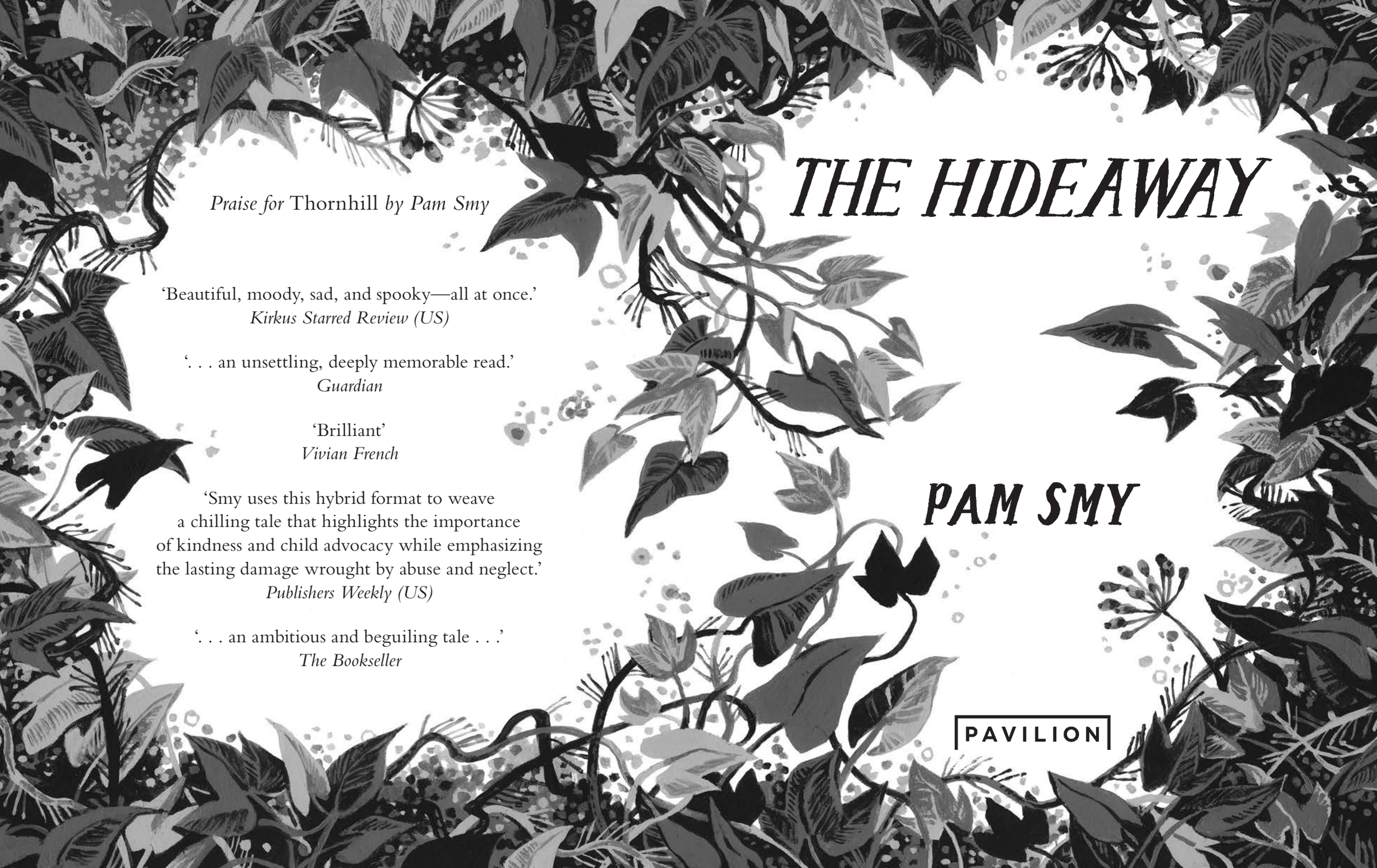

THE HIDEAWAY
PAM SMY



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PAVILION



Praise for Thornhill *by Pam Smy*

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Kirkus Starred Review (US)

'. . . an unsettling, deeply memorable read.'
Guardian

'Brilliant'
Vivian French

'Smy uses this hybrid format to weave
a chilling tale that highlights the importance
of kindness and child advocacy while emphasizing
the lasting damage wrought by abuse and neglect.'
Publishers Weekly (US)

'. . . an ambitious and beguiling tale . . .'
The Bookseller

THE HIDEAWAY

PAM SMY

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The poem 'All Souls' Night' © The Literary Executors of Frances Cornford (1886-1960)

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For those who long to be reunited with those they have lost

Chapter One

30th October, 24 Brownsfield Close, 8 p.m.

