

CHAPTER ONE

DARKNESS SURROUNDED THEM, a deep velvet black, so that she couldn't see a hand before her. He dragged her wearily through the wood, stumbling and tripping over roots and dead branches, through a shallow stream, their boots heavy now with mud, until they came to a road. It was lighter here where there were no stars but there were fat clouds rushing across the big sky, and the occasional gleam of a segment of orange moon.

She sobbed, her breath broken and ragged. 'Are we there yet, Sid?'

'Nearly. Come on.' He pulled her across the terrifyingly empty space and into more darkness. A military truck coughed and screeched as it slowed to negotiate the bends. The headlights swept across the road.

'Get down!'

It didn't stop. They hadn't been spotted. He switched on the torch briefly to get his bearings. Between densely packed trees and shrubs he saw a pile of abandoned building materials including a length of pipe about three metres long and of a diameter sufficient for the two to stand upright. She was unable to walk any further.

He picked her up and carried her into the tunnel.
'We're safe here.'

Lo woke with sun flickering through high branches, dappling the leafy floor outside their new den. Sid was good at making dens. He had made three that she remembered. One was a brick-walled roofless coal shed, which she liked because she could see the stars, but when it rained they got wet. The next den was a smelly old chicken house, but the feathers and dirt made her sneeze and they were discovered and chased out by a gang of kids who threw stones at them. They had had trouble finding another safe place. There were many empty buildings in the city, windows smashed, contents trashed or looted. But other kids had taken them as their own. Eventually, after walking all day through dusty deserted suburbs, hiding whenever they saw anyone, when they were exhausted and frantic for shelter they came across an old bus in a burnt-out depot full of very young kids who shared their drinking water with them.

Teams of them went out each day to scavenge for food. Sid was good at it and the little kids wanted them to stay. That was the best refuge and lasted ages and ages, at least two weeks. She'd liked it there because there were other little girls and they played tea parties with her and she was allowed to be Mother and pour the tea. They admired her fairyprincessdress. It was all pink and she liked to twirl round in it and show off her frilly pants. But a gang of youths had found them and thrown the younger ones out, threatening them with the Reducers, and they had had to run with only a small backpack containing several tins of baked beans, a can of Labmeat, a tin opener, a half-empty water bottle, matches, and the stained photo of their parents that Sid carried in the pocket of his baggies. And their IDs, carried in a waterproof

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pouch on a string around his neck.

Lo had cried bitter tears at leaving the other bus children, who had scattered and disappeared like scuttling rats.

She wept at lots of things these days: like when soldiers had pushed her and Sid into one truck and Mammy and Dadda into another.

‘Mammy, Mammy,’ Lo had screamed. But there were lots of screaming children in their truck.

Sid had tried to comfort her. He said Mammy and Dadda were going to a Sunshine Camp and they would see them soon. But she had cried so much her head hurt.

She wept when later the same day, after they had run away from the broken-down truck, Sid had thrown away her armband with the yellow sunshine picture on it.

‘I like it, Sid. Why did you do that?’

‘Because!’ he said. And her sobs began again. ‘Shh, don’t cry, Lo.’ He had hugged her to him, aware of how her hair was sticky and unwashed, her arms covered in scabs and grime. They were hiding in a large wheelie bin full of smelly rubbish. No one would look for them in there.

He had thrown away his own armband too. They’d all had to wear them in the ghetto.

Most people there were very young or very old, disabled or chronically sick, derelict or pregnant. There was a football pitch, a soup kitchen and even a prison in the ghetto, but no one was allowed out. It was for their own safety, they were told, because life outside the ghetto was chaotic, hazardous, lawless. The news-sheets announced a relocation programme to transport them to a place where they could be looked after.

However, Sid knew better now. He knew from what he had witnessed and what he’d heard along the way, that ghetto people were not going to be cared for. The opposite

was true. He'd seen with his own eyes soldiers bludgeoning those who didn't go quietly. His mother had been dragged away and his father had been lifted from his wheelchair and thrown roughly into the back of the truck.

His mam had been right. She had heard rumours from the other ghetto women and had tried to warn his dad weeks before the razor-wire went up. In the cramped two-roomed accommodation they shared he couldn't help overhearing their midnight rows.

