interesting name for a bird,” Katherine Westcott said, giving Helena another sunny smile. “I should like to be introduced to Orbit…at an appropriate time of course.” She glanced at her brother.

A sudden tinkling chime burst from a silver carriage clock, standing on Mr Westcott’s desk, to mark quarter to the hour. The noise reminded Helena of a gentle waterfall. Chimes from other rooms in the house began to bleed through the wooden walls. High-pitched ones,

deep ones, silvery toned and soaring ones. Orbit squawked and screeched in his cage, his pupils wide and dilated. Helena swallowed, gripped the cage bars more tightly. How many clocks did Mr Westcott have exactly?

"This clock conservator position is extremely well-paid, Helena," her father had said the previous week, his eyes shinier than they had been for a while. "Board and lodgings are provided, so I'll be able to save every pound and shilling for a clock-making shop of our own. And Cambridge is a beautiful town, by all accounts. I think perhaps it will be good for us – to be somewhere new."

"But I want to stay in London," Helena had replied, glancing around the small parlour of their suburban terraced house, and pausing at the portrait of herself, Father and Mother, which had been painted two years earlier, in 1903 when Helena was ten. Mother's round face was rosebud healthy, there was no sign of the terrible sickness which would sweep through their front door and out again, taking Mother with it. "All of our things are here. All of *Mother's* things are here."

"Pop goes the weasel. Mother, Mother, Mother," Orbit had squawked, walking along the back of the

armchair until he reached Helena's shoulder. He'd nuzzled his beak into her hair and tugged on a few chestnut-brown strands until her scalp began to smart. She'd picked Orbit up and placed him on her lap. The bird was still pining, and Mother had been gone almost twelve months now.

"I have committed to the position for as long as Mr Westcott requires my assistance, but it will not be for ever. Our house and all of our things will still be here when we get back," Helena's father had said firmly, drawing the conversation to a close in the same way he drew the curtains at night, and Helena knew there would be no further discussion.

Helena felt a renewed unease at the open-ended nature of their stay, as Mr Westcott's eyes flickered to her and Orbit and back again.

"You understand the terms of the contract, Mr Graham?" Mr Westcott asked. His Adam's apple bobbed in his scrawny throat. "I do believe you were sent them in advance of your arrival."

Helena scrunched up her nose. What did Mr Westcott mean by "terms"?

"Yes," Helena's father replied, his eyebrows knitting together. He glanced at Helena and swallowed.

Mr Westcott opened a folder, pulled out a stiff piece of paper and slid it across the large desk past an engraved, brass telephone with a wooden mouthpiece, which Helena had seen her father give frequent appraising glances. It made Helena realize just how rich Mr Westcott must be, for she did not know anyone who could afford to have a telephone in their own home. His fingers lingered on the edge of the contract for a second, as if he was hesitant to part with it.

Helena leaned forward to better see the words. The creamy parchment was covered in small swirly writing.

Worldly possessions…

Signed over…

Damaged…

If a single clock should stop…

Helena sucked in a breath.

Mr Westcott and his sister peered at her.

Her father ignored her, picked up a pen, dipped it in a pot of black ink and scribbled his signature on the bottom of the paper.

"It is important my clock collection is maintained and kept in good working order at all times," said Mr Westcott.

Helena stared at their host, who was now looking at a gloomy long-ago family portrait of a gentleman and

lady with two children, standing next to a huge longcase clock. He sniffed, ran a finger under his nose. "No clock must be allowed to stop – ever. You do realize the consequence of that?"

"Father?" Helena said, her voice so small that if it had been an object it would have slid between the gaps in the floorboards. There was something unsaid in this room, something that made her feel rather cold.

"Father, Father. Three blind mice," Orbit squawked.

"I don't understand," said Helena, the metal cage suddenly feeling like a lead weight on her lap. "Why must no clock stop?"

"Not now, Helena," her father said in a firm voice, sliding the signed paper back across the table to Mr Westcott.

"Oh, my dear girl," Katherine Westcott said. It was then that Helena noticed the white combs lined with tiny baby-blue feathers holding her silky dark hair in place. "There is no need for you to worry."

Helena's father cleared his throat, turned to look at her. "It is my job to wind the clocks – keep them ticking, make sure they are in fine working order. If any one of them stops or is damaged, in any way…then we will hand over…all of our possessions as recompense."

Helena's throat tightened into a knot.

"*Snicker, snicker, snicker,*" Orbit chirped, bobbing his head.

"We have to give away our things if any of the clocks stop or are damaged?" Helena's breathing was jerky, and she struggled to pull air into her lungs. "But why?"

"Clocks, clocks, clocks. Dickory, dockery clocks," squawked Orbit loudly.

The look Helena's father gave Mr Westcott and his sister was one which requested help.

But it seemed neither Mr Westcott nor Katherine Westcott had help to give. Or maybe they had some but were not in the right frames of mind to dispense it, at that moment.

Helena gave Katherine Westcott what she hoped was a beseeching look.

"That is correct," Katherine Westcott said eventually, picking up the signed contract. A gentle flush stained her cheeks. "The contract is a…deterrent. So that my brother can be certain that any clock conservator he employs will fulfil the requirements of the post and not let any clock stop." She paused, her gaze settling on Helena's father. "Oh, and Mr Graham, it is imperative that this arrangement is kept as a private matter. You

may witness some unexpected things in this house and anything you or Helena hear or see must never be spoken of, even amongst yourselves." Katherine Westcott held the contract close to her chest. "Otherwise, the terms will be initiated and again, you will forfeit the right to all of your possessions." She gave them both what Helena interpreted to be an apologetic look.

Mr Westcott's jaw tensed as he looked up at his sister, then away again.

Helena blinked, forcing the words into some sort of order in her head. But they would not settle or make any sense. And her question seemed to float unanswered.

Mr Westcott's gaze settled on Orbit's golden cage. There was an odd, feverish gleam in his eyes.

Helena curled her arms around the cage, a tree of panic sprouting in her stomach. She had been forced to move from their perfectly pleasant home in the London suburbs to this strange, stuffy house and now this? If a single clock stopped they would lose all of their things, including the one most irreplaceable and precious thing Helena must not lose at any cost. And, stranger still was that everything inside the house was never to be spoken of… *What had her father agreed to?*