Billy tried to slide the drawer shut as quietly as he could. He folded a couple of hoodies and stuffed them into the bag with his joggers, jeans, socks and pants. He slid some cash into his back pocket.

He could hear the familiar noises from downstairs. It was starting again and he knew it would follow the same pattern.

I'm sorry, Jeff, I didn't mean . . .

He packed a pen and a few books.

Please, Jeff! It won't happen again . . .

He pulled the sleeping bag from under his bed and squeezed it into a backpack. He grabbed his rolled-up camping mat and strapped it to the bottom of the bag. He took his pillow but not his mobile. Where he was going he wouldn't be able to charge it anyway and he didn't want to be found.

It was just a silly mistake . . .

He slipped the notebook he had been writing in back into its usual place on the bookshelf and made sure it couldn't be seen.

Then Jeff's gruff growl of a voice started just as he knew it would.

You stupid cow!

Billy pulled the backpack closed, zipped up his bag and put his coat on. He took one final look at his room. Was it tidy enough? He always tried to keep it tidy, just to help his mum out. He tiptoed down the stairs, although Jeff was shouting now, so they wouldn't hear him anyway. As he

crept along the hall he saw, through the frosted glass of the sitting-room door, Jeff's silhouette looming over his mum.

I just don't know what to do! You never listen! You drive me bloody crazy, woman! You make me . . .

In the kitchen Billy quietly pulled open the cutlery drawer. He took a spoon, fork and knife, and after hesitating for a few seconds he decided to also take all the sharp chopping knives. He wrapped them in a tea towel. Then he took string, candles, matches, a torch and a roll of bin bags from under the sink. He dropped some apples, cheese and half the loaf of bread into a bag. As he turned the key in the lock of the back door, click, he heard the first . . .

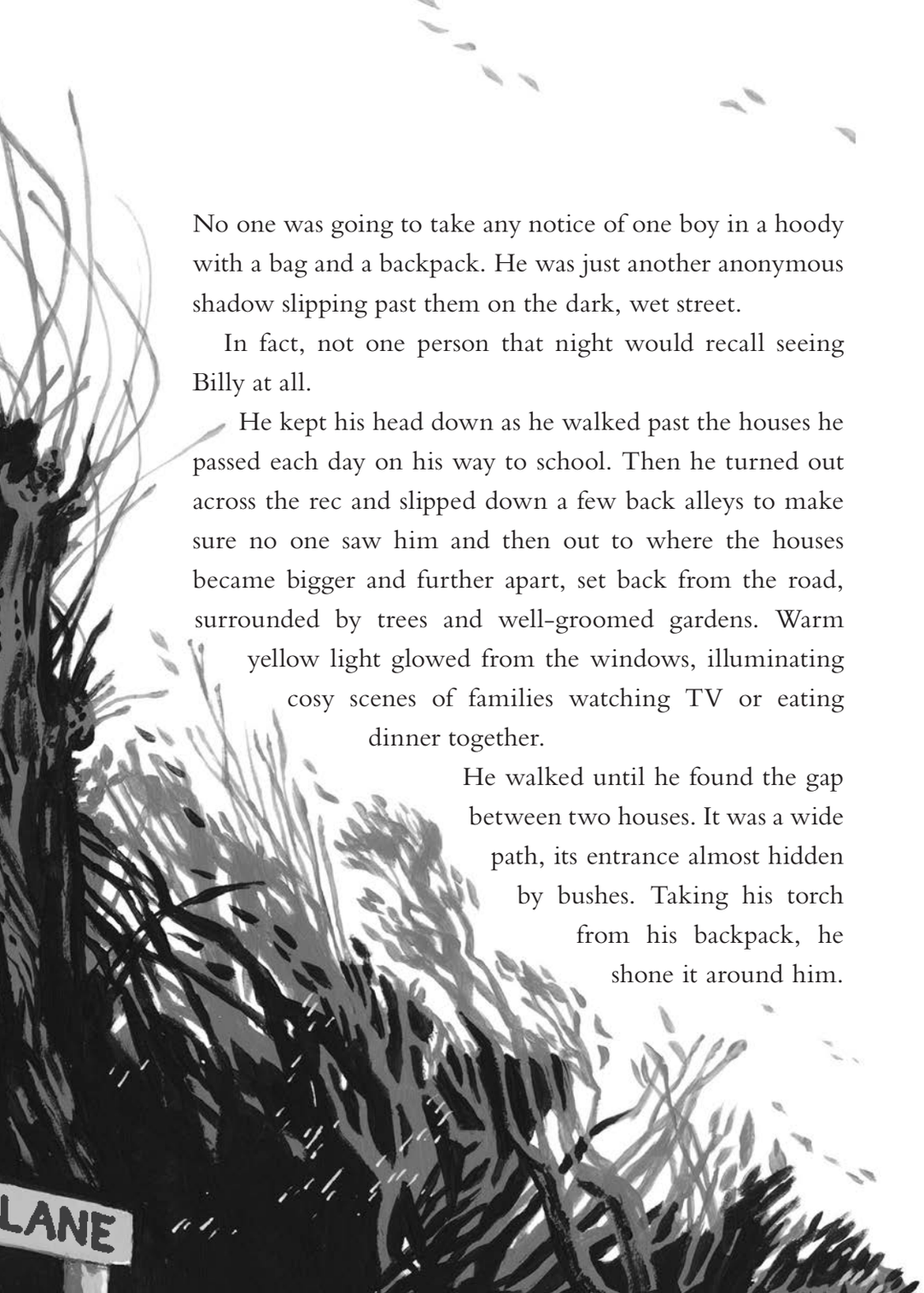
Slap!

