

When the Mountains Roared
by Jess Butterworth

WHEN THE MOUNTAINS ROARED



CHAPTER FOUR
Ship

After several hours, the landscape becomes more urban and soon we enter a city.

Grandma peeks at the joey under her coat and smiles at me. 'She's sleeping.'

My stomach twinges as I recognise the buildings and criss-crossing roads outside.

Perth.

It was where we had Mum's funeral.

She died on a Friday, the same day the roses bloomed. She'd been watching and waiting for them to open every day.

'Mum didn't get to see them,' I had said.

'Maybe they came out to say goodbye,' Grandma had replied.

I picked them before the funeral and scattered them over her coffin.

'Ruby.' Dad's voice snaps me out of the memories. 'Can you keep an eye out for vets?'

I scan the buildings we pass. Grandma checks under her coat again. 'I think she's a fighter.'

'There!' I say and point at a small building with VETERINARY CLINIC written in blue letters on the outside.

'Good luck, little one,' I whisper as Grandma disappears inside.

We wait for what feels like for ever. Dad glances in the rear-view mirror at the cars passing us.

'We're going to India to get away from the people who came to our house, aren't we?' I say.

He's quiet.

'Do you even have a job there?' I continue.

'I do have a job, I promise. And I'll sort this all out, Ruby.' He turns in the chair and smiles at me. It doesn't make me feel better. 'A new start. It will be good for all of us.'

I turn away from him and rest my head against the window. I don't want a new start. I just want things to go back to the way they were before Mum died.

'What's going on in there?' mutters Dad, nodding towards the vets. He drums his fingers against the steering wheel.

Grandma returns. She's clutching a carrier bag by her side.

'I bought a snack,' she says quickly, seeing us looking at the bag.

'From the vets? They have food on the boat,' replies Dad.

Polly barks at her as she gets into the car, sniffing her coat.

Grandma nudges Polly away.

'Will the joey be okay?' I ask.

'They said she's big enough to be out of any real danger. She simply needs a carer.'

I breathe a sigh of relief.

We continue until we reach Freemantle and the ocean. Skyscrapers and cranes rise into the skyline. The cruise ship towers out of the water, bigger than the other boats bobbing by its side. It gleams in the sunlight.

'We can board,' says Dad, pointing at a queue of people gathered on the ramp.

He unpacks the car before kneeling and hiding the keys on top of the back tyre.

'I've arranged for someone to collect the ute,' he explains.

'When are we coming back?' I ask.

'Someday,' he says, straightening and standing. 'Someday.'

We stand on the top deck together as the ship pulls away from Australia. Polly is by my side. A salty breeze whips my long hair across my face.

Dad's tense body seems to relax as he leans against the rail next to me, but all I feel is sadness to be leaving. I didn't get to say goodbye to Emily and my friends or even the house. I think of all Mum's belongings that we left behind. My stomach turns as I realise I forgot her favourite orange scarf. It was the one thing that still held her citrusy scent.

Last time I was here, we scattered Mum's ashes along the beaches hugging the mainland. The wind picked them up and carried some out to the ocean.

I wonder if they fell on the water below me.

'Follow me, Mum,' I whisper into the wind and clutch my necklace. 'I don't want to leave you behind.'

I wake up the next morning, and for a moment I lie there, wanting to believe that the past day didn't happen. I'm lying on a top bunk in a cabin with portholes. The boat rocks underneath me. I groan, sit up and swing my legs over the side.

'Grandma?'

Silence.

I scan the room: my clothes are still in a pile on the floor; Grandma's suitcase is in the corner; everything's the same as last night. Climbing down the ladder, I see Grandma's bed is made. Polly's gone too.

The rooms in the cabin are arranged in a line, each with doors connecting to a hallway between them and a shared bathroom. I tiptoe past the bathroom and into Dad's. There's a note on the table. I rush towards it.

Gone to breakfast – see you there. Didn't want to wake you.

I dress quickly and hurry to the restaurant. I spot Dad and Grandma, huddled in a corner with a table full of toast and fruit.

Dad waves at me.

I feel a rush of anger at him for acting as if nothing's happened and pull my chair close to Grandma's, sitting as far away from him as possible.

'I have a surprise for you,' says Dad, passing me a bowl of fruit. 'One of my new bosses used to work at a wildlife sanctuary. He said he'd be delighted to teach you about the animals around the hotel. Think of the photographs you could take.'

