

HARKLIGHTS



In memory of my father,
your sunshine light lives on.

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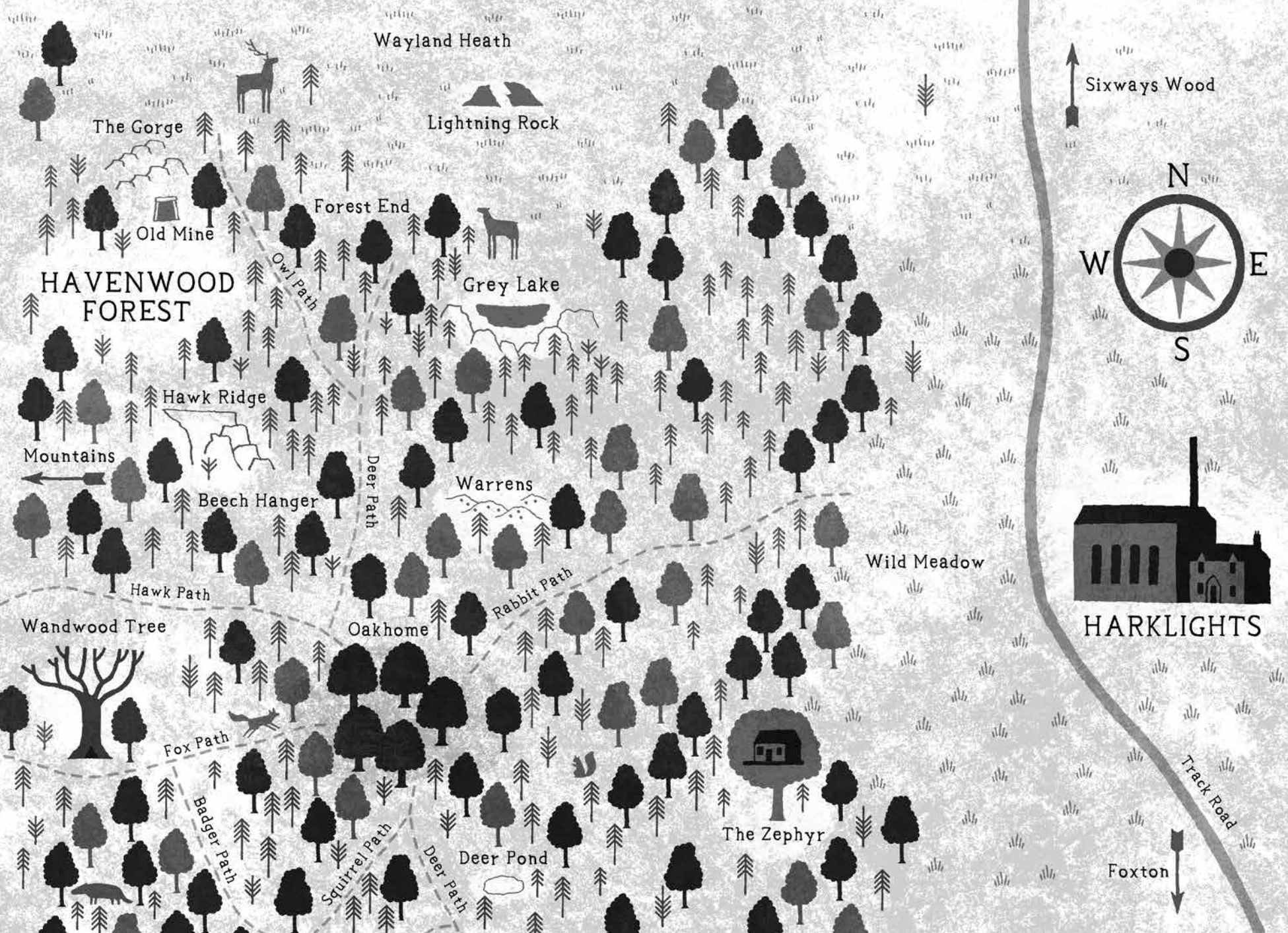
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Wayland Heath