Even though he had heard it hundreds of times before, the shock of it made him wince, but, determined to follow his plan, he stepped out into the cold of the night and shut the door on the sound of his mum crying.

Chapter Two

A fierce wind battered the rain hard against pavements and windows. Despite having his hood up, rain splattered on to his forehead and into his eyes, running in rivulets down his jacket as he walked purposefully through the streets. He followed the route he had rehearsed in his mind so many times before. Passers-by tucked their heads deep into their coat collars as they hurried home. Cars splashed through puddles, their headlamps casting blurred beams of light.





No one was going to take any notice of one boy in a hoody with a bag and a backpack. He was just another anonymous shadow slipping past them on the dark, wet street.

In fact, not one person that night would recall seeing Billy at all.

He kept his head down as he walked past the houses he passed each day on his way to school. Then he turned out across the rec and slipped down a few back alleys to make sure no one saw him and then out to where the houses became bigger and further apart, set back from the road, surrounded by trees and well-groomed gardens. Warm yellow light glowed from the windows, illuminating cosy scenes of families watching TV or eating dinner together.

He walked until he found the gap between two houses. It was a wide path, its entrance almost hidden by bushes. Taking his torch from his backpack, he shone it around him.

Was it the right place? The torchlight picked out the sign behind the clump of nettles. ALL SOULS' LANE. *This was it.*

The lane was unlit and very quiet. Away from the road, the houses and the street lamps, the night seemed to become darker and the sound of his footsteps louder. On he walked, his torchlight picking out the scattering of leaves as the wind blew around him. On and on into the leafy black and the gate at the end of the lane.

That was where he stopped.

This was where he wanted to be.

This was where he knew he wouldn't be found.

He swung open the gate and stepped into the graveyard beyond . . .

Chapter Three

30th October, 26 Brownsfield Close, 8.45 p.m.

Suzie stopped midway through unpacking another box of books, leant across and clicked off the radio.

There it was again.

The noise from next door.

She had only been in Brownsfield Close a few weeks and this was the second time she had heard an argument through the walls.

