

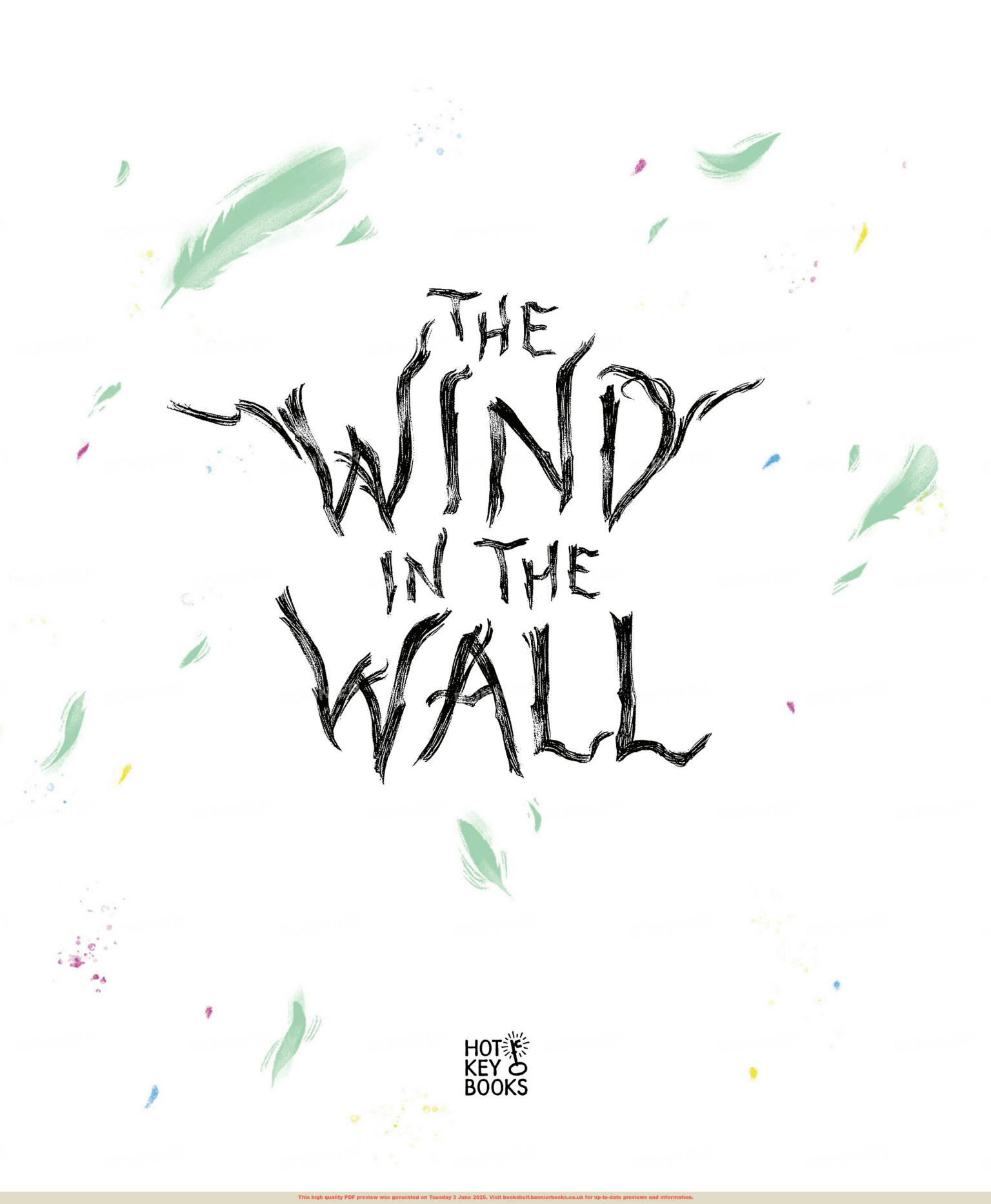
THE WIND IN THE WALL

SALLY GARDNER

Author of *Maggot Moon*,
winner of the
Carnegie Medal

ROVINA CAI

Illustrator of *How the
King of Elfhame Learned to
Hate Stories* by Holly Black



THE WIND IN THE WALL

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

For Anya, who first loved this story and encouraged me to go further
S. G.