Sixways Wood

The Gorge

Lightning Rock

Old Mine

Forest End

Grey Lake

HAVENWOOD
FOREST

Hawk Ridge

Mountains

Beech Hanger

Warrens

Wild Meadow

Wandwood Tree

Oakhome

Rabbit Path

Fox Path

Badger Path

Squirrel Path

Deer Path

Deer Pond

The Zephyr

HARKLIGHTS

Foxton

Track Road



CHAPTER ONE

THE NEW ORPHAN

Old Ma Bogey is coming. We wait, like coiled clock-springs, for announcements. Wait to hear who's getting punishment, or if there's a new orphan. Wingnut jumps out of his seat as Old Ma Bogey marches into the dining room, wearing her usual black fitted jacket and floor-sweeping skirt. Her grey hair is pulled up in a bun at the back of her head. She carries her beating stick. A small boy follows in her wake.

I stop holding my breath and let out a sigh.

It's a new orphan.

The small boy looks terrified. He's already dressed in the grey clothes we all wear. A black-and-yellow box of Harklights Everstrikes rattles in his hand. Old Ma Bogey gives every new orphan a box of matches. She says it's a gift, the first matchbox packed for you.

Most of us orphans call Miss Boggett “Old Ma Bogey” behind her back. We call her this because the first thing she does when a new orphan arrives is to take their name away and give them a new one.

Old Ma Bogey wears an iron thumb-guard, which looks like part of a knight’s gauntlet. She wears it all the time, even though it’s only to protect her thumb when firing her crossbow.

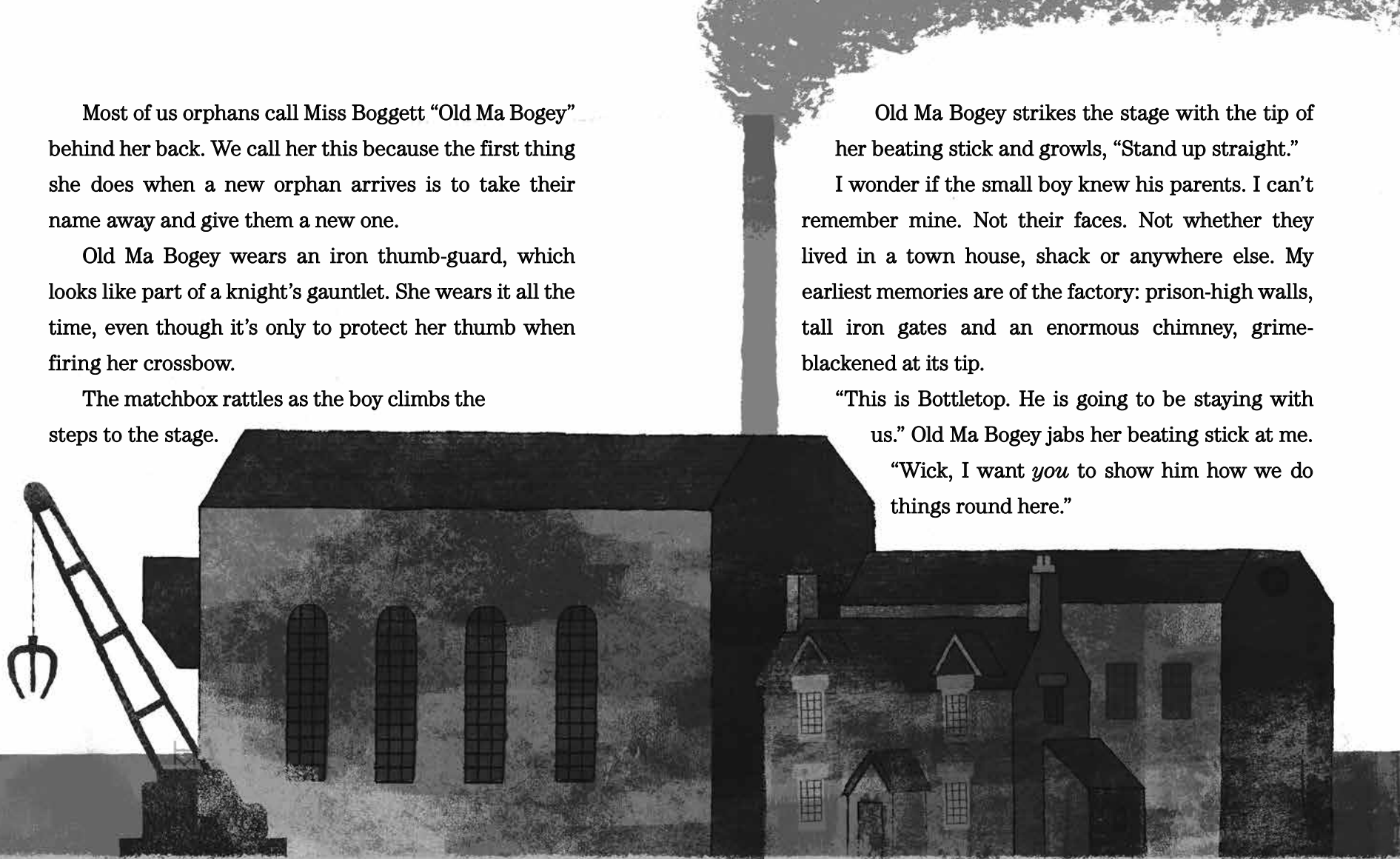
The matchbox rattles as the boy climbs the steps to the stage.