She stood as still as possible, books in one hand and strained to hear what was happening next door. She couldn't make out the words but she *could* hear the bellow of a man's

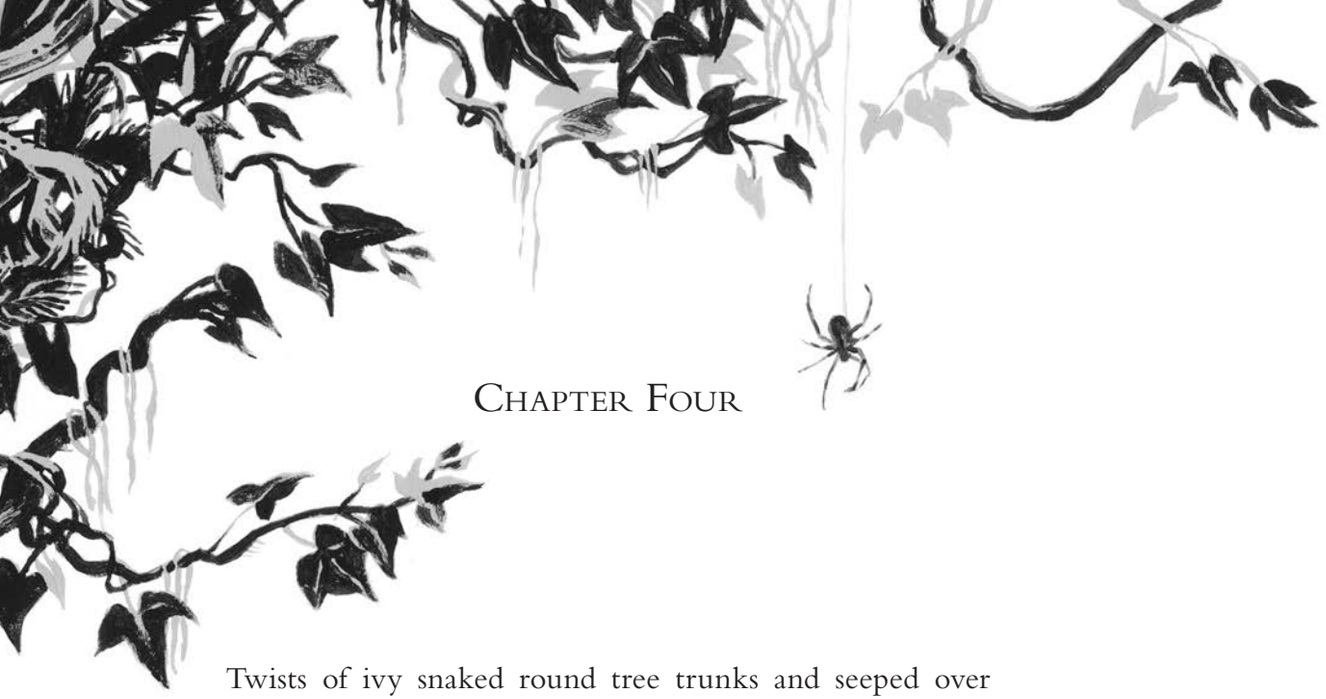
voice and the occasional crash of . . . what? Crockery? She wasn't sure.

It went quiet. She held her breath, trying to imagine what had happened. All couples argued but what she had heard through the wall was unsettling. It was wretched. Desperate. Frightening even. But all couples were different, weren't they? Maybe her new neighbours just had a fiery relationship. How could she tell? And maybe it sounded worse than it really was. She hadn't actually *seen* anything.

Then Suzie heard the man's voice coming from the hall, just a few metres from where she was standing.

She clicked off the light and walked through to the sitting-room window.

The door of number 24 slammed shut and the man pulled on a jacket, pausing at the end of the garden. Suzie watched as he turned away from the bluster of the wind and clicked at a lighter. His face was temporarily lit by the small flame and then it was gone. Only the orange tip of the cigarette was visible against his dark shape. He blew out a long breath of smoke, stepped out on to the pavement and walked away into the night.



Chapter Four

Twists of ivy snaked round tree trunks and seeped over gravestones. Dark rows of yews lined an overgrown path, their swaying, shifting branches forming a tunnel that Billy lit up with the weak beam of his torch. Branches, graves and statues flashed in and out of sight in the torchlight. Billy swung the beam to the centre of the graveyard where, in the middle of it all, stood an old stone chapel. It was a small, squat, dark shape against the night sky and was dwarfed by the trees around it.

Everything was so different in the dark. He had known it would be but hadn't imagined it like this . . . So inky-black and so lonely.

