

PROLOGUE

As I sleep beneath its foundations, I often dream of Estrella.

It's always the same: I'm floating above the city, its rows of glittering skyscrapers arranged like a star, and I'm awed by human endeavour. How we created such beauty in a poisoned world. How we developed a way to live pain- and worry-free. *Aren't we lucky?* I think.

But then it spins into feverish scenes where RoboPals, Pixels and people fight to the death in game shows watched by cheering crowds. Those who don't cheer are removed, swallowed up by slamming doors and returned as vacant shells. These are nightmares, of course. In Estrella there is no fighting, or bloodshed. The violence is more subtle.

I was born there. I lived there for sixteen years. I thought we had free will. But drugged and entertained

to distraction, we were just lab rats. And I know now that the system that governed us was not benevolent. But if it wasn't for Advice, I'd still be there, so I should thank them, I guess.

They knew I was different, and they could have zapped my brain. But they gave me an assignment instead: to visit London Under – the world deep beneath the wasteland beneath the skyscrapers – and collect information about a society I never knew existed. I jumped at the chance. I'm a *questa* – I love quest games; I'm good at them; they saw that in me. They told me that my mission was to make sure Estrella's foundations were safe from Under's activities. After three days of exploring, mapping, and falling in love with the life in Under, I returned to discover the real plan: my information would provide Advice with options. For annihilation.

I didn't know until it was nearly too late.

Before they could download me, I got out. I climbed down a skyscraper, crossed the Void and found my way back to Under. It was fast, with no time for goodbyes, but deep down I was glad to go. Because outside Estrella, life felt electric. I felt finally alive. Free.

Six months I've been here, and I don't feel free any more.

Perhaps it's because of the nightmares – reminders that my parents, brother and best friend are still up

in the skyscrapers – or because Estrella will always be a part of me, in the genetic engineering of my body, and the chip they put in my head.

Or it could be me. Am I impossible to please?

CHAPTER 1

I surface with my eyes closed.

Swimming in my own darkness, I can forget there are walls all around me. Like the character in the *Gravity Shy* game I used to play, I pretend I'm free, somewhere far from here, untethered and floating into the unknown... But my imagination works overtime – it always gets the better of me in the end. I begin to wonder what lurks below the water: fish with needle teeth; whirlpools that could pull me under; no one to hear me scream. So I open my eyes and let reality guide me back to the here and now, and to the reservoir deep below ground.

‘Wet enough?’

I spin round in the water. ‘Jay? What are you doing here?’

He’s sitting on a brick wall, holding up my lantern. I didn’t even hear him arrive. He shrugs. ‘Watching my favourite mermaid.’

‘There are others?’ I swim towards him.

‘Hundreds.’ He grins. ‘Cold?’

‘Freezing. But it’s brilliant. Come in!’ I slap the top of the wall, splashing water over his feet.

‘I don’t have time.’

‘You’re no fun anymore. Come on, it’ll make you feel alive, ready for the day.’

‘I can’t. I’ve got to do a thing before the Gathering.’

‘Do a thing,’ I repeat, flatly. ‘You’ve always got to do a thing.’

‘I know, I’m sorry.’ He leans forward so his face is close to mine. ‘But I made time to come here, didn’t I? I love you.’

‘Then show me.’ As he reaches to kiss me, I propel myself backwards, into the middle of the reservoir. ‘No, not like that.’

He sighs. ‘I know what you want, and –’

‘What we want.’

‘We want,’ he corrects. ‘Soon, I promise.’

I say nothing, because I’ve heard this before. There’s always just something he needs to do. There’s always a promise. He stands up, throwing shadows across the walls.

‘You know it can’t happen yet. But we can still plan it.’

‘Planning. That’s one way to keep the dream alive,’ I murmur sarcastically.

‘Exactly!’ he says, ignoring the snark. ‘Let’s go to the cabin after the Gathering. We’ll go, just the two of us, and talk about it.’

