Praise for The Undying Tower

"In the spirit of The Hunger Games but deeper, more heartfelt, even profound in its examination of the downsides of eternal life. I loved The Undying Tower. Melissa Welliver has arrived on the scene and attention should be paid."

***Michael Grant**, author of the GONE series*

"A gripping read."

***Claire Hennessy**, The Irish Times*

"Honestly one of the best YA dystopian books I've ever read, so fast-paced and exciting. Sadie is one of the most compelling main characters in a long long time."

***Ben Oliver**, author of The Loop*

"The thing that most stood out to me about this book is it's ability to discuss important themes of discrimination and inequality in a dystopian society that has hauntingly similar elements to our own."

***Aneesa Marufu**, author of The Balloon Thief*

"A richly developed dystopian world, with tight plotting and characters you can root for. I can't wait to see what's next for Sadie and the Avalonia Zone."

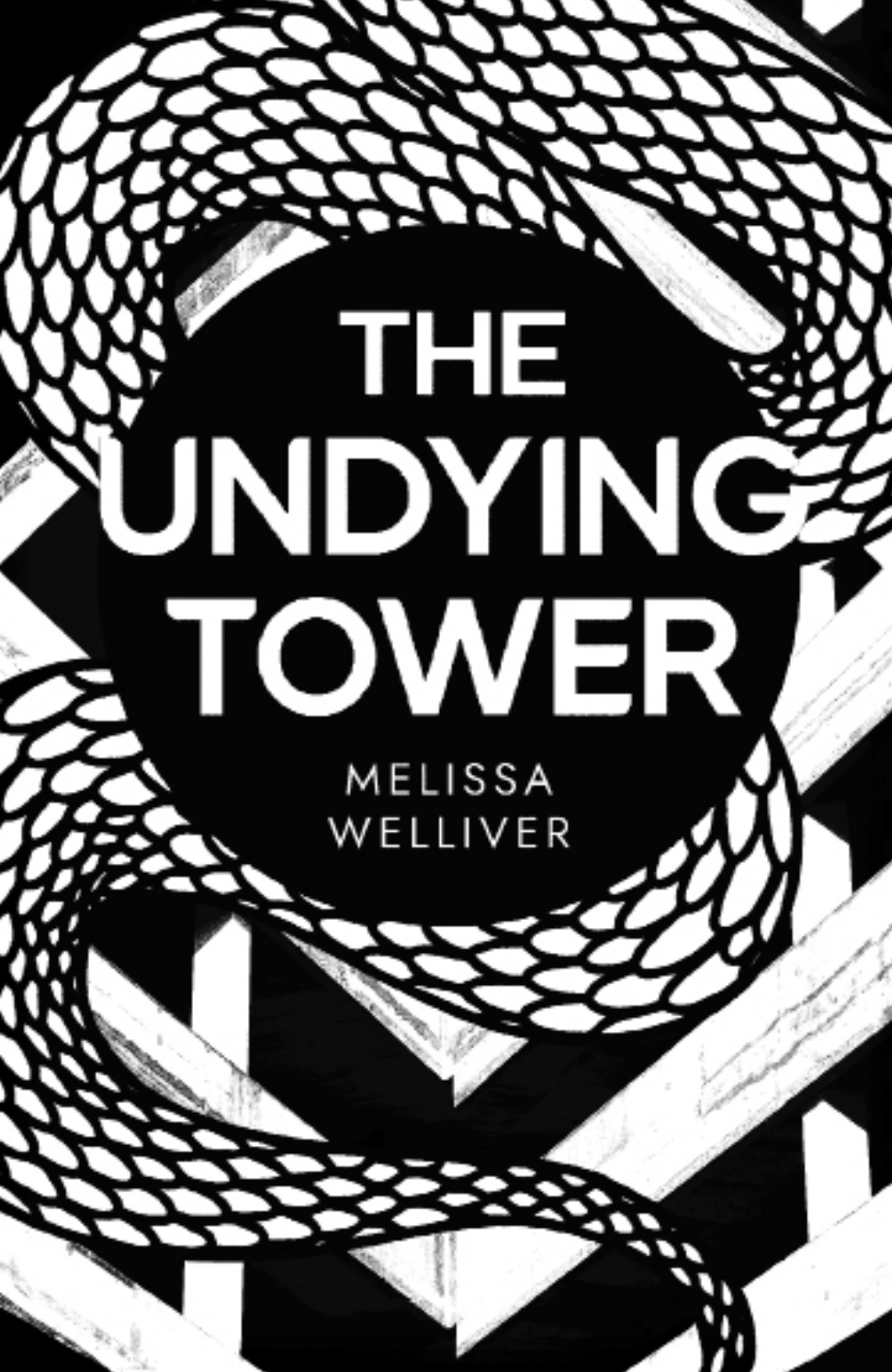
***Lauren James**, author of The Loneliest Girl in the Universe*

"[Melissa Welliver]'s created a unique world, an amazing 'what if' scenario that I adored, and characters I rooted for and was genuinely excited about."

