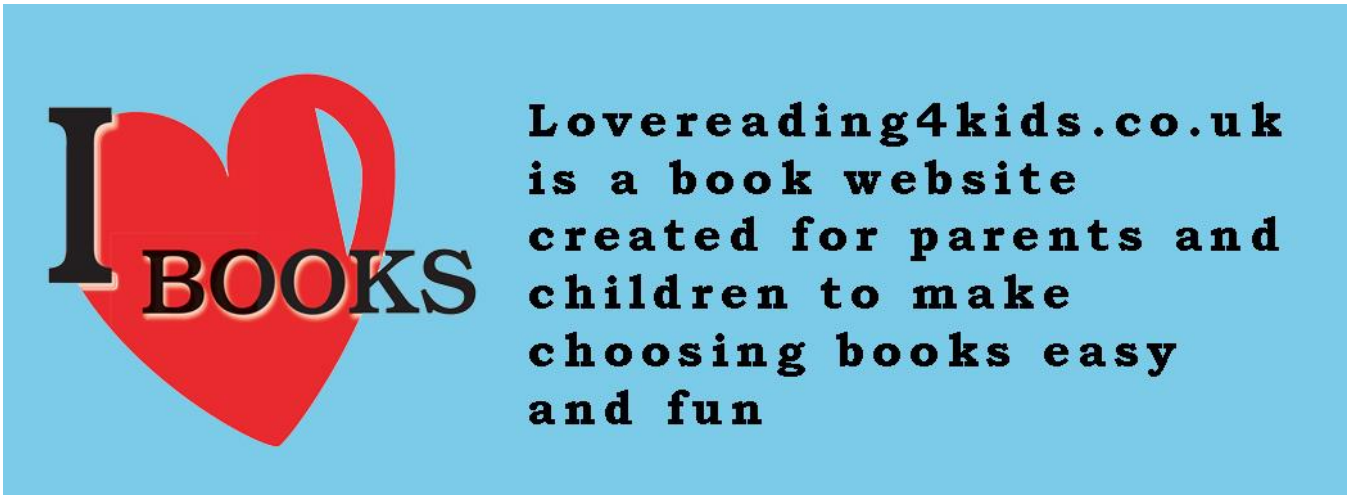

Opening extract from

A Small Free Kiss in the Dark

Written by

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Contents

A fun park isn't the kind of place you'd expect to find a ballerina on a rainy afternoon. But that's where we found Tia. In the beginning I wished we never found her. Three was perfect: Billy and Max and me. We didn't need anyone else to look after, especially not a ballerina. Worse still, she had a baby. You couldn't choose just one; they came together, like a free sample of mayonnaise sticky-taped to a bag of salad leaves.

The girl didn't look like a ballerina when we found her. She just looked like a girl wearing a long red coat and black motorbike boots that were way too big for her skinny legs. Her skin was the colour of the moon and her long hair blew around her face like threads of spider web. She was sitting sideways on a white horse, like ladies in the olden days did. The baby was just a lump inside her coat. Rain dripped off the roof of the carousel and made it look like a giant-size crystal chandelier, except you don't get wooden horses on chandeliers.

We were gobsmacked to see the girl because not many people visit fun parks that don't work, especially when there's a war going on.

1

Permission not to have a friend

Skip was my running-away name. It seemed like a good name because of how I skipped school whenever I was doing a runner. I still liked it, even after I found out that's what you call the massive metal bins that demolition crews dump their rubbish in. A skip is somewhere you can shelter when there's nowhere else, and getting a new name is a bit like being born all over again. I hoped my new life would be better than the one I'd left behind.

