

When the Mountains Roared
by Jess Butterworth

WHEN THE MOUNTAINS ROARED



CHAPTER TWO
Darkness

I'm still sitting on the porch when Dad drives the ute to the back of the house and loads Grandma's suitcase into the bed of it.

Back in the kitchen, he removes Caspar, the taxidermy python, from the display case and packs him, leaving all the other snake things behind. He catches me watching from the porch.

'There's only enough room for us to bring one suitcase each,' he says. 'Can I help you pack?'

I shake my head and go to my bedroom, turn my music up and ignore him and Grandma.

We don't have that many belongings - when the hotel guests stopped coming, Dad sold almost everything, even the piano. Still, they stay up late into the evening packing.

Near ten o'clock there's a loud knock on the door and Dad enters. He turns the music off and perches at the edge of my bed, on Mum's patchwork quilt. 'You can be angry at me all you want but you still have to pack.'

He waits.

I remain silent and seething.

'I don't have time for this, Ruby,' he says, pressing his palm against his forehead.

'Go away,' I say and bury my head under my pillow.

'I'll pack for you if I have to. We're leaving in the morning,' says Dad.

Outside, a distant car engine rumbles. I lift my head. From the window, I see a tiny dot of light moving through the darkness towards the house. Our driveway stretches for miles. We haven't had any guests or visitors for at least a few months now.

Dad's body stiffens. He runs to the window and yanks the curtains closed. Flattening himself against the wall, he lifts the curtain slightly and peers outside. 'It's too late,' he says.

Grandma bursts into the room. 'Have you seen? They're here.'

'Who?' I ask, at the same time as Grandma asks, 'What do we do?'

'We go now,' says Dad.

'Who's here?' I ask again.

He ignores my question. 'Get Polly on her lead,' he says.

'Quickly,' says Grandma, ushering me towards the stairs.

'But I haven't packed yet.'

'Just grab what you can,' says Dad.

'But ...' My voice trails off and I stand there swaying, my heart pounding.

'Ruby. We need to leave.' He raises his voice. There's a fear in his eyes that makes me listen and jerks my body into action.

'Don't be seen in the windows,' he says.

Why is Dad afraid of them?

'Ruby!' hisses Grandma up the stairs. 'Quickly now.'

I dart to my cupboard. I only have seconds to decide what to take. I snatch up some jeans and a few tops. I know it's hot in India.

I stuff my mini torches into my pocket. I'll need those. And my camera. I stop in the doorway, rush back, and grab a photo of me and Mum from the bedside table, along with Mum's quilt.

With my arms full, I sprint down the stairs, leaving everything else behind.

My whole life.

Grandma fastens Polly's lead and passes it to me. Dad guides us silently out of the back door. The night air is still except for bats flitting in and out of the trees and the sound of the car driving towards our house. The building blocks us from sight but I still see flashes from the moving car's lights in the distance.

We have to cross the back garden to reach the ute. I stamp my feet instinctively to warn any snakes that we're coming.

'Not tonight,' whispers Dad. 'Tonight we take our chances with the snakes.'

We follow each other in a line. The night's darkness wraps itself around me, squeezing my insides. My breath quickens. There are three things I've been scared of since I lost Mum. The first is darkness.

I reach out to grab the back of Grandma's coat with one hand. My jacket rustles. My other fingers find the torch in my pocket and grip it nervously.

Polly's ears prick up. 'Shh,' I whisper to her. 'Quiet now.' She crouches low to the ground, staying close to my side.

Dad opens the ute doors and we pile inside one after the other, and sit in a row in the front. Polly, excited by a night outing, wags her tail at me before jumping on to my lap. We pull the door gently closed and it clicks shut.

Dad starts the engine. It's loud at first then settles to a hum.

Did they hear?

He keeps the headlights turned off.

I glance at the moving lights. They must be only a few minutes away now.

'Everyone hold on,' says Dad. 'We're going off road.'

He drives in darkness through the bush, down one of the trails we haven't used in a long time. It's overgrown and bumpy. The moon casts just enough light to see the shadows of the ditches.

We meet eyes in the rear-view mirror.

'Don't worry,' says Dad. 'I know these paths like the back of my hand.'

We bump over rocks. The ute tilts to the side as the wheels spin slowly up a verge.

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I turn and stare at our house through the rear window as we drive away, rattling along the dirt road.

We weave deeper and deeper into the bush until I can't even see the house any more. We're silent in the car, as if the people might be able to hear us.

They'll be in the house now. I imagine them touching Mum's things and swallow. 'What did you do?' I ask Dad under my breath.

He's silent. I watch his profile. His jaw is tight. Time crawls until Grandma quietly asks, 'Do you think they saw us?' 'I don't know. Just let me think,' he says, gripping the steering wheel.

I turn and focus behind us, searching for any signs we're being followed. All I can see is darkness.

After about twenty minutes we reach a main road and Dad switches on the headlights. We're joining the highway. There are no other cars in sight. He turns on to it and presses the accelerator. We speed up, getting further and further away from home.

'Who are they?' I ask. 'Why are we running away from them?'

