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opening extract from

London Deep

written by

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LONDON DEEP



MOGZILLA

London Deep

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Backwater

THE RADIO SAID THE PRICE OF AIR WAS GOING UP AGAIN.

THEN IT DIED. Jem decided there was nothing on the news worth winding the radio up for anyway. Luckily, she'd just been given three tanks of air for her birthday. That was really generous for dad. He'd told her to make it last. Now she was twelve years old, Jem had decided it was time to start listening to her father. However...



The Advanced Police Diving Manual said there were only five dangerous species of fish in the river Thames. None of them were sharks. Clearly the shark hadn't read *The Advanced Police Diving Manual*. Jem wasn't taking any chances, so she kicked for the surface. When she hauled herself aboard her boat in the fading light, there was no wind. So she had to get the oars out and row.

On the way home she'd been blown off course. It was easy to lose your way with the river winding through the marshes. She remembered drifting around here with Abel – her first boyfriend. They loved shouting at each other. He was the one who'd nicknamed her 'Miss Hap' because she never seemed to be happy. In the end, he'd chucked her – off a pier. That had been his first mistake. With a scrape of timber on metal, the boat came to a sudden halt. In a panic, Jem realised that she'd been rowing straight towards a restricted area. The water was dark and cloudy, not the normal clear Thames blue. To warn off passing boats, the 'Dult police had put a huge ring of buoys around the danger area. Their sign said: CRIME SCENE, STAY OUT!

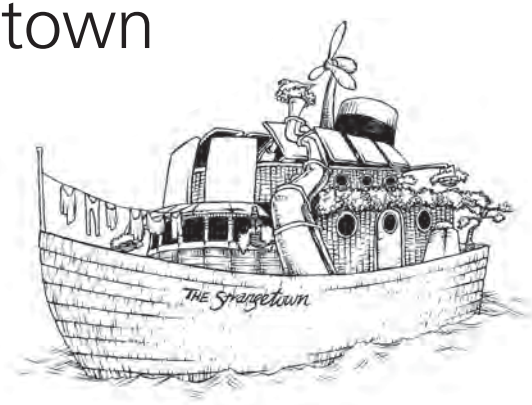
Not to be outdone, the Youth Police Department had also taped off the whole area with their trademark wasp-stripe tape.



Jem didn't get it. If the murky water inside the 'black holes' was poisoned, couldn't it just flow out and mix with the rest of the river? The cops had put a few ropes around the polluted area. Like that would make a difference! Pointless, but both forces liked everything done by their books. Peering out across the ripples, Jem saw that the black hole wasn't actually black. It was a more of a murky brown colour, like one of her dad's Yorkshire stews, and just as mysterious. A white swan made an ugly landing, clipping the rope with its back legs as it flopped into the water. With a sudden grace, it turned in a swanly manner and pecked at a bit of drift wood. Swans are incredibly fussy birds, thought Jem. If this water is clean enough for swans…



Strangetown



BACK ON HER HOUSEBOAT, JEM SIPPED MISO SOUP FROM A MUG WITH AN APD LOGO ON IT. Her dad had told her off once for leaving soup sludge at the bottom of his mug so Jem had made it a tradition ever since. As she drank the soup, Jem thought how ironic it was that the police would steal mugs from their own canteen. Dad said it was impossible to stop it. Stuff slipped off the station boats like water off a duck's back. *The Strangetown* was as quiet as a creaky old boat can get, except for the tick-tock-ticking of the tiger clock in her cabin. It was stripy and one of the hands looked like a tiger's tail. It was weird the way that clocks got louder and quieter. Sometimes you could barely hear them beating out time, sometimes each tick scratched your brain like rats on the cabin roof. Suddenly, she heard an unfamiliar sound:



From somewhere out on the open water came the buzz of a small engine, a jetski most likely. Jem didn't think about reporting it. Secretly she liked engines, even though they were illegal. There was something about the whine of an exhaust that whispered excitement. Engines were interesting, it was too bad that they polluted the river.

Jem went over to the window to take a look. *The Strangetown* was more house than boat and never left its mooring at Trafalgar Swamp. Low water, when the tide was all the way out, was still two hours away. But already you could see the first Mayor's great head sticking up out of the water. Little blue waves kissed his broken nose.

'Wack!' called a duck that had appeared from nowhere. It pecked at the Mayor's ear, which was all slimy with weed.

'Wack!' it called again. Jem wondered if it was her imagination, or was the duck speaking to her?

'Wack! Wack! Wack!'

'I think you need to work on your conversation skills,' said Jem.

