

**A GREAT
ESCAPE**

FELICE ARENA

PUFFIN BOOKS

Halt!

STOP!

Peter shadows Sabine and Manfred until they reach the wall around a small cemetery. They glance back in his direction. Peter ducks behind a parked car, a little Trabant – the most common automobile in the East. Peering over the tiny bonnet, he sees them walking through the gate.

I know this place, Peter thinks. The cemetery backs on to the border. Manfred and Sabine are making it look as if they are visiting a grave. They're obviously planning to climb over the cemetery wall and cross over into the West that way. It's a brilliant idea.

But then he hears voices behind him. Back down the street, a group of soldiers from the NPA, the

National People's Army, are marching in his direction. They're easy to recognise from their turtle-shell-shaped helmets. And they're serious and stiff like their shin-high leather boots. There's no time to waste – Peter follows Sabine and Manfred into the cemetery.

The area is dotted with large oak trees and blanketed in overgrown grass and weeds. Dirt paths wind among old cracked headstones and newer, better-cared-for graves.

It doesn't take long for Peter to catch up. He hides behind a tree, right next to a freshly dug grave. There's a pile of soil with a shovel stuck in it right beside the hole, but no coffin and no mourners.

Sabine and Manfred don't seem to have spotted him. He hopes the soldiers haven't either. Ahead, Manfred is helping Sabine to climb over a high brick wall. On the other side is the West. And freedom.

'Halt! Halt!'

Peter turns to see more soldiers running towards them from another entrance to the cemetery.

'Stop! Stop, or we'll shoot!' a soldier shouts.

Sabine pulls herself up to the top of the wall and turns to pull Manfred after her. But as he tries to launch himself up, the soldiers swarm on him and grab him by the ankles.

With a cry, Sabine jumps to the other side, and Manfred is pulled back down to the ground.

Peter's heart is pounding. If the soldiers spot me they'll arrest me too, he thinks. He slinks down along the trunk of the tree, drops into the grave and crouches there, frozen.

The soldiers drag Manfred right past him. Peter catches a glimpse of Manfred's face as they pass and sees terror in his eyes. Peter holds his breath and stays motionless until he hears the soldiers' voices fade in the distance.

Only then does he realise that he's trapped himself. The grave is way too deep to simply step out of. Peter panics. Now what?

He jumps a couple of times, trying to claw at the top of the grave – but it's useless. He's still a long way off the top.

Peter hears someone approaching and his heart races even faster. One of the soldiers has obviously stayed back, he thinks. If he finds me here, this could end up being my grave! Peter scans the ground and spots a partly buried rock. He picks it up. It's a little larger than his fist.

When the footsteps seem to have passed by, Peter frantically begins digging small holes into one of the hard dirt walls. Standing on his toes he shovels out

two holes shoulder-width apart – as high as he can reach – another around the level of his face, and one more at waist-level.

Peter drops the rock. ‘Here goes,’ he whispers, wedging his right foot in the hole closest to his waist and pushing up to grab the two highest holes. With as secure a grip as he can manage, he raises his left foot and places it in the next hole up.

Using all the strength he can muster, Peter grits his teeth and propels his body upward. He lunges for the top of the ditch, clutching at a clump of grass and pushing a foot into one of the higher holes.

‘Yes!’ he sighs, lifting himself out of the grave.

Peter looks up to see a soldier standing only a few graves away. Thankfully the man is facing away from him. He exhales quietly, then springs to his feet and bolts for the entrance.

But then he hears someone following him. ‘*Halt! Halt!*’ cries a man. Big boots are thumping against the ground behind him.

Peter runs faster than he ever has before. Thankfully no new soldiers appear. But he doesn’t stop running until he has put the cemetery far behind him.

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'Thank heavens!' Oma rushes to Peter when he gets home. 'Are you all right? We were so worried.'

Peter nods, but he doesn't feel all right.

'You're out of breath.' Oma hugs him tightly. 'I can't believe the government has done this to us. Sit down and I'll get you a drink.'

Peter joins Opa at the kitchen table. Opa is shaking his head as he listens to the reports coming from the West on the radio. He's clearly upset. He always said something like this would happen – that the Communist government would take away their rights. That something bad would happen. He mutters as the news crackles through the tiny speakers. He places his shaking hand on Peter's wrist.

Peter can't look at him. He knows if he does, he might not be able to control the emotions surging up inside of him.

Just as Oma hands Peter a glass of water there's a knock at the door. Oma opens it cautiously. It's Sabine's mother, Herta Roeder.

'Oh, Frieda,' she says to Oma. 'This is terrible. I've just come from visiting my friend. I've heard that the people who live in the apartments running along the border are going to be kicked out of their homes.'

'What?' gasps Oma.

'Why?' asks Peter, shocked.

‘The rear of the buildings are here in the East,’ says Frau Roeder, ‘but the front of the buildings are in the West.’

‘Like Bernauerstrasse?’ says Oma.

Frau Roeder nods. ‘There’s talk that the police are going to raid the apartments, evict the residents and brick up all the windows and doors. What’s this world coming to? I hope Sabine and Manfred are all right. I hope they made it across!’

Peter knows he will have to tell her, but he doesn’t know how. He looks up to see Opa staring at him. His opa knows him too well – he can tell that Peter knows something.

‘I told them it would be dangerous, but you know Sabine, and Manfred for that matter, when they set their minds to something . . .’

‘Sabine got through,’ Peter blurts out. ‘But Manfred didn’t. I’m so sorry, Frau Roeder. He’s been arrested.’