



RF HUXLEY

Rachel Huxley grew up in Canada, where her best friend was the daughter of a refugee. Following a transatlantic move, she spent fifteen years as a lawyer. She's now settled in England, in a village within a city, with her partner, the grandson of a refugee. She spends her time watching YouTube, painting graffiti and getting handcuffed – all in the name of research. She has a BA in English literature and an MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University.

About *Through the Valley*

I'm leavin' Kingdom.

I'm headed away from the Anointed, away from men who invoke the name o' the Lord like He's their own personal mascot.

Away from men who wanna turn Caleb into a killer.

Sixteen-year-old mixed-race Ziah wants to save her white half-brother Caleb from the extremists who have destroyed their lives in small-town America. Ziah drives north, in the hope of finding them a new life in Canada as refugees.

But America is at war with itself, Canada is a long way from home – and Caleb's only four years old. Will Ziah get them to safety before a secret unravels everything?

And will it be worth the price?

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THROUGH THE VALLEY

Chapter One

The militia are right behind us, tight on our tail, flags whippin' in the wind. Momma hunches over the steerin' wheel an' pulls over, way over, clean outta their way. The black pick-up sweeps past an' Caleb shouts, 'Ziah! Look! New militia!'

I don't answer.

There's more 'n' more Anointed militia in Kingdom lately. Means every time you step outta the house, you wonder if today's the day you're not gonna make it home again.

We crawl into town, wipers slappin' away at the rain. Caleb jigs in his seat, singin', 'The animals went in two by two,' an' the radio proclaims the war to be one long march o' glory for the Anointed:

'God is making our nation great again! After heavy fighting, the Anointed have overcome the northern infidels and consolidated their hold ...'

Momma shoots me a look an' I snap the radio off. We got no way o' knowin' what's true an' what's not – same as for internet an' TV news – but I got no desire to fuel Caleb's adoration o' the Anointed.

Rain thunders on the roof o' the pick-up as Momma turns into the square. The rain's that heavy, I've not got much hope o' spottin' a dog, but Samuel's been missin' a few days now. Every moment I get, I'm searchin'. Even now, on our way to church.

But there's no sign o' him.

'Long one side o' the square, there's the general store, where we line up now the Anointed have started rationin' stuff an', beside it, Malt Whymode's BBQ emporium an' ice-cream parlour, cos somehow ice-cream is not one o' the things they ration. All closed today, it bein' the Sabbath.

Pastor Eli's courthouse an' the jail, they got their doors shut against the rain, but they're always open for business – rain, shine, Sabbath, noon or night. I breathe a quick prayer for those the Anointed got inside, a plea that no one I love ever ends up behind those doors.

An endless row o' black militia pick-ups squat in the rain outside church, the cars an' pick-ups o' the congregation squeezed 'round 'em. Momma parks up, at the far end o' a row, an' unclips Caleb from his seat, 'C'mon baby, we don't wanna be late, do we?'

What we want doesn't really come into it – you don't worship at church, you risk a knock at the door an' a close acquaintance with the inside o' the jail.

Momma helps Caleb outta the cab, takin' care to place herself between him an' the militia vehicles. Over his head, she mouths to me, 'Be careful now' – *careful* is how our coffee an' cream family gotta live, always – an' then we run into church thru the slicin' rain. The whole way, Caleb gazes back over his shoulder at the militia pick-ups.

In the foyer, there's a sea o' militia in black uniforms, an' the smell o' boot polish an' sweat hangs heavy in the damp air. My wet skirt clings to my legs. Mrs Addison is on welcomin' duty this mornin'. She's makin' sure everyone knows it too – *Oh Commander this* an' *Oh Commander that* is all you can hear over the shufflin' militia. Me an' Momma, we get Caleb pinned safe between us. I ruffle his blond hair, try to get rid o' the worst o' the rain. He pays me no mind – blue eyes shinin', he gazes at the militia.

An' then there is one body. One body pressed up hard against me. A hot hand on my waist. I bow my head an' I keep it bowed. If I call out the militia, on the threshold o' the sanctuary? That's askin' to be made an example of. So, I bow my head. Behind me, a low laugh. Another body moves in hard. I peel my body away, inch towards Momma, but the bodies behind press me tight. A cudgel digs into my hip. Two hands paw at my waist, workin' their way inside my blouse. Fingers on my skin. Panic flutters in my throat.