It was easy, once I decided to go. I made a plan and I kept it in my head because everyone knows you should never write a plan down in case someone else finds it. Even though it was the last day of term, before the holidays, I still went to school. That was part of my plan. If I didn't turn up the teachers would ring my caseworker

because they knew I'd run away before, only then I hadn't made a plan so it was easy for them to find me. I heard the other kids telling their friends what they were going to do after school and in the holidays. Some were going to the beach and others were going to stay with their grandmother or their aunty or someone else they were related to. I didn't tell anyone what I was going to do. That was part of my plan, too. I even had a strategy for an unlikely event. If someone asked me over to their place after school, that would be an unlikely event because people only ask you to their house if they're your friend. But if anyone did, my strategy was to pretend not to hear.

Sometimes I made up reasons to myself why I had no friends. They were a bit like the notes some kids take to school so they don't have to play sport because of their sore knee or some other part of them that doesn't work properly. These are some of my reasons:

> Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend because he's moved to seven schools in three years and there's no time for him to get to know anyone properly.

> Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend in case he accidentally tells them something he's not supposed to.

Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend in case they ask him about the bruises.

Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend because he doesn't have a proper family to talk about.

Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend because sometimes he doesn't hear people talking to him when he's drawing, and that makes them think he's rude or crazy.

Dear Mr Kavanagh, Skip can't have a friend because he's no good at maths, and they might think he's dumb.

As well as my excuses for not having friends I also invented other notes I'd like to take to school if only there was someone who'd write them for me.

Dear Mr Kavanagh, I give my permission for Skip to put his hands up to the sky because that's how he finds out about the light. It's important for him to see where it falls on his fingers and where the shadows begin and end, and the difference between sharp black shadows and soft grey ones.

Dear Mr Kavanagh, I give my permission for Skip to look out the window whenever he wants and for as long as he wants because he's not being lazy, he's thinking about important things like colour and light.

> Dear Mr Kavanagh, I give my permission for Skip to spend every day making pictures or looking at other people's pictures because that's how he makes sense of the world.
>
> Dear Mr Kavanagh, Please don't punish Skip for drawing, even if he's doing it when you think he should be doing maths.

I hoped that where I was going I wouldn't have to explain myself to anyone.

The night before I ran away I got Dad's coat out of the toolshed, where I'd hid it, and stuffed it in my backpack. It still stunk of smoke, and the blackened bits around the hem crumbled in my hands like burnt toast. l left early the next morning, so no one would ask awkward questions about my bulging bag. School finished at two o'clock on the last day of term, so there was no one from my pretend family waiting to pick me up. I filled my pockets with chalk, and walked to the station. I bought a ticket to the city with money I'd found under the sofa cushions. The train was waiting. It was midnight-blue, my favourite colour for trains, and I stepped onto it before I had time to change my mind. When the doors closed behind me I felt like a bird had got inside my chest and was beating

its wings trying to get loose, and it wasn't leaving much room for me to breathe.

At Central Station I got off. I went to the toilets and put Dad's coat on, even though there was nearly a heatwave. It was all I had left of him, except what was inside my head. The counsellor told me there had to be give and take if I was going to settle with my new foster family. She said that Mrs Ransome was probably only trying to help me move on when she tried to burn Dad's coat.

When I came out of the cubicle I stood side-on so I could only see the left side of my face in the mirror. That's the side of me that looks brave, thinks brave and acts brave; the side that says I don't need friends or family. It's my chestnut side. Once, my dad said that God was a woman and She couldn't make up her mind what colour eyes She liked best, chestnut-brown or pigeon-grey, so She gave me one of each. I try not to look at things with my grey side because it reminds me of my dad, and I don't want to be like him. Pigeon-grey is like a shadow. It's not real by itself; something else has to be there for it to exist. That's how it was when my mother left: my dad started to disappear.

I stepped out into the subway and got swept along with a swarm of people all looking like they had places to go. Homes and families was my chestnut thought. Not all homes are happy, the grey whispered like a ghost. I

hitched Dad's coat up and put one sneaker down on the metal teeth of the escalator, and then the other. It took me up to street level where God rays streamed down between the skyscrapers and made all kinds of interesting angles and shadows. I stopped and put my hands up to the sky, but it's hard to be still in a big city. People bump into you and look annoyed, as if stopping's against the law and looking at the light isn't normal. So I put my arms down and followed the others, but only as far as the mall.