The cabin is better than nothing, and it’s been so long

since it was just the two of us. I glide back to the edge and grab his ankles. 'Really?' My voice echoes through the brick arches of the cavern.

'Really.' He lays a hand on his heart. 'I'm going to head back up. Are you coming? I'll give you a lift on my bike.'

'I came by bike, too. And I want to stay a little bit longer.'

'But the Gathering, Alara?'

'Yeah, yeah. Just one more quick swim. See you there.'

'Don't be late. Please.'

He blows me a kiss and I dive under. I'm so buoyant, I forget about razor-sharp fish teeth. My imagination has moved on. Jay and I are going on a journey. Not now, but soon. We're going to zigzag between coastal paths and big old roads all the way up the country until we get to Scotland, where we'll climb green mountains and sit on white-sand beaches. After that, who knows? We'll just live day to day and see what happens.

Anything to bring back the excitement. Anything to feel electric again.

I float on my back. The ancient domed ceiling of the Finsbury Park reservoir ripples with refracted light. It shimmers and shivers, even if I lie absolutely still. That's because the water is always moving – filled by one of the River Thames' thousands of rivulets, when Old London collapsed and dammed it. It trickles in through cracks in the rock, pools into the lake, and trickles out again.

Just like the water, I want to find new routes and explore the land. The wilderness.

Jay was the one who opened my eyes to it. He had come down from Estrella, too, and was almost evangelical about London Under, preaching how it was where we belonged. He asked how anyone living in skyscrapers on stilts a mile high, so detached from the earth, could call themselves human. Genes washed, germ-free. Sensations regulated by whitecoats in a medical centre. People in a petri dish. Life wasn't meant to be confined to tubes and tunnels.

But that's the irony. Here we are, in London Under, a world confined by tubes and tunnels.

Just four weeks after I arrived in Under, Jay was voted onto the governing board, Progress. And the number of carefree days we could go walking in forests and swimming in rivers dwindled to zero. No day is completely ours now, and he's busier than ever. A too-hot summer means less food to go round. People are stealing more, fighting more. He devotes his time to meetings and to developing a computerised rations system that will work out fair portions and future projections. Some don't approve of Jay's technology; they think computers have no place in London Under. And because he's from Estrella, like me, they're suspicious of his motives. It's laughable. Jay is the most Under-centric person I've ever met. You'd think he's part-mole, he loves it down here so much.

He's under a lot of pressure, and it makes me feel silly sometimes, like my desire for adventure is immature. But I went through a lot to be here, sacrificed a lot, too – family, for a start. And at some point, you've got to put your happiness first.

I swim to the wall and get out. Give myself a quick dry, tuck my shirt into my trousers, comb back my wet hair with my fingers, and practise my smile. Smile and look grateful. Because this Gathering is partly for me. It's just a formality – one that's totally irrelevant if Jay and I are leaving like we're planning to – but Jay says it would look good if I go along with it. And I understand. He's being watched by people who'd like to see him fail, which means I'm being watched too.

Holding the lantern in my teeth, I walk the top of the supporting wall, swinging myself round the reservoir's pillars, until I reach the back of the giant room, where the original steps are still in place. They lead to a higher ledge, where a vertical ladder leads up the wall to the old street level. I climb the rickety metal rungs and pull myself through the old manhole at the top, ruining my top. Too bad. I fling my towel in the front basket of my bike – it's maybe a hundred and fifty years old, a new purchase from Daley's Salvage shop – and set off through the dark tunnels towards Spitalfields.

There is no lighting this far down. My lantern swings on the handlebars, throwing yellow light against the tunnel walls, illuminating splashes of graffiti. I call them

out as I pass. The names, for names' sake, like Peter, Suze, Harry; declarations of love; some, too, of hate. *London Under will not surrender. Death to the Spikes.* That one I cannot bring myself to say aloud.

