To the Other Side



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Chapter 1

Refugees



You might expect a bus-load of people heading off to start a new life to be a noisy, buzzing crowd but, on this journey, barely a word was spoken. There was coughing, because of the thick, smoky air, but nobody talked. Some people slept on the journey of many hours. They were the lucky ones — for fear, regret and sadness prevented sleep in most.

Anna simply stared out the bus window in silence.



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The smoke haze prevented Anna from seeing anything clearly, but occasional fireballs lit the sky and she could make out a few remaining familiar landmarks in the distance. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Mum hugged her and rocked her, for her own comfort as much as Anna's.

The bus chugged with great effort up the mountain road — a narrow track, not used to the heavy traffic of recent weeks. It was barely wide enough for a bus, and certainly not wide enough for oncoming vehicles to pass. Thankfully, none were travelling in the opposite direction. Nobody was entering Anna's troubled homeland. People were leaving in droves.

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As their steep climb progressed, the scenery became less and less familiar. The trees were different. There were very few houses around. Eventually the air became clean and the coughs reduced in frequency. When darkness fell, Anna slept a little.

She awoke with a start at the border. Guards boarded the bus and shone torches in their faces.

"Any documents?" they were asking in a language she didn't understand. "Passports?"

Anna's mum showed a guard what they had.

"No visas?" he asked.

Mum shook her head apologetically, guessing what he was saying.

"No passport for the girl?"

Again Mum shook her head. Anna felt Mum's grip around her shoulders tighten. A pain shot down the arm she'd injured in the fall from her tree. That seemed like a long time ago now. She looked across at Dad and the others.

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The guard frowned. He called a colleague over and showed him the documents. They mumbled to each other and looked at the other passengers, then mumbled some more.

"What if they don't let us in?" Anna asked.

Mum shrugged, too nervous to answer. But the second guard took charge and smiled at them. "Refugees," he said. "Okay."



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Everyone on the bus was a refugee, escaping the war. The guards herded them off the bus and into a cold tin shed. "Wait here," they said.

* * *

They waited a long time in the mountain shed, shivering in the chilly night air. Anna's family huddled close together: Anna, Mum, Dad, Uncle Malek, Aunty Jana, baby Lena and Grandpa, who was coughing again. Anna wrapped her scarf around him. With most of her wardrobe on, she had plenty to spare.