'We could get out in the night. Start walking. Go west. To my folks. Sid and I could push your wheelchair.'

'Don't be stupid, woman, it's a hundred miles or more. Haven't heard from them in years. Don't even know if they are still alive.'

'But we can't just wait to be taken away. It's like the Nazis. They aren't going to look after us, they are going to take us to Reduction camps. And we're going meekly to our deaths.' She sobbed into her hands.

'It's vicious gossip, don't listen to it.'

Sid had tried not to listen. Instead he'd read his book under the bedclothes. *The Life of Isambard Kingdom Brunel*. He'd disappeared into another world: a world of huge bridges, of grand buildings and tunnels under the Thames.

Before their life in the ghetto, the bridges over the Tamar had been demolished to keep out refugees. He had been on the river bank to watch with excitement the huge structures fall creaking and crashing into the water. His father, who had worked on the maintenance of the Isambard Kingdom Brunel Railway Bridge for most of his working life, had wept openly.

Their new den was a dry tunnel. Sid had been hard at work already, gathering bits and pieces. They sat on plastic cartons.

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'I'm hungry.' She scratched her scalp.

'You're always hungry, Lo.' He opened a tin of baked beans and gave it to her. She scooped out the tomato goo with her fingers and sucked them clean.

'Where are we?'

'Roundabout.'

'Where are the rides?'

'Nah, not that sort of roundabout. It's like an island, but instead of water around it there's road.'

'Is it the country?' (She couldn't yet sound her r's, so it sounded like *countwy*.)

'Sort of.'

'Is it safe?'

'Yeah, it's safe.'

'Why is it?'

'Just is. Come on, we've work to do.'

Sid enjoyed building things. He wanted to be a structural engineer, like his dad had been before his accident. This, he thought, is a miniature version of the Thames Tunnel that his hero had helped to build when he was just twenty. Only six years older than Sid. He pretended that he was working with Brunel as he yanked, tugged and manhandled a sheet of corrugated plastic to block one end of the tunnel, then disguised it with dead branches.

'There you are, Sidney, very well made.'

'Thank you, sir.' It comforted Sid, to imagine that he wasn't alone in this task.

The other end of the den was already hidden by dense bushes and a tree trunk that had fallen close by.

It was like a cave, a wild creature's lair.

'Are there wild things?' Lo was scared.

'Like what?'

'I don't know. Wild things what roar and eat people.'

‘Nah. We’re all right.’

‘No rats?’ Lo had seen many large rats in the city and she was frightened of what they could do. One of the bus girls had said a rat as big as a cat had crawled over her in her bed and roared at her.

‘No rats.’ Sid’s experience of wildlife was limited to the moan of feral pigeons, the screech of rats, the rich scent of city fox, and his body’s own wildlife – nits and fleas, and more recently, lice.

‘Can I explore?’

‘I’ll come with you first time, okay? Then we’ll both know the way home, won’t we, eh?’

‘Is it our den, now, Sid?’

‘For a bit, yeah.’

Being careful not to show themselves to the open road, it took about twenty minutes to walk round close to the perimeter of the roundabout, climbing over fallen trees and pushing through brambles and shrubs with a stout stick.

‘Sid, my feet hurt, Sid,’ Lo whimpered. Not surprising, he thought. He still couldn’t believe that they got this far. They had walked over sixty miles in the last ten days or so, following minor roads and disused railway tracks, sleeping in abandoned buildings and old train stations, always heading west. And she was only little.

Lo’s legs were already covered in scratches and bites, so the thorns didn’t bother her much. But her precious dress tore easily and she was upset by its every new imperfection.

‘Where are we going, Sid?’

‘Find Gramps and Grumps.’

‘Why?’

‘They want to see us, that’s why.’ He doubted that Grumps would be happy to see them, but maybe his grandfather would. If he could find them. A town with a ‘z’ in it. He had

no choice, they were his only hope. No way could he look after Lo and himself for long. They both needed somewhere safe to stay. He daren't think about what had happened to his parents. He wasn't ready to face the horrific possibilities that flitted through his mind.

'But Sid, how will Mammy and Dadda know where we are?'

'Don't start, Lo. Watch out.' He lifted her over a prickly bush. 'Why don't you tuck your dress in your pants.'

'Don't want to.'