***Naomi Gibson**, author of Every Line of You*

THE UNDYING TOWER

uclanpublishing


THE
UNDYING
TOWER
MELISSA
WELLIVER

Dedication:

For Caroline

The Undying Tower is a uclanpublishing book

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CHAPTER ONE
ONE HOUR BEFORE

An old man with a young face was about to be hanged outside the cinema. His photograph was splashed across every poster that lined the walls of the crumbling building. I pushed forward through the crowd, my hands gripped so tightly around the handles of Dad's wheelchair that my knuckles were white. My heels stuck to the gummy concrete.

I hated the standing-room section of The Corrections. There were so many people, too many, all crowded round burger vans and concession stalls, all trying to grab a memento of the day. There were the usual posters with the same quote printed across them – *I was at the 345th Correction in Roure Estuary!* – and there were dozens of multicoloured T- shirts in different designs. The one at the front of the stall had the Avalonia Zone – or the AZ, as we mostly called it – flag printed across it, the silhouette of an owl with a lifeless snake in its talons. Another shirt had a mugshot of a seemingly young man, the same man on the posters scattered around the staging.

I was so busy studying the Undying man's eyes I stumbled.

The stench of sweat was hard to avoid as my face collided with the back of a large woman in one of the commemorative

T-shirts. She turned and nearly knocked her hot dog over me, the ketchup squeezing out over her bosom. The red stain spread like blood across the staring Undying's face printed on the front. The woman's eyes met mine, and her skin turned purple with rage.

"Sadie." A hand shot out from the throng of bodies and caught my elbow. The hand was shortly followed by the rest of Jasper's mum. She looked as immaculate as ever, lipstick freshly applied and not a hair out of place. She nodded to my dad. "Hi David, you're looking well. Come and sit with us. We've got some seats reserved."

"Great. Thanks, Rachel," I said, turning Dad's wheelchair with difficulty and seizing my chance to get as far away from the angry woman as possible. Once people saw that me and Dad were with Rachel, the crowd parted like they were making way for the Lord Protector.

Soon we were at the VIP area, away from the knock-off merchants and their hungry customers. A man dressed in all black with a semi-automatic weapon slung over one shoulder nodded once before undoing the velvet rope to let us through to the half-empty seats beyond. I took a deep breath, and while the air still smelt of stale beer and body odour and the colour red, at least I wasn't arse-to-elbow with anyone.

A girl from school turned and smiled at me from the front row and I smiled back. As head of the social committee, most people at school knew who I was. If Dad was still working, most people outside school would know, too.

"Look who I found," Rachel cooed once we were a few rows from the stage. The executioner was already out, his expression

hidden under the dark hood of his mask. I parked Dad at the end of the row and put the footbrake on, then bent down and gently slid his oxygen tank off my back and placed it on the floor next to his chair. Straightening out my skirt, I covertly checked my underarms for sweat patches before I stood back up.

"Thanks, love," Dad wheezed, giving me a weak smile. I bit my lip hard. He seemed more tired than usual today, but we rarely missed a hanging, and part of me had hoped it would give him something to look forward to as he rarely left the house. He hadn't said more than a handful of words to me since we got back from the doctor's yesterday.

"Hi Sadie. Great weather for it today, eh?' Jasper's father, Andrew, took the seat next to Dad and slapped him hard on the back, which elicited a small cough. 'Me and your dad need to catch up on a few things before the show starts. Right, Dave?" I opened my mouth to say something, but Dad's cough turned into a laugh and Andrew wrapped his meaty arm round his shoulders before they launched into a conversation as if I wasn't even there. I cast a quick eye over his oxygen set up – wire to tank, no kinks in the line, no obstructions – before turning into our row.