I liked the mall right away. Banners stretched from one side to the other like smiles, the never-ending kind of smile you'd give your mother if she came back for you. People acted different in the mall. They walked slow if they felt like it. They looked in windows and sat on steps and fed their lunch crumbs to the birds. I spotted a bunch of people watching something and I edged in between them till I could see what they were looking at.

There were three people drawing on the pavement with chalk. There was an old black woman, a young guy with a barbed-wire tattoo around his throat and a man with wrinkles like canyons on his forehead. I figured he might be someone's dad, or maybe his wife had left him or else he'd been in a war sometime, because you don't get wrinkles on your forehead like that for no reason. The

weirdest thing was that no one told the people drawing to scram, and no one spat on their pictures or peed on them. It was like a miracle. I knew I'd been right to come. I sat down on Dad's coat and watched. The pictures were good, really good. I'd never imagined proper artists using chalk. The only reason I did was because I could get stubs of it for free.

The black woman looked up at me. I couldn't tell what colour her eyes were. They were wet and dark and shining, like pools of deep, still water. For a second I thought I could see pictures in them, like I was looking right inside her to where her memories were. She smiled, and I wondered if she knew what I'd seen or if she could see the pictures I kept hidden inside myself. Then she went back to her drawing. She had long white hair and a necklace made of feathers, shells and string. The feathers were bright red and sky blue. I never saw feathers like that before. City birds are nearly always dull, except for the pigeons with their rhubarb toes and emerald-and-violet collars. I wondered where the black lady came from, and if she missed the birds.

I sat there for a long time, maybe hours. The old lady with the magic eyes left but I was still there when the two guys wrapped their chalks up in scraps of rag and slapped the rainbow-coloured dust out of their pants. After they'd

gone I took a closer look at the pictures. An old man was looking too. I'd seen him before, in the crowd. It was Billy, but I didn't know him then.

There was a picture of an American Indian wearing a feathered headdress. It was drawn to fit inside an oval shape, and the colours were orangey-brown and white, like a really old photo. You could tell the guy who drew it knew all about light and shade because of the wrinkles on the Indian's face. It looked like you could stick your fingers in them. Beside the Indian picture was another oval with writing in it. Together, the two ovals looked like one of those lockets girls hang around their neck, only this one was much bigger.

The old man, who was Billy, said, 'It's s'posed to be Chief Seattle. He's famous for some speech he made over a hundred and fifty years back. Said some pretty important things that people have remembered ever since. That's a bit of his speech.' He nodded towards the words inside the oval.

My mother's photo also fits inside a locket. I wished I could remember if she said any important things to me, so I could write them in the oval opposite her picture. I know it's not a hundred and fifty years since I saw Mum, but it sure seems like a long time. They told me I was nearly twelve, but sometimes it felt like I'd been

around a lot longer. Maybe they lied about my age; they told me other things that weren't true. All I knew for sure was that I was somewhere between being born and being dead.

I wished I could draw my mother on the pavement, next to Chief Seattle, but I can't remember her face. Her photo was taken from far away. She was standing in a backyard, next to a clothes line and in front of a shed, and she was holding something small, wrapped in a blanket. I can't see what's inside the blanket but I know it's me. The person who took the photograph didn't know that shadows are as important as light. We need both of them to help us see things the way they really are. In the photo of my mother there aren't any shadows, and I can't see her face for the light.

The drawing next to Chief Seattle was done mostly in red and black. These are the colours of war. Once I saw a war on television, but my dad threw a chair at it and sparks and smoke and a terrible stink came out. It was like the war had really been there, inside the television. We didn't have a television after that.