Old Ma Bogey strikes the stage with the tip of her beating stick and growls, “Stand up straight.”

I wonder if the small boy knew his parents. I can’t remember mine. Not their faces. Not whether they lived in a town house, shack or anywhere else. My earliest memories are of the factory: prison-high walls, tall iron gates and an enormous chimney, grime-blackened at its tip.

“This is Bottletop. He is going to be staying with us.” Old Ma Bogey jabs her beating stick at me.

“Wick, I want *you* to show him how we do things round here.”



My stomach tenses. This could wind up getting me another beating. As I get up from my bench seat at one of the long tables, Petal nudges my elbow. "Bet he won't last half a day."

"We'll see." I hope she isn't right. Otherwise that'll be three orphans in a row – gone in a flash – and I'll be working next to an empty seat again.

I collect Bottletop. He's about seven or eight years old, at a guess. His skin is pale as paper – it makes him look as if he's been living in a cellar or a coal shed. He's still rattling the matchbox when I find him a place on the bench next to me.

"She took all your things, didn't she?" I whisper.

Bottletop nods.

"She does that with everybody. I'm Wick."

After a few minutes, a door from the kitchen bangs open and Padlock comes through, wheeling a trolley of empty bowls and a brass tea urn. Padlock is the oldest orphan at the factory, and works as Old Ma Bogey's assistant. His stubble is so rough he can strike matches off it. Sometimes he flicks them at us packsmiths. We hate him almost as much as we hate Old Ma Bogey.