"Where's Jasper?" I asked. Usually it would be hard to miss him as he was a full head taller than anyone I knew, plus he was usually trailed by a group of at least half a dozen sighing girls from our year. I flopped down into one of the chairs on our row labelled RESERVED FOR INQUISITOR MEADOWS AND GUESTS.

"He went to talk to his friend." Jasper's brother Felix had been so quiet I had nearly sat on top of him. His nose was

in a book, which Rachel promptly pulled out of his hands without breaking her concentration from the conversation she was having with Dad and Andrew. Dad was still laughing with Andrew, and Rachel was as stony-faced as she always was. Sometimes it was easy to forget how much Dad missed working at the Protectorate. Sitting here with his old colleagues, it was almost as though he'd never got ill.

Almost.

"Look, there's Jasper now." Felix sighed his displeasure at having his book taken away and pointed towards the floor below the stage, where Jasper stood talking to someone in a hoodie. Another executioner? I narrowed my eyes, trying to see under the hood that blocked my view of Jasper's friend's face. After a few seconds, as if he could feel he was being watched, Jasper looked over to us, his brown eyes locking on to mine. At school, people often thought we were brother and sister we looked so alike, all lean limbs and dark features. I smiled and waved, but instead of waving back he whispered something to the mysterious figure, who then disappeared behind the curtain at the side of the stage.

"Hey, Sadie Q." Jasper covered the ground between us in a few lithe steps, and by the time he reached me he was wearing the same perfect smile I remembered from our first day of primary school. "How's tricks? Hey, David," he added, waving to my dad, who gave him a quick nod from the end of the row. "Who was that?" I asked, my eyes still trained on the spot where his friend had stood.

"Oh, jealous, are we?" Jasper grinned and reached to pinch my cheek, which I shrugged off, and Felix tried not to laugh.

"No." I rolled my eyes and sat down. "Just wondered who was so interesting that you nearly missed some of the best seats in the house for them." My voice dripped with sarcasm. I gestured to the chairs around us, which were quickly filling up with people in their finest clothes.

"Perks of being in the inner circle. Excellent seats, no matter when I turn up." Jasper's voice was equally droll. I'd say the only reason we sat through the executions was for the mad after-parties, but as minors we were forced to sit through them anyway. Jasper took one look at my face and rolled his eyes. "Come on, Sadie Q. I'll level with you." He reached forward and put his hands over his brother's ears. Felix turned to object, though one stern look from Jasper and he shut his mouth. "I was trying to sort out some B-O-O-Z-E for the real P-A-R-T-Y tonight."

I smiled. Jasper's after-the-after-party parties were legendary at school, and I hadn't been able to go for ages since Dad's lungs had flared up again.

"I can spell, you know. I'm eleven, not stupid," Felix said, despite Jasper's tight fix over his ears.

I laughed, and Jasper let go, then reached into his bag.

"All right, Mr Eleven-Not-Stupid. Maybe this will keep you quiet." He pulled out another book, and I recognised it as the next in the boarding school series from the well-thumbed copy Rachel had confiscated earlier.

"No way," Felix whispered. "But Mum won't let me—"

"It's cool. That guy I was talking to happens to work here, in the cinema. He's letting all you little nerd brains hang out inside, if you're finding all this just, like, so boring." Jasper exaggerated

the last part in an impression of Felix, though he didn't seem to mind. He was already scanning the first page of the book. "Hey, bookworm. More moving, less reading, before Mum realises you've gone."

Felix saw Rachel still chatting to Andrew and my dad and scrambled over Jasper's lap into the aisle. Soon, he too had disappeared behind the black curtain.

"That was nice of you," I said. Jasper shrugged as he slid over to take his brother's seat. Sitting this close, he smelt like lemons and . . . and something else, something new. "Hey, what's that smell?" I said, wrinkling my nose. It was slightly aromatic.

"Ah, you can smell it? Bugger," Jasper muttered. He searched his pockets, checking over his shoulder as he did so. Despite the seats being packed, everyone was too excited by what was happening on stage to notice what Jasper was doing.

There were the cameras; the live feed that would be taking over every channel in the Avalonia Zone during the hanging. Up on the filming platforms, the camera operators were still loading their equipment and testing the lighting rig.

Once he was sure no one was looking, Jasper pulled a package out of his pocket – a folded piece of kitchen roll that he unwrapped to reveal a clear, plastic bag. Inside the bag was a deep sunflower-yellow powder.

I recognised the colour immediately. Rooting through my bag, I pulled out my art tin and picked out a pencil, a matching deep yellow with a word engraved across the side.