It feels as if they've multiplied recently, and not just here, but all over the town. *Estrellans go home.* That kind of message is nothing new. While regular Estrellan people don't know about London Under, the people down here definitely know about Estrellans; they've been told stories since they were small about how we're half-robot and will one day take over. Most people don't believe it, but some do. Like Mark. He chilled out when he realised I was staying in Under, but not before trying to take my life. He'll be there at the Gathering.

The Gathering. *Don't be late.* I pedal faster. When I reach the upper levels and enter the main thoroughfares, I notice they're eerily empty. I'm definitely late.

Spitalfields Market has become a multipurpose space. It's where we go to get selected by employers for jobs that will pay us chits – it's also where Progress makes its announcements. Today, it's two in one. I dump my bike just outside, hoping it will still be there when I return.

The square is full, and the members of Progress are standing on a stage peering out at the crowd. They're looking for me. I push my way through to the front. When Diana spots me, she rolls her eyes, but she's smiling as she offers a hand and pulls me up onto the stage. There are others here, too, but I don't have time to

check them out as someone bangs a water trough with a stick, filling the air with shuddering booms.

I stand exposed, scratching at the ring of scar tissue around my wrist. It's become a habit when I'm nervous. And I am nervous being up here, though I don't know why. It's not like I'm unused to people staring at me. I look a little strange, act a little different. *The girl from the Spikes*.

'Morning, everyone,' Diana shouts, and the last threads of chatter die. Most people listen when she speaks. She has one of those voices that demands you do. Probably how she became head of Progress. 'Glad to see you all here. I know you're all ready for a day's work, but before you set off, we're having a short, long-overdue ceremony to welcome our newest residents of Under. These residents may have been here a while, but they are still in need of a family.'

'Moss! Give Alara Moss!' someone shouts, and I look down to see Martha among the friendly faces at the front. She gives me a thumbs up.

Diana nods at me to begin. 'Alara, your gratitude reading, please.'

Trying to still the tremble in my hands, I extract a folded piece of paper from my pocket. Of course it's soggy now, having been next to my damp skin, the writing smudged like a riverbed. I have to ad lib.

'Um. Six months ago I left the control of Estrella. I also left behind my, um, mother, father and brother –' I

take a deep breath around the lump in my throat – ‘to forge ... to forge a new beginning with the good people of London Under. You offer me warmth and protection and challenge me every day to reclaim a meaningful life. I am grateful, I see this as my home, and I wish to be given a family.’

‘Alara Tripp, with your hand on your heart will you promise your loyalty, spirit and life to London Under?’

‘I promise my loyalty, spirit and life to London Under.’

There’s a heartbeat. A moment of stillness as everyone waits.

‘Alara, Progress has decided that you will be joining ... Moss.’

I’m hit by an eruption of applause, louder than the rattle of cart trains on old tracks, loud as a burst of Carnival joy. Martha is punching the air and Danny is behind her, arms around her waist; they’re inseparable. Next to her, Ellie claps furiously with a smile as warm as fresh bread, along with others in Moss. It’s not like it’s a big surprise. I’ve been living with Ellie and Martha since I got here. Being put with Moss makes sense. They’re my guardians, and now they’re my safety family too: a group whose members look out for each other.

I mouth ‘thank you’ to Diana and search the crowd for Jay.

He’s standing alongside members of his family, Ore, and our eyes meet over their heads. He wipes his forehead in a phew motion and smiles. And as we grin

at each other, the crowd seems to vanish. In a couple of hours, we'll be at the cabin, planning our adventure. I wonder if he can guess how hard I'm going to kiss him when we get there. From his smile – the way he bites his bottom lip – I reckon he can.

The moment is broken as Diana pulls me in for a quick hug and steers me to the side of the stage, alongside Karlton. The sixty-year-old tech guy was recruited just a couple of months after me. Though, I remember with a guilty stab, I wasn't recruited at all. I just appeared. And I didn't come with any skills that could help this underground society. I came with problems and a cloud of suspicion and danger. The idea of being allocated a safety family was absurd to me at first – why would anyone need to have a group of unrelated people looking out for you? But I'm glad of it now. I'm glad to be in Moss.

