The Great Escape

megan rix



PUFFIN

PUFFIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

puffinbooks.com

First published 2012
001 – 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Text copyright © Megan Rix, 2012
All rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 13/16 pt Baskerville. Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–141–34271–9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from paper certified by the Forest Stewardship Council.

Chapter 1

On a steamy hot Saturday morning in the summer of 1939, a Jack Russell with a patch of tan fur over his left eye and a black spot over his right was digging as though his life depended upon it.

His little white forepaws attacked the soft soil, sending chrysanthemums, stocks and freesias to their deaths. He'd soon dug so deep that the hole was bigger than he was, and all that could be seen were sprays of flying soil and his fiercely wagging tail.

'Look at Buster go,' twelve-year-old Robert Edwards said, leaning on his spade. 'He could win a medal for his digging.'

Robert's best friend, Michael, laughed. 'Bark when you reach Australia!' he told Buster's rear end. He tipped the soil from his shovel on to the fast-growing mound beside them.

Buster's tail wagged as he emerged from the hole triumphant, his muddy treasure gripped firmly in his mouth.

'Oh no, better get that off him!' Robert said, when he realized what Buster had.

'What is it?' Michael asked.

'One of Dad's old slippers – he's been looking for them everywhere.'

'But how did it get down there?'

Buster cocked his head to one side, his right ear up and his left ear down.

'*Someone* must have buried it there. Buster – give!'

But Buster had no intention of giving up his treasure. As Robert moved closer to him Buster danced backwards.

'Buster – Buster – give it to me!'

Robert and Michael raced around the garden after Buster, trying to get the muddy, chewed slipper from him. Buster thought this was a wonderful new game of chase, and almost lost the slipper by barking with excitement as he dodged this way and that.

The game got even better when Robert's nine-year-old sister Lucy, and Rose the collie, came out of the house and started to chase him too.

'Buster, come back . . .'

Rose tried to circle him and cut him off. Until recently she'd been a sheepdog and she was much quicker than Buster, but he managed to evade her by jumping over the ginger-and-white cat, Tiger, who wasn't pleased to be used as a fence and hissed at Buster to tell him so.

Buster was having such a good time. First digging

up the flower bed, now playing chase. It was the perfect day – until Lucy dived on top of him and he was trapped.

'Got you!'

Robert took Dad's old slipper from Buster. 'Sorry, but you can't play with that.'

Buster jumped up at the slipper, trying to get it back. It was his – he'd buried it and he'd dug it up. Robert held the slipper above his head so Buster couldn't get it, although for such a small dog, he could jump pretty high.

Buster went back to his hole and started digging to see if he could find something else interesting. Freshly dug soil was soon flying into the air once again.

'No slacking, you two!' Robert's father, Mr Edwards, told the boys as he came out of the back door. Robert quickly hid the slipper behind him; he didn't want Buster to get into trouble. Michael took it from him, unseen.

Lucy ran back into the kitchen, with Rose close behind her.

'You two should be following Buster's example,' Mr Edwards said to the boys.

At the sound of his name Buster stopped digging for a moment and emerged from his hole. His face was covered in earth and it was clear that he was in his element. Usually he'd have been in huge trouble for digging in the garden, but not today. When

Mr Edwards wasn't looking, Michael dropped the slipper into the small ornamental fishpond near to where Tiger was lying. Tiger rubbed his head against Michael's hand, the bell on his collar tinkling softly, and Michael obligingly stroked him behind his ginger ears before getting back to work.

Tiger had been out on an early-morning prowl of the neighbourhood when the government truck had arrived and the men from it had rung the doorbell of every house along the North London terraced street. Each homeowner had been given six curved sheets of metal, two steel plates and some bolts for fixing it all together.

'There you go.'

'Shouldn't take you more than a few hours.'

'Got hundreds more of these to deliver.'

Four of the workmen helped those who couldn't manage to put up their own Anderson Shelters, but everyone else was expected to dig a large hole in their back garden, deep enough so that only two feet of the six-foot-high bomb shelter could be seen above the ground.

Buster, Robert and Michael had set to work as soon as they'd been given theirs, with Mr Edwards supervising.

'Is the hole big enough yet, Dad?' Robert asked his father. They'd been digging for ages.

Mr Edwards peered at the government instruction leaflet and shook his head. 'It needs to be four foot

deep in the soil. And we'll need to dig steps down to the door.'

Tiger surveyed the goings-on through half-closed eyes from his favourite sunspot on the patio. He was content to watch as Buster wore himself out and got covered in mud. It was much too hot a day to do anything as energetic as digging.

In the kitchen, Rose was getting in the way as usual.

