

# CLOSE TO THE EDGE

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Soil crumbles under uncertain footsteps as we walk north, the only direction we know. South and east and west no longer matter. All we know is that somewhere, farther along this dusty track, we may find what we are looking for. Yet we have walked for days – and it feels as if we will never stop.

With each breath, I taste dust. It floats into the air, stinging my eyes, sticking to my sweaty hands and dark hair. I turn to my mother, swallowing another mouthful.

“Mum,” I say, but she has drifted away, oblivious to everything going on around her. She is sucked into another world ... a place anywhere other than where we are right now, searching for something we may never find. Something that has been lost. Something we have destroyed.

“Opal,” my mother mutters, blinking back tears as she takes my hand. “Don’t go too close to the edge.” I shuffle closer to her, towards the middle of the track, away from the cliff that hangs precariously over a wide valley.

I look towards the horizon. The sun’s crimson rays melt into tainted blue sky as day turns to night. From here, I can see the city, even though we are miles from it. Laurel-green smoke rises thickly above it. I feel a flash of hate for the Citizens. They have left us to suffer.

The track thins out, and we trudge on in single file. All I can see is the smoke, the yellow rock, and the drooping heads of the people in front of me. Dreamily, I slide my rough hand along the smooth rock, thinking faraway thoughts. Anything to take my mind off the thirst.



My hand slips over a crack in the surface of the rock at the same time as we hear a sudden noise. The line stops. Somebody has stepped too close to the edge, sending sand and stone tumbling down. While everyone is distracted, I explore the crevice in the rockface. The gap is just big enough for a dehydrated, starved girl to fit through.

I glance around and then slide in, scraping my chest on the jagged surface. I find myself in a dim cave. Sunlight shines through the odd gap and is scattered across the walls. It is the only light, and I can't find the crack I have come through. I will keep exploring – in whatever direction the cave leads me.

I walk on, scared, with no idea of what's going on outside. The only sound I can hear is my breathing and my tentative footsteps.

And suddenly, I step in something wet. It welcomes me, curls around my ankles, wraps around my legs.

It is cold – and sends tingles down my spine. I know exactly what it is.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TIM GIBSON

