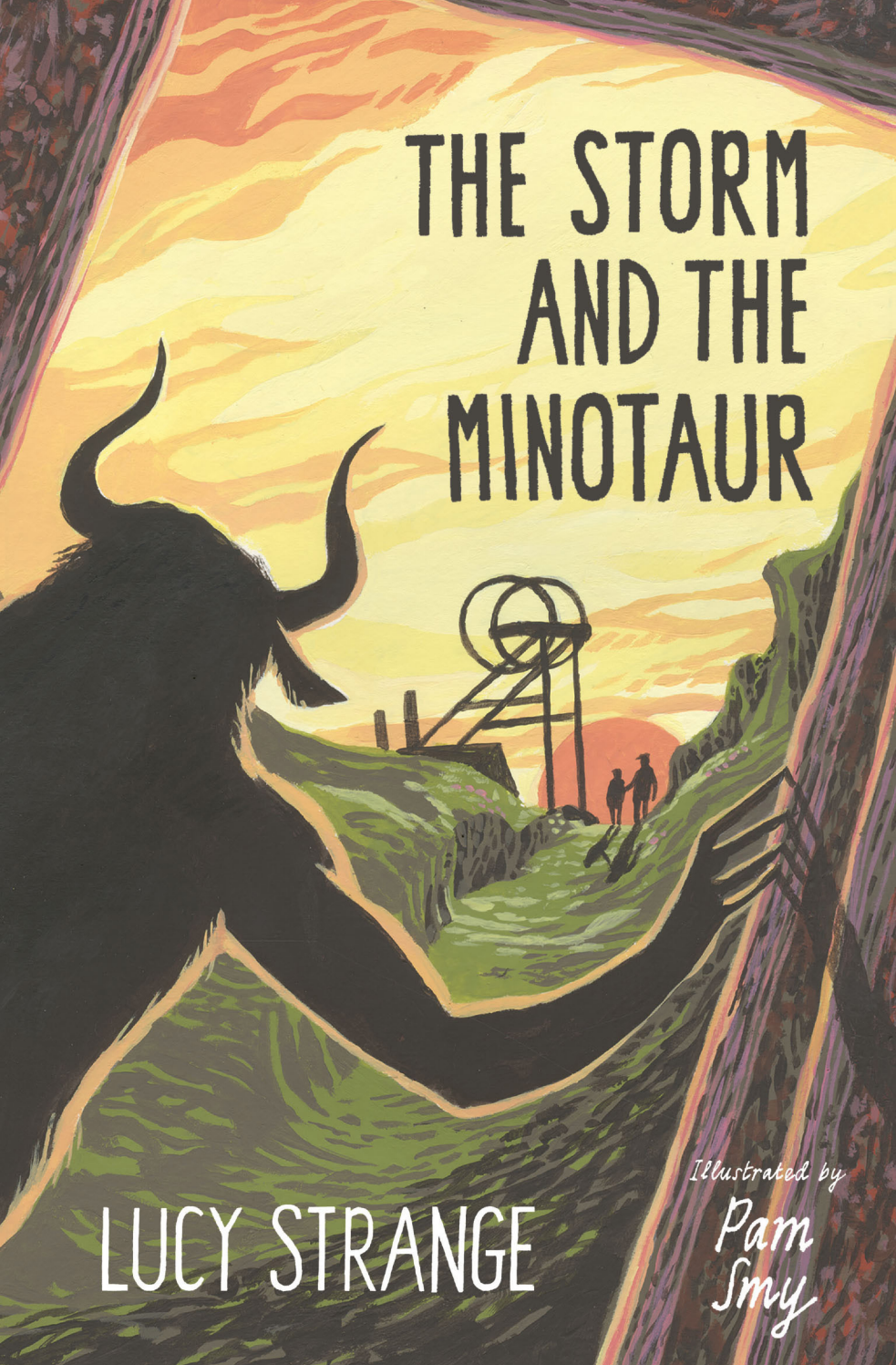

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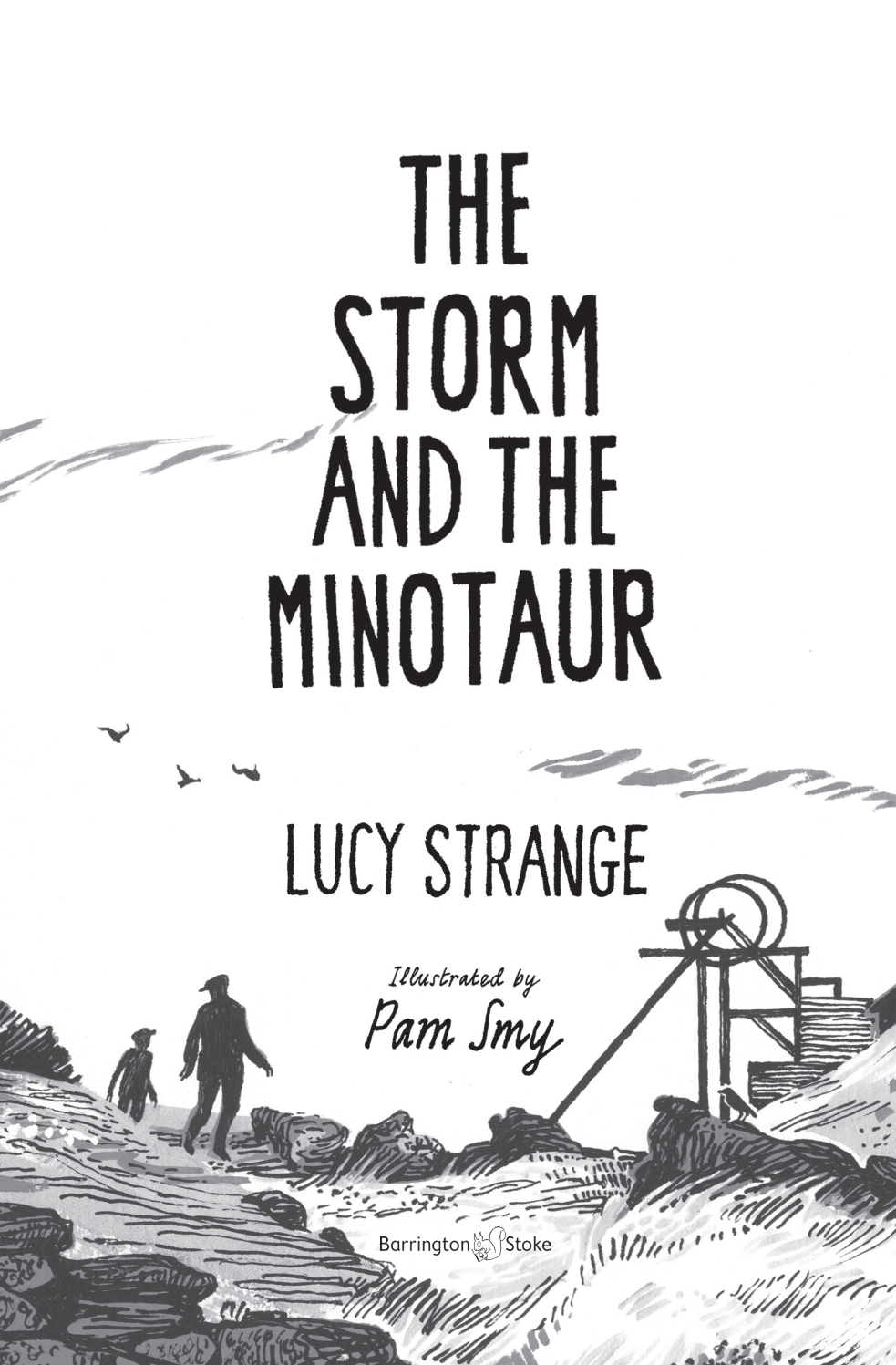

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Barrington Stoke

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For Janet and Stuart – L.S.

For Dad and Jan – P.S.



Chapter 1

The mouth of the coal mine is in front of me. It is just as black and just as terrifying as you might imagine. It is a square hole in the hillside – about as high as my chest and as wide as my arms can stretch. It is framed with thick wooden beams.

There are different ways in and out of the mine. There are shafts that go straight up and down. Some have rusty old ladders to climb down. Some have winches to haul up coal, and to carry the workers too. You have to hold on tight to a rope to get lowered all the way down

in the darkness, like a bucket being dropped into a well.

Then there are drifts and slopes like the one I'm looking at – narrow tunnels that go into the hill sideways until they meet the shafts and passageways of the coal seam.

Some of the tunnels have tracks for the hundreds of carts of coal that are dragged out of the mine every day. Some, like this one, are just for letting fresh air into the mine, but they can also be used as a passageway if you stoop down or crawl along on your hands and knees.

The children who work in the mine call this drift the dayhole. They often use it when they are coming home. It's a longer route, but you don't have to wait for the winch to bring you up, or climb that awful ladder when your arms are already tired and aching.

