

Chapter One

The say the day the Governor arrived, the ravens did too. All the smaller birds flew backwards into the sea, and that is why there are no songbirds on Joya. Only huge, ragged ravens. I'd watch them perch on the rooftops like omens, and try to quint them into the chaffinches and goldcrests Da drew from memory. If I imagined hard enough, I could almost hear them singing.

'Why did the songbirds leave, Da?' I'd ask.

'Because they could, Isabella.'

'And the wolves? The deer?'

Da's face would darken. 'Seems the sea was better than what they were running from.'

Da would tell me another story then, about the girl-warrior Arinta, or about Joya's mythical past as a floating island, and refuse to say more about the wolves and the backwards birds. But I kept asking, until the day came when I found my own answers.

The morning it began was like any other.

I woke in my narrow bed, sunrise just starting to brighten the mud walls of my room. The smell of burnt porridge hung on the air. Da must have been up for hours, as it took a long time for the fire to heat the heavy clay pot. I could hear Miss La, our hen, scratching about outside my room, seeking out crumbs. She was thirteen years old, same as me, but even though it's young for a person, it's very, very old for a chicken. Her feathers were grey, her mood was black and even our cat Pep was scared of her.

My tummy rumbled as I stretched my arms. Pep was sprawled across my legs, and he yowled loudly as I sat up.

'You awake, Isabella?' Da called from the kitchen.

'Morning, Da.'

'Porridge is ready. A little over-ready, in fact...'

'Coming!' I eased my legs out and smoothed the cat's rough fur where it had ruffled in the night. 'Sorry, Pep.'

He purred and closed his green eyes.

I washed my face in the basin by the window, and stuck a tongue out at the reflection in the polished metal above Gabo's bed, straightening his sheets, dustier everyday, but still made. The voice line arched next to his pillow – a long, thin hollow Da had etched for us up the walls and over the ceiling. When we pressed our lips to it and whispered, it carried our voices so we could talk even when we were at each end of the room in our separate beds.

Three years now. Three years since I sat there, my twin's hand fire in mine as he faded in the night, fast as a blown-out match.

But still I could conjure him. Easy as breathing.

It would not do to start the day sad. Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I pulled on my school dress. It was as big as it had been six weeks before. My best friend Lupe would laugh. *Still the shortest in the class!* she'd say.

I quickly braided my unbrushed hair and hoped Da wouldn't notice I hadn't untangled it all summer. Pep was rolling on the bed but I wasn't allowed to stroke him with my uniform on. My teacher, Señora Feliz, was always picking ginger hairs off my dress with irritated fingers.

I pulled aside the curtain that served as my bedroom door, and carefully stepped over Miss La, who squawked as I scattered her small pile of crumbs. Sher narrowed her misty eyes and pecked at my ankles, chasing me further into the main room where we ate, talked and planned adventures.

A big bowl of blackened porridge sat on our large pine-plank table, marooned among a sea of maps.

1. What does 'the day the Governor arrived, the ravens did too' suggest about the Governor's character? Why?
(You may need to find out what a raven is and how some people perceive them.)
2. What does 'her mood was black' suggest about the hen, Miss La?
3. Gabo's bed is 'dustier everyday'. What does this mean?
4. 'A big bowl of blackened porridge sat on our large pine-plank table, marooned among a sea of maps.'
What does this suggest?
5. Isabella's dad is a cartographer. What does that mean?
How do we know this is his job based on the contents of his home?
6. What impression do you get of Isabella?
Give two impressions and provide evidence for each from the text.