Karlton reads his lengthy gratitude speech and receives a place in Orchard family. As people applaud, he raises his hands as if he's praying, and I notice he doesn't have a scar round his wrist. So, a surgically implanted Flip wristband was a bespoke body-tech horror. When I returned from my mission, Advice told me it was a gift, but they implanted it while I was unconscious. It wasn't a present, it was a precaution. They're not stupid. I guess they thought if my boredom couldn't be contained, my body could be. They underestimate the pain we endure for freedom: I ripped that thing right out of my skin.

'And that concludes the Gathering. But don't leave

just yet.' Diana bongs the trough again to get everyone's attention. 'As we're all here, it seems like a good time to make an announcement. The family heads have decided that next week there will be a Discovery Run. We meet here, at Spitalfields, in seven days' time, first thing in the morning. Have a good day.'

Excited chatter buzzes; people holler to each other. There's backslapping, nods and winks. Some people leave, tripping with excitement over the news, and others stay on as employers begin to advertise jobs and select their serfs.

Karlton and I look at each other and shrug. It looks as if no one's going to bother explaining what the Discovery Run is to us newcomers.

Martha reaches up for my hand, fluttering her fingers, and pulls me off the stage, Danny still clinging to her back like a rucksack.

'We're going to the skate place.' She laughs as he tickles her armpit.

'Just us?'

'No, Danny, too of course. And others will be there.'

I miss her. I miss the times when I was new, bright and shiny from the outside world, and she showed me round London Under like it was a playground. Now there's rarely a time when she's without her limpet boyfriend. But I'll always be grateful. Martha was the first friendly face I found when I defected from Estrella. When I entered the subterranean world, her smile was a

beacon. And where others were suspicious – *She's from up there. From the Spikes. Can't be trusted* – she welcomed me with open arms.

'Oh. Did you want just us to go?' Her tone suggests it would be really inconvenient if I said yes.

'It's okay, Martha. Maybe I'll join you later.'

'I have to serf later. But don't forget dinner tonight. Ellie's making your favourite to celebrate.'

'Mashed potato and butter? Wouldn't miss it for the world.'

'And we might finally get to meet her secret boyfriend, too.'

'Definitely not missing that!' I laugh.

Martha and Danny stagger off, walking awkwardly as one, and I feel happy for her, I do. But I hope she's not losing herself. I'm new to love, but from my amateur perspective, it shouldn't make you insecure. I see the way Martha looks at him – to make sure she has his approval – and it worries me. Not that Danny would judge. He's sweet as pie.

I wander through the dwindling crowd searching for Jay, but he's disappeared. Maybe he's set off already, to get the fire started, to gut fish and prepare lunch. Setting the scene for the perfect kiss. My heartrate rises.

I wave goodbye to Diana, who stands chatting with David, Mark and some family heads, and she winks back. To think six months ago she interrogated me relentlessly, and David sedated me, more than once. Knowing what I

know now, I can't blame them. They were worried that Estrella wanted to bring this hidden society down, and they were right. They thought I might be the catalyst. Also right. But the information Advice needed was inside in my head, and I ran away before they could crack it open.

CHAPTER 2

I'm walking out of Spitalfields with a skip in my step when I hear a whistle, loud, like a shepherd calling his dogs.

'Hey, Alara! Wait up.'

'Ross! What are you doing here?' I rarely see Ross in Under – usually it's his dad, Ken, who comes down from the land farms to find serfs for farmwork.

'Came to see what family you were getting. I was hoping it would be Flint.'

'Sorry.'

He rolls his blue eyes and runs a hand over his dark buzz-cut hair. 'My manifesting needs some serious work.'

'Manifesting?' I laugh. 'You believe in making wishes?'

'I'll give anything a go, you know that.' He wraps his thick, muscly arm around my neck, pulling me towards him in a rough hug. 'Reckon it wouldn't hurt if I just pretended you were in my family and looked out for

you anyway. Is that okay with you?’