I gaze into the square black hole. A breath shudders in and out.

This is my life now.

Somewhere down there, far beneath my feet, there is a whole underground world …

A hand claps hard on my back. "Excited, lad?" my dad asks.

I try to smile. I want Dad to be proud. I've known all my life that I'd end up following him into the mine one day. But now that day is here at last, and I wish it wasn't.

"Excited!" I lie.

Dad nods.

We both look into the mouth of the mine. I chew on my lip.

I want to tell Dad the truth – I'm frightened. I don't want to work in the mine at all. But I know how much it means to Dad, and I know how much we need the extra money. I've heard

Mam and Dad whispering about it at night – counting the pennies out on the kitchen table. I've heard the long silences …

"It's hard work," Dad says. His voice is low and serious. "Dangerous too. But it's honest,

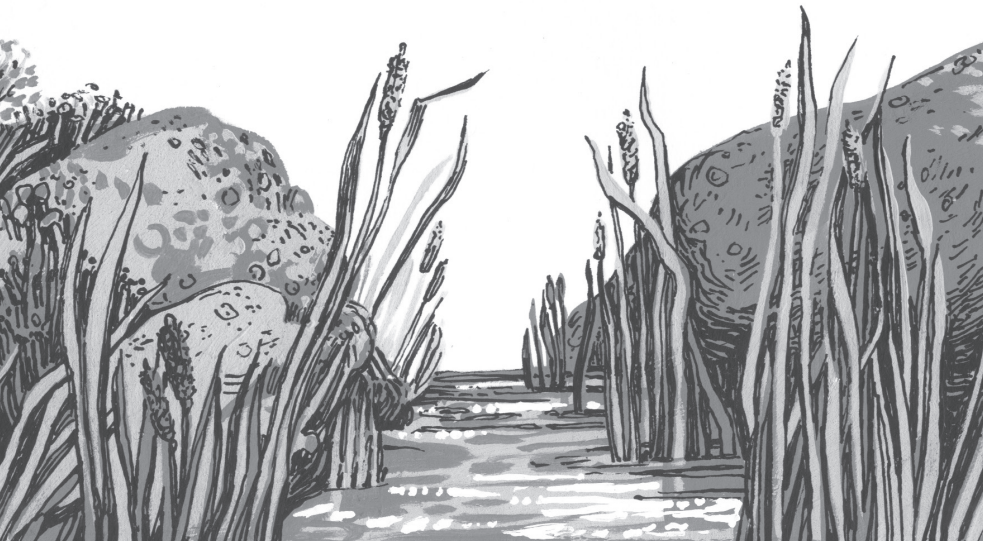


and it's important. We're the beating heart of this country – working down there in the dark. Nothing happens without us – not factories, not steam trains – nothing. Remember that, son." He ruffles my hair. "We'll be working side by side, you and me."

Dad has been looking forward to this for a long time.

And I have been dreading it.

He is smiling. I notice the lines around his eyes and mouth. Coal dust has settled into his skin in deep black creases. "Let's head home, lad," Dad says. "Early start in the morning."

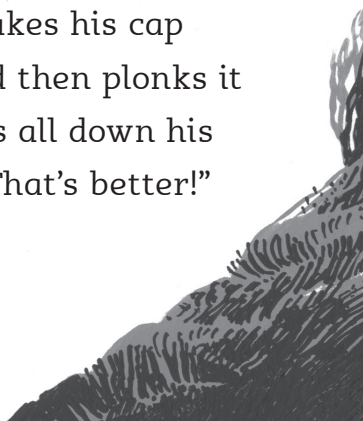


I turn away from the coal mouth. I hope it will make me feel better to face the trees and the hills and the village instead – to see green and grey and brown rather than that gaping blackness. But I don't feel better at all. I feel as if I've turned my back on a hungry monster. I can feel the coal mouth watching me.

It knows it doesn't have long to wait ...

The sun is setting as Dad and I head back towards the village. It has been another hot day, and the sky is a strange colour, as if all the blue has been bleached out of it by the heat of the sun.

We jump across the stream, and Dad bends down to dip his hands in it. He takes his cap off, dunks it in the cool water and then plonks it back on his head. The water runs all down his face. "Aah!" he says, grinning. "That's better!"



I laugh at him, take my own cap off and do the same thing. "Aah!" I say, just like he did. The water is icy cold down my neck, down my back. I blink it out of my eyes. The world blurs for a moment, and everything else disappears – the hillside, the trees, the stream, the mouth of the mine. It is just me and Dad laughing.

Like I'm little again.

Like everything is fine.