'Pardon me, pardon me.' Someone knocks away the hands, 'Thank you kindly, so kind.' Mr Neel slides Abigail in beside me an' positions himself between us an' the militia behind me, 'I can assure you, it does not often rain like this here.' Mr Neel wipes rain from his glasses, then holds out his hand to the militia, 'Welcome.'

I wanna weep with gratitude. Militia are no friends to us, but they hold a special kind o' hell for the Neels. After her momma got killed in Anointed crossfire, Abigail took all o' her Abigail an' she tidied it away someplace, deep inside. Mr Neel got lost. Then he got so scared o' bein' lost that everythin' got found, smartened up an' put in its place. He doesn't speak much, an' certainly not to militia. Abigail gives me a small smile 'fore lookin' back at the floor.

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The sanctuary is full. Facin' us, high on the main wall, Jesus hangs on the cross. Rows o' militia are tight packed behind us civilians, meanin' we all worship under their hungry gaze – hungry not jest for your body, but for your errors. A skirt too short, a laugh at the wrong moment? The correction o' the Lord will be visited upon you – or not, dependin'. Dependin' if the militia got better sport elsewhere. So, I rise an' I sing an' I pray when directed – but I keep my heart an' my faith to myself.

We sit, as one, as the last notes o' the hymn hang in the air. Pastor Eli steps to the pulpit, 'Brethren, the Lord has richly blessed us with children. Let us pray for the teachers of their Sunday classes, that they may train and instruct them to be valiant soldiers of the faith.'

My chest tightens. A couple o' rows ahead sit the blond buzzcuts an' square shoulders o' Jacob Heap an' his son Adam. Jacob Heap's in his black Anointed uniform – so's we don't forget we got the Anointed executioner worshippin' with us. Adam – Caleb's Sunday School teacher – he's in the dark grey o' the senior Anointed Youth.

Pastor Eli raises his hands in prayer. We bow our heads. My mind an' my heart search for Jesus, but I keep stumblin' up against those words. *Teachers. Soldiers.* Keepin' my head bowed, I open my eyes an' seek out Caleb. He's got his eyes screwed shut an' Momma clutches one o' his hands in both o' hers. I shut my eyes again. *Jesus, watch over Caleb, keep him safe.*

The organ plays a bouncy lil' tune an' Caleb races down the aisle to the front, where Adam Heap's waitin' for the boys. Mrs Addison takes the girls out back – they don't run, they walk.

Head bowed, Momma grips her empty hands tight together.

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Then it's over for another week. Mr Neel an' Abigail stand to let Momma out, so's she can go fetch Caleb from Sunday School. Momma an' Mr Neel nod to one another as she passes, then Mr Neel falls into step behind me an' Abigail.

The foyer is full o' black uniforms, noisy with catcalls an' guffaws. I fold my arms across my body, Abigail hesitates beside me. Then Mr Neel's shakin' hands with every militia we pass, sayin', 'Thank you for your service, soldier.' Each pauses to look important, some o' 'em even salute. An' their hands stay offa our bodies – we get safe outside, where the sunshine is burnin' off the rain.

Mr Neel wipes his hand across his forehead. A patch o' sweat blooms in his armpit an' his hand trembles. I thank him, he nods at me. Then clears his throat. Then nods at me, again, takes Abigail's elbow an' leads her to the safety o' their car.

As I head over to our pick-up, I keep a lookout for Samuel an' that fool lopsided run he does. But there's nothin', 'cept a swarm o' militia, their backs to me, just off to the side o' the church. They got somethin' in there, thank the Lord, somethin' that keeps their attention offa me. I creep towards our pick-up, wishin' I had Samuel by my side for a bit o' courage, when the militia give a huge cheer an' there's a flash o' yellow fur.

Samuel.

Chapter Two

My brain pins me to the spot, stock still in the parkin' lot, the sun beatin' down. No female, no Negro female, willingly puts herself in the path o' the Anointed. It was jest a flash o' yellow – it might not be Samuel – what if I go over an' it's *not* Samuel? Might as well offer myself up to 'em on a platter. I remember the foyer, the fingers inside my blouse. My head is talkin' powerful sense.

Samuel's jest a dog.

All the while my head's tellin' me this, my heart's watchin' the militia. They got somethin' in there, they do – those at the back stand on tiptoe, strainin' to get a look at what they caught. An' then the crowd ripples, militia bendin' an' twistin', one after the other, tryin' to catch a hold o' somethin'.

Another flash o' yellow.

Samuel.

I run.

