



INTO THE
FAERIE
HILL

H. S. NORUP is the award-winning author of *The Hungry Ghost* and *The Missing Barbegazi*—a *Sunday Times* Book of the Year in 2018. She grew up in Denmark, where she devoured fairy tales and escaped into books. After living in six different countries, she now resides in Switzerland and writes stories inspired by her travels, set in the borderlands between the real and imaginary worlds. When she's not writing or reading, she spends her time outdoors either skiing, hiking, swimming or taking photos.

ALSO BY H.S. NORUP

The Missing Barbegazi

The Hungry Ghost

PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S



H.S. NORUP

Pushkin Press
Somerset House, Strand
London WC2R 1LA

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Into the Faerie Hill was first published by Pushkin Press in 2023

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

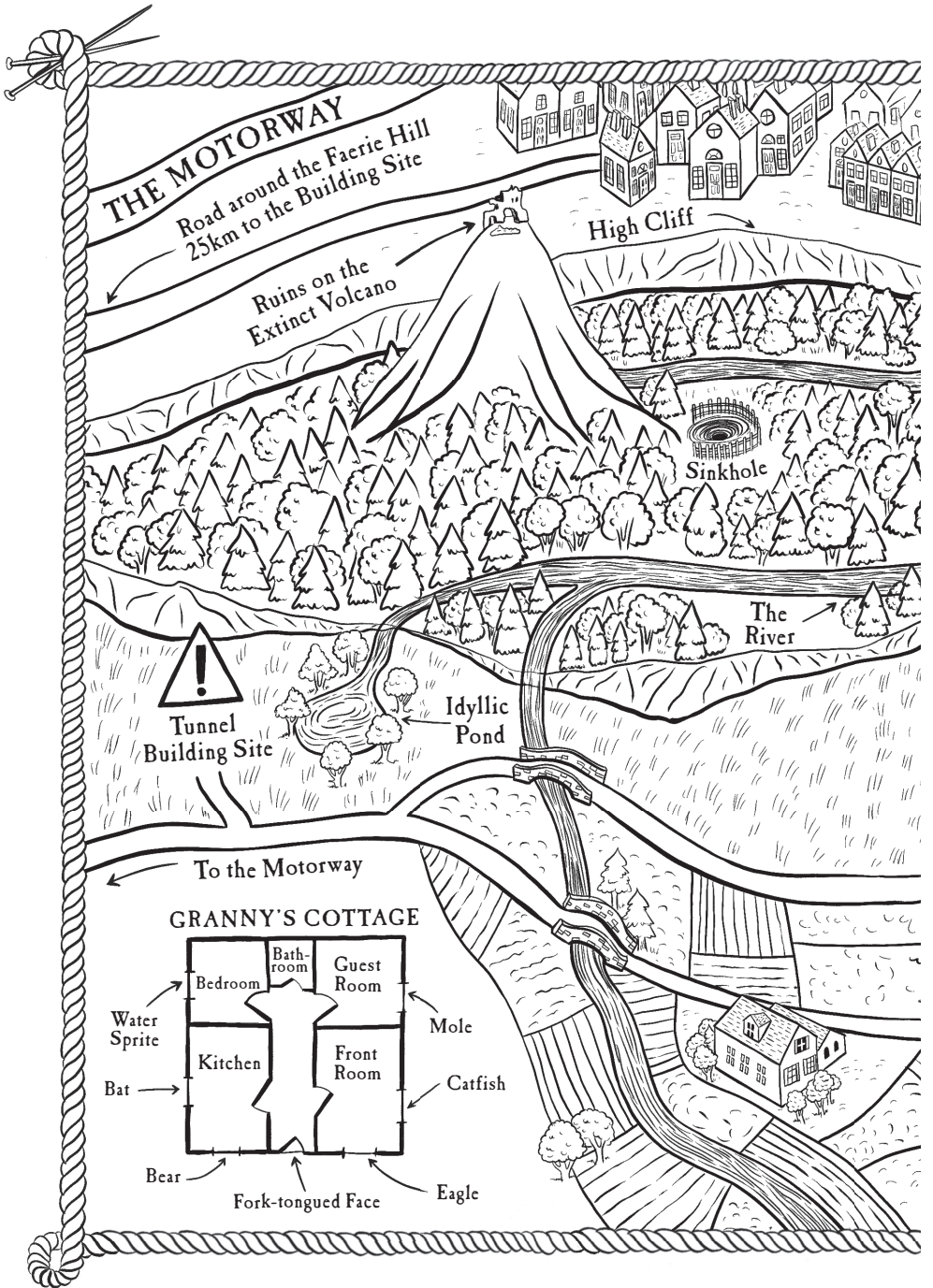
