

TRISTAN
BANCKS

DE
TEN
TION



PUFFIN BOOKS

ESCAPE

5.28 AM

Sima watches the man carefully as he snips fence wires one by one. He's skinny, nervous, his shaved head slick with sweat and glowing silver in the moonlight. His tattooed hands squeeze the sharp cutters closed. The gap looks almost wide enough to get through now.

Sima and her family are pressed to the rough, cold ground among about fifty others. They lie in the gap between two tall fences designed to keep them in. The outer fence is the only thing separating them from freedom. They wait. They've become very good at that.

Sima hears a noise, the scuff of boot on gravel. She glances over her shoulder, through the inner fence and beneath the portable dormitory building

to the path where a guard will walk by at any moment.

Hurry, she thinks, urging the protester to work faster. She thinks his name is Ed. An Aussie guy. He's been camping outside the centre all week with the others.

Snip.

Dad rests his hand on Sima's back, his face criss-crossed with diamond fence shadows. 'I love you very much,' he whispers. 'Remember, no matter what, you run. Don't stop till you get to the trees.'

The baby coughs quietly and Mum gently pats her back and soothes her, 'Shhhhh, shhhhh, shhhhh.' Laila is two months old. She's been coughing since the day she was born. If she cries now, it'll be disastrous.

Mum had argued against the escape, but Dad had convinced her that to stay meant almost certain death. Tonight they would be sent home. *Deported*. Fifty people from this centre alone. Hundreds all up.

Snip.

The protester pries the fence wide. Another one, Jasmine, pulls open the other side. She motions for them to hurry. Two families climb through before it's Mum, Laila, Dad and Sima's turn. Sima squeezes through the narrow opening, headfirst, scratching

and scraping her ears on the sharp-cut metal. She always thought her ears were too sticky-outy. *Wing-bats*, she called them. Dad had assured her many times that her ears were not wing-bats and that they stuck out just the perfect amount.

I knew he was lying, Sima thinks.

She flattens herself to the ground again. It feels different out here. She peers through the low-hanging fog towards the road and the promise of freedom.

‘Come,’ Dad whispers, crawling past.

She follows Mum and Dad along the fence line, wriggling on her belly through the patchy, clumpy grass. Rocks graze and gouge her arms and legs, but she doesn’t feel it. Fear masks the pain. Deep, bone-shaking fear. Dozens of other detainees follow her along the base of the fence.

Her father’s thick-soled shoes stop, sharp. Sima almost headbutts them.

To her left, in the gap beneath the dorm – the one where Sadia, her best friend, sleeps – Sima sees the black-booted feet of the guard walking towards the corner of the compound. The guard is going in the same direction that she and the others are heading. They wait, watch, till the boots turn and walk back along the far side of the buildings. It must be the guards’ changeover time. 5.30. This is it.

The human chain starts to move again and Sima low-crawls along the dark night ground, double-time now. Once they reach the corner, the plan is to run across about thirty metres of open grass to the nearest trees, close to the road.

Dad and some of the other men have been watching, thinking, planning, quietly communicating with the protesters through the fence over the past few days to hatch this plan. Dad hates to break the law, but makes an exception when his family's lives are on the line.

We're good people in a bad situation. That's what Mum always said.

Dad's shoes kick up a puff of dust, which tickles Sima's nose. She feels a sneeze coming. She stops crawling, squeezes her nose hard. Someone behind taps her ankle to tell her to keep moving.

The sneeze twists and turns, painfully stabbing the inside of her nose. Sima never sneezes just once. Always five, six times. And loud. The person behind taps her ankle urgently now. Dad, Mum and Laila move further and further ahead.

Stinging tears run from Sima's eyes and she knows she won't be able to keep it in. Years of struggle, days of planning, this escape their only hope, and a sneeze – five sneezes, probably – will be their undoing,

not just for her and her family, but for all of them. She pinches the top of her nose so hard the bone might break.

The people behind start to crawl past Sima, filling the gap between her and her family. Then, as quickly as it arrived, the sneeze is gone. She slowly releases her grip, waits, rubs her face and nose. Through the double fence she sees a guard's boots coming back towards the corner now. She starts moving, joining the chain again.

With no warning, *choo!* She covers her nose with one hand. Then three more muffled sneezes. So loud.

Silence. Everyone stops. The human chain lies dead still on the ground.

Sima hears fast-moving footsteps. Up ahead, at the corner, the guard. He drops his cigarette. A plume of smoke rises like a mini mushroom cloud to the moths swarming the light above him. He moves to the fence, flicks on his torch, shines it in the eyes of Sima and nearly fifty others lying motionless on the ground outside.

'Escape!' the guard shouts.

'Run!' Dad screams.