I shrug.

Grandma's canvas shoulder bag hangs off the chair. The fabric gathers and stretches as if something is wriggling inside.

I jump and narrow my eyes. Two grey furry ears poke out the top.

My mouth drops open. Grandma raises her finger to her lips.

'I need to go for a rest,' she says to Dad.

'I'll walk back with you,' I say and grab some toast to take with me.

'What happened?' I ask, once we're out of earshot.

'They wouldn't take her at the vets,' whispers Grandma. 'They had no room. I panicked. I couldn't leave the poor thing to die.'

'She needs a proper carer,' I say, opening Grandma's bag and staring down at the baby kangaroo's big eyes and nose. I kneel to look closer. The roo reaches her head out and kisses my nose with hers. It's soft and warm. My heart melts.

'I know how to take care of a kangaroo, Ruby,' says Grandma. 'Make a pouch. Keep her warm. Feed her kangaroo milk. The people next door raised one, remember?'

'But not on a cruise ship! And not in India.'

The roo flicks one ear.

Grandma raises her eyebrows at me.

'Being a carer is a full-time job,' I add. Mum always taught me that nature must be respected and that cute baby animals can grow up to be huge and wild. They aren't pets.

When we reach our cabin, Grandma lifts a pillowcase pouch out of her shoulder bag with the kangaroo inside. She hangs it on a coat hook, off the ground.

'I've named her Joey,' says Grandma, unscrewing a tub of powder with a picture of a kangaroo and a koala on the front. She pulls out a baby bottle with an extra-long teat. 'They gave me this to feed her at the vets. I've got enough to last until she's weaned.'

'How are we going to keep this a secret from Dad?'

'I don't know, but he can't find out. All it would do is cause him unnecessary worry.'

'At least he chose the front room. He shouldn't have to come in here very often,' I reply.

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I stroke Joey's soft nose and she rests her head against the pillowcase and closes her eyes. Polly curls up next to the pouch on top of my feet, looking up at us.

'I can't believe you smuggled a kangaroo out of Australia, Grandma,' I whisper, shaking my head.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Sea

On our second day at sea, Dad joins me and Grandma on the open-air terrace at the bow of the ship. He leans against the guardrail, watching the waves below.

'Dad,' I say quietly. 'How did it happen? How did those people end up at our house?'

'It was only one person to begin with,' says Dad, after a pause. 'Until the payments weren't enough.'

'Why didn't you tell the police?' I ask.

'They're dangerous people. I was frightened they'd hurt you or Grandma.'

Grandma rests a hand on his shoulder.

I remember the headlights coming up the driveway, my bedroom, and everything we left behind.

'I really am sorry, darling,' Dad says, turning to face me. 'What can I do to make the move better?'

My chest tightens. He made us flee in the middle of the night, leave behind Mum's belongings, move across the ocean, and he thinks he can make it better?

'You don't get it.' I lift my head and gaze out to the ocean. Sunlight dances on the rippling surface.

'Then tell me,' he replies.

'There's nothing you can do!' I say, my voice rising. A few bystanders shuffle away. 'I don't have any friends in India. I don't even have any memories of Mum there.'

Dad breathes in sharply and clasps his hands together. 'I know. But I met your mum in India. She's every bit there as she is here. In a way, you're following in her footsteps.'

I shrug but something inside me softens slightly.

'She'll always be with you wherever you go,' adds Grandma. 'Remember that.'

I nod but just in case, later that day, I decide to write her a note. I know it's a weird thing to do but it makes me feel better. I dot the Is with stars like she used to.

Mum. We're moving to India. You've been there before so you know where it is. I don't know the exact location yet, except that it's on top of a mountain. See you there. Love, Ruby.

I rip it up and scatter it into the waves below, imagining them floating down to her. The pieces flutter down to the water, resting on the surface before sinking. Some are whipped up by the wind and disappear into the sky.

That evening Grandma and I return to our room to discover Joey's learnt how to jump out of the pillowcase pouch and hop about the room. She's as tall as my knees

and her feet are as long as her legs. She leaps up to me and sniffs my hands before losing her balance and toppling over. She's been chewing on Grandma's shoe which is soaked and tattered.

Dad knocks on the door.

I spin my head round to look at Grandma, eyes wide.

'Get her in the bathroom,' Grandma says, passing me a bottle.

She opens the door to Dad as I close the one to the bathroom.

Muffled voices filter through. Joey squeaks at the sight of the bottle.