ISBN 13: 978-1-78269-386-4

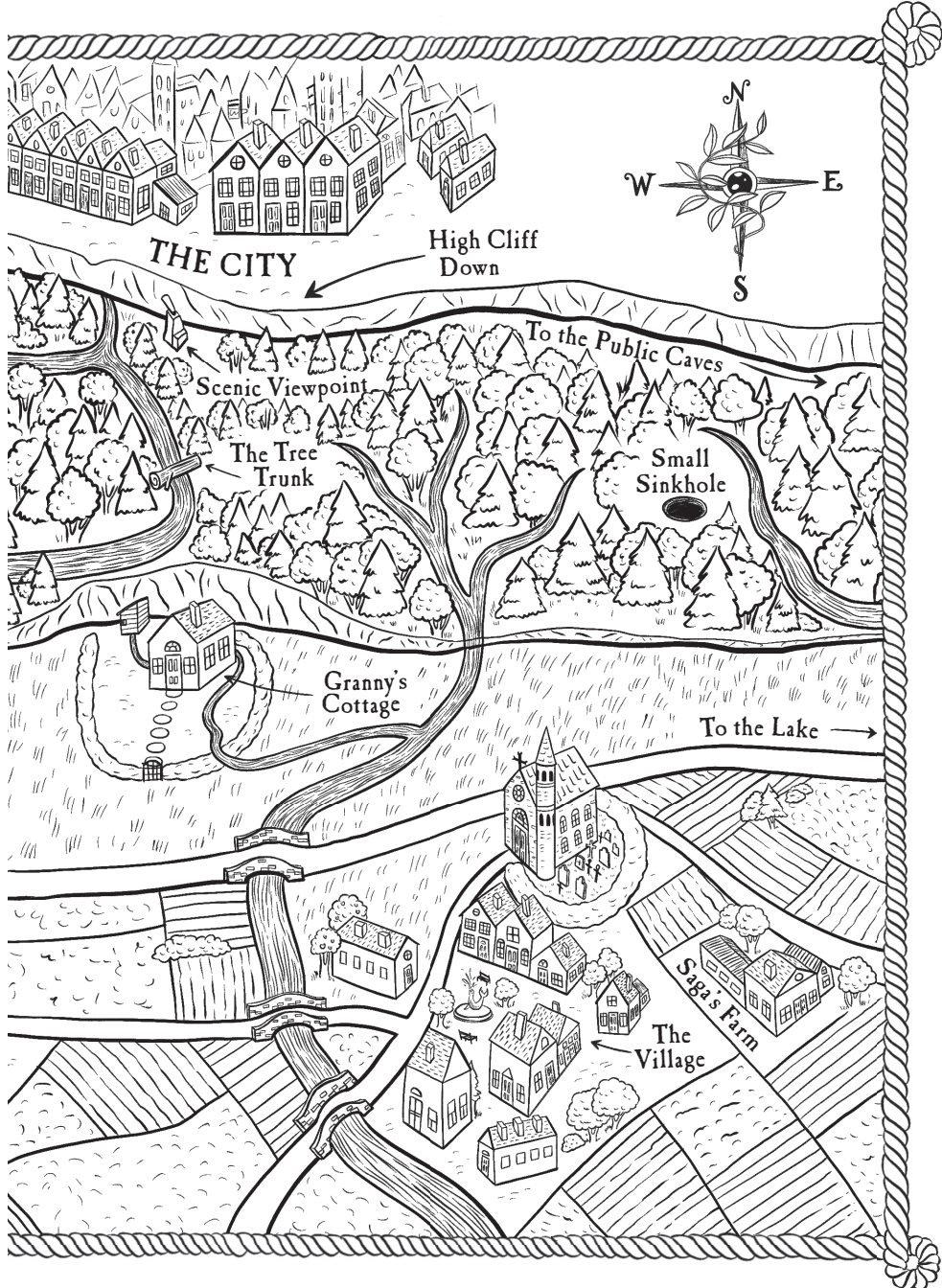
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Designed and typeset by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

www.pushkinpress.com

*For Far—my dad—and all fathers
who raise children on their own*









I



The Cottage Under the Forest

Alfred stopped on the garden path, slowed his heart-beat and concentrated on becoming invisible. He thought about his jeans turning the faded, peeling brown of the gate behind him. He focused on his T-shirt becoming a mass of sun-speckled leaves. And he imagined his dark, unruly curls becoming the twigs of a corkscrew hazel. This time, though, his little trick didn't work. It didn't make the feeling of being watched disappear.

Ahead of him, Dad was skipping towards the red door of Granny's cottage, jumping over cracked stones with easy familiarity and the movements of a carefree boy.

After closing the gate, Alfred looked up at the limestone cliff that rose behind the cottage. At the top of the cliff, tall trees leant out from the edge, stretching their branches over the thatched roof. Tree roots formed deep lines in the rock face. They looked like pointy teeth, ready to gobble the cottage in a single bite.

Alfred shuddered. Maybe all his dark-forest nightmares stemmed from here. The place was even more sinister than he recalled from his visit five years ago. He only remembered

staying here once, but of course he knew that he was born in this cottage and had lived in it the first months of his life, until Dad took him away.

In the past twelve years, the two of them had lived in ten different cities, in six different countries, on three different continents. A stream of nannies had taught Alfred their mother tongues. An even bigger stream of bullies had used those languages to taunt him. Granny had travelled to visit them wherever they called home.

'Come on, Alfie,' Dad said from the front step. 'Mum, we're here!' he called, as he opened the door.

A crow cawed. Two black birds took off from the roof and swooped down towards Alfred, coming so close he ducked. The slab of granite he was standing on wobbled. He put the foot of his longest leg down on the next stone.

Something scuttled around under the hedge of brambles.

'Does granny have a cat?' he called, without getting an answer. Careful not to lose his balance, Alfred crouched and peered under the thorny branches.

'A cat? That one calls us a cat, Little Father,' a high-pitched, screechy voice said.

'Is it him, Little Mother? It is, isn't it?' a slightly less screechy voice replied.

'Hello,' Alfred said. 'Who's there?' He thought he could see a pair of eyes reflecting the light. An odd musty smell mixed with the scent of roses.

'Is he speaking to us?' the first voice, the one called Little Mother, asked.

'Never mind that. We must tell Her at once, Little Mother.'

Whatever was hiding under the brambles scuttled away. Leaves shook and white petals floated to the ground.

Alfred stood up and craned his neck. On the other side of the hedgerow, poppies and dandelions dotted a green meadow. The long grass swayed in a zigzag pattern. Clouds of downy tufts rose and blew away.

Could it have been small children? It didn't sound like children, but the grass wasn't tall enough to hide adults, and he couldn't believe anyone would be able to crawl away so fast. Perhaps talking animals? He rolled his eyes at himself. Probably it was all in his head.

Somehow, whenever he was in the countryside surrounded by nature, Alfred's imagination went into overdrive. He often had the feeling something was watching him. A few times, he'd imagined seeing glimpses of weird creatures. Once, when he'd been swimming in the sea, an ugly catfish had warned him of an undertow near the shore. Or so he'd imagined.

The cat, or whatever it was he'd actually seen just now, disappeared in the direction of the trees.

As he stepped from stone to stone, Alfred tried not to look up at the forest. He focused on avoiding the cracks and only raised his eyes as far as the cottage. The red door was open. He could hear Dad's and Granny's voices. But it was as if his gaze was being pulled upwards to the half-circle of panelled windows above the door.

Alfred gasped. A small face up there was staring back at him. He stopped abruptly, tried to still his racing heart, become unnoticeable, unseeable, invisible. It still didn't work.

The face was unnaturally long. Black, deep-set eyes narrowed. A tongue flicked out—a forked tongue.

All his nightmares came awake in his mind. His breathing grew shallow. So many times, this exact face had invaded his dreams and made him wake up screaming. He hadn't known

where it came from. He hadn't remembered. But it was here, from Granny's cottage.

Quickly, his eyes sought out the panelled windows on either side of the door. Two of his other nightmare figures were there. In one window stood a carved wooden bear with its nose in the air as if it were sniffing. Its head had almost human features. In the other stood a wood-carved eagle in flight, its wings spread wide. Its eyes were clearly human, and it was scowling at him with a cold glare that gave him the chills.

Alfred glanced back up above the door. Like fun-mirrors, the old windows must've been skewing the features, because now the forked tongue was still, the eye sockets empty, and it was just a strange face carved out of a small wooden log.

He wondered if his mother had found the woodcarvings scary too. If she had liked it here...

He often wondered about his mother. Who had she been? Did he resemble her at all? Most of all, he wondered whether she'd been like Dad, someone easy-going who fitted in everywhere without having to make an effort. Or whether she'd been like him, a fish out of water, always an outsider.

The hope of learning more about her was the only reason he'd agreed to stay in the cottage.

Granny pushed past Dad out onto the front step. A strand of long dark hair had escaped her bun and swept across her forehead.

'Alfred,' she called. She didn't rush out to hug him or say any of the usual things, like how lovely it was to see him again and how much he'd grown since Christmas. Instead, she looked up and left and right with a worried frown. 'Don't stay out there. Come inside!'

'Why?'

'Don't dawdle now.'

Limping slightly, Alfred hurried the last steps.

A whisper went through the trees far above, and a flutter of leaves, like green snow, fell behind him, as Alfred entered the cottage, crossing the threshold.