

I'd never met anyone else with brown skin the same as mine and George's before, not unless it could be rubbed off – like someone who'd come out of the coal factories, or a chimney sweep's boy, covered head to toe in soot. But this man was darker than us both, and, somehow, the way he sat so upright and still made me think he wasn't ever teased about not scrubbing himself hard enough.

I stepped towards him.

He was a smartly dressed in a black waistcoat and dark grey-striped trousers. He slowly removed his tan leather gloves. Out of his waistcoat pocket dangled a gold chain, linked to a watch, which he was staring at, as shiny as any I'd seen. His moustache was big and bushy, and his hair fluffy, like mine. Didn't look like he went hungry, either, with such plump cheeks.

He smiled at both of us, though – his dark, lively eyes fixed on me.

“Come closer, both of you. I shan't bite.”

If he was not a prospective lodger, perhaps he had come to offer me an apprenticeship? Mother had mentioned that the local book-binder enquired about me a few weeks ago – was this he? I'd been hoping for decent work, something less dangerous than the steel factory. Leaning over a grinding wheel, shaping steel knives and forks was hard, dirty work, and after George