"Turmeric," I said, holding up the pencil for him to see. "Isn't that foreign? On the banned items list?"

He didn't answer, his gaze instead drawn to the pencil in

my hand. "You brought your art stuff here? To a hanging?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. If you must know, Mr Turner says I need to practise more with human subjects. My drawings are," I made air quotes, "'photographic in quality, but lacking in soul'. Or something. What does he know? He writes my uni reference though, so I have to play nice." I shook my head and lowered my voice to a whisper. "And hey, stop distracting me from your petty crimes. Where on earth did you find that stuff? Jasper, if you've been down to the black market *again*—"

"Oh, chill out, Sades. It's turmeric, not drugs. Sam on the athletics team got it for me. His mum grows and dries all sorts of spices in her loft. Was thinking you might like to see it, actually. Apparently, it tastes a bit bitter but makes really good dye when mixed with a bit of oil or water." His voice was tense, his jaw clenched forward, and I immediately felt bad for questioning him.

"Thanks, Jasper. That's really nice of you, but I just can't accept it. And I wasn't going to tell on you. I was just wondering how you got it, that's all." My cheeks were starting to burn, so I busied myself with getting out the rest of my pencils and my sketchpad while Jasper put the package back into his pocket. To try to make up for it, I said, "Hey, don't forget who found you a Bible for your initiation thingy."

Before anyone was officially on the athletics team, they had to pass an initiation test; some type of scavenger hunt. In year ten, all the items on the list had been banned articles, and Jasper's job had been to get a Bible. Luckily, Dad had just moved into the Illegal Antiquities department, so I had managed to swipe one from the confiscated items when I went to visit

him at work. Jasper had been so pleased that I thought he was going to crush me with his bear hug.

What bothered me was that this wasn't the first time Jasper had got hold of something illegal on his own. I didn't know what had got into him lately.

"OK, Bible-hunter. I guess you're sort of cool," he said.

Some of the heat left my cheeks. "Sort of cool? I've been voted Head of the Social Committee four years running. I'm as cool as they come, *loser*," I countered.

A screeching whine filled our ears. "Ladies and Gentlemen, if you could please take your seats, the Correction is about to begin." The constant chatter around us quieted almost immediately. Some of the people in the seating area finally sat down, including one rather tall man in front of me whose head blocked half my view of the stage.

"I'm glad we're not so near the front today," I whispered, moving my head from side to side.

"Yeah, you can thank me for that." Jasper leant in close, and his breath tickled my ear, making the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. "I asked to be sat further back. Wanted to try and spare poor Felix, before I knew some kids were hanging out inside the cinema. Little nerd isn't really used to it yet."

I understood. When Jasper and I had first been made to come to the hangings when we were ten, we used to squeeze our eyes shut until it was all over. That didn't stop the sickening noise of ropes, and necks snapping, no matter how far in my ears my fingers were wedged. We had been to dozens of hangings now, and, as much as I hated to admit it, it was getting easier. This was the first one since Dad's security pass had expired though,

so I was glad Rachel could still get us seats. I focused on the blank page of my sketchpad and swallowed down the sour taste of bile that filled my mouth.

A man in dress whites with a military-short haircut and yellow teeth stepped up on to the stage and made his way to the front. "You ready for me?" he asked, addressing the filming platform. In his hand was a leather-bound book, which he flipped open to a marked page. Some of the camera operators checked their lenses before giving the man a thumbs-up.

"Bring out the Undying." The man's voice was solemn as he addressed the back of the stage, and a low cheer went up from the civilian section behind us. Without even realising it, my hand had begun to sketch the man, twitching the pencil across my pad like an animal coming out of hibernation. I started with his nose, the cut of his jaw. Behind him, in the wings of the stage, another man was shoved forward, his face pale and set, his hair stuck up on one side like he had just been asleep. The same man from the woman's stretched T-shirt.

Two heavily armed guards came up behind the Undying and checked the ties that bound his hands behind his back before wrapping a length of rope around his feet. The audience went eerily quiet. If there was going to be any fuss, this was when the Undying would usually make his final plea.

But he stayed quiet. His eyes were glassy as the guards half- carried him up to the gallows, placing him slightly to the left of the hangman's noose.

Something nudged my sketchpad and I glanced at Jasper. His leg was bobbing up and down, almost like a twitch, so violently that it had almost sent my pencil right across my rough sketch.

