

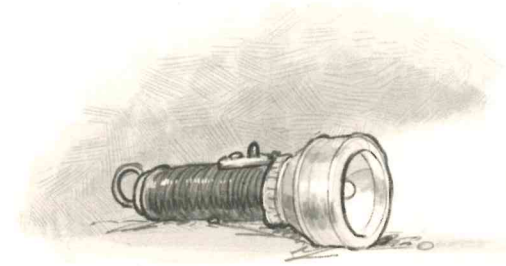
## THE CREAKERS

'NormEllaTron?' Ella asked.

'Exactly.' Norman nodded.

Ella peered into the swirling hole opening up in the floor as the bright morning sunlight filled the room. 'Norm, what *is* that?' she asked, putting her pink, heart-shaped sunglasses on.

Norman took a deep breath and straightened out his neckerchief. '*That*, my dear Ella, is the way to the Woleb.'



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR SUNLIGHT

**T**he red light flickered out. Lucy's broadcast was over.

'Well done, Lucypops,' Lucy's mum said, pulling her into a hug.

'Not bad, kid,' said Piers Snoregan, 'but never interrupt me again.'

'Now what?' Mayor Noying whined. *He sounds a lot like his daughter*, Lucy thought.

'Now we wait . . .' she said.

'For what?'

Lucy grinned. 'For *that*!'

She pointed at the large tunnel she'd crept down earlier; the one that led from below Whiffington to



## THE CREAKERS

Creakerland. Far in the distance, dirt and mud were falling – but not falling *down*, like you would expect. It was falling **UP**! It was crumbling from the floor all the way up to the ceiling as the

# BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

of marching children could be heard echoing through the twisted tunnels of the Woleb from their bedrooms above.

Suddenly a streak of blinding-hot sunlight pierced through the tunnel floor like a laser beam. Everyone jumped and gasped. Mayor Noying let out a high-pitched scream and hid behind Mrs Noying.

‘What in the world is that?’ cried Mrs Dungston.

Lucy smiled. ‘Sunlight!’

Then another beam of glorious light exploded through one of the wormholes and into the Woleb. Then another, and another, until the entire tunnel was flooded with the most brilliantly warm, fresh morning sunlight.

The walls of the rotten tunnel began melting, dripping like a runny nose, and, as the morning sun rose higher





## THE CREAKERS

in the sky over Whiffington, its light shone deeper into the tunnel of the Woleb until it finally hit the rotten roots that were trapping the grown-ups and Lucy.

One by one the mouldy green bars dried up and turned into powdery dust, crumbling at the slightest human touch into puffs of decayed Woleb powder.

'It's working!' cried Old Man Carvey. 'We're free!'

'Not so fast, you rotten stinkers!' screeched Grunt as he and his army of Creakers leapt back into Main Street, Creakerland.

'Arghhh! It be daylight!' Guff cried, seeing the warm light glistening magically out of Whiffington and up into their world, crumbling away the walls of the Woleb.

'She be lettin' in the bright down here,' gasped Scratch in horror.

'The kiddering be tryin' to kill us Creakers!' Sniff shrieked as they ducked for cover, hiding themselves in whatever dark shadows they could find. All the other Creakers ran for it, disappearing back down the

## SUNLIGHT

tunnel as fast as they could with stinking smoke billowing from their black, treacly bottoms as the sunlight touched them.

'Let's go!' Lucy cried, leading all the grown-ups down the tunnel, feeling the kind glow of sunlight on her skin as they arrived at the hundreds of wormholes that led back to Whiffington.

She stood over the first, which was now five times bigger than before and still growing as the sunlight melted away all the rottenness of the Woleb. She shielded her eyes from the light so she could see into it.





## THE CREAKERS

Once her pupils had adjusted, she saw fifty or so friendly children peering down at them from her bedroom above.

'NORMAN!' Lucy called, her heart skipping when she saw the unmistakable silhouette of Norman in his Scout uniform.

Lucy could see that he had propped her mattress up against the wall of her bedroom, allowing the fresh sunlight to chase away the shadows beneath her bed, where light never normally reached.

The pure sunbeams were too strong for the rottenness of the Woleb, and with the mattresses out of the way there was no stopping it penetrating the entrances to the Woleb hiding under every child's bed.

Lucy's plan was working! Or, in Woleb terms, *it was all going horribly wrong.*

'Lucy! Sorry we fell asleep!' Norman shouted back. 'But then we saw you on the telly and we did what you said. We started stripping the bed, and this hole just melted into the floor!'

'Great!' Lucy called. 'Well done!'

'I helped too!' called Ella. 'We both did. We're NormEllaTron!'

## SUNLIGHT

Lucy blinked. 'What?'