Billy said the name of the war picture was Armageddon. There was a diagonal red stripe across it, the way the council does when something is banned, like dogs or skateboards. I think the artist wanted war banned,

which is a good idea because wars kill a lot more people than dogs do and I don't think skateboards have killed anyone at all yet.

2

Vincent and the wedding birds

Billy and me looked at the pictures until it started getting dark. 'You hungry?' he said.

I'd saved my lunch: two cheese and Vegemite sandwiches and an apple, just like in the plan. I followed Billy down a flight of stairs to a food court and we sat outside Sam's Kebabs and shared my sandwiches. I put Dad's coat on again because I saw Billy looking at the bruises on my arms, but he didn't ask me about them. We didn't talk much at all. We just watched Sam's fifty-two-centimetre flat-screen television and tried to lip-read because we couldn't hear the sound.

Sam turned his TV off after the late news and Billy got up and walked away. When I was making my plan I'd never worried about a place to sleep. The most important

thing was to make my getaway. But now it was dark I wasn't so sure. I followed Billy up the stairs. He turned around when he got to the top and I thought he was going to say something. I was waiting for him to tell me to get lost, but he didn't. He just disappeared himself around the corner.

I waited a bit and then bolted up the stairs and watched him shuffling along the street. He walked lopsided, like one leg was shorter than the other. When he was nearly a block away I started walking slowly after him, hoping he'd lead me to a safe place to sleep. He crossed the road but by the time I got there the traffic lights had turned red. A whole bunch of people dressed in fancy clothes poured out of a building onto the footpath just as Billy walked by. I fixed my eyes on him so I wouldn't lose sight of him. Then I felt an arm go around my shoulders. I had to take my eyes off Billy to look sideways at the face pressed too close to mine. I saw black stubble poking through mud-coloured make-up, electric-blue eyelids and lips as red as parrot feathers. I felt sick.

'Need a bed for the night, sweetheart?' Hot breath filled my ear and that bird got inside me again, flapping and flapping against my rib cage.

'I'm . . . I'm with him!' I said, pointing across the road. 'Billy, wait up Billy!' I yelled.

He turned around and I stepped out on the road. Horns blared and tyres squealed as I dodged and weaved between the cars. I made it to the safety island and then the lights changed and I darted across to the other side. Once Billy saw I was okay he walked off like nothing had happened.

'You can't come where I'm goin', kid,' he said over his shoulder.

'Why not?'

'It's a refuge for blokes.'

'I'm a bloke.'

'No you're not, you're a kid.'

'How old would I have to be to get in?'

'Eighteen, and if you're going to tell me you're nearly eighteen, don't bother.'

'It doesn't make sense,' I said.

'What doesn't?'

'They'll let you stay if you're a man but they won't if you're a kid.'

'Doesn't have to make sense,' said Billy. 'They've got rules and the rules are all that count.'

'What sort of rules?'

'Rules about everything. There's lists of them stuck up on the walls like the Ten bloomin' Commandments.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what the Ten Commandments were when Billy said, 'And number one commandment is: Thou shalt not ask too many questions.'

Then he stopped so suddenly I almost bumped into him. He spun around and grabbed me by the shoulders. 'Listen kid, if I let you in here and you get sprung, the Welfare will be around to pick you up before you can blink. So you'd better make yourself scarce if you don't want to end up back where you came from.'

For a couple of seconds I thought he might be telling the truth. But it didn't take me long to figure out he was only worried he might get kicked out if he let me stay. I was used to people not wanting me around. I don't know why I thought Billy might be different.

To our left was an old two-storey building. It was made of grey stone and had bars on the windows. A fence of metal spikes guarded the building and each one had a little arrow on top like a devil's pitchfork. I watched Billy do something to a panel on the fence and then the gate opened and he limped past the pitchforks and disappeared himself into the bushes beside the building. I didn't know if he left the gate open on purpose. I just made sure no one was watching before I walked through. Some of the blinds on the downstairs windows weren't

pulled right down and enough light leaked out for me to see a path. I followed it around the back of the building until I came to a small separate room with a wooden door and no windows. I felt for a switch, before I nipped inside, closed the door and turned the light on.