'No water, but it's good here,' he announced. They had come back to where they had started, a yellow flowering gorse bush and a clump of tall teasels behind a large arrow sign.

'What's it called?'

'What do you mean?'

'What's its name, the roundyabout?'

'Don't know. We'll give it a name, shall we?' He pushed a stray lock of matted hair behind her ear.

Lo scratched her leg and frowned. 'Fairy Island.'

'Nah. Don't be stupid.' He hit at a thick clump of branches to make a way through back to the den.

'I'm not stupid. And you're a pooey-face.' Lo paused, looking up through the mass of leaves at the cloudy sky. 'Green Island'.

The roundabout was a thick mass of shrubs, bushes and tall trees and supported a small zoo of wildlife, though nothing that wanted to eat children. Lo was right. It was a green island.

The resident badger was aware of their presence and the barn owl in the high tree had heard them arrive as he was delicately eviscerating a rat.

The badger was digging for worms in the warm earth

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when the humans arrived. She lifted her heavy striped head and sniffed the air. They smelled bad but not in a dangerous way. The skinny fox who had his den on the roundabout was roaming far away.

CHAPTER TWO

AT THE FIRST GLIMMER of dawn Sid left Lo sleeping in the tunnel. He had made them a bed with a polythene sheet covered in dead grass and dry leaves, a huge pile that smelt of earth and autumn. Over the last weeks they had acquired the habit of snatching the blessed oblivion of sleep when they could, day or night.

He hid behind one of several curved metal barriers that edged the island and listened to the two roads within his sight for a few minutes. Nothing came or went, only a gang of twenty or more motorbikes going too fast, leather-clad riders leaning at dangerous angles around the bends. The roar they made was scary and made his stomach churn. He went back to the tunnel to check that his little sister hadn't been disturbed by the racket. She was snoring softly. Nothing woke Lo. Mam said she was always *a good baby*.

A pair of buzzards circled high in the white hot sky, mewing harshly. He made a dash across the road into the wood, his stout stick at the ready for whoever or whatever challenged him. In this case it was only brambles.

After about a kilometre he passed an abandoned piggery, five pens still faintly smelling of pig – a sweet meaty scent –

(another possible den, he filed into his brain for the future). Nothing in them – only a gnarled tree growing through one; rusted feeding troughs outside. The yard tap squeaked when he turned it, but no water flowed. A hundred metres away he found what he was looking for: fresh water. A flooded quarry. The sides were steep, the water level low. He walked around its edge, climbing trees to get a better look at what was ahead. He watched as a fish touched the lid of the water and sent out ripples. Beyond the concentric circles he saw a moulded fibreglass dinghy tied to a short wooden pier. Crouching, he made himself small, picked his nose thoughtfully, and watched for a few minutes to make sure there was no one there. He climbed down and continued around the edge until he came to wooden steps to the pier. Fixed to a pole was an orange lifebelt.

Filling up the bottle with the greenish water, he waited for the silt to settle and drank deeply, refilled it and screwed the lid on. He stayed under the pier for a long time, watching branches dipping into the water, a cloud of mosquitoes shimmering in the sun. A movement startled him. A grey squirrel leapt from one tree to another like a slow motion film, feathered tail flickering over its back.

Sid had never been anywhere this quiet. Tranquillity. That was the word for it. There was no menace in the silence, only the sounds of birds and insects, the hiss of wind in leaves, the smell of water and green things. Reflections of clouds passed beneath him as he looked longingly at the boat. Walking all the way around the quarry he looked for signs of life, but saw no paths, no broken twigs, nothing to indicate that anyone had been there for many months. He saw a bright green grasshopper climbing up a tall grass. He knelt to watch a spider mend the web that he had inadvertently broken as he stepped through it. A dancing pair of brown speckled

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butterflies flickered in the corner of his eye. The scent of honeysuckle soothed him. He had no idea that there was so much wildlife in the countryside. A ladybird landed on his hand, and he examined it closely as it crawled up his arm. Red and black, like a small armoured car, he thought. Seven spots. ‘Fly away ladybird, fly away home...’ he couldn’t remember the words of the nursery rhyme. Something about a fire and losing its children. Even ladybirds had a hard time. Obediently, it folded back its red and black carapace, opened its wings and flew off.

