

Fred stole a look at the other three. Con had closed her eyes. Her brow was furrowed, but her lips had half a smile at the tips.

On the fourth day the river began to change. The trees arched densely overhead and the water was choked with weeds. It no longer smelt fresh. Fish flitted through the reeds.

'Are they - piranhas?' said Con. 'I mean, piranha.'

Lila peered down over the edge of the raft and nodded, her jaw set. She stroked Baca, hanging round her neck, and buried her chin in his fur. Her breath, as she exhaled, was shaky.

It was mid-morning, but it grew dark as the branches thickened above them.

'Is it just me, or does the river feel suddenly less on our side?' asked Con.

'Not just you,' said Fred shortly. His upper lip and forehead were dripping sweat: the sweat wasn't only from the work of poling. But he had Con's bark map in his pocket, and the thought of it warmed his

chest, bearing back against the cold doubt in his stomach.

The current was in their favour, but travelling through the weeds was arm-aching, back-stretching, skin-shredding work.

'Watch out!' called Lila.

Fred flinched, looking around for something about to hit him in the face, then watched in silence as a snake slipped along a branch, spiralled up the trunk of a tree and disappeared into the green over their heads. Even Max didn't move.

'It's almost certainly not deadly!' said Fred. He winced. He'd intended it to sound reassuring, but instead his voice landed somewhere between 'desperate lying' and 'stern aunt on a deathbed'.

He concentrated on doubling his speed until they were past the weeds, and they sped down the dark-green passageway of overhanging trees.

'We're close,' said Fred. 'On the map this river goes on until it meets a lake - I think it would be three or four hours, but it's hard to tell - and then there's a black

square, and then a short line – that might be a path or a river, but could just be a squiggle – and then the X'

Con reached into the water for a flatish stick as it floated by, and began to paddle. 'The sooner we get there, the sooner we'll know the worst.'

The raft followed the river, Fred's pole splashing in his impatience to see what was around the next corner. He guided the raft around a floating fallen tree, traversed another five minutes of dark water and found, without warning, that they had come to the mouth of a small lake.

The lake was an exquisite blue, shining under a cloudless sky, but Fred did not notice. They all four sat crouched on the raft, looking up, their jaws open and their eyes wide.

There was a long silence.

Then Lila spoke. 'Did I ever mention I'm terrified of heights?'