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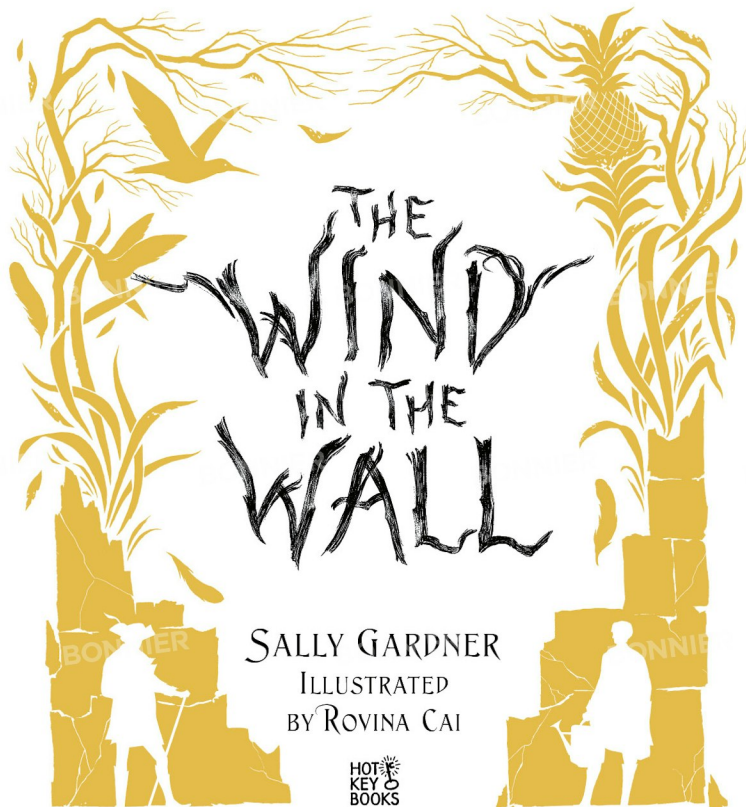
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I have no idea how long I've been incarcerated within these ancient walls. Occasionally, when the stones and mortar are battered by violent winds or beaten by rain I wake up, conscious of my plight. But it is the tapping that has woken me this time.

Tap-tap-tap.

Let me explain how I find myself in this predicament.




I once was a gardener to the Duke of Northumberland. It was our shared passion for the amaryllis that first brought me to the attention of His Grace. We were agreed that in point of beauty few other plants can surpass *Amaryllis belladonna*. I wrote an article about the growing of the flower in a horticultural magazine. I remember it started like this: *To those who possess a small stove...*

At that time I believed that, by degrees, I would rise up through the ranks, eventually attaining the position of head gardener. But the duke's admiration for the amaryllis waned and was replaced by a passion for the pineapple. To me the pineapple was a prima donna of acidic fruits, yet all the nobility in England and Scotland had taken up the challenge to produce the finest pineapple specimen in the northern hemisphere, a climate decidedly unfavourable to the growing of this herbaceous perennial. The gardener who possessed the most skill with the sun-obsessed fruit was considered an artisan and in great demand.

Perhaps it was as consolation for the loss of my beloved wife and child to fever that the duke suggested I was put in charge of the pineapple house. Here, in huge plant pots, among a mass of spiky foliage, the monsters grew. It was an honour to be given the job, I know, but – not that I told anyone – I loathed those cursed, scaly dragon eggs. I loathed the heat of the hectic hot house.






The duke and duchess had taken up residence in Paris. It was said that His Grace astonished the continental nobility by the size of his entourage, the lavishness of his furnishings and by his flamboyant generosity. The fruits of my labours, if successful, were destined to be admired at his dinner table, and even presented to the King of France.

I was permitted to read every book in His Grace's library on the subject of the *Ananas comosus*. I learned that in its native climate, hummingbirds and bats propagate the fruit. But here no such help was to be found and despite all my efforts the pineapples remained small and stunted, refusing to grow in abundance. Those that grew at all tasted bitter, as bitter as the grief I felt for the loss of my child, my sweet wife.