'Let me past, Rose,' said Lucy and Robert's mother, Mrs Edwards, turning away from the window.

Rose took a step or two backwards but she was still in the way. The Edwardses' kitchen was small, but they'd managed to cram a wooden dresser as well as two wooden shelves and a cupboard into it. It didn't have a refrigerator.

'What were you all doing out there?' Mrs Edwards asked Lucy.

Lucy thought it best not to mention that Buster had dug up Dad's old slipper. It was from Dad's favourite pair and Mum had turned the house upside-down searching for it.

'Just playing,' she said.

Lucy began squeezing six lemon halves into a brown earthenware jug while her mother made sugar syrup by adding a cup of water and a cup of sugar to a saucepan and bringing it to the boil on the coal gas stove. Wearing a full-length apron over

her button-down dress, Mrs Edwards stirred continuously so as not to scorch the syrup or the pan.

The letterbox rattled and Lucy went to see what it was. Another government leaflet lay on the mat. They seemed to be getting them almost every day now. This one had 'Sand to the Rescue' written in big letters and gave instructions on how to place sandbags so that they shielded the windows, and how to dispose of incendiary bombs using a sand-bucket and scoop.

Lucy put the leaflet on the dresser with the others and went to check on her cakes. She didn't want them to burn, especially not with Michael visiting.

Two hours later Mr Edwards declared, 'That should be enough.'

Robert and Michael stopped digging and admired their work. Buster, however, wasn't ready to stop yet. He wanted them to dig a second, even bigger hole, and he knew exactly where that hole should be. His little paws got busy digging in the new place.

'No, Buster, no more!' Robert said firmly.

Buster stopped and sat down. He watched as Robert, Michael and Mr Edwards assembled the Anderson Shelter from the six corrugated iron sheets and end plates, which they bolted together at the top.

'Right, that's it, easy does it,' Mr Edwards told the boys. The Anderson Shelter was up and in place.

For the first time Tiger became interested. The

shelter looked like a new choice sunspot – especially when the sun glinted on its corrugated iron top. He uncurled himself and sauntered over to it.

'Hello, Tiger. Come to have a look?' Michael asked him. Tiger ignored the question, jumped on to the top of the shelter and curled up on the roof.

Robert and Michael laughed. 'He must be the laziest cat in the world,' Robert said. 'All he does is eat and sleep and then sleep again.'

Tiger's sunbathing was cut short.

'You can't sleep there, Tiger,' Mr Edwards said. 'And we can't have the roof glinting in the sunshine like that. Go on – scat, cat.'

Tiger ran a few feet away and then stopped and watched as Mr Edwards and the boys now shovelled the freshly dug soil pile they'd made back on top of the roof of the bomb shelter, with Buster trying to help by digging at the pile – which wasn't really any help at all.

Mr Edwards wiped his brow as he stopped to look at the instruction leaflet again. 'It says it needs to be covered with at least fifteen inches of soil above the roof,' he told Robert and Michael.

The three of them kept on shovelling until the shelter was completely hidden by the newly dug soil.

Lucy and Mrs Edwards came out, carrying freshly made lemonade and fairy cakes.

'Good, we've earned this,' Robert said when he saw them.

'Those look very appetizing, Lucy love,' Mr Edwards said when Lucy held out the plate of cakes.

'Do you like it?' Lucy asked Michael, as he bit into his cake. Her eyes were shining.

'Delicious,' Michael smiled, and took another bite.

Buster was desperate to taste one of Lucy's cakes too. He looked at her meaningfully, mouth open, tail wagging winningly. When that didn't work he tried sitting down and lifting his paws in the air in a begging position.

Lucy furtively nudged one of the cakes off the plate on to the ground.

'Oops!'

Buster was on it and the cake was gone in one giant gulp. He looked up hopefully for more.

Mr Edwards took a long swig of his lemonade and put his beaker back on the tray. 'So, what do you think?' he asked his wife.

Mrs Edwards's flower garden was ruined. 'It's going to make it very awkward to hang out the weekly washing.'

'In a few weeks' time even I'd have trouble spotting it from the air,' Mr Edwards said. He was a reconnaissance pilot and was used to navigating from landmarks on the ground. 'It'll be covered in weeds and grass and I bet we could even grow flowers or tomato plants on it if we wanted to.'

Lucy grinned. 'But you'd still know we were nearby and wave to us from your plane, wouldn't you, Dad?'

'I would,' smiled Mr Edwards. 'With Alexandra Palace just around the corner, our street is hard to miss. But Jerry flying over with his bombs won't have a clue the Anderson Shelter's down here with you hidden inside it – and that's the main thing.'

Lucy shivered. 'Will there really be another war, Dad?' It was a question everyone was asking.

