

PREFACE

This book is set in London, but not as we know it. It is a London where Big Ben beeps and Battersea Power Station belches out smoke; where bustling river markets float on the rising water and kidnapping is rife; where the Channel Tunnel lies closed, ever since the old war ended.

And far below, hidden underground, children are shovelling . . .



CHAPTER 1

COAL DUST

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

Luke Smith-Sharma lived beneath Battersea Power Station. It was a gloomy place with towering chimneys and blackened bricks. A treacly darkness oozed from its walls and at night the corridors were stalked by shadows.

'Come on, speed up!' hissed Ravi, from behind. 'You're spilling the coal.'

'Sorry, I was thinking.'

'Well, don't. Less sleuthing, more shovelling, mate.'

Luke was a shoveller for the station's first chimney. He kept the fuel coming in the great furnace room, feeding the fires till they glowed white-hot. Lines of children, one hundred kids long, snaked across the hall to the hungry flames, each passing coal dust to the child in front. Hidden from the millions of people above they powered

all of London: from Big Ben's beep to the robot-horse carriages, from Buckingham Palace to London Zoo.

'You know, I miss homework. And detention. And sprouts.'

'Focus, Luke.' Ravi wiped his glasses. 'They say she's visiting today. She's giving amber tickets to the hardest shovellers . . .'

'. . . and it's our only way home. I know. I know.'

Luke tightened his grip on the rust-iron spade. He ignored the chafe of his coalsack collar and the tickle of sweat on his neck and brow. He had to keep shovelling. Nobody ever stopped shovelling. Not unless they wanted to be fuel themselves.

Iron scraped carbon. Lungs panted hot air. Dancing flames hissed and crackled. These were the sounds of the furnace room. The same sounds he'd heard for over two years. But each week, on Sunday, he heard a different set of sounds. And you had to be ready.

A door creaked. A deliberate creak he knew well. It was followed by a hush that rolled up the line, silencing guards and children alike, then the echo of heels on a hot stone floor.

'Don't look back,' Ravi said. 'Keep your eyes on the spade!'

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

Black nails tapped, on a black clipboard. A black lab coat

swished, over black leather boots. A black heart beat, closer each second.

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

Luke tried to think happy thoughts: eating ice cream under a warm blue sky; flying kites with his sister Lizzy; his dad sifting through his police files on the kitchen table. Or the day – maybe today, if Ravi's intel was right – when they'd earn their amber ticket and leave this miserable place for good.

But the good thoughts wouldn't stick. Instead, he found himself looking up at the darkness. At the ceiling so high that the light never reached it. At the cloud of black above their bowed heads.

Spade down. Scoop up. Lift. Pass forward.

There was a squeal of pain down the line, then the sizzle of hot ash on naked skin. A solitary sob echoed through the hall.

'Never cry,' Luke muttered. 'That's what she wants.'

'She' was Tabatha Margate, and she ruled the station. If you cried, she just blew smoke in your face. Or emptied the ash from her pipe on your hand. Or into your eye, if you didn't shut it in time. That's what she was like. She didn't care one bit about the children that worked there. For her, all that mattered was that they were cheaper than adults: they ate less food. She could fit

more in. And most important of all, they were easier to kidnap.

The click of her heels started again. The pace of shovelling picked up at once. It always did, when she paid them a visit.

And that was when he saw it: the girl in front could no longer keep up. Her skinny arms began spilling and flinging the coal dust. Her breaths started coming in grunts and gasps. She looked exhausted. Unsteady too. He remembered how that felt. How he'd struggled, at least until he'd met Ravi.

But it didn't matter how he felt. All that mattered was that she'd mess it all up. If Tabatha saw, the whole line would be punished. He had to do something – and do something quick – or his and Ravi's chance of an amber ticket, and a way out of this place, would go down with her.