I began to wonder if it was despair that stunted my efforts with the pineapple, though I was certain that if only I had been allowed once more to grow the amaryllis all would have been well. Perhaps the French king would have delighted in the beauty of the flower, the perfection of its petals, the symmetry of its stem. I had read that in Greek mythology 'amaryllis' was the name given to a shepherdess who shed her own blood to prove her love. Had I not lost my heart when my family died? I believed I had much in common with the amaryllis.

For all my hours of study and the sweat of my work in those heated hot-houses, the pineapples failed. Failure was the one thing the duke would not abide. Such was the severity of his disappointment that I feared I might lose my job and my cottage.

The *tap tapping* shakes my whole being. Or rather, it shakes the wall and therefore it shakes me. It isn't the wind. The wind is a wheezy breath devoid of speech; it seeps through the crevices, torments one with the possibility of freedom. No, not the wind. I can hear words and, to my parched mind speech is water. But the voices drift off. I long to be washed away in language, not sprinkled with meaningless sentences.



The duke's head gardener announced that he had found a specialist in the growing of the pineapple, a Mr Amicus who had travelled the world as far as Brazil, seen the pine of the Indies growing in its native land where the sun shines hot and there is no need for glasshouses.

The dust of old stone has made a rusty merry-go-round of my memory so forgive me for not recalling the exact date Mr Amicus arrived. I would check if I could only reach my notebook. I believe it was a Wednesday, Wednesday, 4 March 17—.

Mr Amicus was a stunted plant of a man, prickly in nature. His fingernails were dirty, his beard an untrimmed hedge. He wore a feather in his hat and hummed rather than spoke.

I knew a charlatan when I saw one. I felt it to be nothing short of my duty to point out to the head gardener that Mr Amicus was a cheap trickster, the kind you may find in any country fair.

Unfortunately, what I had to say was not taken well. The head gardener told me that Mr Amicus's reputation as a grower of exotic fruit was second to none and that from then on I would be working with flowers. Flowers were the duchess's domain, the head gardener continued, and therefore of lesser consequence than the pineapple. I was undermined, my artistry standing for nothing, and did not speak again about Mr Amicus to anyone.



Mr Amicus was given one of the largest tied cottages on the estate. That in itself was a source of great irritation to me and illustrated my demotion more perfectly than any one action could.

He brought with him a cartload of furniture – nothing remarkable about that. But it was the large birdcage covered in black cloth that caught my eye, and I wondered if he owned a parrot.

A cruel April that year turned into a bitter May. The rain poured, the wind blew and still the garden was a skeleton of bare sticks, without a green shoot to give hope that spring had not forsaken us. My attempts to talk to Mr Amicus were hummed away by him. He ignored me and any suggestion or crumb of conversation I made would always be turned to my disadvantage so that I appeared to be in the wrong or, even worse, ignorant about the growing of certain plants. He had the other gardeners mock me. I am not to be mocked at. I am a well-read, self-educated man and there is nothing I don't know about plants. It was his rudeness that made me suspicious. I began to make notes on his behaviour.

Note 1. He has a birdcage but he laughed when I asked if he owned a parrot.



Note 2. He has had locks made for all the doors of the pineapple house and allows no one else to enter.

Note 3. He wears the keys on a chain around his neck and is never seen without them.