One of Jemima's earliest memories was of feeding a family of ducks, that had made their home near where *The Strangetown* was moored. That was back in the day when Jem's mum and dad were still together. She must have been about three years old.



Ever since that fateful finger incident, Jem had hated ducks. And this one was no exception.

'Peck off!' yelled Jem, pounding on the glass.

'Wack?' called the duck. 'Wack, wack?'

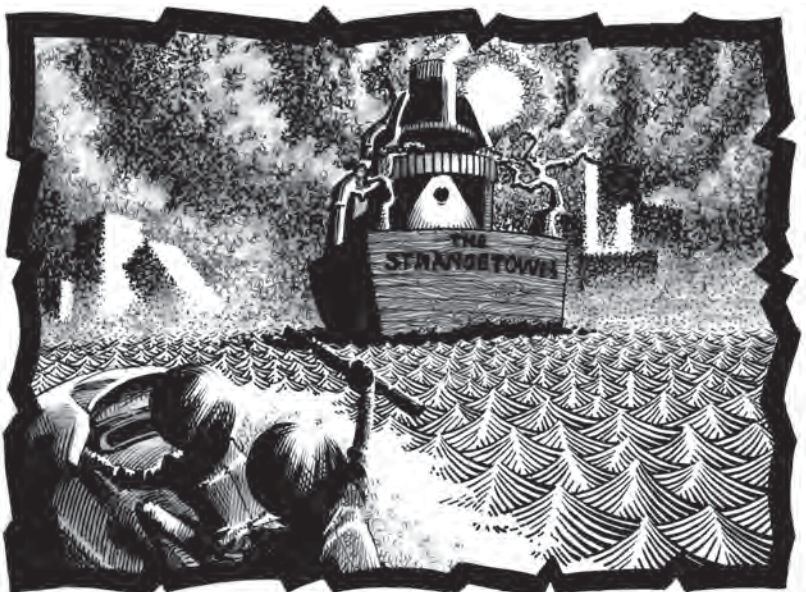
'Move! There's nothing for you, greedy.'

But the duck wasn't going anywhere.

'Wack!' it called again. Then Jem had a thought. She tore off a good-sized chunk of her birthday cake. Dad had made a big fuss about baking it with his own two hands. Jem hasd told him it was yummy, but in fact it was too dry. Now the icing had solidified like concrete. Unlocking the window, she waved the cake at the duck.

'Come on then,' she cooed, in a voice like chocolate sprinkles. The duck cocked its head and paddled closer. Jem threw the lump of cake straight at its head. Her dad's baking hit the water with force.

'Scram!' she shouted, already regretting throwing the cake so hard. But water runs off a duck's head as easily as its back. It dipped its head into the water and began to gobble up the floating pieces. Suddenly, the howl of a jetski broke the calm.



A wave from the ski crashed over a sign saying 'Slow down – wakes cause damage!' The duck bobbed over this wave, and began to search for cake again. The jetski made another pass – closer to *The Strangetown* this time.



Jem caught a glance of the youth on the back of the ski. He was shouting and waving a weapon over his head. On dry land, he'd probably be strutting about in celebration. He kissed the badge on his t-shirt and held it towards her. Jem could just make out the letters C.F.C, on a blue background. Then he killed the motor and floated – waiting for her next move.

Jem ran from the window and hit the 'panic' button. A powerful spring released a catch. Metal shutters snapped down in front of the windows. Once she was sure that they were shut tight, Jem rushed to the galley. The radio was in the fridge, where she always kept it, but it was dead. A note stuck to the radio said: 'I'm your friendly radio, so wind me up before you go!

Jem ripped up the note and began winding the radio frantically. Two minutes later, a green light on the dial blinked weakly. Jem stabbed the talk button three times. Through the static hiss, a round sounding voice said: 'C.Q.D.X. Identify yourself?'

A strange sucking noise carried across the airwaves, not unlike the sound of lips on a lollipop.

'This is Bravo, Alpha, Bravo, Yellow,' sighed Jem.

Apparently, someone at the police station got a kick out of making up silly call signs for Jem that spelled words like 'B.A.B.Y' or 'K.I.D.D.O.' They were changed every few weeks as a security measure. It was tough being 'Frogspawn' – a cop's kid. You got a heap of fill from the normal kids, and another helping from the Youth Police – so you didn't need it from the 'Dult Police as well.



Although she'd known Jem since the girl was a toddler, Sergeant couldn't swing the APD into action. The jetskiers were the YPD's problem. But she promised to send a launch to pick Jem up and to keep Chief Inspector Mallard posted too. 'He's with top brass now. Probably taking some biscuits into custardy.'