‘Er, okay.’ I laugh. ‘Although I’m pretty good at looking out for myself.’

‘Where are you going now?’

‘Sneaking up top, to get some air.’

‘Got permission?’ I shake my head. ‘Tut tut.’

‘I’m not scared of disapproval.’ I grin.

Fear of being seen by Estrella has been etched into the Under psyche, and unless you’re a registered farmer or have a serf job up top, it’s discouraged: the more of us that roam the surface, the more trouble we’ll invite. That’s the reasoning.

‘I’ll walk with you.’

‘I’ve got my bike.’

‘Great. You can give me a backy.’

We set off, me pedalling and Ross sitting on the rear rack, wobbling under the weight of two through London’s old streets. We point out the homes we like – full-height houses beneath domed ceilings of compacted trash – and imagine what kind of people lived there in olden days when the windows let in natural light. Now the sky above is mud-red soil, and not even the rooftops see the sun. Instead, light strings create a warm glow. Mostly, it’s cosy, womb-like. Sometimes, it’s claustrophobic. The tunnels lack movement – wind and breeze. That’s why I hang out with Ross. He lives up top, with one of the few families allowed to, out on the farms, far from Estrella’s windows.

We jump off the bike to descend staircases and on again to ride the passages between them, until we're in a tunnel where Old London's subway trains once rumbled. A battery-operated cart train pulls up, carrying a few people in its open carriages. Most will be in Eat Street now, crunching chilli trash crabs. With the food shortages, it's about the only thing that's plentiful.

After handing over a couple of chits, we put the bike on board and start the bumpy ride out of the city. It used to make me feel sick, the rock and sway, but I'm used to it now. Every chance I get, I serf out in the open, begging employers who come down looking for farmhands and builders. It's how I met Ross's family. They needed labour and I volunteered. I went back every day for a week. Sometimes it rained and sometimes the sun shone. It didn't matter; it filled me with joy anyway. Every time I take this journey to the surface, excitement wells in my chest, as though my heart is trying to race ahead and get to the open air.

'Are you coming to mine, or does a Moss not play with a Flint?'

Ross and I sit on opposite sides of the cart, facing each other. I look at him – his bright eyes shining in the low light of the overhead lamps. He's stupidly good-looking. Brown skin, black hair, clear blue eyes. But I don't think of him like that. For me, he just embodies fun. He's made of his environment – fresh air, wild.

'I can't. Not this time.'

His face falls, just slightly. His dimples fade. 'That's a shame. I wanted to show you something.'

'What?'

'You'll see, next time. It's a surprise.'

'You're really not going to tell me?'

'What's the definition of a surprise, Alara?'

'I'll come over soon, I promise. But tell me about the Discovery Run.'

Ross sticks out his arm so his fingertips scrape along the wall, wiping off dust and exposing old subway tiles. He rubs the filth on his thigh. 'Sounds more exciting than it is. Basically, volunteers go in search of new tunnels and passages. Apparently, we've only scratched the surface of Old London – they reckon there's lots more to find.'

'Why bother? We have everything we need, don't we? Apart from food. But that's just the drought. How's going deeper going to help?'

Ross shrugs. 'Maybe there are landfill sites full of old electronics and stuff. It's less dangerous than going up there.' He points to the ceiling. 'You'd know about that.'

Yeah, I would. I've crossed that tortured surface a few times. The Void is an enormous junkyard surrounding the skyscrapers, filled with lethally sharp pieces of metal and machine carcasses, with crevasses that could swallow you whole.

'Hey, you don't have to go there ever again,' Ross says, sensing my unease. 'I told you, whenever you want to go up top, my dad will hire you on the farm. He loves

you. And the pigs love you.' He snorts. 'Leave raiding jobs to the weirdo serfs who get a kick out of it.'