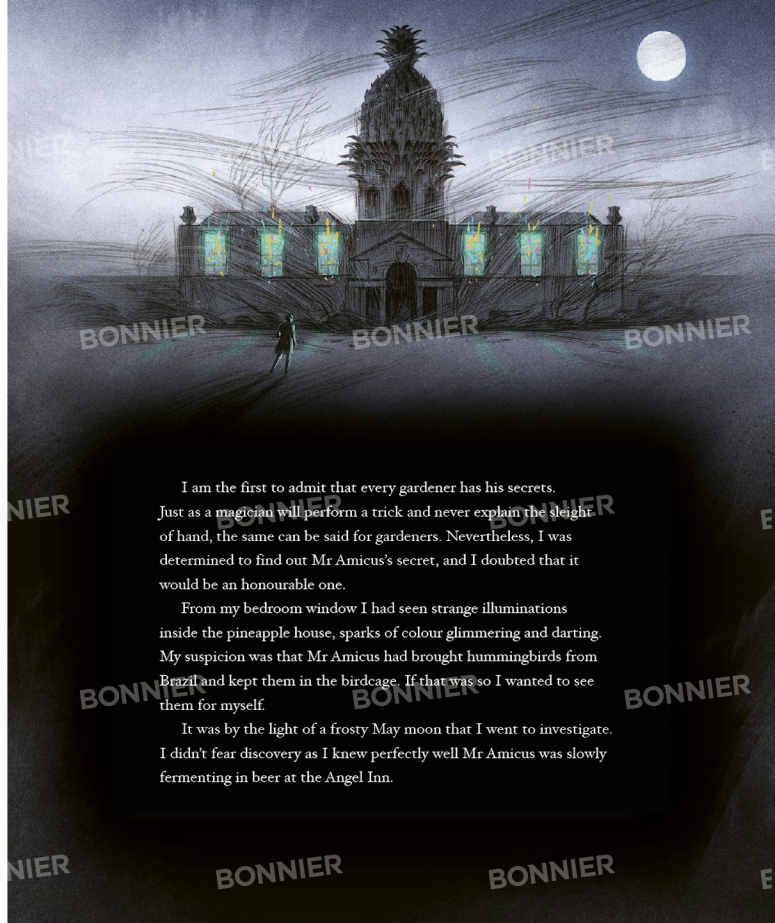


Note 4. From morning until night he is to be found at the Angel Inn, morose and drunk and speaking a language no one understands.



These facts relieved my anxiety somewhat. Surely news of Mr Amicus's outlandish conduct would reach the ears of the head gardener, who would see that I had been proved right: the man was a charlatan.

But alas, no. The first pineapple the wretched Mr Amicus grew was one of the most perfect specimens of its kind. It was reported to the head gardener that His Grace had commissioned an artist in Paris to paint a still life of the cursed dragon egg.



I am the first to admit that every gardener has his secrets. Just as a magician will perform a trick and never explain the sleight of hand, the same can be said for gardeners. Nevertheless, I was determined to find out Mr Amicus's secret, and I doubted that it would be an honourable one.

From my bedroom window I had seen strange illuminations inside the pineapple house, sparks of colour glimmering and darting. My suspicion was that Mr Amicus had brought hummingbirds from Brazil and kept them in the birdcage. If that was so I wanted to see them for myself.

It was by the light of a frosty May moon that I went to investigate. I didn't fear discovery as I knew perfectly well Mr Amicus was slowly fermenting in beer at the Angel Inn.




I crept up to the pineapple house and peered in through the window. There, amidst all those smug plant pots, sat the cage. It was without its black cover and at first I wondered if my eyes betrayed me, for inside was a small lady, a delicate honey-coloured shadow that appeared to be made out of gossamer. As I watched, transfixed, she started to *tap-tap-tap* on the bars of her cage. The moon was revealed by a passing cloud, illuminating the scene before me. I was truly shocked by what I saw. The lady in the cage was naked apart from a feathered gown that hung down her back. The feathers were iridescent green, as was the one Mr Amicus wore in his hat.

It was none of my business, I know, but it seemed so wrong that this ghostly beauty should be imprisoned. I determined to free her and to that end I had my hand on the door, prepared to force it open if necessary, when the sound of humming stopped me. I retreated behind a bush, not daring to move lest I should be discovered.

Mr Amicus swayed drunkenly to the pineapple house, cursing under his breath as he fumbled with the keys. I watched him put the black cloth over the cage, lock the door of the pineapple house and, humming, stumble homewards.