Fly away home. He would never see *his* home again. He sniffed hard.

There were oars in the bottom of the boat, and a dark puddle of rainwater in which mosquito larvae wriggled. He got in, rocking the dinghy, put the oars in the rowlocks, untied the rope and rowed off into the middle of the water.

He’d never done it before, but he soon got the hang of it. Now, the muscles on his arms felt stretched and good. It was such a normal boy thing to do. It was a long time since he’d done normal. It took him some time to circle the flooded gravel pit. A hatch of dragonflies shimmered above the water. A wood pigeon cooed sadly. Woo, woo, woo-oo.

He reluctantly tied the boat to the pier again and started off on the journey back to the roundabout. Looking inside the pigpens once more, he kicked at the soiled straw and found an empty plastic bucket. He sniffed inside it. Satisfied, he put the handle over his arm and hurried back, suddenly anxious that Lo had woken and wandered off.

Lo was awake, listless, but her eyes brightened when she saw him. He thought again how grubby she looked. Tears had made white tracks down her cheeks and neck. And it occurred to him that he was also caked with dirt. They hadn’t bathed or washed since fleeing the city. He still

couldn't believe their luck: the overcrowded truck breaking down a mile or so outside the ghetto. He, Lo, and several other kids had made good their escape before the driver could stop them.

'Where were you?' she accused.

'Here, drink this.' She sipped at the water, grimaced and spat.

'Gritty?'

'Yes.'

'Take your sock off.'

'Why?' She only had one sock and she was fond of it.

'Give it to me, go on.'

She reluctantly removed a pink and blue flowered wellie and the filthy white sock and sniffed it.

'Pooh, smelly feet.' Lo giggled.

'Maybe it's not such a good idea,' said Sid, and reached inside his backpack for his spare football socks, which were slightly less grubby than his little sister's.

All they had on them was what they were wearing when the soldiers came. Sid had just got back from football practice and Lo was wearing the same thing she had worn all weekend – wellies and a pink net tutu dress and wings. The wings had long gone, torn to shreds by thorns soon after they reached open country, and the wire frame had been abandoned days ago. Thinking about it, he should probably have saved the wire. You never knew when it would come in useful.

'Hold it open, like this,' he said. He poured a little of the gritty water through a football sock into the water bottle and she drank the vaguely filtered water.

'Still bitty,' she grimaced.

'I know what will do it.' Without asking, he took the underskirt of her pink net dress in both hands and ripped off a strip.

She wailed, 'No, Sid!'

'Shh! It's all right, see, makes no difference. Can't see it, can you?' she looked as if she was going to cry. Her mouth went down at the corners and her lips quivered. He put the fine gauze over the neck of the bottle, told Lo to hold it steady, and gradually poured the silty water through it. It works, he thought, pleased with himself. 'Now try it.'

'I found a lake,' he said as she quenched her thirst.

'What's a lake?'

'Swimming pool.'

'Swimming pool? Go now! Go now! Go now!'

A lone black-headed gull sat on the lake, its tiny wake snagging the silk of the calm water. Alarmed, it took off when it saw them, diamonds dripping from its webbed feet.

Sid tied her to the pier and put the lifebelt over her head and around her waist. She splashed around the sides of the boat, barefoot, in just her pants, squealing with excitement and the cold. 'I'm swimming. I'm swimming. Look at me, Sid.'

'Shh! Someone might hear.'

He dunked their clothes in the water, swooshed them around, wrung them out and hung them on bushes to dry. Sun glinted in a million stars on the water. They lay in the shade of a rowan and slept. When he woke he was surprised at how blonde she was. He'd forgotten. Under the filth and grime they were both tanned. He shook her gently to wake her.

'Want a boat ride, Sid. Can I have a boat ride?' She rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands.

'Another time, all right?'

'Why not now?'

'Because.' It was what his mother would have said. They drank again and dressed in their damp clothes.

'It's all floppy, Lo complained. Her fairyprincessdress had

once been stiff with starch.

‘Nah, it’s nice. Clean, yeah?’

‘Yeah. Smells like sweetsies.’

A blackbird fluttered past them, chittering in alarm. The dusty branches quivered in the light breeze.

‘Is this our new den?’

‘Nah, roundabout’s safer.’