I waited for him to notice me staring, but if he did, he didn't let on. He just kept staring at the stage, his eyes sharp, his jaw still set forward.

"Timothy Green, seventy-six years of age, an Undying residing in the Roure Estuary?"

I tore my eyes away from Jasper and looked back at the stage. The official in the dress whites addressed the Undying as he read from his book, before Timothy Green gave a short, sharp nod.

Someone from the civilian section booed, the sound made louder by the contrasting silence of the rest of the crowd. No one wanted to prolong the time before the firework show could begin, and it was almost dusk. I flipped my page and started to sketch Timothy's face – the soft, round cheeks and bright, green eyes that I partially remembered from the posters. All smooth skin and strong shoulders – he didn't look a day over twenty-five. None of them did. We learnt in school that twenty-five was the year most of them stopped ageing, though there were some rare cases of Undying with slightly older cells.

"Please, have mercy," a woman's voice cried out. It was immediately drowned in more boos. I winced before looking up and saw the voice belonged to someone from the Undying's family.

To the left side of the stage was another platform, like the one that housed the cameras, but this one was surrounded by more armed guards. Behind the string of chain, a woman cried out and gripped on to the railing, while a boy held her back. On both of their arms were the matching blue armbands that marked them out for who they were, a golden 'U' stitched in the middle. Compulsory accessories for all Undying out in public.

Unless you were about to be hanged, of course.

The boy looked even younger than the woman he held back, possibly even my age. While her face was bright red, crumpled with despair, his was set, resolute.

My heart panged and I flicked a quick glance over to Dad, who was watching the stage intently. I don't know what I would do without him. He was my only family. Timothy could very well be the woman's father, or brother, or even son. It was impossible to tell. I shook the thought from my head.

Scrambling under my seat for the opera glasses, I zoomed in and focused on the stoic boy holding her back. His hair was blonde, almost ashen, and his eyes were different colours: one blue, one brown. I was already reaching for a pencil I knew would match the right eye when one of the guards pulled his gun back and hit the crying woman in the face.

"Ooooh," the crowd howled, before applause fluttered across the seated area. I turned away, dropping the blue pencil under my seat as I heard the woman fall to the ground with a sickening, orange thud.

"How unsavoury," Rachel said, giving my arm a quick squeeze when she caught sight of my face. She turned back to the stage and made a hand signal, which in turn was reciprocated by one of the men behind the cameras. The spotlight revealing the family staging area was abruptly shut off, sending the boy and his family into darkness once more. The Undying on stage didn't even blink. "Doesn't he even care? She's making it worse for herself. She needs to stay quiet, like that boy in her family," I whispered to Jasper, but he didn't reply, his leg still bobbing up and down like it had a life of its own.

"Hey, what's up with you?" I hissed, before turning back to the stage.

The announcer held up the leather book and cleared his throat. "Timothy Green, you have been found guilty by a jury of Avalonian citizens for preaching illegal, ancient and religious practices, all pertaining to the existence of an afterlife, in direct contravention of Article III, Division One of the Avalonia Zone Constitution. You will now serve your sentence, which is to be hanged by the neck until you are dead. Do you have anything to say before the sentence is carried out?"

Timothy blinked, and to my surprise finally reacted to something. Opening his mouth, a dangerous glint in his eye, he spoke his final words.

"God save the Queen."

A ripple of shocked gasps spread across the seats in front of us, barely audible over the shouting of the civilian section. Some of the armed guards near the stage jogged to the back of the seats, towards the rope that held back the civilians from the VIP guests.

"Did you hear that? Jasper?" I tried to talk to Jasper again, this time putting a firm hand over his knee to stop it from bobbing. He went completely still.

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly, a little too loudly, and several people sitting in front of us turned around. He was looking directly at me and took my hand from his knee.

My cheeks burned again. "What are you on about? Sorry for what?" I whispered back, trying to ignore the people still glaring at us.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the guards shove

a black hood over the Undying's head before threading it through the noose. The noise from the crowd behind was getting louder, more boisterous, and more guards were dispatched into the throng from the stage. The executioner stepped forward, his gloved hand wrapped around the lever set to one side of the gallows.

Jasper squeezed my hand so tightly it hurt. I tilted my head in confusion. "Jasper?"

But he never replied. Because when the hangman pulled the lever, a blast of heat ripped through the crowd, and even Jasper couldn't hold on tight enough to stop me from being blown away.