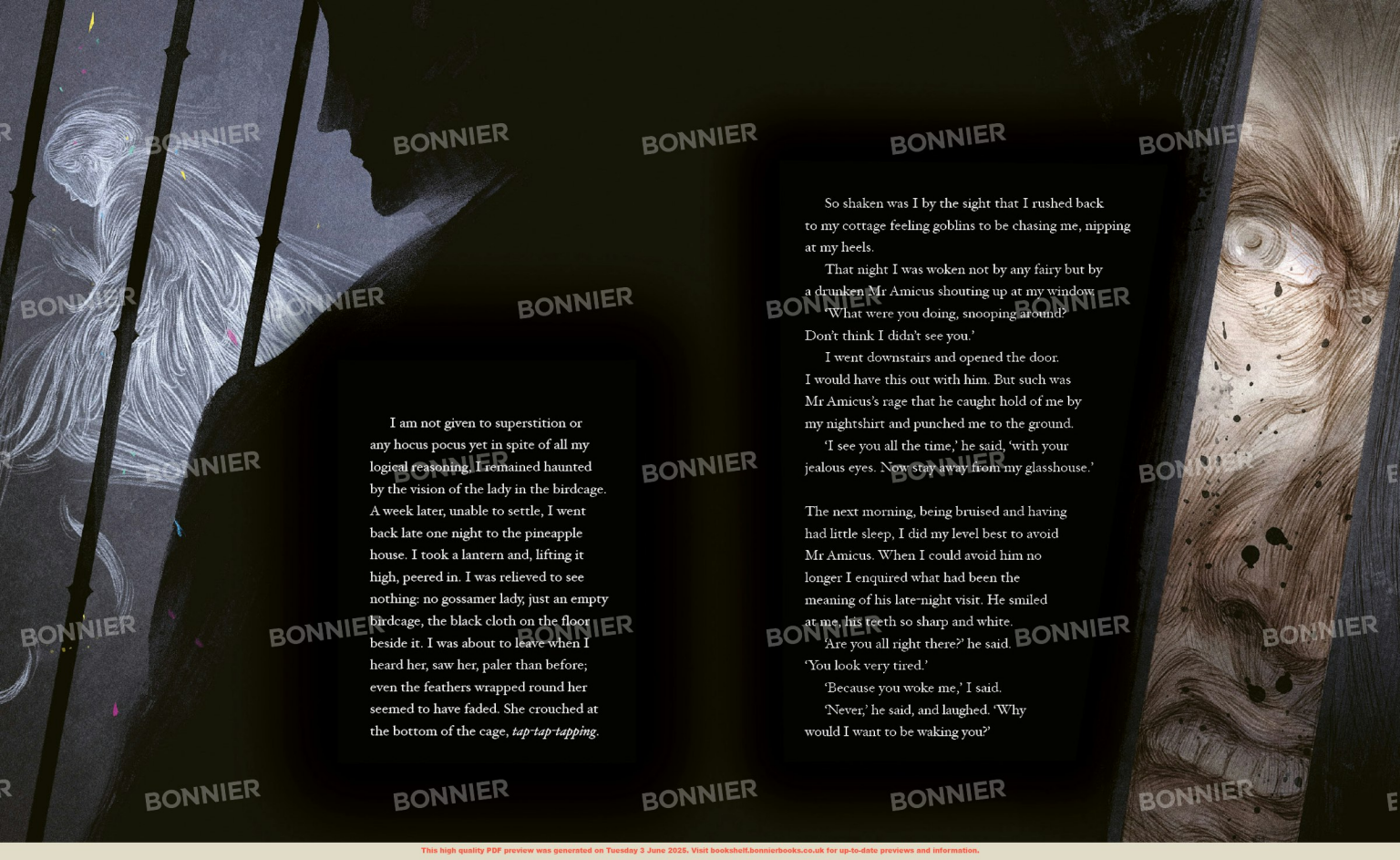




I returned to my cottage. Sleep evaded me. My mind whirled with thoughts of the fairy feathered lady. I remembered the beliefs of a bygone generation that told of fairies who lived here, of a Fairies' Green not far from Vittry's Cross. On moonlit nights these tricky folk trooped from dells and other lonely places to hold their revels with music and dance in the Fairies' Hollow at the top of Clay Bank.

The weather being contrary, the next day was warm. I worked in the walled garden and for the first time that year felt the sun on my back. There is a peace to be found in nature, in the tending of plants, a comfort in the passing seasons. That is what I objected to most about the pineapple: its disregard for winter, spring and autumn, its greed for heat. By the afternoon I had, through rational thought, convinced myself that what had happened last night was nothing more than a vivid dream. It was laughable to take it seriously.

On the way home I passed Mr Amicus. A gust of westerly wind blew the feather from his hat and floated it towards me. I picked it up and thought to call after him, the words on the tip of my tongue, then decided against it. I opened my notebook and carefully placed the feather there.