'NormEllaTron!' Ella shouted back. 'Oh – never mind. The stupid name was his idea anyway.'

'We're here to rescue you. I hope there's a badge for this!' Norman said. Suddenly a long rope rose up out of the hole in front of Lucy like a snake from a basket. It had perfect knots at regular intervals, ready to be climbed.

As Lucy watched, the Whiffington kids threw ropes into the Woleb through every sunny hole in the squashy floor. There were hundreds of them!

'Norman! These are some of the best knots I've ever seen. I'm so proud of you!' shouted Norman's dad, a tear twinkling in his eye as he gazed at the ropes.

'Thanks, Norman!' Lucy called down into the world above, and Norman gave her a huge smile back.

'Right, grown-ups,' Lucy said, looking around. 'Take your time climbing out of the Woleb. There's no need to rush.'

The grown-ups looked confused for a moment, before Mrs Dungston caught Lucy's wink and understood. 'She's speaking the Woleb's language!' Mrs Dungston hissed to the grown-ups standing next to her. 'Pass it on!'



## THE CREAKERS

What she actually means is . . .'

'HURRY UP! THIS PLACE IS GOING TO COLLAPSE!!!!!!' whispered Mr Quirk.

The grown-ups started climbing down into the holes and back to Whiffington at once. Lucy marched around, overseeing the escape, making sure they all got in. Old Man Carvey, Ella's parents, Paige Turner, and every single mum and dad and grandma and grandad and aunt and uncle of every single boy and girl.

She wasn't leaving anyone behind.

Suddenly the ground shook violently and more beams of brilliant sunlight exploded sideways out of the wall.



## SUNLIGHT

'Lucy, what's happening?' shouted Norman, peering into the Woleb.

'I don't know!' she called. 'I think – I think maybe the Woleb is becoming unstable! I don't know how much longer it's going to hold!'

As she said this, a little voice in her mind added, *Or what's going to happen to it once we've all climbed out.*

She glanced back along the winding tunnel and saw the pointy ears of the four Creakers poking out from behind lumps of melting mud and crumbling rock as they hid from the sunlight.

Lucy's heart suddenly sank.

*The Woleb is their home,* she thought.

Was she really going to leave and let this place turn to dust? Could she really destroy these creatures and their entire world? Lucy didn't want anyone to get hurt – not even the rotten Creakers.

'Lucy, you go first, darling!' Mrs Dungston said, giving Lucy a little nudge towards the rope.

'No, Mum! YOU go first. I'm rescuing *you*, remember!' Lucy said, and pointed at the rope.

'Oh yes,' Mrs Dungston said, and quickly began



## THE CREAKERS

climbing into what was now an enormous hole leading to Lucy's bedroom in Whiffington.

Lucy watched as her mum climbed out and was lifted to safety by Norman.

She had done it!

She was the last human left in the Woleb.

She reached out and grabbed hold of the knotted rope, ready to leave this place behind once and for all. But, just as her fist tightened around the rope, she felt someone else's fist tighten about her leg, and she was jerked back into the Woleb.

**'AHHHHHHH!'** Lucy screamed.

But how could a Creaker be grabbing her leg? The beams of sunlight pouring up through the holes into the Woleb would surely have turned any normal Creaker to Dozy Dust!


Lucy looked back and got her answer immediately.

This was no ordinary Creaker.

'It's the Creaker King!' Lucy breathed.

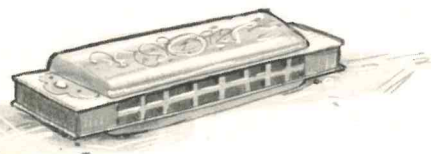






*Here we go. I told you this was going to happen. I warned you that Lucy would have to face the King. Don't blame me. It's not like I'm making this stuff up. If you didn't go to the loo the last time I warned you, then now's your last chance. No? You sure? Because, by reading on, you agree to the terms and conditions that I, Tom Fletcher, the author of this book, am not responsible if you pee your pants with fright in the next chapter.*





## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# THE CREAKER KING

Lucy's stomach twisted in horror as she saw a flash of fluorescent green. She recognized it at once. It was her dad's jacket – and it was draped round the shoulders of the largest Creaker she'd ever seen. He was the size of Guff, Grunt, Scratch and Sniff put together, a hideously rotten creature who kept himself hidden in the shadows of the tunnel.

With the sun in her eyes from the world above, Lucy could just make out glimpses of the King's cracked lips, his beaky nose and his flaky, scaly head. His battered, crab-like claw was as tough as bone as it grasped Lucy's

## THE CREAKER KING

ankle, but worst of all was his smell. It was like fish guts and vomit. It made Lucy gag.