He shivered as the rain ran down his neck. He felt small

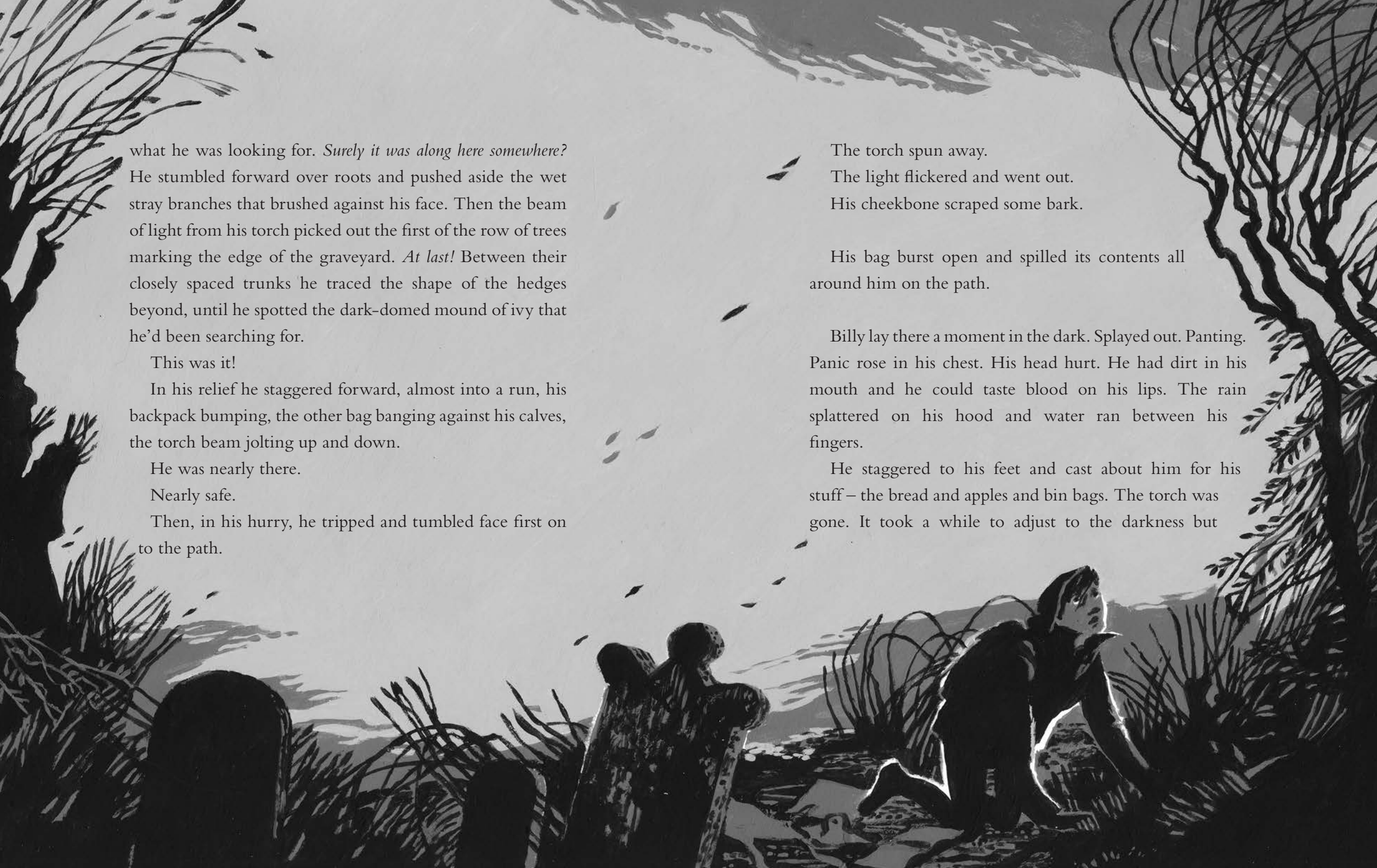
and lost. But anything was better than being at home. Even this.

Hesitantly he took the path between the yews, his torch lighting the carved headstones that lined the graveyard. He tried to make out the exact path but the tangle of weeds obscured the way and snatched at his ankles. He dragged his wet jeans through the leaves, snapping twigs underfoot and swivelling the torchlight between what was at his feet and the direction the pathway took ahead. The wind swished through the trees and his torch beam lit up spindly branches as they danced across his path, catching at his jacket and snagging on his hood like brittle fingers reaching for him.