I am not given to superstition or any hocus pocus yet in spite of all my logical reasoning, I remained haunted by the vision of the lady in the birdcage. A week later, unable to settle, I went back late one night to the pineapple house. I took a lantern and, lifting it high, peered in. I was relieved to see nothing: no gossamer lady, just an empty birdcage, the black cloth on the floor beside it. I was about to leave when I heard her, saw her, paler than before; even the feathers wrapped round her seemed to have faded. She crouched at the bottom of the cage, *tap-tap-tapping*.

So shaken was I by the sight that I rushed back to my cottage feeling goblins to be chasing me, nipping at my heels.

That night I was woken not by any fairy but by a drunken Mr Amicus shouting up at my window 'What were you doing, snooping around? Don't think I didn't see you.'

I went downstairs and opened the door. I would have this out with him. But such was Mr Amicus's rage that he caught hold of me by my nightshirt and punched me to the ground.

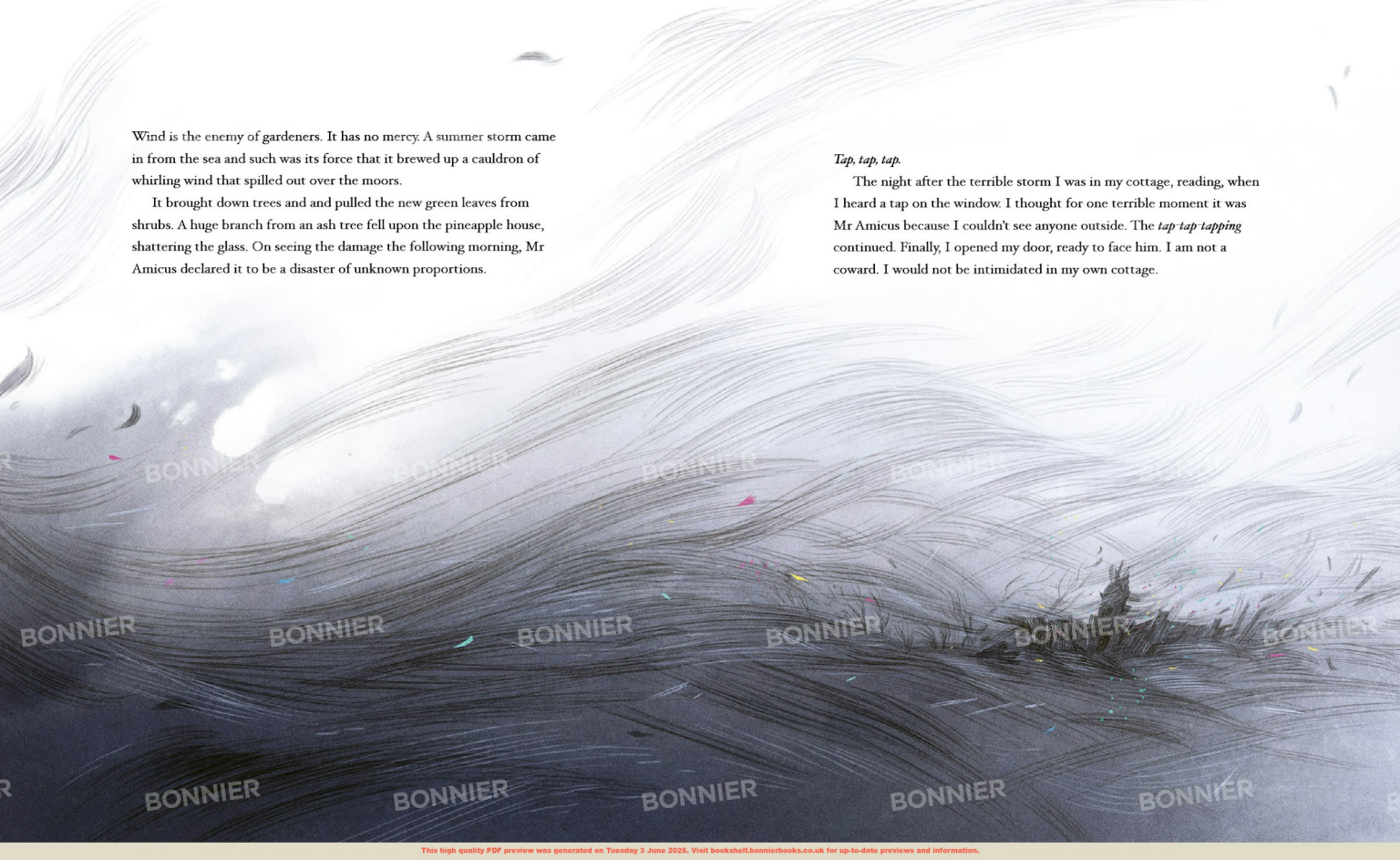
'I see you all the time,' he said, 'with your jealous eyes. Now stay away from my glasshouse.'