As the daughter of a Chief Inspector in the APD, Jem had seen her father chug on merrily through all sorts of situations. Okay, she was more than a bit scared right now, but she wasn't about to let it show. She thanked Sergeant and grabbed her diving kit and the precious air. Then she threw some clothes into her waterproof duffle bag. The second seal was a bit of a struggle – she almost ripped as she tugged it shut. The packing frenzy came to sudden halt as Jem stood gazing at the tiger clock for an age before finally deciding to pack it. This meant another struggle with the seals on the duffle. This time the dodgy seal broke. Furious, Jem pulled the contents out of the duffle and stuffed them into her Dad's floatsack – a long flat rucksack with a float inside. Dad never used it, he was 'sailing a desk' these days.



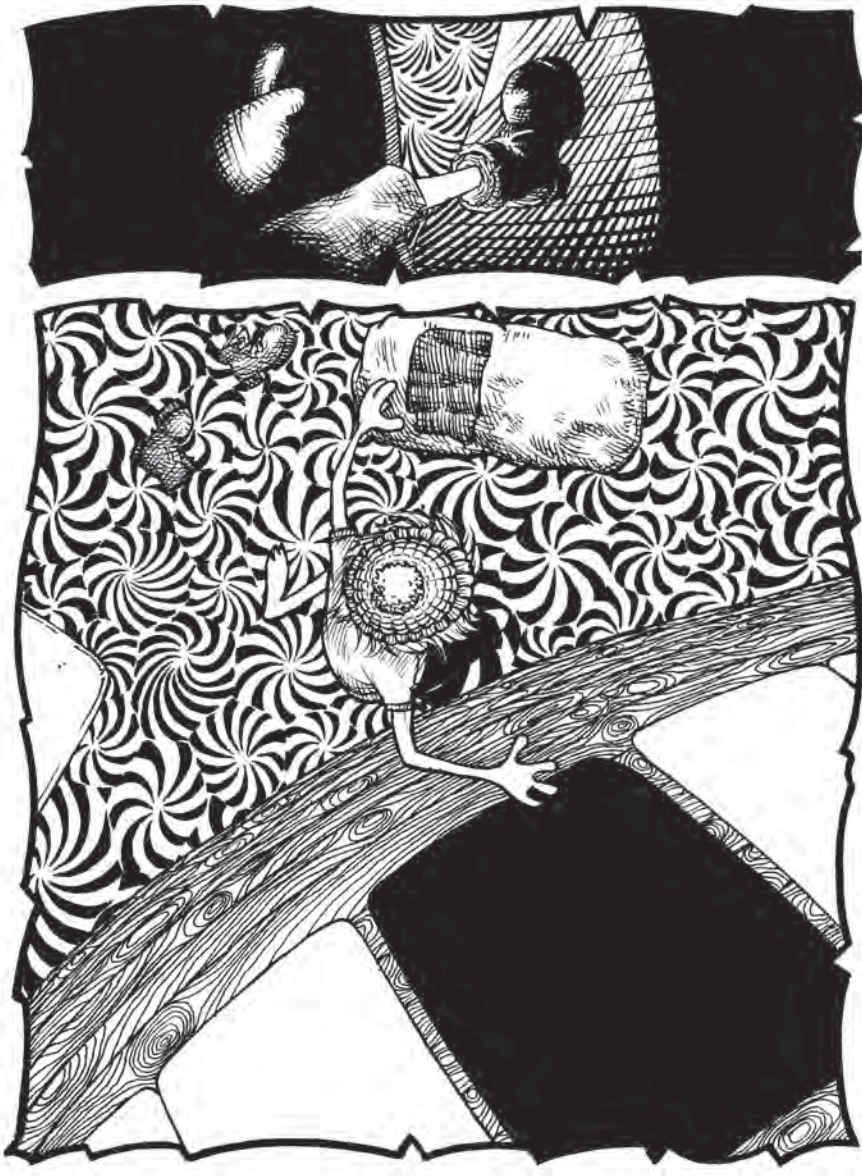
Jem loved her old tiger clock, even if the book she was reading said it was important to be able to let go of things at the right moment.

She hoarded 'treasures' like a magpie, her cabin was full of them. Her father didn't approve. Whenever he said, 'Stuff is for shallows,' she'd reply: 'That's really deep, Dad.' Secretly, she was starting to agree with him. There'd been too much stuff before the flood, according to her history tutor Mrs. Shah. Jem loved history and had read a lot of the pre-flood stories. They were mostly fairy tales. But there were also grim tales of kids younger than Jem stabbing each other. The media had sent them mad, Mrs. Shah had reckoned.