I smile and nod, but I don't tell him that, despite my fear, I get a kick out of raiding too. Maybe it's the thrill of finding the treasure in the trash that keeps me volunteering for those night jobs – the gold and copper wires and computer chips hidden among the burnt-out trains. Or is it a way to stay close to Dad? Sometimes I spot the sweeper trucks on the night shift, turning over junk, and I wonder if it's my dad. He's the best refuse manager ever. Brilliant but ignorant. He thinks he's preventing the build-up of trapped gases that could blow up the towers; in reality, he's working on keeping the land grey, preventing green from taking hold, so no one looking down would know there's clean air and life outside. Not that anyone bothers to look down. They're obsessed with the penthouses above. And anyway, there's a whole mile between the first level of the skyscrapers and the Void. No one cares; no one's going to see.

'Come on, dreamer.' Ross shakes my knee. 'The great outdoors awaits.'

We clamber off the cart and cycle the route I know so well now, dismounting when we reach the exit path. There's a sound behind us – a scuff of shoes, a flapping of material.

'Where are you two going?' A man in dark clothing stands half in shadow. It reminds me of my run-in with

Mark when I first got here. My skin prickles.

‘Why are you asking?’

He steps closer and peers at me, with a sneer. ‘You’re that girl from the Spikes.’

My heart gallops. The Spikes is such an ugly term for Estrella, and it’s made worse by his accusing voice. ‘You can call me Alara if you like. Can I help you?’

‘You’re not supposed to be going up top in daylight unless it’s for a good reason.’

‘I’m meeting Jay there. He’s with Progress.’

‘Yeah, I know Jay. I don’t see Jay, though.’ He looks Ross up and down.

Ross gives him his best smile. ‘Jay’s meeting us both later. I’ve hired Alara. We need a hand on the farm. There’s a food shortage, you know. We have to get the ground turned and new fences made for the chickens. Foxes came last night. You wouldn’t believe –’

‘Yeah, yeah, alright, I get the picture. Stay low. And get back down as soon as you’re done.’

‘Why do you –’ I’m about to ask why this man thinks he’s the boss of me, but Ross takes my hand and pulls me onwards. ‘Bet he’s from Briar,’ he whispers. And I don’t reply, because I’ve got a horrible feeling he’s right. Briar is Mark’s family. Famously hostile to newcomers.

‘They’ve been snooping round the farms recently. They won’t say why. Let’s just get out of here.’

We leave the bike and walk up the final incline, and we don’t talk again until we reach the surface hatch.

When my head breaks through to the open, a gust of wind smashes into my face, and unsettling thoughts of Briar and Under are blown clean away. I pause to feel the power of it.

Ross pushes my backside from below. 'Hurry up, will you?'

I climb through and walk a few feet, trying to keep my balance in the gale. The wind crashes and whistles, bending trees and making grass dance. It's warm, too; too warm for winter, that's what they've been saying. This is my first winter outside Estrella, so I wouldn't know. Before I came here, I didn't know anything above or below twenty degrees. Ross stands next to me and spreads his arms, his face raised to the sky. He roars at the wind and then looks at me and laughs.

'Does the wind annoy you?'

I shake my head. 'No. You?'

'Never. I'd take a dangerous storm over a safe tunnel any day.' He tries to tidy my hair, which has been whipped across my face.

'Me too.' Immediately I feel guilty for saying it. 'I'd better go. I'm ... meeting Jay at the cabin.' I don't know why I hesitate to tell him that. Jay and I are no secret. And Ross and I say all the time how we're like brother and sister.

'Just for an hour?' He pauses. 'If you change your mind, I'll be in the forest collecting wood. Give me a holler and I'll come and find you.'

‘I probably won’t be able to. Not today.’

‘I know.’ He does that cute shoulder-raise thing and walks away.

‘Hey, Ross? Thank you for covering for me. With that Briar guy.’

He doesn’t turn back. Just raises an arm. Then he breaks into a run, and I stand and watch him to make sure he doesn’t turn back again before I set off in a different direction.