‘I like it here, Sid.’

He liked it, too. But the boat must belong to someone. That was Sid’s worry. If they camped here, they were more likely to be discovered. The roundabout was a better bet.

‘Put your boots on.’

‘Don’t want to.’

‘Don’t start, Lo.’ He put her wet sock in his backpack and picked up her boots.

‘My feet hurt,’ she yelled.

‘Shh! Okay, don’t wear them. You’ll have to carry them, then.’

He set off with Lo limping behind, whining softly, a boot under each arm.

They cut across a field, bordered by tall stone hedges.

‘What’s that?’ she asked. She had trodden on a dry cowpat.

‘I think it must be cow shit.’

‘You swore,’ she said disapprovingly. ‘What’s a cow?’

‘Farm animal. Before Labmeat there used to be hundreds of cows, sheep and pigs in the fields. Farmers fed them until they were fat, then killed them and we ate them.’

‘Yuk!’

‘We got milk from the cows. Remember milk? White stuff? Ah no, you had soy milk, didn’t you? I had real cow’s milk when I was little.’

He started singing to her:

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*'Old MacDonald had a farm, E I E I O
And on that farm he had a cow, E I E I O.
With a moo moo here
A moo moo there...
Here a moo, there a moo,
Everywhere a moo moo,
Old MacDonald had a farm, E I E I O.'*

'Remember, Lo?'

She shook her head. 'What's it like?'

'What?'

'Cow milk?'

'Dunno. Warm, chalky, nice.'

'Chalky?'

'Yeah, like liquid chalk.'

'Yuk! I like soy stuff.'

'Anyway, there's next to no farm animals anymore. Same as pets.'

'There's rabbits,' Lo said.

'Yeah, and birds.'

'In books there's animoos.'

'Yeah, in books.'

'Cawwy me,' Lo implored. He yanked her up onto his shoulders once more. He had carried her it seemed forever like this.

Back at the den she asked, 'Can we have a barbecue, Sid?'

'They'll see the smoke, stupid.'

'I'm not stupid. Pooley-face!' She frowned at him, pouting until she felt a bubble coming. She liked blowing bubbles.

They ate another tin of baked beans between them. He would have to find more food soon.

'Read me a story, Sid.' Her eyelids were drooping.

'Haven't gotta book, have we?'

'Make a story then,' she begged as she lay on the bed of

leaves, the limp net skirt in a circle around her. She bent a leg, held one foot close to her face and picked at it.

He sighed deeply and lay down next to her. ‘Once upon a time, once upon a time,’ he gabbled, frowning, ‘there were two kids who ran away from home.’

‘Why did they run away?’

‘Listen, will yer? Or I won’t tell you a story.’

‘Want the Billy Goat story! Billy Goat story! Billy Goat story!’ She waved her feet in the air.

‘Don’t start, Lo.’ He needed to relax, to sleep.

‘My feet hurt.’ It was as if she was almost apologising.

He sighed and looked at the foot she waved in his face. There were burst blisters on her heel and toes. He felt a pang of sympathy. Poor little kid, she had been so stoic. He had been embarrassed when Mam got pregnant with Lo when he’d been a shy and sensitive nine-year-old. He hadn’t wanted to think about his parents having sex. And he hadn’t had much to do with Lo while she was a baby. He had his own life to lead – football, school, his dreams of being an engineer. He had got to know her well really only in the last few weeks. She was amazingly adaptable, accepting the drastic changes in their life as if it was completely normal. At first she had cried for her parents, but now she seemed to have almost forgotten them. He felt a deep affection for his little sister. He had got them this far, he would make sure that she was safe. He’d never had to look after anyone or anything in his life. But he would never forget his mam’s words as they had been taken away –

‘Look after my baby, Sid, keep her safe.’

Lo wished she still had her bit of blanket that she used to rub on her nose when she was sleepy. She couldn’t remember how it had been lost. She picked at her net dress as she

sucked her soggy thumb.

She was asleep before he had to think of what happened next in the Billy Goats Gruff story.

Darkness came like a friend.

As he was slipping into sleep a dreadful noise came, like monsters murdering each other. Sid's heartbeat quickened. He didn't breathe, he sat up straight, watching for lights. The angry yowls stopped. He sat there for some minutes, listening, watching, tense.