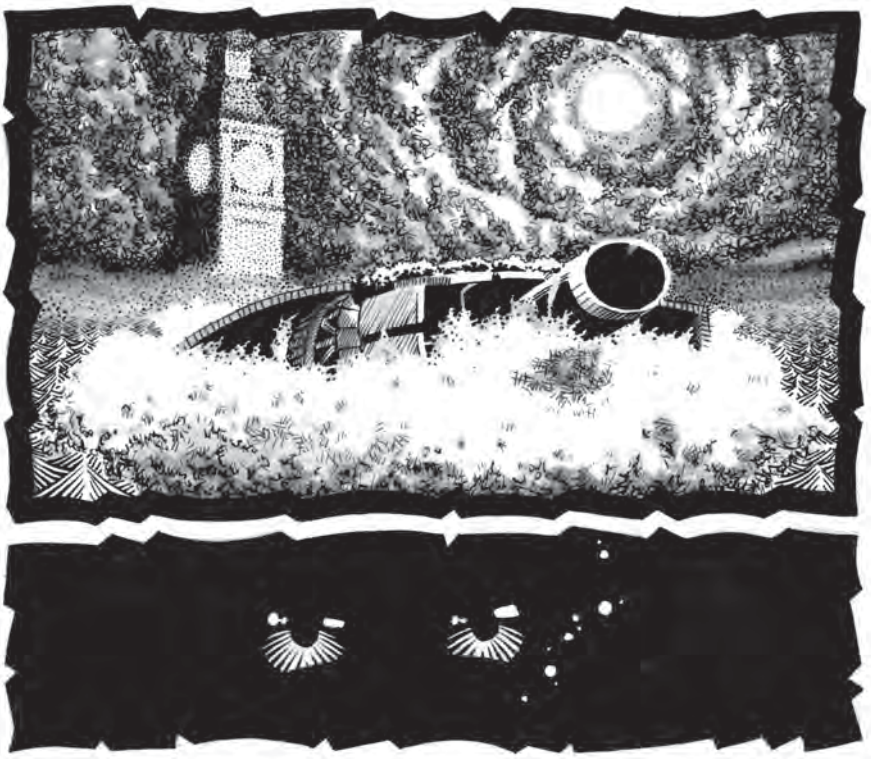
Jem had practiced for emergencies so she knew what she was supposed to do. The rule book was heavy, with print too small to read in a crisis – as Jem had pointed out. To sum up the 602 pages, in case of trouble you should stay with your boat. Unfortunately, every wannabe Captain Kidd on the river also knew the rules. A sudden blast set the old boat rocking.



Every window and cabin was fitted with heavy wooden shutters, but strong oak wouldn't hold off intruders for long. The other option was to slip off *The Strangetown* unnoticed. Old wooden barges weren't built with escape hatches. But Jem's dad had fitted one at the stern. He'd hidden it behind a couple of dummy solar panels. 'Remember to give it a proper kick,' he'd said.



The water was just as cold as she'd expected. So cold, it made her gasp. Searching for her bearings, Jem spotted Ken's Column, lit up like a red Christmas tree, to warn passing ships. Now she'd got her bearings, Jem swam underwater with powerful strokes, building up the speed with her kick. Jem was a strong swimmer, but the Thames was immeasurably strong. When its currents got hold of you, they could drag you anywhere. After two minutes of hard strokes, Jem dared to rise to the surface. Catching her breath, she scanned the horizon and soon spotted the red glow of the lights of Ken's Column. Breaking another rule, she risked a glance back towards her boat. Jem was half expecting to be spotted by the intruders and followed. Even she couldn't outswim a jetski. But what she saw was far worse. In the midst of the boiling mass of water, *The Strangetown* was dancing a terrible jig.



Jem had seen the Thames get rough before, but this was wilder than any winter gale. Its wooden back broken, *The Strangetown* gave up the struggle and began to roll over. Jem had no time to watch it slip away. Instead she fixed upon the huge waves that were ripping towards her like ripples from a giant's skim-stone. Thinking fast, she unhooked the straps of her float-sack and reversed it, so it was now under her belly. As she struggled to do up the straps, she was forced upwards on the first of the great swells.



By the time the APD arrived in their launch, the jetski kids and *The Strangetown* were both long gone. The river was calm now. A seagull flying overhead might have looked down and seen a dark circle, like a giant muddy spot in the middle of the river – with the old column on its outer edge. But there were no seagulls. The only bird on the river was a small white duck. It held itself in mid stream, battling the current. Then, with a splash, it turned in a neat circle and began to follow the APD launch on its way up river towards the Station Boat.