'Say farewell to your world, kidderling,' the King snapped in an awful creaky croak that scratched Lucy's eardrums. He pulled her from the open wormhole, out of the sunlight and back into the dark shadows of the Woleb.

'Get backs from the holes, you disgustin' bunch of twitnits,' the King spat at his Creakers. 'Or you'll all be dusted!'

Lucy saw the upside-down world turn upside down as he picked her up by the leg with one mighty claw. She was carried, swinging dizzily from side to side, back into the cavernous opening where the entrance to Creakerland had once stood. *Stay calm, Lucy!* she told herself, trying desperately to ignore the leaping of her heart in her chest. *Stay calm!*

With a thud, Lucy was dumped in the middle of Main Street, which was thick, oozing mud now that the polished green paving had vanished. She rubbed her sore ankle where the King's claw had gripped her as he stood at the entrance to his grand castle





of dustbins. With a wave of his powerful arms, he commanded the brightly lit tunnel that led to Whiffington to twist shut, sealing off the warm sunlight.

'Let me go home!' Lucy shouted at the King, her voice echoing around the enormous cave.

The Creaker King stood very still. Lucy saw his shoulders rise and fall as his rotten, reeking breath filled the air with stinking steam. He reminded Lucy of a fearsome dragon.



## THE CREAKER KING

He opened his fist, revealing long, black, pointy claws. Lucy gulped.

The King twisted them round and a huge, greasy throne of mud began to grow out of the floor, bubbling and oozing as it formed in the deepest shadows of the Creaker Castle.

The King suddenly bent forward and creaked along on all fours, more like the Creakers Lucy was used to seeing, although his creak was more creepy, more powerful, like that of a strong silverback gorilla. He crept into the shadows and sat on his mouldy throne of rot. If it wasn't for the luminous green jacket he'd stolen from Lucy, she wouldn't have been able to see him at all.

'So, kiddering. You've come to destroy us?' The King's voice cut through the darkness.

'No!' Lucy said honestly. 'That's not why I came here at all!'

The King was silent for a moment as his four loyal Creakers, Grunt, Guff, Scratch and Sniff, crept beside his throne.

'These Creakers of mine be tellin' me how you tricksed 'em. How you caught 'em in a suntrap. And now you



## THE CREAKERS

brings the day down here with yous?' the King said.

'Yes, but I . . .'

'So, you see, it seems that you are destroyin' us whether you wants to or not.'

Lucy's heart sank in her chest. She'd never meant to destroy anything or hurt anyone.

'I just wanted my mum back and to rescue the other mums and dads for the other children,' she explained.

'LIES!' the King roared.

Lucy found herself trembling with fear. She wished she could run away, but something about the King made her feel frozen to the spot.

'No kiddering wants their grown-ups back. We takes 'em away – we lets the kids be free, be messy, be naughty,' the King boomed. 'In return, all we wants is your rotten waste.'

'Yes, but . . .' Lucy gulped. 'Your Rottenness, you see, it all got a bit out of hand.'

'Outs of hand?' the King asked.

'Yes! We realized that we needed the grown-ups. We missed them . . .'

'Missed them?'

## THE CREAKER KING

'Yes! When they were gone, it was fun for a little while, but then we got lonely and sad. We wanted our mums and dads back.' Lucy paused for a moment. 'My mum . . . She's all I've got in the world since my dad disappeared. I had to come and save her.'

The King was silent. Lucy could only see his large, pointy claws dangling over the arms of his throne like spiders sitting on their webs, waiting to attack.

Suddenly the lumpy ground of Main Street started rumbling and shaking. Lumps of decaying floor crumbled upwards, floating towards the cave ceiling.

'Your Creakiness,' Grunt said in a panic, 'the bright be comin' through!'

Lucy knew that Grunt was right. The mouldy ground beneath was getting warmer and warmer. As she looked down, a crack appeared by her feet.

'You've got to hide!' Lucy yelled at the Creakers. 'Get into the shadows!'

The King stood up, spreading out the long, filthy jacket. Grunt, Guff, Scratch and Sniff leapt behind it, taking cover in the shadow of their King.

Then the crack split open, and an enormous shard of



## THE CREAKERS

blinding white sunlight exploded into the cave, slicing through the shadows and falling directly on the King. With a roar, he shielded his face with his arms, protecting it from the hot rays.

'No!' Lucy cried out, terrified they would all be turned to dust.

But the King stood in the pool of light and slowly lowered his arm, allowing the warmth to touch his face.

For the first time Lucy saw what he looked like.

She saw his eyes, which were a twinkling blue.

His nose, which was a little bit big, just like hers.

His mouth, which looked like it might break into a smile at any moment.

A lump instantly caught in her throat, tears formed in her eyes and her head spun with confusion.

'Dad?!' she gasped, before everything went black.