He stopped, confused about where he was. Had he gone the wrong way? Everything looked so different in the dark. He gripped the torch and swung it around him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. His heart thumped.

Don't bottle it now, he told himself. *Keep going. You can't go back.*

Then he spotted the wall again. All he needed to do now was to follow the outline of the graveyard and he'd find



what he was looking for. *Surely it was along here somewhere?* He stumbled forward over roots and pushed aside the wet stray branches that brushed against his face. Then the beam of light from his torch picked out the first of the row of trees marking the edge of the graveyard. *At last!* Between their closely spaced trunks he traced the shape of the hedges beyond, until he spotted the dark-domed mound of ivy that he'd been searching for.

This was it!

In his relief he staggered forward, almost into a run, his backpack bumping, the other bag banging against his calves, the torch beam jolting up and down.

He was nearly there.

Nearly safe.

Then, in his hurry, he tripped and tumbled face first on to the path.

The torch spun away.

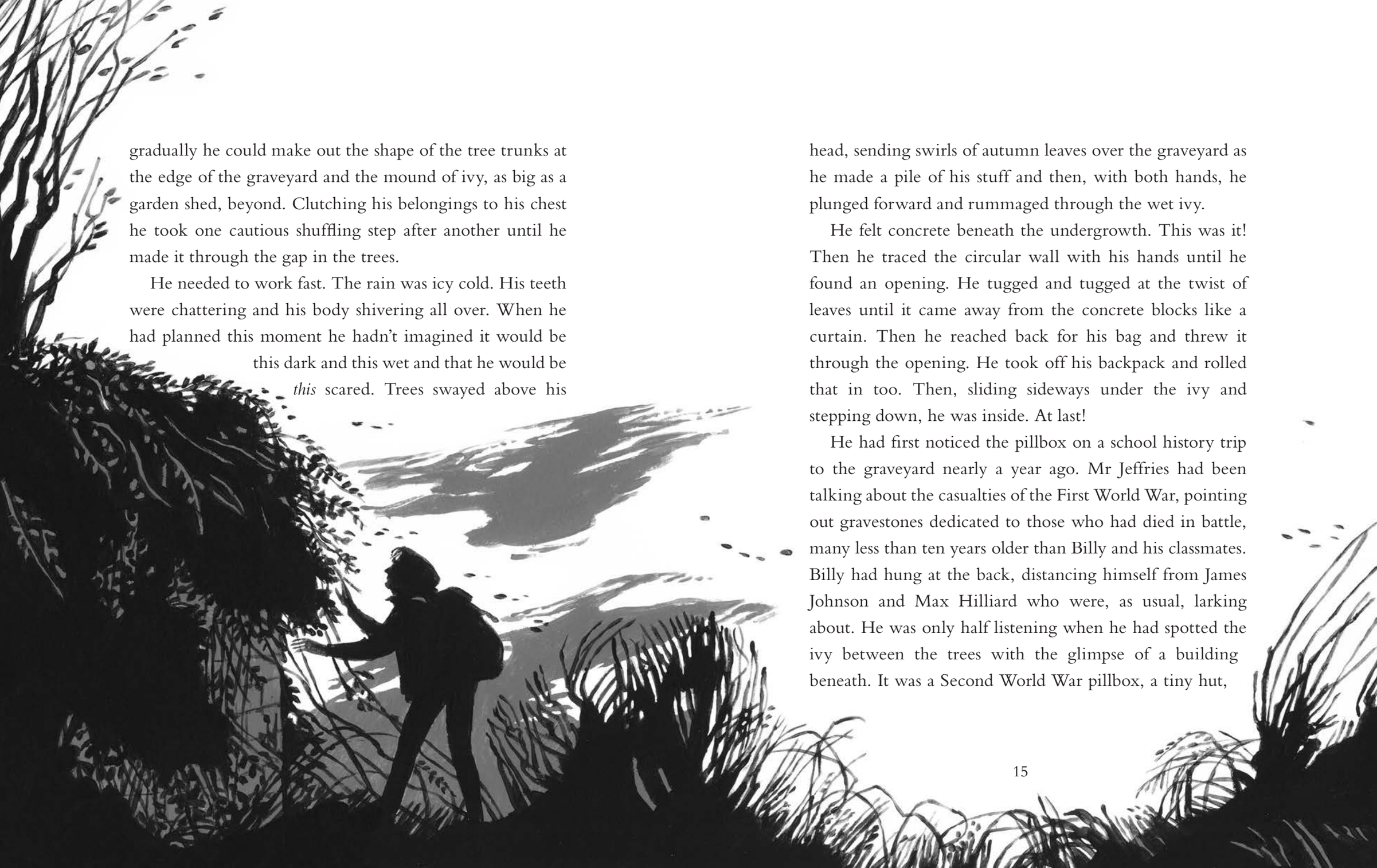
The light flickered and went out.

