

and place it on my front, even though my back's already aching with my own bigger bag and the tarpaulins in a roll beneath it, and the rat trap beneath that.

"Can we make a fire tonight?" Bear asks.

"We'll try."

"Shall I start collecting sticks?"

"Not now, Bear," I say, quietly desperate. "You have to walk faster than this."

I can't help thinking that by now some alarm has been raised. Maybe Border Patrol are already coming after us. If not, then at 9am tomorrow, when school starts on Monday morning, our desks will be empty. Our teachers will mark us absent, Abbott will call Annie Rose. She's going to pick up the phone and say we're sick. To buy us time before they come looking. I'm not sure any of us believe that will work though.

Sometimes I think I see them. Lumbering white figures lit by the moon. Border Patrol in their Hazmat suits. But it's all in my head. There's no one for miles.

When we can't go any further, we make our tent. A tree holds a branch out for us at just the right height and I drape over one of the tarpaulins and lay the other on the floor.

Bear doesn't ask about collecting sticks or making a fire. He simply gets inside his sleeping bag and falls asleep. His body can't do any more. I'm so exhausted I crawl into mine, right next to him, and shut my eyes.

Some bird is calling above us. This high-pitched trill, little snatches of song that stop only to start up again a moment or so later.

Bear's out of his sleeping bag already and I clamber up next to him. I want to say something but I can't find the words and anyway it doesn't matter because I know Bear's feeling it too. Anyone would. The scale of it – the trees, right up into the sky, all green and yellow and gold, and the sunlight filtering through them, dancing down on our upturned faces.

It's like the Palm House only a hundred times greener, a thousand times more fresh.

That first bird's still singing but there are different birds too, their songs weaving together. It's beautiful. But, it's more than beautiful. It's alive.

"It worked," Bear says.