He grabs a bowl with one of his thick hands then

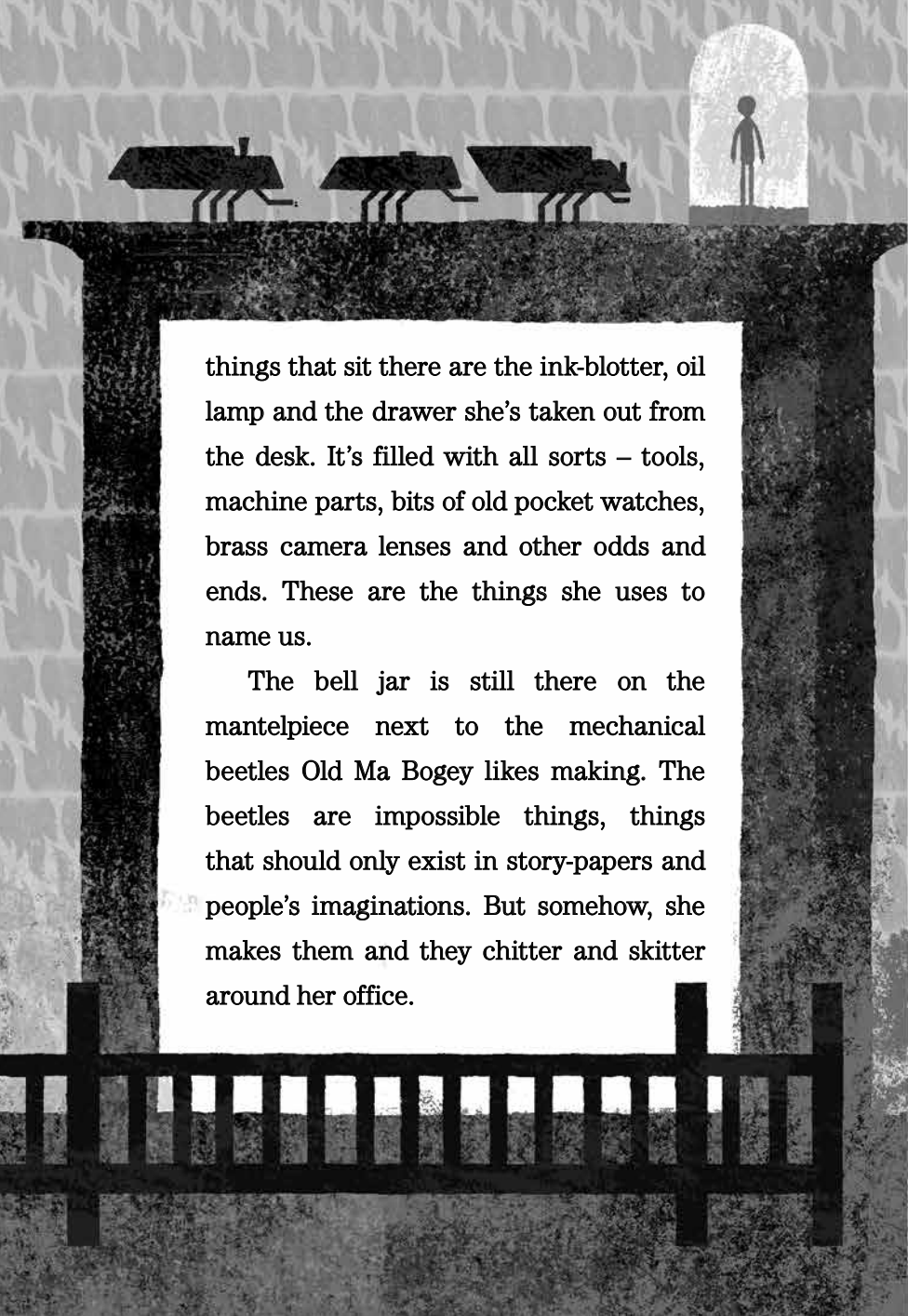
turns on the brass tap, letting loose a stream of lumpish bone-coloured liquid.

Bottletop gapes at the filled bowl.

"Porridge," I say. "We get it for every meal. It's not that bad. It doesn't taste of anything, so you can imagine any flavour you like. Make sure you eat it all up or there'll be trouble." I nod towards Padlock, who's putting a drop of liquid from a brown bottle in the middle of every bowl of porridge he hands out. "And that's medicine. She gives it us so we stay healthy."

Old Ma Bogey and Padlock don't have porridge. At the high table, they eat roast chicken, turkey, duck, sausages and bacon, great joints of beef and lamb, and roast potatoes with thick gravy. For pudding, there's new penny buns, apple pie with custard, sponge cake, plum cake, treacle tart and jam tart, and bread-and-butter pudding. They never share their food, or give us leftovers, even though they leave lots.

After dinner, Old Ma Bogey orders me and Bottletop to come to her office, while Padlock marches the rest of the orphans upstairs. She unlocks the door and ushers us through. Inside, the office is as it always is. Neat and ordered. The desk is empty of paperwork. The only



things that sit there are the ink-blotter, oil lamp and the drawer she's taken out from the desk. It's filled with all sorts – tools, machine parts, bits of old pocket watches, brass camera lenses and other odds and ends. These are the things she uses to name us.

The bell jar is still there on the mantelpiece next to the mechanical beetles Old Ma Bogey likes making. The beetles are impossible things, things that should only exist in story-papers and people's imaginations. But somehow, she makes them and they chitter and skitter around her office.

Inside the bell jar is a miniature man, no bigger than a couple of matchboxes stood on top of each other, end on end. He's dressed in doll's clothes and rests on a bed of dried moss and leaves. His skin is thick, leathery, like a glove. His eyes are shut.

Bottletop notices him and has the same reaction as every new orphan – disgust and fascination. He shifts on his feet and says nothing as Old Ma Bogey unlocks one of the low cupboards.

"Here, this is yours," she barks as she hands him a thin wool blanket, the same ash-grey as her hair, the same ash-grey as our clothes. The only colour anyone sees at Harklights – apart from bruises – is Old Ma Bogey's blood-red lipstick.

"And this," she says, handing him a stick of white chalk. "You get a piece once every two weeks and Petal will give you newspaper pictures." A smile curls the corner of her mouth. "Use them to remember the things you *miss*."

Bottletop glances at me, bewildered.

I try and give him a reassuring look.

Scratch, Old Ma Bogey's enormous black cat, skulks into the office and springs up onto the desk. Old Ma

Bogey strokes him with her iron-thumbed hand. She's the only one who can touch him without getting ripped to shreds.

"Right, that's it," barks Old Ma Bogey. "You can go."

As me and Bottletop climb the main stairs to bed, I stop halfway up by the framed box filled with butterflies. Next to it is a photograph of a man wearing spectacles with grey hexagonal lenses, and an unhappy-looking girl. "He's not real, you know, the little man in the bell jar. He's made up – like that fairy that sells floating soap flakes or the Drink Imp that sells lemonade."

I show Bottletop the bathroom, then take him to the dormitory. He clutches his blanket and looks around at the bare floorboards, covered in chalk drawings.

"There aren't any beds," I say, pointing to the rows of chalked-out boxes that show where our beds would go. "We sleep on the floor. You get used to it. Like the stink of match mixture."

Petal sits in the only chair we've got in the dormitory. The other orphans lie on their blankets around her. She straightens her back, making herself look even taller, and wraps her blanket around her shoulders. Then she takes out several sheets of *The Empire Times* from her

pocket and unfolds them. She's the one who's given the old newspapers to read each week. She lays the pages on the dormitory floor in rows, sharing out the pictures as if they're sweets. Some of us collect pictures of gentle people to be imaginary parents, or find ones that look like the parents who left us. Some draw them in chalk on the dormitory floor and fall asleep in their arms, only to find them turned to dust by morning.

Petal reads by candlelight. "Preparations are under way for The Festival of Empire at The Crystal Palace in London."

"Festival?"

"The Crystal Palace?" come voices from the blankets.

Petal nods. "To celebrate the King's coronation. Can you imagine if we went? It's going to have an electric railway, an imperial choir and replicas of parliament buildings from all across Empire Britannica!"

I try not to look interested at the mention of replicas.

Wingnut stops drawing an eye on the floor with his broken chalk. "We'd never be allowed to go," he says in a flat tone. Wingnut doesn't like make-believe stories. He only believes in what he knows to be true, like the fact that Petal is the best reader, Scratch hunts small

creatures and Old Ma Bogey has a short temper.

The younger orphans chatter noisily.

“Shhh,” whispers Petal. “Keep your noise down.”

We don’t want Padlock coming in and telling us off.
Or worse, Old Ma Bogey.

The voices fall silent. Wingnut finishes drawing the chalk eye, giving it eyelashes like sun rays.

Petal clears her throat and finishes reading the news.
Then she says, “Who’s ready for a story?”

There are nods around the dormitory. Everyone settles down under their thin blankets, including Bottletop, who looks better, but still a bit scared. Petal always makes up stories. They allow you to escape. Change the things you can’t change. Be somewhere else. Be someone else.

Petal’s eyes widen. “Once there was a clockmaker—”

“Did he work on the Great Clock?” whispers one of the orphans. “The one in London that keeps the Empire running like clockwork?”

“No, this was after. The clockmaker made other clocks. But he was lonely and longed for a daughter, so he made a clockwork one.”

I’m only half listening, staring out of the window at

the forest beyond the meadow. I’m waiting for everyone to go to sleep. That’s when I get the dormitory all to myself.

Petal carries on with the story. The clockmaker dies and there’s no one left to wind up his daughter. She’s an orphan, then adopted by a horrid guardian who beats her and makes her wash the floors, even though the water makes her rust.

“Is there going to be a prince?” a small voice calls out at one point.

Petal sighs. “Why do fairy tales need princes to be the answer to problems?”

It’s dark outside by the time Petal says, “I’ll tell you the rest tomorrow night.”

A streak of light flashes across the night sky – there for a moment, then gone.

“Falling star!” I say.

“Another orphan finds a home,” adds Petal.