'What was that?' I hear Dad ask from the cabin.

'Ruby's in the bathroom,' says Grandma.

Joey sucks on the bottle noisily before leaping out of the pillowcase and into my arms, knocking me into the towel rail.

'What's going on in there?' asks Dad, tapping on the bathroom door. 'Are you all right, Ruby?'

'I'm fine.' I flush the toilet to cover the noise. 'Just feeling a bit seasick,' I shout through the door.

'Can I get anything to make you feel better?'

'No, thanks.'

I gather Joey's pillowcase pouch in my arms to keep her still. She rests her nose on my shoulder, tired from her playful burst.

Grandma opens the door a few minutes later. 'That,' she says, 'was far too close.'

I nod and wish Mum was here. She would have loved Joey.

Imagining Mum with Joey makes my chest feel tight. For a long time, it was too hard to think about her at all. I'd picture her as clearly as if she was next to me - her smile and chipped front tooth, the lemon eucalyptus scent she wore as mosquito repellent - but it would just remind me of everything I'd lost, so I stopped picturing her at all. Now I can almost see her again, stroking Joey's soft little nose, and my heart aches. I think of my letter bobbing around on the waves. I wonder whether, in some way, it will reach her.

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CHAPTER SIX
Equator

After six days on the cruise through the Indian Ocean, Dad hammers on my door.

'Come quickly,' he says. 'We're crossing the equator!'

Polly and Joey are curled up in a ball together by my feet at the end of the bed, hidden under a blanket. I wriggle my toes out from beneath them.

I go on to the deck and join Grandma and the other passengers leaning over the rails and staring into the deep blue water.

'How do we know when we cross it?' I ask Dad.

I was half expecting there to be an actual line drawn across the ocean.

'I'm not sure,' replies Dad.

'Now!' shouts someone at the back of the crowd and everyone cheers.

'At this moment we're exactly halfway between the North Pole and the South Pole,' says Grandma.

White foaming waves gather where the hull meets the water.

'In the middle of the earth,' I say. Although all I can see is ocean. I take a photo anyway, a seagull flying into the shot just as the shutter clicks.

'Did you miss India when you first came to Australia?' I ask Grandma.

'Every day,' she says, putting her arm over my shoulder and squeezing it. 'But it got easier with time. There were lots of new things to keep me entertained. I'd never seen the sea before I came to Australia.'

'Never?'

'I grew up inland.'

'What did you think?' I ask her.

'That it stretched further than I ever could have imagined. And that I couldn't wait to dive into it even though I didn't know how to swim.'

I smile.

'Did you know that it was me who gave you your middle name?' she asks.

I shake my head no. My middle name is Sky – unusual, but I never questioned where it came from.

'I wanted you to remember that wherever you are in the world, you'll always be under the same sky as the people that love you.'

I smile.

Sunlight catches the flecks of grey in Dad's dark hair and trimmed beard. As we walk down the stairs back to the cabin I remember how he stopped caring about his appearance after Mum died. For months his hair was long and tangled and his beard thick and full.

Inside Dad's room, I open the door to the hallway leading to my bedroom and Joey hops straight past me.

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'Wait,' I say and lunge to grab her. I must have left our bedroom door open as I rushed on to the deck earlier.

I glance up to see Dad's mouth fall open as Joey hops in circles around him. With each bounce, she springs herself upwards, getting faster and faster, her large eyes shining.

'That's not ours,' says Dad. There's a pause while he looks slowly round at us. 'Is it?'

Joey spots me and bounds to my feet. Dad glances at the main door and ushers us into my bedroom, slamming the sliding doors shut behind him. He turns to glare at us.

I grab the pillowcase off the hook and Joey leaps inside, headfirst. She readjusts, sticks her head out and licks her own nose.

Grandma and I sit on the bed. I swing my legs and Polly lies across Grandma's lap.

'She's called Joey,' I say, finally.

'I don't care,' says Dad, pacing back and forth. 'It's not coming with us.'

'Please?' I ask.

'What were you thinking, Mum?' he asks. 'I thought you knew better. You've jeopardised our whole move. Who knows how many laws we've broken.'

'I can pretend it's another dog,' Grandma says.

'We're sorry,' I say. 'Please Dad, just this once. Can we keep her?'

Joey leaps out of the pillowcase, bounces towards him and licks his fingers. He pulls them away from her and she starts sucking on his shirt instead. