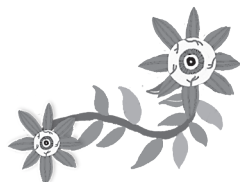




A PLACE CALLED PERFECT



HELENA DUGGAN



To Mam, the original dreamer

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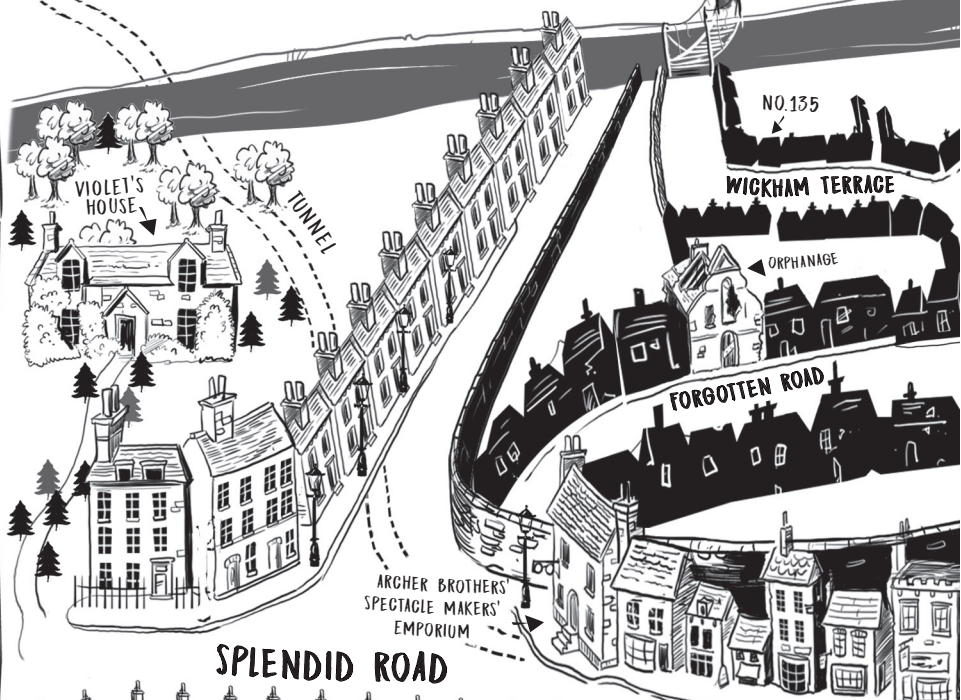
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GRAVEYARD

THE GHOST ESTATE



VIOLET'S HOUSE

TUNNEL

NO. 135

WICKHAM TERRACE

ORPHANAGE

FORGOTTEN ROAD

ARCHER BROTHERS'
SPECTACLE MAKERS'
EMPORIUM

SPLENDID ROAD

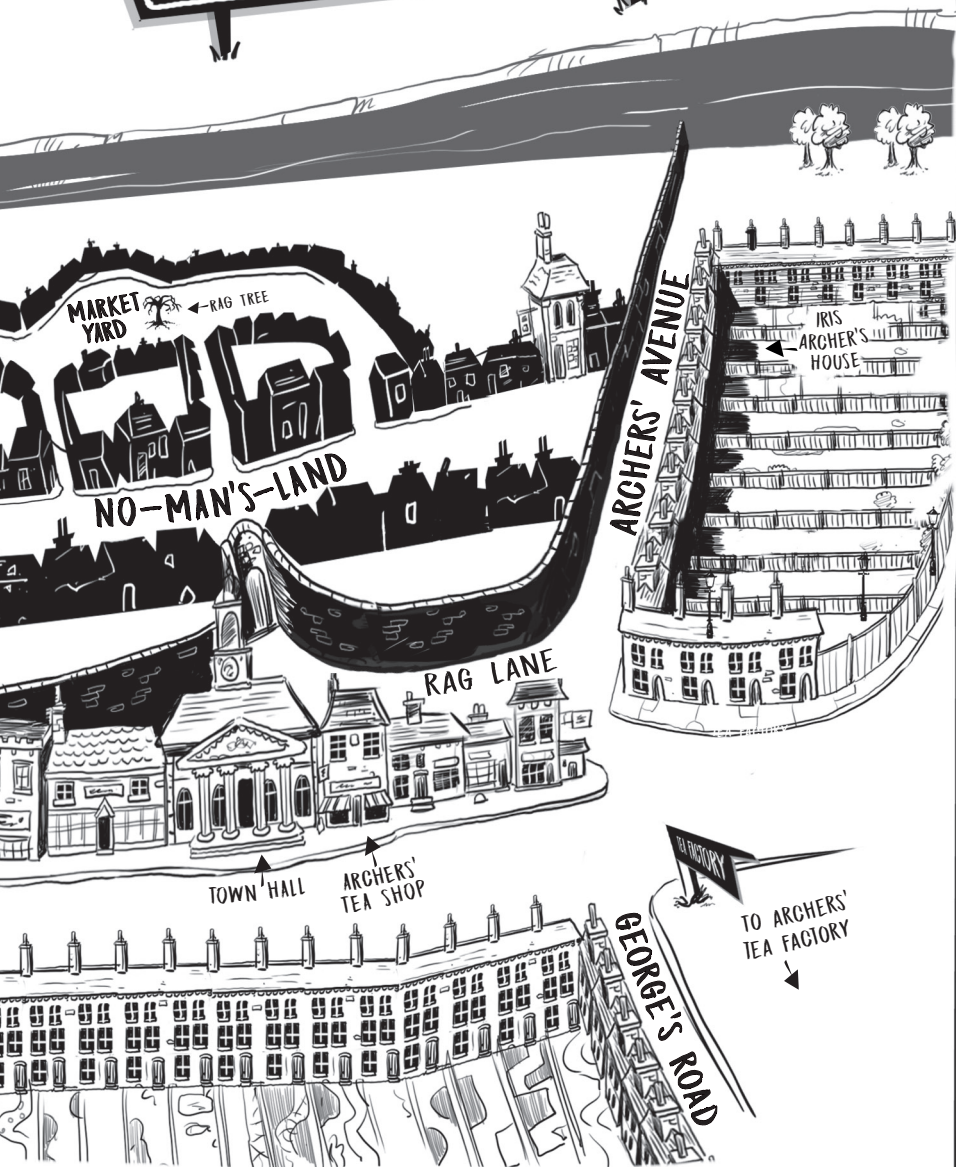
EDWARD STREET

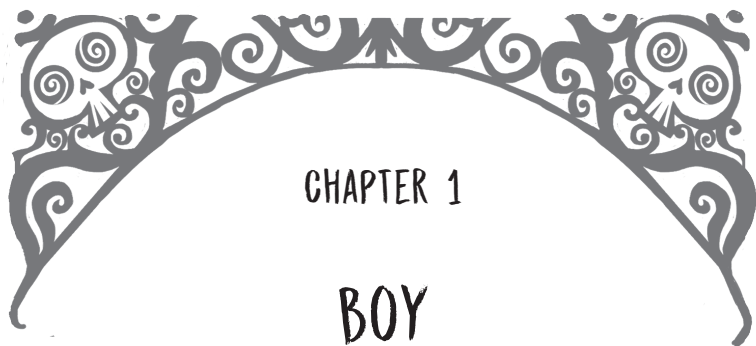


THE SCHOOL



WELCOME TO PERFECT



A decorative arch with intricate scrollwork and skull motifs on either side, framing the chapter title.

CHAPTER 1

BOY

He waited. Hidden by dusk and the garden bushes against the bark of an oak tree. Watching. The spot gave him full view of the house and gravel driveway.

Worrying about being seen felt weird.

Perfect had been alive with the news of Doctor Eugene Brown's arrival for weeks. The doctor would help. Boy knew it, more than he'd ever known anything. He just had to get to the man before he changed.

As night closed in, George and Edward Archer strode by and mounted the stone steps to the house. The place lit up and Boy watched them move around inside.

Suddenly light darted across the grass by his feet and Boy pulled back further into the shadows. A silver car

crunched along the driveway towards him and stopped. His heartbeat quickened. The engine purred to silence.

The large door of the house opened and the Archer twins stood silhouetted in the light from the hallway. As Boy watched, statue still, a shiver danced down his spine.

A man got out of the driver's seat; a woman from the passenger's side.

He hadn't imagined the doctor would have company. The woman looked nervous, staring across the roof of the car at the man. He smiled awkwardly at her then walked towards the twins, greeting them with a handshake. The woman followed and the four of them disappeared inside.

Boy ventured a little out of the shadows, stopping short as the doctor called, "Violet. Come in from the car, pet, it's chilly out there."

The back door of the car opened a little, then quickly slammed shut as a breeze rustled the leaves above him.

Boy held his breath and pulled back into hiding. The car door swung open again, and this time a small, frightened girl dashed out across the gravel towards the house.

Boy couldn't help laughing. She sped up, jumped the steps and rushed in through the front door, banging it shut behind her and plunging the yard back into darkness.

The car door hung open and Boy pushed it shut as he

edged closer to the kitchen window. He just caught sight of the girl sliding into the room.

He sat down by the steps to wait.

Night rolled on. The Watchers would be patrolling soon and he couldn't be caught outside the walls again. He'd come back in the morning, early, and speak to the doctor then.

He took one last look in the window. The girl sat between her mam and dad – a proper family. Something inside him stung as he thumbed the rub-worn note in his pocket.



CHAPTER 2



A SILENT PROTEST

Violet woke with a start as the car crunched to a stop over squashed gravel. It was dark. She pulled herself up from the warm leather seat and peered out the side window. The house was big, much bigger than their old one and looked like something from a magazine. The lights were on inside.

She gasped and ducked back down.

Two dark figures, one tall, one small, stood shadowed in the light from the open doorway. Violet's father looked at her mother then unbuckled his seat belt and stepped out of the car.

"Ah, Mr and Mr Archer," her father said, approaching the men, "we didn't expect a welcoming committee."

“Well of course, Dr Brown, we wanted to see you settled,” the taller one said, extending his hand.

“We’ve been preparing all day. The house is spick and span and we’ve the kettle on the boil,” the smaller man said, stepping in front of the larger one to grab her father’s hand. “Leave your stuff in the car and come in for a brew. I’m sure you must all be exhausted.”

“Of course, how kind,” her mother said, reaching the front door to greet both men, “we’d love a cuppa.”

The four entered the house leaving Violet to fume in her seat, seemingly forgotten.

“Violet. Come in from the car, pet, it’s chilly out there,” her father called from across the driveway.

He hadn’t forgotten her after all. That still didn’t mean he cared about her though. He only cared about this job. When he was offered it, her mother had said “it’s a job amongst jobs”. It was probably like winning an Oscar for opticians. Her dad’s exact words had been “I’d be stupid, utterly stupid to turn it down”.

Her dad was an optha...an opthalo...an ophthalmologist, which meant he was an eye surgeon and cut up eyes all day. Violet thought that was disgusting, so whenever anybody asked, she said he was an optician. His work meant so much to him. Other people’s parents always seemed to talk about how much they hated their jobs, but not her dad. Violet was proud of him but that didn’t mean

she was happy to pack up all her stuff and leave her friends just because of his new job. She thought he was selfish and had told him as much through her tears the night he'd announced they were moving.

She pushed open the heavy car door and poked her head out to look left and right.

The driveway was dark and surrounded by large trees. Huge twisted branches played on the wind, sweeping shadows across the gravel. Violet shivered as the leaves began to whisper. She jumped back and slammed the door, locking herself safely inside the car.

Her mam always said she had an overactive imagination. Violet wished she knew how to make it underactive as she looked out on the dark yard and imagined all the monsters that might lurk in the surrounding trees.

She'd have to make a run for it. She took a deep breath. On the count of three. "One, two, threeeee..."

She flung open the car door, jumped out and ran for the house. Without looking left or right, she bounded up the steps and leaped over the threshold.

Just as she slammed the front door, she thought she heard laughter echo through the trees. She slid down the wall onto the hall floor, trying to catch her breath. Surely it wasn't laughter? Then the car door banged and she froze. Was there someone outside? Her heartbeat quickened.

“Violet, is that you, pet?” her mother called from a room down the hallway. “Come in and say hello to our guests.”

Violet shook the dark thoughts from her mind, putting all sounds down to the wind. *There goes your imagination again*, she scolded herself, getting up from the floor.

She pulled off her shoes and threw them down by the door. The hall was covered in shiny, cream tiles perfect for socks. She took a run and slid the whole way into the room straight ahead, coming to a stop against the kitchen table.

Four pairs of eyes stared at her, two in embarrassment, two in shock.

“Violet!” her father snapped. “We have guests.”

Violet didn’t respond.

She’d decided the night before that she wasn’t going to talk to her dad for as long as it took him to change his mind and move them all back home again. She hated not talking to him because she loved him more than a billion pounds. But she didn’t want the same things as her dad. Her mam didn’t really either. Rose Brown was an accountant in a successful firm and had lots of friends in their old town – but she’d told Violet that sometimes you had to do what was right, even though it was hard and you might not want to do it, and that this move was right for their family.

Violet had thought about not talking to her mam either but as an only child that would mean she'd have no one to talk to at all, at least until she made some friends.

Quickly her dad covered the silence, introducing her to the strange men who sat round the kitchen table.

"Violet, this is Mr George Archer."

"Just George is fine," the tall man said, standing up to shake her hand.

She tried not to laugh. George Archer was so tall he couldn't stand straight in the low-ceilinged room. His head bent to one side almost touching his shoulder. Everything about him was long, from his snake-like arms and wormy fingers to his pencil-thin nose that almost divided his face in two. His head was completely bald and creamy white like a freshly laid egg. Clearly uncomfortable, he quickly sat back down.

"And I'm Edward. Pleased to meet you, Violet," the smaller of the Archers said, as he stood to shake her hand too.

Again she had to stop herself laughing. Violet wasn't even the tallest in her class, but she was the same height as Mr Edward Archer. What he lacked in height he made up for in width. He was square, like a loaf of bread. His head was attached straight to his shoulders as if he had forgotten to grow a neck and his eyes stuck out a little as though they were trying to escape from his face.

The two brothers wore the same brown suits and shiny brown shoes. Edward Archer had a funny bowler hat just like the one on her dad's favourite painting of a man with no face. Mr George Archer had the same hat but his rested on the table beside him – he probably wasn't wearing it because it would fall off every time he stood up indoors.

Both of them had weird reddish eyes hidden behind rectangular gold-framed glasses. They looked a little scary until George took his specs off.

"Oh, it's just the glasses. I thought there was something wrong with your eyes!" Violet smiled at the taller twin. "Why are the lenses red?"

George Archer pushed his glasses back onto his nose.

"They're rose-tinted." He scowled. "We—"

"Well, Violet dear –" Edward Archer quickly interrupted his brother – "it's a funny story really, one we hope your father will help us solve. You see this little town of ours is perfect except for one curious fact: every single inhabitant here wears glasses. After only a short time in Perfect, Violet, you and your family will find that your eyesight starts to get dusty, then the edges of your vision will blur. Eventually you will all go completely blind. We've had numerous scientists come to investigate our situation. They say it's because we're so close to the sun."

"Mam!" Violet quivered, trying not to cry. "I don't want to go blind. I like being able to see. I knew we shouldn't have moved here."

"Oh no, I didn't mean to frighten you, Violet dear," Edward Archer said, kindly. "I assure you the effects are only temporary. They wear off as soon as you leave this town of ours – although I'm quite sure you won't ever want to leave Perfect, nobody ever does." The stout man smiled. "In fact, we have found a clever way around our little problem. These glasses work a treat. You'll find everybody here is wearing them; they're quite in vogue as they say." He adjusted his own pair a little, resettling them on his nose.

"You'll have to visit our spectacle shop, dear, so we can fit you with a pair," George Archer smiled.

Violet grabbed her mother's pinstriped skirt.

"I don't want to wear glasses, Mam, there's nothing wrong with my eyes."

"That's why your father's here, dear." Edward smiled. "Hopefully soon nobody will need to wear them."

The Archers were her dad's new bosses. "Eugene was headhunted" her mam had said proudly to friends one evening. Violet didn't think that sounded like a good thing and tried hard *not* to imagine her dad without a head. He'd won an award for his research and had been on the cover of *Eye Spy* magazine. Her mam said the whole world was

talking about it, or at least the part of the world that loved eyes too. She said the Archers had read the article in *Eye Spy* and searched him out for the job.

"It's only for a short time, Violet," her mother shushed, looking anxiously at her husband. "Your father will fix the problem."

"Don't worry, Violet," her dad said, reaching to rub her head.

She moved round her mother's back, away from his arms.

"She's tired," he sighed, his cheeks a little red. "It's been a long day, I think it's probably time for bed."

"Oh no, not yet," Edward Archer said quickly. "You must try our tea. It's a Perfect tradition."

"Oh yes." George Archer smiled, grabbing a teapot and cups from the worktop. "It's our custom, I assure you."

A small package sat on the table. Edward opened it, scooped out two large spoons of tea leaves and tipped them into the pot. The package was navy with "Archers' Tea" printed in ornate gold letters under a brownish picture of the twins in their bowler hats and white aprons.

"It's you," Violet said, looking at Edward.

"Eagle-eyed I see." The smaller twin smiled, pouring boiling water into the pot. "Yes it's our tea. We own the factory that produces it; it's a big employer in the town. Something we're very proud of."

"I don't like tea," Violet said, looking at her mother.

"You'll like this one," George Archer replied sharply.

"This tea is a speciality here. It's harvested daily and delivered fresh to every doorstep in Perfect each morning. It's made from the Chameleon plant, which is unique to our town. It's very good for your health and has the most unusual properties. You'll see what I mean. Most people here drink at least a cup a day. It's a tea-mad town." Edward smiled.

Violet didn't like tea and she wasn't sure about the Archers; there was something odd about them.

Eugene and Rose looked at each other as they sat down at the table; Violet sat between them. George Archer stared at her from his place opposite, as his brother poured the tea.

"Now imagine the nicest taste you can think of then take a sip," Edward said, raising his mug.

Violet did as she was told. She imagined her father's favourite drink, which was hers too – ice-cream sundae. Big chunks of cold vanilla ice cream dunked in fizzy orange. She pictured clouds of froth bubbling over the rim of a glass and could almost taste the burst of flavour. Her mouth watered as she raised the mug of tea. A waft of vanilla tingled her nose. She took a sip, careful not to burn her lips. The tea fizzed as she tasted orange and vanilla heaven. This couldn't be tea. She opened her eyes

to check no one had swapped the cups, but sure enough, a dull milky brown liquid smiled back at her. She glanced either side at her mam and dad; their eyes were still shut and silly smiles played on their lips.

"I think I'll have another cup," her father said, a little later.

"We thought you might," the Archers replied in unison.

The Browns finished one pot and then had another as Edward told them all about their new home.

Edward was the chatty one and Violet warmed to him a little more than George, who just seemed to snarl and stare. Though, truth be told, she wasn't sure she liked either of them very much at all. Violet heard her mother say the same thing to her dad as they waved goodbye to the Archers from the steps of their new home a little later.

"They give me the creeps, Eugene," Rose whispered through a staged smile.

That night, Violet climbed beneath her new sheets in her new room. The town sounded nice enough from what Edward had said and the tea did weigh heavily in its favour. There were some strange things about the place though. Edward had told them about a curfew. He said it was so everyone got a good night's sleep in Perfect. "Sufficient sleep makes for a happy and healthy town."

She definitely didn't like the idea of a curfew or going blind. And anyway, how could she ever live in a place

called Perfect? She'd have to be neat and tidy; she'd definitely have to brush her hair and probably even clean her shoes. It just wouldn't work.

Violet made up her mind: she didn't and wouldn't like Perfect. Then she turned over and slipped into a perfect night's sleep, oblivious to the troubles the morning would bring.