His cheekbone scraped some bark.

His bag burst open and spilled its contents all around him on the path.

Billy lay there a moment in the dark. Splayed out. Panting. Panic rose in his chest. His head hurt. He had dirt in his mouth and he could taste blood on his lips. The rain splattered on his hood and water ran between his fingers.

He staggered to his feet and cast about him for his stuff – the bread and apples and bin bags. The torch was gone. It took a while to adjust to the darkness but



gradually he could make out the shape of the tree trunks at the edge of the graveyard and the mound of ivy, as big as a garden shed, beyond. Clutching his belongings to his chest he took one cautious shuffling step after another until he made it through the gap in the trees.

He needed to work fast. The rain was icy cold. His teeth were chattering and his body shivering all over. When he had planned this moment he hadn't imagined it would be this dark and this wet and that he would be *this* scared. Trees swayed above his head, sending swirls of autumn leaves over the graveyard as he made a pile of his stuff and then, with both hands, he plunged forward and rummaged through the wet ivy.

He felt concrete beneath the undergrowth. This was it! Then he traced the circular wall with his hands until he found an opening. He tugged and tugged at the twist of leaves until it came away from the concrete blocks like a curtain. Then he reached back for his bag and threw it through the opening. He took off his backpack and rolled that in too. Then, sliding sideways under the ivy and stepping down, he was inside. At last!

He had first noticed the pillbox on a school history trip to the graveyard nearly a year ago. Mr Jeffries had been talking about the casualties of the First World War, pointing out gravestones dedicated to those who had died in battle, many less than ten years older than Billy and his classmates. Billy had hung at the back, distancing himself from James Johnson and Max Hilliard who were, as usual, larking about. He was only half listening when he had spotted the ivy between the trees with the glimpse of a building beneath. It was a Second World War pillbox, a tiny hut,

built from concrete blocks as part of the country's defence in case of attack. It was there and then, in that history lesson, with Mr Jeffries droning on in the background, that Billy had realized he had found the perfect hiding place should he ever need it.

And tonight he needed it.

It was even darker inside. Unable to see, Billy fumbled with numb fingers at the zip on his backpack and reached into an inside pocket for his bike light. He clicked it on and looked around.

The floor was compacted dirt and was covered with leaves and the odd crisp packet and cigarette butt. He scrabbled around, scraping the rubbish aside, unrolled some bin bags and laid them out like a bed. He flattened out his camping mat. Then unpacked his sleeping bag and rolled it out with shaking hands and he put his pillow in place.

He pulled out some candles and matches. It took several attempts to strike a light. Eventually the candles were lit. He dug them into the dirt floor so they balanced there, the light flickering around the low walls.

Slowly he peeled off his wet trainers and socks and slid out of his cold jeans. He shrugged off the wet hoody and pulled a clean, dry one over his T-shirt. He put on his joggers and then three pairs of socks. He felt the warmth seep into his body, although his teeth were still chattering.

So this is it, he thought. *I've done it.*

He lay there listening to the sounds outside, the thump of his heart steadily slowing as warmth returned to his body. The rain pelted the leaf-covered roof of the pillbox and the wind rushed through the tall branches of the trees above. Somewhere a fox barked.

Billy felt safe here, cocooned in the pillbox in the middle of a graveyard of all places. So much safer than he felt at home. He was relieved he had got away at last, but, as he drifted off to sleep, it was the sound of his mum's crying that filled his head.