It’s an easy half-hour walk to the cabin, but as I picture Jay, sitting by the campfire, battling the wind and smoke, I start to speed up. Soon I’m sprinting across the fields, startled hares zigzagging in front of me, and I don’t stop until the pine forest comes into view: a tide of dark evergreen trees, dense like a patch of night. I slow, catch my breath, let the sweat dry. Don’t want to arrive looking like something from *Beast Breath*.

Walking through the trees, I breathe in the woody scent and listen to the creak of tall trunks in the wind, a sound that makes my senses prickle. It’s how we should feel in this environment – at home, but not invincible. Although in the cabin, with Jay, I feel both.

When I get there, it’s empty. I’m here first.

I set about making it ready for a day of hanging out. I eventually give up on the outside fire – the wind’s too strong – but we installed a metal drum inside with a funnel that feeds smoke out of the window, so I put some logs in there with a few King Alfred’s cake fungi, which

make good firelighters. It's not cold outside, but I like the cabin to be cosy. I spread blankets and cushions on the floor, and feed the fire again. Then I sit and wait.

Jay's still not here. But he will be. He knows how much this means to me. To us.

I go through the drawers and find the old map. *The United Kingdom, 2007*. Someone Ellie knows found it during an excavation and gave it to her for Daley's Salvage, her bric-a-brac shop. She let me have it in exchange for sweeping the floor, and when Jay and I opened it up, we marvelled at the shape of the old country, the wiggly coastline and the contours that marked high land. It was the catalyst for our decision to go on an adventure. It gave us destinations to head for – coasts, mountains, settlements – although Jay said we didn't need destinations, as he'd go to the end of the Earth with me.

Smiling as I remember, I fix the map to the wall with two nails in the top corners. Then I sit on the cushioned floor and gaze at the road lines, all the possible routes we could take to Scotland – if they still exist. An hour ticks by. My stomach rumbles.

There are a few tins in the cupboards: ancient food, brilliantly preserved. We were saving them for a time we might need them, and I do feel bad about hoarding, considering the food shortages, but a few tins won't go round many people, anyway. When we leave, we'll need them in case we can't catch enough by fishing and

foraging, or we can't catch a rabbit. Ha! How easily I talk about eating animals, now.

No animal in this. It's a tin of beans. I peel off the lid and place the tin on top of the fire drum until the contents are bubbling. I take it outside. Spooning beans straight from the hot tin, I walk in my bare feet down the path through the trees to the rocky river bank and stand by the water. It's fast and deep due to a recent flash flood – it washed half the farmlands away without replenishing the soil – and the surface is made choppy by gusts of wind.

When we visit the cabin, I've always swum, no matter the weather. In hot weather, it's refreshing, and in cooler weather it makes my skin sting – it reminds me that I'm lucky enough to feel anything at all. Now I know Jay isn't coming, I'm not that keen. Suddenly the river feels dangerous, and swimming alone a stupid thing to do. I've never felt like that before. But I have to do it. I don't want to be like Martha, who crumples when Danny lets her down, her bright mood turning to ash.

I strip and walk in carefully. The river stones rock beneath my feet. Dignified entry is practically impossible. Falling over is funny when Jay's here, but when I do inevitably slip, it's to the taunts of crows watching from the treetops. The freezing water stops my heart for a brutal second or two, and then I'm in. Not getting anywhere, just keeping up with the flow. The sharp cold cuts every inch of my skin until the protest drains out

and I become numb. And it's not enjoyable, so I get out. The wind lashes my naked body. If I wanted to feel alive, mission accomplished.

In the cabin, I get dressed and tidy everything away as I wait for the fire in the drum to die down. And I set off again, the way I came, the wind now more irritating than invigorating. I hate that I feel this way. My time up top is precious. I don't want to waste it on a bitter mood. I refuse.

So I find myself heading to Ross's farm, half an hour in the opposite direction.

When I get to the woods at the bottom of the lane, I call him. There's no answer, so I go up to the farmhouse. He sees me through the window and grins, his dimples deep. He meets me at the door, leaning against the frame. 'Couldn't resist me.'

'Couldn't resist your surprise.'

'Same thing... Joking. Come this way!'