My heart shoots straight for Samuel, straight as an arrow, but militia pickups block my way. I gotta jink round 'em, this way an' that, an' it makes me slow. Samuel writhes thru the militia's legs. Hands grab at him, but he slithers an' slides – they can't get a grip on him – he's free!

An' then.

One o' the militia, a big man right at the back, he knocks Samuel flat with one swipe o' his boot. Samuel disappears, swamped an' strugglin', as the big militia wrestles with him. It takes a few seconds, an' then the big militia stands, Samuel pinned under his arm, his hand clamped round Samuel's muzzle. Hollerin' an' stampin', the crowd parts to let 'em thru. There's a space, right in the centre – a rope – an' then Samuel's swallowed up by the crowd.

Wild, I look around. I gotta save Samuel. But how? More folk are spillin' outta church now. Some make for their cars, fast, like they happen not to notice the militia are up to somethin'. Some are plain delighted to go join in the militia's game – Adam Heap strolls right on over to 'em, half like he owns the whole town an' half like he's got somethin' to prove.

There's a shout from the crowd, a cheer. I scurry forward, taggin' along behind Adam. Cos everyone's lookin' at Samuel, not me, I git myself up where I can see. Samuel's tied to a streetlight, cowerin' in the centre o' the crowd. My heart crawls towards him, but my head runs in circles, tryin' to find a way out.

'Disco time.'

It's the big militia, who captured Samuel. He draws his handgun an' steps back a few paces. The crowd surges backwards to give him space. Guns drawn, a couple o' other militia step forward. Then the big militia motions at Adam with his handgun, 'You the executioner's kid?'

Adam nods.

The big militia snorts, 'Let's see if you can shoot like your dad.'

'*Like* my pa, you say?' Adam draws his gun with a flourish, 'I shoot *better* 'n my pa.'

If Jacob Heap were here, no way would Adam be makin' so free with his reputation, tho' Adam himself does have reason to brag – he can shoot. It was a hard-bought skill, Jacob Heap not bein' an instructor who spares the rod,

but now – bein’ able to shoot a tethered dog? That way glory lies, if you’re Adam Heap.

Adam lines up with the rest o’ the shooters, ’longside a skinny militia. Tho’ I cannot reach Samuel from where I stand, my heart crouches in the dirt, arms wrapped round him, as if my love can shield him from harm.

Bang!

My world stops dead.

Samuel barks. Sputterin’, I breathe again.

‘Dance, dog, dance!’ someone yells. They shoot at his paws – *bang, bang* – make him jump an’ skitter. Someone starts clappin’ out a beat, an’ the shots keep time. Samuel barks in terror, yankin’ on the rope, dancin’, his ears back, the whites o’ his eyes rollin’.

My heart drags itself back towards me. What can I do? Throw myself in front o’ their guns? That’s a one-way ticket to a hole in the ground. I can do nothin’. Nothin’. I turn, blindly pushin’ thru the crowd, desperate now to get away.

Samuel screams.

Someone yells, ‘Dead dogs don’t dance!’

I whirl round.

Samuel’s down, his front leg out at an angle. Blood trickles from a wound in his shoulder. He whimpers, lil’ hiccupin’ whimpers, an’ I twist an’ shove my way back thru the crowd towards him.

The big militia leads one o’ the shooters, the skinny one, out into the centre o’ the circle. He spins him ’round an’ slaps his hands over his eyes, ‘Cos you shoot like a blind man.’

Laughin’ an’ jostlin’, a space opens up behind Samuel as the crowd get themselves outta range o’ the blindfolded shooter.

He raises his gun.

I hold my breath.

His shot pings offa the streetlight, *thank you, Lord.*

The big one spins him again. Another shot. Samuel yelps, shakin’ his head. Blood sprays from his ear. I beat my way to the front o’ the crowd. I gotta save him.

The crowd laughs an’ Adam steps forward, ‘Lemme show you how it’s done.’ He cocks his gun.

I dive, dive towards Samuel in the centre o' the circle.

Adam shoots – misses – he's shot the rope clean thru. Bayin', Samuel spins round an' speeds away. Adam lets fly a volley o' shots after him, which send up plumes o' mud.

The mob is silent with surprise for half a breath, to see Samuel gone an' me in his place. Then they roar with delight an' surge towards me, hungry for fresh blood. My brain whirs, but it's like the hammer clickin' on an empty gun – I got no plan.

The big militia picks up the shot rope an' saunters towards me, the rope danglin' from his hand.

'Do you dance, Negro?'