They slept. The temperature had dropped to a comfortable twenty-six degrees. This autumn was even hotter than usual. Leaves still hung limp on the trees. Grass was the colour of sand.

They hadn't noticed the paw prints of badger and the spoor of the fox that had investigated the den in their absence. The badger had a sett in the middle of the roundabout. Her tunnel went down and under the road, and had several exits in the woods on the other side. She returned, bad-tempered and sore after the battle with a young male. He had come off worse and had lumbered off, nursing wounds to his face and shoulder.

Many rabbits had burrows on the roundabout, and night and day they gathered on the edge to feed on grass, noses and whiskers twitching. The pair of buzzards kept watch overhead and one suddenly swooped to pick off a kit. Before sunrise the ghost-white owl flew back low over the road from vole territory on the other side.

Sid woke, checked that Lo was still deeply asleep, then explored the whole of the roundabout. It was a low circular mound. There were only bushes and trees, no other piles of building materials. But it was thickly planted and he felt strangely safe. It was like an island, a desert island. Shady

and cool. Green. No one would think of looking for them there. And the proximity of fresh water was ideal, not too close, not too far away. They could rest up here while Lo's blisters healed. He tunnelled through the leaves and tangled branches, his fingers stained purple by the blackberries he ate as he came across them. There were nuts on the leafy earth. He didn't know what they were, but he knew he had had some one Christmas. He cracked open the shell between two stones and ate a hazelnut. He searched and found more. His stomach was cramping. He had to find more food. When he got back, Lo was sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

'I got you some berries, look.'

She took a blackberry, spitting out the seeds.

'I'm going to leave you here and find us something to eat.'

'Why? Why can't I come?'

'Because.' His mam was always saying that, and it had always irritated him. He fought to find the words to persuade Lo with a sensible explanation. 'You're going to stay because you've got sore feet. Don't go near the road, yeah? In case someone sees you. Stay here. Eat the blackberries.'

He wasn't worried that Lo would stray off the roundabout. Since leaving the ghetto he had instilled in her a fear of empty spaces, of the openness of the road, aware that a small figure crossing could be seen for miles. And he *was* concerned about the state of her feet. The blisters needed to heal before she walked any great distance.

He shrugged on the empty backpack. He left her the bottle of water and the torch, in case. In case he didn't get back before dark. In case he didn't get back at all. He had thought about tying her to a tree but decided against it, in case he didn't ever get back to set her free. And anyway, it was a long walk to the quarry to fetch the rope.

'You know how to do it. Like that. See?'

He switched on the torch and switched it off again. Don't turn it on unless you have to,' he warned. 'And don't make a noise or someone will find you.'

'Okay. Kiss bye-bye.' She held her cheek up to his lips. He sighed and pecked it briefly.

'I lost my wellies, Sid,' she whispered.

'You didn't! Where?' He looked around in vain. 'Why didn't you tell me before?'

Her lips started to quiver.

'Never mind, don't cry. I'll find them.'

He tried to remember when she had had them last. She had been carrying them when they left the lake. Had she put them down in the field where the cowpats were? He'd have to go back and look. A Reducer could find them. Or the TA. They would know then that there was a small child nearby.

'Be good, be safe,' she said.

It was what their mam had always said when he set off to the ghetto school. He'd hated school. Now he longed for those lost days when he had gazed out of the dusty windows, bored out of his mind, yawning in the airless room that smelt of feet and chalk and adolescent sweat.

'You too,' he said, frowning. 'I'll be back soon as poss. Eat the beans if you get hungry and don't go near the road. And Lo – if someone comes, tell them you're eight, Okay?'

'I'm eight,' she said, doubtfully. 'Why must I say I'm eight when I'm only five and a half?'

'Just say you're eight.'

It was hopeless, he knew. She was obviously very young, and anyway, once they checked her microchip they would know exactly how old she was.

He opened the can and left the lid on.

'Don't cut yourself on the lid,' he warned her. 'Open it with a stick, okay? Like this.'

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He showed her how to prise up the lid, and pushed it down again. Having second thoughts, he removed the lid completely and buried it. He couldn't risk Lo cutting herself while he wasn't there.

He blew a kiss at the forlorn little figure in the limp tutu.