The other orphans – except Wingnut – climb out of their blankets and go to the window, whispering excitedly, imagining what it would be like to be adopted or to escape. But the truth is we’re going nowhere – we’re like the pinned butterflies in the framed box. No one has ever

come to Harklights looking to become a guardian. No orphan ever got away. Once Cog tried to sneak out on one of the lorries, but as all the drivers work for Old Ma Bogey, he only got as far as the end of the lane. That's all we see here – steam lorries, horse-drawn wagons, new motor vans. They take away matches, and deliver wood and food. And we get the orphanage inspector once a year. The inspector meets Old Ma Bogey outside the gates and never sets foot in Harklights.

After Petal snuffs out the candle with her fingers, it takes ages for the younger orphans to settle down. I lie there, listening to the sound of their breathing slow and fade, like winding-down clocks.

When everyone is asleep, I get up and creep across to the fireplace that's not been lit in years. I'm careful not to step on the chalk-drawn flowers – things the other orphans miss so much, things I've never seen. On a hidden ledge inside the chimney are the matchstick buildings I've been making in secret for over a year.

I take the new matches I've nicked from the Match Room today and carefully cut off the strike-tops. Then I glue the final pieces of the chimney into place on my latest model.

I've made a dozen or so, all based on places I've seen in newspaper photographs. I make them to keep my wish of finding a new home alive – stop it from fading, help it come true.

I carefully take the completed building and place it on the deep window sill.

I feel a surge of pride as I admire the finished thing, built one pocketful of matches at a time. It's a grand town house. The sort you might find in London. Four storeys, with large windows and steps running up to a smart-looking front door.

The rising moon shines through the model house's back windows, illuminating the inside, making it look as if there are lights on. I imagine the rooms with roaring fires and books and a workshop for making things. And a new family.

I don't want to break the spell, but the light in the little windows fades as the moon –



nearly full – climbs higher, now silvering the tiny rooftop and the newly finished chimney. I hide the model away and climb under my blanket. As I fall asleep, I hold onto the images of who I could become, as tightly as a new orphan holding a box of Everstrikes on their first day.



Old Ma Bogey's gong wakes us at six o'clock. After going to the bathroom, we march downstairs to the dining room. When Padlock arrives with the trolley, Bottletop gives me a look as if to say, *I can't believe we have porridge for dinner and breakfast.*

I say, "You'll get used to it."

"Mmm," says Petal. "I'm going to imagine it's chocolate pudding. Then tonight I'm going to have lemon tart."

"Me too," chorus some of the others.

After breakfast, we all follow Old Ma Bogey and Padlock down the corridor. We stop at the emerald-green door that joins the house to the factory. The Machine's roar has already started. The clanking and clanging is so loud you couldn't hear your own voice even if you dared to speak.

Old Ma Bogey fiddles with a bunch of keys, then unlocks the door and opens it. Beyond it is a set of metal stairs that runs up to the Machine on the first floor. No orphan is ever allowed to set foot on the stairs, except Padlock. Not even the first step.

"Take these sacks of red phosphorus to the cauldron," she says to Padlock. "And make sure there's enough glue."

The waiting sacks look heavy. Padlock shoulders one of them easily and climbs up the stairs. Old Ma Bogey leads us down a winding corridor to another green door. A sign reads:



Inside, a waterfall of matches tumbles down from a ledge at the top of the far wall. Below the waterfall, a conveyor belt runs the length of the room, carrying them away in a river, which then cascades into a massive heap. At regular intervals on either side of the conveyor belt

are packsmith workstations, each with two seats and piles of empty matchboxes.

“So, this is where we work,” I say to Bottletop as we file in and I lead him to one of the workstations. “The factory has the Machine to make matches, but it still needs us to fill the matchboxes and pack them into crates.”

Bottletop nods sadly and mumbles something about wanting soldiers.

“What’s that?”

“She took my tin soldiers.”

“I’m sorry.”

I can’t remember if I arrived with any toys, but I’ve seen pictures of them in the newspapers. It must be sad to have something so special taken away.

I show Bottletop how to take a clutch of matches – not too many, not too few – and sort and pack them into an empty matchbox, then stack them into one of the crates for transporting.

He’s useless.

His hands keep jolting as he tries to fill the matchboxes. The matches go everywhere.

I want him to be better than the last orphan I was paired with, but he’s even worse.

Maybe Petal’s right.

Maybe he won’t last half a day.