He sighs. 'I borrowed some money from people I thought were my friends,' he says, finally. 'They want it back.'

'So, pay them,' I say.

'It's not that simple,' says Dad. 'They want more now.'

I check behind us again.

I'm still staring backwards at the dark road when Dad slams on the brakes and we're all thrown forward. I grip on to the seat. Grandma yelps as Polly falls on her. I turn forwards just in time to see the ute skidding towards a big grey object in the middle of the road. The car veers to the side as Dad spins the steering wheel. We slide closer and closer and I'm sure we're going to collide. This is it. I scrunch my eyes shut.

Not again. Please not again.

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CHAPTER THREE
Crash

Grandma reaches for my shoulders and presses against me to break the impact. The car screeches to a halt in a cloud of dust.

My body jolts forward then back again as the seatbelt catches me.

For a moment we all just sit there. I know exactly what's flashing through our minds; images of Mum.

A sharp pain fills my head, not because I hurt it, but because of the memories filling it. I rub my palm against my forehead and wait for the wave of wooziness to pass.

'Everyone all right?' asks Dad, turning.

I nod but my ears ring and my fingers tingle. The second thing I've been scared of since Mum died is driving.

'Yes,' says Grandma, rubbing her chest.

'What is it?' I ask, peering at the mound in the middle of the road.

'A kangaroo,' says Dad. 'Someone must have hit the poor thing earlier.' He glances back at me.

'We should move it out of the way so no one else gets hurt,' I say.

Dad nods. 'Help me?'

Grandma opens the door and I drop to the tarmac, landing on shaky legs. The kangaroo is lit up by the headlights. It's still and dark blood coats its nose. Flies rest on the corners of its open eyes. I want to close them.

I walk towards the kangaroo, place my hand on its chest and feel its rough, bristly hair. There's no breath. No heartbeat. No life.

I slide my palm down its side and the kangaroo's skin gets warmer. I press gently on its stomach and feel the tiny pulse of a heart, beating too fast.

'It's still alive!' I shout.

Dad races over and kneels next to me.

'No - it's too late for the mum,' he says. 'But look ...' He pulls the kangaroo's pouch open. A rush of heat hits my face along with the smell of sour milk. A baby joey stares up at us through big eyelashes. Its pointy ears look too big for its head. I reach down and it breathes through its nostrils on to my hand.

'Luckily it's big enough to have fur,' says Dad. 'It should survive out of the pouch.'

'Let me see,' says Grandma, kneeling next to us.

'We can't leave it here,' I say, softly. 'Please, Dad?'

Dad hesitates and glances around us. 'We'll find an animal centre on the way,' he replies. Dad tries not to show it, but he loves animals as much as I do.

He rummages in the car and returns with a knife from his outback emergency box and an emptied tote bag. Kneeling beside the kangaroo, he says, 'I'm going to have to cut the pouch to get it out.'

Grandma reaches for my hand as Dad carefully pierces the skin around the pouch, slicing through the flesh until it's separated from the mother kangaroo.

I wince. *Please be okay, please be okay* repeats in my head.

Dad leaves the joey suckling on the teat and cuts that off from the mother too.

Dad slides the joey into the bag. She's about a foot long, with an equally long tail. Blood stains the material a dark red. Grandma tucks the bag under her clothes to keep the joey warm with her body heat. She secures it using her shawl as a sling. When she pulls her coat closed at the front, you wouldn't even know there was a joey inside.

Dad glances around us again. 'We need to get out of here,' he says.

We drag the kangaroo to the side of the road before squeezing into the ute and setting off again.

'Can I hold her?' I ask.

Grandma shakes her head. 'Not yet. We need to keep the little one as calm as possible.'

Polly sniffs Grandma's coat.

'Lie down,' I say, commanding Polly to stay by my feet, even though she'd never hurt anything.

'We'll find a vet or someone to take her when we reach Perth,' says Dad.

We drive all night through the Great Sandy Desert on long roads that stretch for miles.

'You should take a break,' says Grandma to Dad eventually. 'Get some sleep. We're far away now. They won't find us.'

He sighs and nods, and we pull over on to the side of the road. I try to stay awake.

The third thing I've been afraid of since Mum died is going to sleep. I'm scared I'll never wake up again. Usually, I stay up and read until I'm so exhausted I can't help falling asleep, but I don't have my book now. I sing songs quietly to myself instead.

In the end, tiredness takes over and I drift in and out of sleep until the sun is up and we're driving again, going through red sands under a deep blue sky. We pass giant termite mounds and huge rocks made from layers of sandstone, each layer a different shade of orange. The air above the tarmac road shimmers from the heat.

Dad passes me a strip of paper. I stare at it.

Three tickets for a cruise.

'We're travelling by boat?' I ask, startled.

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I thought it would be fun to try something different,' he says with a brief grin.
'It will be nicer for Polly to travel this way too.'

Grandma leans over to me. 'I think Dad's being kind to his old mum.'

I'd forgotten that Grandma's scared of flying.

I stare at the tickets in my hand. I've never been on a boat before in my life.

I look at Dad's strained face and wonder what else he's hiding.