The next morning, being bruised and having had little sleep, I did my level best to avoid Mr Amicus. When I could avoid him no longer I enquired what had been the meaning of his late-night visit. He smiled at me, his teeth so sharp and white.

'Are you all right there?' he said. 'You look very tired.'

'Because you woke me,' I said.

'Never,' he said, and laughed. 'Why would I want to be waking you?'



Wind is the enemy of gardeners. It has no mercy. A summer storm came in from the sea and such was its force that it brewed up a cauldron of whirling wind that spilled out over the moors.

It brought down trees and and pulled the new green leaves from shrubs. A huge branch from an ash tree fell upon the pineapple house, shattering the glass. On seeing the damage the following morning, Mr Amicus declared it to be a disaster of unknown proportions.

Tap, tap, tap.

The night after the terrible storm I was in my cottage, reading, when I heard a tap on the window. I thought for one terrible moment it was Mr Amicus because I couldn't see anyone outside. The *tap-tap-tapping* continued. Finally, I opened my door, ready to face him. I am not a coward. I would not be intimidated in my own cottage.

At first I did not see her, so ghostly was her outline. Then I did. It was her. I asked her to come in and warm herself by the fire. She sat close to it, her feathers hiding her nakedness. I made her welcome, fetched a shawl of my late wife's to wrap around her shaking shoulders, brought a bottle of elderflower wine and some bread and beef dripping.

'You live alone?' she asked.

'I do. And you?'

'No,' she said. 'I am Mr Amicus's wife.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'You saw the birdcage.'

'Why does he keep you in a birdcage?'

She didn't answer for a while. Then she said, 'Perhaps all bad marriages are cages.'

I knew not what to say for as she spoke I noticed her ghostliness take on a more solid, voluptuous form and the nakedness of her filled me with unbearable desire. I went to her and knelt beside her. She put her arm about me; the overwhelming softness of her skin brought tears to my eyes, made me realise the barrenness of lonely. I kissed her and she did not pull away. Sweeter than any fruit were her kisses.





Just before dawn she rose to leave,
stretching out her feathers. The
glory of her wings filled the room
with light.

'For the kindness you have
shown me I grant you one wish,'
she said. 'Use it wisely'

'Will I see you again?' I asked.
'That is for you to decide,'
she said.

Later, when I opened my
notebook, I found the feather
was missing and felt strangely
glad of it.

I was about to go to work when my
cottage door burst open and there he
stood, Mr Amicus, red raw with rage.

'Where is my wife, you interfering
busybody?'

'Gone,' I said.

I backed away the moment I saw
the pistol.

'Then I have come for your heart,
for that alone will bring her back to me.'

