



Songbird

'I loved Jamila and the
resilience and bravery of
her family.' Sally Rippin

Ingrid Laguna



Chapter 1

Jamila paced the kitchen, feeding bread to her little brother, Amir, as she passed his highchair. Her hands kept moving—fiddling with the buttons on her school dress and re-pinning her headscarf. Jamila had been at her new school for three weeks, and she was trying hard to fit in. She missed her school in Iraq and her friends, especially Mina.

Today it was her turn to stand up at the front of her class and talk about herself. But it was hard to tell people in this new place about her old life. ‘My name is Jamila,’ she practised. ‘I come...I

came to Australia because...' She didn't know how to explain it. There were things she could not say. She would just have to give the bare facts. 'We left our country, Iraq, because it was not safe for us there.'

'Just tell the class a few things about yourself,' Jamila's teacher, Miss Dana, had said. Miss Dana wore a stack of bracelets and scuffed red boots. Jamila liked her from day one. She let out big laughs and sat on the carpet with her students as if she was one of them. All the kids in Jamila's class gave a talk about themselves, not just Jamila, but Jamila felt different. What secrets could the other girls and boys have that were nearly as strange and shameful as hers?

'Mama—it's time to go!' called Jamila. She looked at her watch. Her father had given it to her the day she left Iraq.

'You will be safe in Australia,' he had said, crouching beside her, but Jamila saw the fear

and worry in his eyes.

‘You are brave, Jamila. Look after your mother. Help with Amir. I know you will. *Al Hamdu li’Allah.*’ Praise God. Baba had slipped the watch off his wrist and put it on hers. It was too big and it hung loose. Jamila had to push it halfway up her arm and wedge it there.

It would be late afternoon in Baghdad now. Jamila wondered what Baba was doing. Was he on his way? He said he would come soon, but what did that mean—three days? Three weeks? Three months?

And what was Mina doing now? Jamila squeezed her eyes shut tight to send her thoughts to Mina. *Mina, are you okay?*

In her talk, Jamila wanted to tell the class about Mina, but how could she tell people she had only known for a few weeks that she had been wrenched away from her best friend in the world? And how would she explain that her father was

not here and she didn't know when she would see him again? She could tell them he was coming soon. Jamila nodded to herself. She could say that. That felt good. She would say that in just a week, maybe two, he would be here.

But what would she say about her life with Mama and Amir? She didn't want anyone to know what that was like.

My Mama goes to the market. She talks to people, makes friends. She brings home cake and strawberries. And she laughs. Always, she laughs. That was what Jamila wanted to say, but it was mostly lies. She thought about her new song. Jamila liked to make up songs when she was scared or sad or worried, to take her away from the feelings.

Mama was lifting Amir from his highchair. 'Saeideeni!' she called to Jamila. Help! Mama was fretting and she had that worried look. Jamila felt the familiar dread of what might lie ahead that

day. She grabbed a cloth and wiped Amir's fingers.

'Come to Jamila,' she said. She picked him up and kissed his forehead. She tried to imagine standing in front of her class and telling them about looking after her baby brother. Today might be a good day for Mama to call Jamila home. Maybe then she would not have to give her class talk at all.

If I feel nervous, I'll breathe in through my nose for three seconds, then slowly out through my mouth, she reminded herself. (Her uncle Elias had taught her this when they were hiding in Baghdad.) If someone asks a question, I'll just answer, even if I have butterflies.

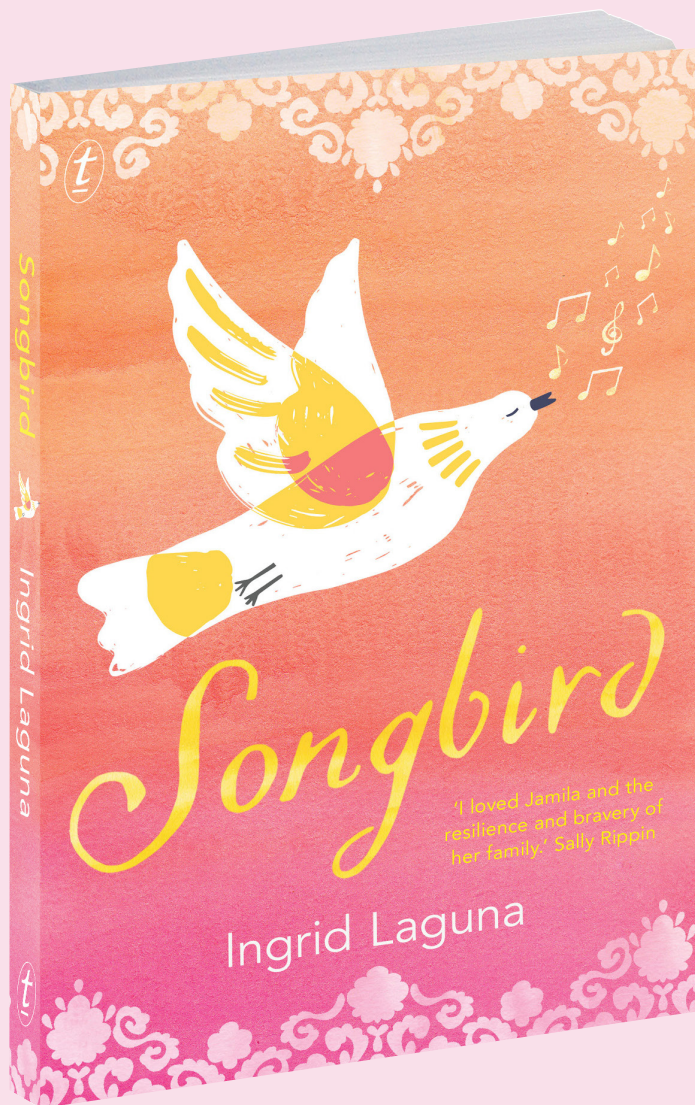
Jamila strapped Amir into his pram. 'It's time to go, Mama!' she called.

'I am coming.' Mama's voice sounded tired, as if it was just before bedtime, not morning. '*Habibty*,' Mama said, smiling weakly. My love.

Jamila put her bag over her shoulder and led

the way out the front door. There were kids' bikes lying flat in the concrete front yard of the house next door. A dog crossed the road nearby and Jamila hoped it had a home to go to. The air was cold, and she wriggled her fingers to keep them warm. She knew it was hot in Iraq. She remembered sitting under the shade of a wild oak with Mina and eating *bassbosa*, semolina cake, at the park in the hot, bright sun.

Maybe there were no soldiers in the street now and no shouting. Maybe Mina's mama and baba were not worrying and talking in whispers in the room next to Mina's. When Jamila had stayed at Mina's house for seven nights with Mama and Amir because Baba was away, she and Mina told each other stories. Jamila made some of those stories into songs and Mina called her *Mutraba*—a girl who is always singing—and sometimes she called her Songbird. Jamila missed Mina so much. She felt like a part of *her* was missing.



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