'I hope not. I really do,' Mr Edwards said, putting his arm round his wife. 'They called the last one the Great War and told us it was the war to end all wars. But now that looks doubtful.'

Michael helped himself to another of Lucy's cakes and smiled at her.

Lucy was beaming as she went back inside, with Rose following her.

As Lucy filled Buster's bowl with fresh water and took it back outside, Rose padded behind her like a shadow. She chose different people, and occasionally Buster or Tiger, to follow on different days. But she chose Lucy most of all. She'd tried to herd Buster and Tiger once or twice, as she'd used to do with the sheep, but so far this hadn't been very successful, due to Buster and Tiger's lack of cooperation.

'Here, Buster, you must be thirsty too after all that digging,' Lucy said, putting his water bowl down on the patio close to Tiger, who stretched out his legs

and flexed his sharp claws. Lucy stroked him and Tiger purred.

Buster lapped at the water with his little pink tongue.

'Buster deserves a bone for all that digging,' Robert said. 'Or at least a biscuit or two.'

Buster looked up at him and wagged his tail.

'Go on then,' Mrs Edwards said.

Robert went inside and came back with Buster's tin of dog biscuits. Buster wagged his tail even more enthusiastically at the sight of the tin, and wolfed down the biscuit Robert gave him. Bones or biscuits – food was food.

'Here, Rose, want a biscuit?' Robert asked her.

Rose accepted one and then went to lie down beside the bench on which Lucy was sitting. She preferred it when everyone was together in the same place; only then could she really settle.

Just a few months ago Rose had been living in Devon and working as a sheepdog. But things had changed when the elderly farmer didn't come out one morning, or the next. Rose waited for the farmer at the back door from dawn to dusk and then went back to the barn where she slept. But the farmer never came.

Some days the farmer's wife brought a plate of food for her. Some days she forgot and Rose went to sleep hungry.

Then the farmer's daughter, Mrs Edwards, came to the farm, dressed in black, and the next day she

took Rose back to London with her on the train. Rose never saw the farmer again.

Rose whined and Lucy bent and stroked her head.

'Feeling sad?' she asked her.

Sometimes Rose had a faraway look in her eyes that made Lucy wonder just what Rose was thinking. Did she miss Devon? It must be strange for Rose only having a small garden to run about in when she was used to herding sheep with her grandfather on the moor.

'Do you miss Grandad?'

Rose licked Lucy's hand.

'I miss him too,' Lucy said.

When they all went back indoors, Tiger stayed in the garden. He took a step closer to the Anderson Shelter and then another step and another. Tiger was a very curious sort of cat, and being shooed away had only made him more curious. He ran down the earth steps and peered into the new construction.

Inside it was dark, but felt cool and slightly damp after the heat of the sun.

'Tiger!' Lucy called, coming back out. 'Tiger, where are you?'

Lucy came down the garden and found him.

'There you are. Why didn't you come when I called you?' She picked Tiger up like a baby, with his paws waving in the air, and carried him out of the shelter and back up to the house. It wasn't the

most comfortable or dignified way of travelling, but Tiger put up with it because it was Lucy. Ever since Tiger had arrived at the Edwardses' house as a tiny mewling kitten, he and Lucy had had a special bond.

They stopped at the living room where Robert was showing Michael Buster's latest trick.

'Slippers, Buster,' Robert said.

Buster raced to the shoe rack by the front door, found Robert's blue leather slippers and raced back with one of them in his mouth. He dropped the slipper beside Robert.

Robert put his foot in it and said, 'Slippers,' again. Buster raced off and came back with the other one.

Robert gave him a dog biscuit.

Michael grinned. 'He's so smart.'

'He can identify Dad and Mum and Lucy's slippers too,' Robert told Michael. He'd decided not to risk Dad's new slippers with Buster today. 'You're one clever dog, aren't you, Buster?'

Buster wagged his tail like mad and then raced round and round, chasing it.

'Tiger and Rose can do tricks too,' Lucy said, putting Tiger down in an armchair. 'And Rose doesn't need to be bribed with food to do them. Look – down, Rose.'

Rose obediently lay down.

Lucy moved across the room and Rose started to stand up to follow her.

'Stay, Rose.'

Rose lay back down again.

'Good girl.'

'So what tricks can Tiger do?' Michael asked Lucy.

Lucy pulled a strand of wool from her mum's knitting basket and waggled it in front of Tiger like a snake wriggling around the carpet. Tiger jumped off the armchair, stalked the wool and captured it with his paw.

Tail held high, he went over to Robert and then to Michael to allow them the honour of stroking him.

Tiger didn't need tricks to be admired.