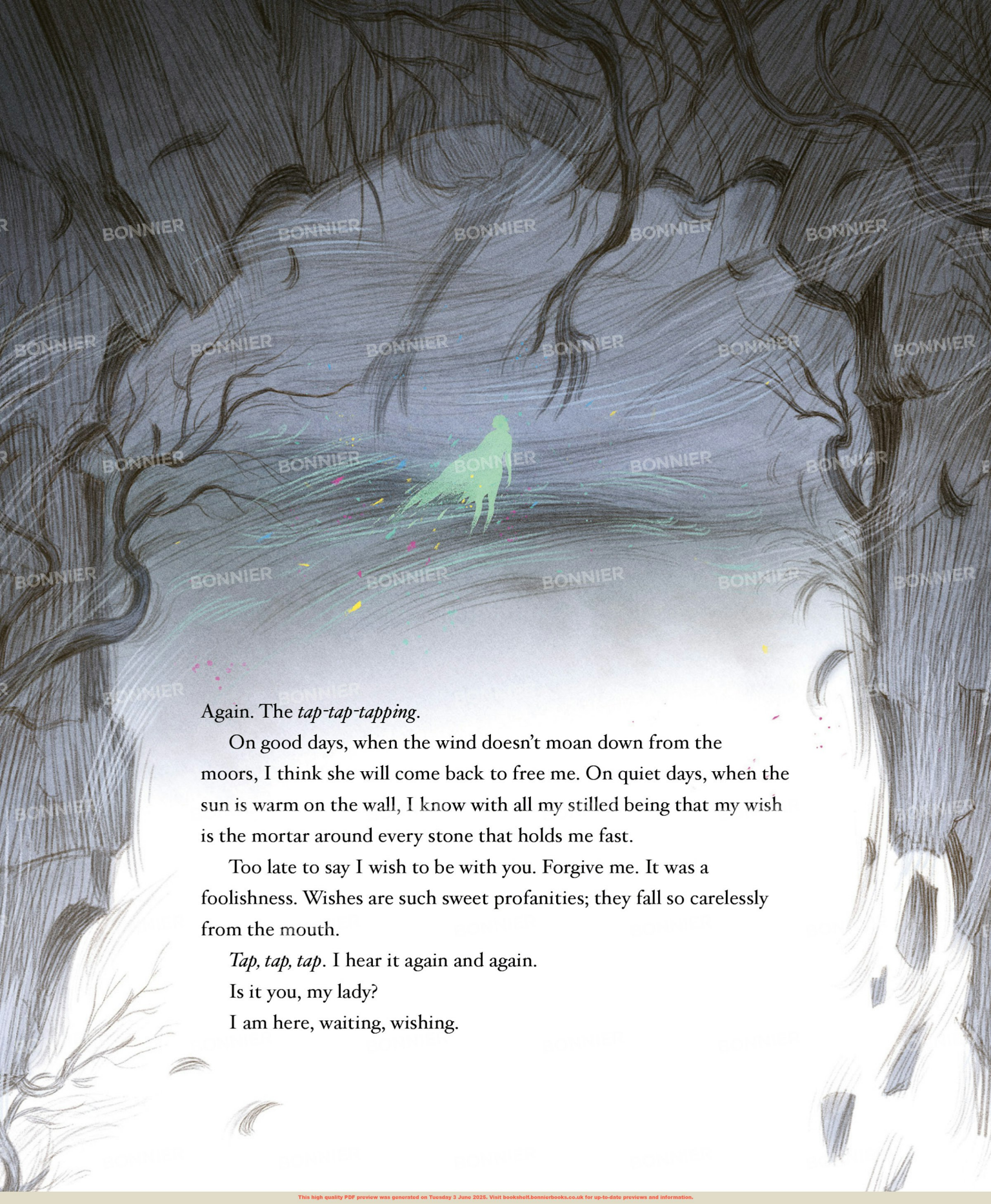
There was a flash of gunpowder and
I thought I must be mortally wounded
but to my astonishment, Mr Amicus had
missed. I pushed past him and made
my escape.





When I reached the walled garden I knew I had run myself into a dead end. The wretched man came towards me, a sneer on his face, the pistol cocked, pointing straight at my heart.

Without thinking, I made a wish. Such a pedestrian wish. I have had so long to contemplate all that was then in my power. I could have wished to be with her again but I did not. Without considering my folly I wished that the wall would hide me, and so it did. I felt it softly embrace me, bury me deep within its sandstone folds, mould itself around me.

A dark, atmospheric illustration of a forest. The scene is dominated by gnarled, dark tree trunks and branches that frame the central area. The background is a deep, textured blue-grey, suggesting a misty or moonlit night. In the center, a small, glowing green figure, possibly a fairy or a spirit, stands amidst a shower of colorful, sparkling particles. The overall mood is mysterious and ethereal.

Again. The *tap-tap-tapping*.

On good days, when the wind doesn't moan down from the moors, I think she will come back to free me. On quiet days, when the sun is warm on the wall, I know with all my stilled being that my wish is the mortar around every stone that holds me fast.

Too late to say I wish to be with you. Forgive me. It was a foolishness. Wishes are such sweet profanities; they fall so carelessly from the mouth.

Tap, tap, tap. I hear it again and again.

Is it you, my lady?

I am here, waiting, wishing.