A MOST
PECULIAR
TOY FACTORY
ALEX BELL
Illustrated by
NAN LAWSON

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Barrington Stoke

In memory of Carolyn Whitaker

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CONTENTS

1. Hoggle's Happy Toys 1
2. The Problem with Biffy 8
3. Meeting Marmaduke J. Hoggle 13
4. Enter the Factory 21
5. A Terrible Picnic 28
6. The Rocking-Horse Room 39
7. A Buffalo Hunt 50
8. The Mermaid Room 60
9. The Secret Diary 69
10. The Goblin's Lair 108
11. A Very Special Penny 129
12. The Teddy-Bear Heart 151

CHAPTER 1

Hoggle's Happy Toys

Years ago, children used to peer past the toy factory gates, hoping to spot the wonderful toys inside.

Now they ran past the entrance, scared and trembling. No one would stop there, not even if they were dared.

The children of Cherryville all knew the factory was an evil place. Something awful had happened inside five years ago. It was something kids still whispered about in the playground and used to frighten each other at sleepovers.

Some people said the toys had gone mad. Others suggested that there had been a gruesome teddy-bear mass murder. There was even a theory that the dolls had strangled each other with their hair. None of the children in the town knew the truth for sure. They just knew that they should stay away from that factory.

It was all boarded up with wooden planks nailed across the windows and doors. The tall gates were always kept padlocked. The gold letters painted above the doorway had started to peel and fade, but you could still see they read:

Hoggle's Happy Toys.

But there was nothing happy about these toys.

Some people said that they could sometimes hear dolls whispering in there. Or that they'd seen the shadow of a teddy bear running across one of the windows. But how could this be

possible if the factory had been closed down for years?

No one ever said the word “haunted”. But nobody wanted to go into the toy factory. And one person who *especially* didn’t want to go into the factory was Tess Pipps.

Ten-year-old Tess lived on a farm with her family, and it was a very special farm too. For a start, its cows produced all kinds of flavoured milk, from chocolate to strawberry to banana. The farm’s bushes grew sugar mice. And they had lollipop trees and cola-bottle trees and even toffee apple trees!

Tess loved living on the farm, but last month something dreadful had happened – a health-food shop had opened in town. Up till then, the farm had supplied the huge boarding school nearby with its milk and treats, but now the school had cancelled their contract with the Pipps. They’d started ordering carrot juice and

pickled vegetables from the new health-food shop instead.

The boarding school had hundreds of pupils, and they ran a summer school in the holidays. They had been the farm's biggest customer. Now that the school had stopped ordering supplies from the Pipps, whole pails of chocolate milk were going sour and the bags of sugar mice were collecting dust. Tess's mother and father talked about money a lot, and what they could do to save the farm.

Tess loved the cows. She loved their smell and their brown eyes and the way they would push their big heads up against her to say hello. But last night her father had said that they might have to sell some of them.

Tess couldn't bear the idea. The cows were part of the family. They couldn't send them away. They just couldn't. She'd miss them even more now that school had finished for the summer holidays. She opened the kitchen door

and found her parents and siblings already sitting around the kitchen table. From the sounds of it, they were in the middle of a very excitable conversation.

Tess's youngest brother, Oliver, gave her a huge grin and said, "Guess what? Dad doesn't have to sell the cows after all!"

"What?" Tess asked, and gaped at Oliver. "Why not?"

"Because the Hoggle's Happy Toys factory is reopening," her father said.

"*What?*" Tess was shocked.

"I'll be able to get employment there," her father went on. "Your older brothers too. There are plenty of jobs going because no one seems to want to work there."

Tess frowned. "Of course they don't. Everyone knows the toys went mad and started killing each other."

Tess's older brothers and father laughed, as if what she'd said was ridiculous. But the younger children didn't laugh. They knew it was true.

"Honestly, Tess, you shouldn't talk such nonsense at your age," her mother said. "Come and sit down and have your dinner."

Tess took her seat at the table and tried to feel pleased about the factory reopening. After all, if it meant that they could keep the cows, then it was a good thing. In fact, it was wonderful. And yet, Tess couldn't squash down the nagging feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach.