

GHOSTCLOWN



MICHAEL MANN

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Hodder and Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Text copyright © Michael Mann, 2021

Illustrations copyright © Chaaya Prabhat, 2021

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

HB ISBN 978 1 444 95929 1

TPB ISBN 978 1 444 96226 0

Typeset in Vendetta by Avon DataSet Ltd, Arden Court, Alcester, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A

The paper and board used in this book are made from wood from responsible sources.



Hodder Children's Books
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder and Stoughton
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk



To Grandad Luke for the coal
and little J for the naps.



PREFACE

This book is set in London, but not as we know it. It is a London where Big Ben beeps and Battersea Power Station belches out smoke; where bustling river markets float on the rising water and kidnapping is rife; where the Channel Tunnel lies closed, ever since the old war ended.

And far below, hidden underground, children are shovelling . . .



CHAPTER 1

COAL DUST

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

Luke Smith-Sharma lived beneath Battersea Power Station. It was a gloomy place with towering chimneys and blackened bricks. A treacherous darkness oozed from its walls and at night the corridors were stalked by shadows.

‘Come on, speed up!’ hissed Ravi, from behind. ‘You’re spilling the coal.’

‘Sorry, I was thinking.’

‘Well, don’t. Less sleuthing, more shovelling, mate.’

Luke was a shoveller for the station’s first chimney. He kept the fuel coming in the great furnace room, feeding the fires till they glowed white-hot. Lines of children, one hundred kids long, snaked across the hall to the hungry flames, each passing coal dust to the child in front. Hidden from the millions of people above they powered

all of London: from Big Ben's beep to the robot-horse carriages, from Buckingham Palace to London Zoo.

'You know, I miss homework. And detention. And sprouts.'

'Focus, Luke.' Ravi wiped his glasses. 'They say she's visiting today. She's giving amber tickets to the hardest shovellers . . .'

' . . . and it's our only way home. I know. I know.'

Luke tightened his grip on the rust-iron spade. He ignored the chafe of his coalsack collar and the tickle of sweat on his neck and brow. He had to keep shovelling. Nobody ever stopped shovelling. Not unless they wanted to be fuel themselves.

Iron scraped carbon. Lungs panted hot air. Dancing flames hissed and crackled. These were the sounds of the furnace room. The same sounds he'd heard for over two years. But each week, on Sunday, he heard a different set of sounds. And you had to be ready.

A door creaked. A deliberate creak he knew well. It was followed by a hush that rolled up the line, silencing guards and children alike, then the echo of heels on a hot stone floor.

'Don't look back,' Ravi said. 'Keep your eyes on the spade!'

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

Black nails tapped, on a black clipboard. A black lab coat

swished, over black leather boots. A black heart beat, closer each second.

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

Luke tried to think happy thoughts: eating ice cream under a warm blue sky; flying kites with his sister Lizzy; his dad sifting through his police files on the kitchen table. Or the day – maybe today, if Ravi’s intel was right – when they’d earn their amber ticket and leave this miserable place for good.

But the good thoughts wouldn’t stick. Instead, he found himself looking up at the darkness. At the ceiling so high that the light never reached it. At the cloud of black above their bowed heads.

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

There was a squeal of pain down the line, then the sizzle of hot ash on naked skin. A solitary sob echoed through the hall.

‘Never cry,’ Luke muttered. ‘That’s what she wants.’

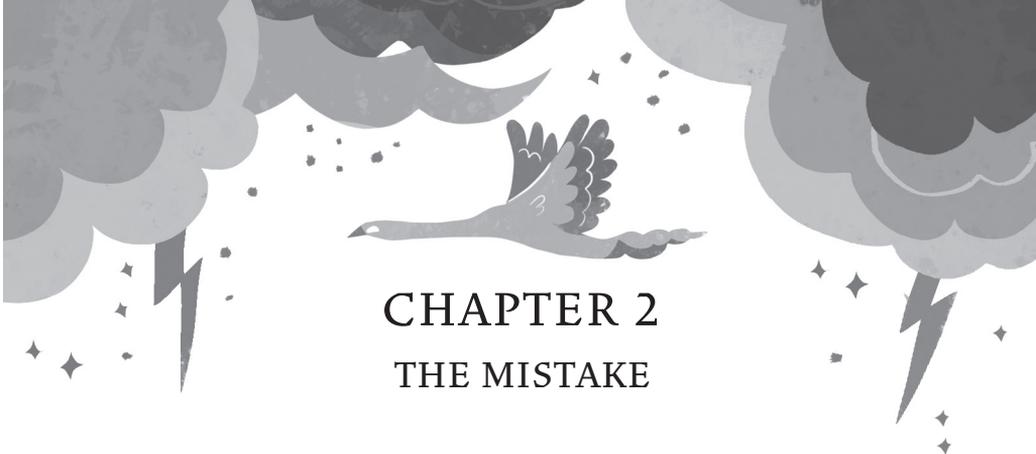
‘She’ was Tabatha Margate, and she ruled the station. If you cried, she just blew smoke in your face. Or emptied the ash from her pipe on your hand. Or into your eye, if you didn’t shut it in time. That’s what she was like. She didn’t care one bit about the children that worked there. For her, all that mattered was that they were cheaper than adults: they ate less food. She could fit

more in. And most important of all, they were easier to kidnap.

The click of her heels started again. The pace of shovelling picked up at once. It always did, when she paid them a visit.

And that was when he saw it: the girl in front could no longer keep up. Her skinny arms began spilling and flinging the coal dust. Her breaths started coming in grunts and gasps. She looked exhausted. Unsteady too. He remembered how that felt. How he'd struggled, at least until he'd met Ravi.

But it didn't matter how he felt. All that mattered was that she'd mess it all up. If Tabatha saw, the whole line would be punished. He had to do something – and do something quick – or his and Ravi's chance of an amber ticket, and a way out of this place, would go down with her.



CHAPTER 2

THE MISTAKE

Kids who couldn't keep up fell into one of two categories: fainters and flappers. Fainters paled, gave up, then fell to the floor. Flappers fought on, admirably, but ended up making an almighty mess of the coal dust. This girl was a flapper.

Click. Tap. Swish. Click.

Tabatha was close, and flappers took time. You had to talk them down from the panic, then fix their technique. Hairs prickled up on the back of Luke's neck. *Calm under pressure*, that's what his dad would have said.

Click. Tap. Swish. Click.

'Ravi, quick, pass me a stone.'

'Now? Seriously?'

'We've got a flapper in front.'

Ravi was a trader, like his dad outside. Whether it was information or goods, he was always well stocked. He didn't give

things for free, even to friends like Luke, but this was an exception. If the line messed up, they could say goodbye to their amber ticket.

A pebble appeared in Luke's scoop of coal dust. He snatched it and tucked it under his arm. He had to be patient. He had to wait for a moment when they'd all be distracted. Surely it was only a matter of time?

Click. Tap. Swish. Thwack!

A child yelped. The smell of singed hair filled the air. A peal of laughter, like broken glass, echoed through the hall.

Luke seized his chance. It was now or never. His heart thundered. The pebble felt hot like coal in his hand. Then he flung it hard with his strong shovelling arm, across to the other side of the hall. A second passed, then . . . CLANG!

Guards began shouting. Shovellers protested. Tabatha's laughter stopped. In the corner of his eye, he saw her turn towards the noise. The click of heels faded.

'You've two minutes, max, before she comes back,' said Ravi. 'Whatever you're planning, hurry!'

Luke did not believe in hurrying. To solve something properly, you observed first and acted second. To calm the girl, he had to first understand her.

He inspected her carefully. She had short blonde hair that stuck up in places. The name 'Jess' was sewn on the back of her sackcloth. And her hands . . . they were different. They weren't callused like his, but soft and sore. They weren't pale from months spent underground, but tanned from the sun. *They were the hands of a new kid.*

Luke knew what to do. New kids brought news. It was the perfect topic: it'd remind her of home and settle her nerves. And he could trade it for rations, when all this was over.

'Psst, Jess. What's the news from the city?'

She looked up from her spade with shadowed eyes, and gave a weary smile. New kids were often lonely, and even one kind word could make their day.