There was a sink up one end and a broken toilet at the other, full of black water. Spider webs clung to the walls and ceiling. The floor was covered with used paper towels, dead leaves and other more disgusting things. I wondered about going someplace else but when I saw the lock on the door and remembered the lady-man at the traffic lights I spread Dad's coat over everything and lay down. It stunk in there, so I jammed my face next to the gap under the door and breathed in silver and black, the smell of night. I promised myself I'd find a better place in the morning.

I didn't think anyone would be looking for me – they were probably glad I'd gone – but for the first two weeks I never slept in the same place twice in a row, just in case. It was hard to fall asleep some nights. There's a lot of reasons why a person can't go to sleep. Being hungry is one reason, or because of the places where they have to sleep, like under railway bridges or in builders' skips. Sometimes I didn't want to go to sleep in case I dreamt about lady-men with electric-blue eyelids. Other times

I slept in the daytime, when there were plenty of people around, so I could stay awake at night. Running away was easy; not knowing what to do next was the hard part.

I didn't know if I'd ever see Billy again after that first day, because the city was so big and there were so many people. But I saw him often. I learnt to know the places I'd find him. Sometimes at Sam's Kebabs, sometimes at the mall, watching people draw, and sometimes on the steps of St Mary's. The first time I saw him, I sat close by, but I never talked to him. I thought he might still be mad at me for following him to the refuge. The next day I handed him half a pie I'd found in a bus shelter. He ate it but didn't say anything. After that I used to go and sit with him whenever I saw him. Sometimes we'd talk and sometimes not, but I never asked him any questions in case I made him mad again.

One day, about a month after I'd run away, I was headed down to the river to watch the boats. I heard the bells of St Mary's ringing and I knew it must be six o'clock. That was dinner time at the refuge. I figured I wasn't going to see Billy that day, although I'd looked in all the regular places. But when I got to the grass beside the water, Billy was sitting there at one of the tables. I'd got close enough to see the bandage before he saw me.

Then he looked up and pulled his hand out of sight under the table. We watched the boats and talked until the lights came on in the cafes behind us. All that time Billy looked straight ahead and I never asked him about his bandaged hand.

'I'm hungry,' I said. 'I gotta go. I found a place you can get bread for free. They leave their leftovers in a laneway, garbage bags full of it. But you've gotta get there before the charity people do or they take the lot.'

I didn't look back. I knew Billy would come with me if he wanted to eat. I heard him shuffling after me and smiled a bit. I didn't see his face till we were waiting to cross the road. He had to turn his head to see the traffic. He could only see out of his right eye. The left side of his face was smashed. You couldn't even tell if his eye was still there. Everything was swollen up like a rotten fish. I looked away fast. I thought I was going to spew in the gutter.

We got cheese rolls and Danishes and went under the bridge to eat them. I had the apple Danish and I gave Billy the blueberry because they're the best ones you can get. Billy took a long time to eat. After he was finished he said, 'Thought I might rough it while the weather's good.'

Sometimes, if you waited long enough, Billy told you

the answer before you asked the question. 'I've moved out of the refuge,' he said. 'There was a bit of an incident.'

I tried not to be too pleased that Billy was going to hang out with me. I reminded myself he was probably only there because he'd been in a fight and they'd kicked him out. It wasn't as if I was the reason he'd left.

When he found out I had trouble sleeping, Billy taught me about *visualisation*. He said it was a useful technique to use when you found yourself in *difficult circumstances*. Turns out, visualisation is what I do when I'm making pictures. I imagine things in my head and draw them, except I can't imagine my mother's face. When I'm trying to go to sleep, I like to picture some place I've been to in real life, or something that's really happened to me. Billy said it's okay to do that or you can make something up if you want to, like being on a tropical island. The thing I like to visualise best of all, especially when it's cold, happened one hot night when I drew the wedding birds.