'Well, I've been kidnapped, which might be news?' she said hopefully.

It wasn't news. Kids were kidnapped all the time these days. It didn't sell papers.

'Maybe . . .' Luke tried a smile. 'What about the truce with Europe?' They had no radio or televisor at Battersea. Not even a newspaper.

'Fine.' Her shoulders loosened when she talked. It helped the

swing of her shovel. 'Though there are rumours they're reopening the Old Channel Tunnel.'

There were always rumours. The tunnel entrance lay deep in the ruins of London South. Haunted, toxic, out of bounds. Nobody knew what had happened: they just knew to avoid it.

'Oh, there is something,' she said, with a glimmer of enthusiasm. 'These new smog-proof riverboats. The Grand High Lord Mayor launched one the other day. They've shiny propellers to suck up the smog and glass domes to keep the fresh air in.'

Jess's breaths were less shallow. As she talked about boats, a tentative grin stole across her face. This girl was different, Luke thought. Strangely cheery, like his sister Lizzy. She'd been like that too. Most new kids didn't grin for weeks, if at all, and he'd never heard one talk so freely in the furnace hall – it wasn't wise. Yet for some reason, he looked back at Jess and found himself smiling too.

Then the click of heels started again.

'She's heading back,' Ravi hissed. 'She must have smelled a rat.'

Click. Tap. Swish. Click.

Luke looked at Jess. She'd stopped flapping, but her shovelling was still messy. 'So, about your shovelling. Try relaxing your grip. Space out your hands. And keep your eyes on the spade.'

Jess nodded and adjusted her hands. ‘That’s miles better!’ she said, too loud.

Luke grimaced at the noise. At least it had worked. She was spilling less dust and almost shovelling in time.

Click. Tap. Swish. Click.

Musky perfume punctured the sticky coal-scented air. Tabatha was near. But he still had time for one more tip. If he got this right, he could be out by nightfall – that amber ticket to freedom clutched in his hand. ‘Now straighten your back, and push from your legs.’

This was key. Legs were stronger than arms. His dad always said that if everyone lifted with their legs, then all backache and stooping would be gone overnight.

‘Like this?’ Jess said, her body rigid, as she catapulted a giant, stiff spadeful of coal dust into the air.

Luke’s grey eyes widened. He watched the scoop of coal dust fly higher and higher, blending into the endless darkness above. Not only up, but back through the air. Back down the line.

He couldn’t help but look. It flew fast and silent. A ball of black, straight towards Tabatha.

Tabatha couldn’t have seen it coming – she was busy blowing

ash on a young girl's neck. But when the missile of coal hit her, it hit her hard, with a loud WHOOSH on the side of her head.

Black crystals burst sparkling into the air. The click of heels stopped. The shovelling stopped. The breathing stopped. The hall went silent. Except for Luke's heart, which he was sure could be heard echoing loudly.

Tabatha turned around, transformed: hair matted, cheeks caked, stylish clothes covered in a blanket of black. She looked like a shadow. A furious, white-eyed, pipe-smoking shadow, who was quite ready to kill someone.

'Who did that?' Her voice was the crackle of gravel under tyres.

'Who did that?' she said, louder this time, heels crushing coal as she stepped down the line.

'WHO DID THAT?' she bellowed. Smoke slipped from her lips, like from the mouth of the furnace itself.

Every kid's head was down. Every single one of them was still holding their breath. They all knew how bad it would be if they were caught.

Well, almost all of them.

'I did, Ms. Margate,' Jess said, only shaking a little. 'I'm awfully sorry. I'm new. It was an accident.'

Luke's heart sank. This Jess was a disaster. Messy. Noisy. Honest to boot. She wouldn't last a week in the station at this rate. But there was something about her. Something bright, like a spark, even here in the dark. It reminded him of his sister Lizzy and of happier times. He couldn't let Tabatha put that spark out.

He was a valuable shoveller. Tabatha wouldn't waste him. 'It's my fault too.' He put up his hand. 'I distracted her.'

Jess nodded.

Ravi sighed.

Tabatha smiled. 'Handing out punishments is one of my favourite things. Handing out two – well, it's my lucky day.'