It was on the Friday before pension day, almost three months after Billy and I met. Billy had no money and I was nearly out of chalk, so we pinched six packets from the Reject Shop. When we found out they were all white, I had the idea about seagulls. I wanted to draw a gigantic flock of them on the footpath outside St Mary's Cathedral. There were always weddings there on

Saturdays, and I wanted to make it look like my chalk birds were eating the rice that people threw at the bride and groom. Billy says throwing rice is supposed to bring good luck but I don't know why, unless the people getting married haven't got anything to eat.

We stayed up till two o'clock in the morning. Billy kept a lookout in case the police came while I was drawing. I don't think the police like art being done on footpaths. I was nearly finished. I used the last bit of my black to give the birds their shadows, and I had a stub of red left to draw legs on the ones that were standing in the gutter. Then I heard the footpath-sweeping machine. It came out of a laneway one block up, did a left-hand turn and was whizzing down our side of the street. Billy and me disappeared ourselves into the shadows beside the church.

All the sweepers had a sign on them that said: 'Caution, slow moving vehicle'. During the day that was true, but at night-time the drivers cut loose. I thought this one was going to run over my seagulls for sure, but he didn't. He stopped and got out and squatted on the heels of his boots to take a closer look. Billy stepped out then and I heard the driver say, 'They're bloody unreal, mate. No kidding, I half expected 'em to fly away when I got close!'

Billy turned around and signalled with his head and

I knew it was okay to come out.

'This is Skip,' he said. He never called me 'kid' any more. 'Skip drew the birds. He's going to be a famous artist one day.'

'Another Leonardo, mate?' the driver said.

'Could be,' answered Billy, nodding.

'Archimedes,' said the driver, sticking out his hand, 'Call me Archie.'

He and Billy shook hands and then they sat down on the seat outside St Mary's. Archie took a cigarette from behind his ear like he was a magician and he and Billy shared it as if they were old friends.

They talked about my picture for a while and then Archie said, 'I reckon my old man could've been an artist, except he was a mollydooker. Back in them days the teachers used to give kids the cuts for drawing or writing with their left hand. So me old man gave up drawing. But later on, when he got crook and couldn't work, he used to design stuff for a bloke who does tattoos. This is one of his.'

Archie lifted up his high-visibility shirt and pointed to a tattoo of a leopard. It was really beautiful, even though it had tufts of black chest hair growing out of its back. When Archie flexed his muscles it looked like the leopard was going to leap off his chest.

After that, he and Billy talked about pigeon poo on

public buildings and the Grand Prix, which is a car race, while I finished off my wedding birds. I wondered if Archie was a racing car driver in his spare time because of the way he drove the footpath-sweeper.

After Archimedes left, Billy and me went under the bridge near the station to sleep. At night you can't tell the river's muddy, and even though the sky is too full of light to see the stars you can see the city reflected in the water. It looks a bit like a painting Vincent van Gogh did before he cut off his ear. It's called *Starry Night over the Rhône River*. It isn't his most famous picture but it's still my favourite. If I painted something as beautiful as that I'd never try to cut my ear off. *Starry Night over the Rhône River* makes me feel peaceful. On the hot night in March when I drew the wedding birds, I went to sleep trying to remember how many stars Vincent had painted in the sky. That's the bit I visualise over and over again: Billy and me lying on the river bank, looking up at the sky. I hear water slapping against boats and I smell mud and water and hamburgers.

One day I'll make a plan and go to France. I'll go at night and lie on my back and look up at the stars Vincent looked at. Maybe they'll be the same stars Chief Seattle saw, only he was over in America. Anyway, I'll look at them with both eyes at the same time because then I

won't be nearly twelve years old and I'll know exactly who I'm supposed to be.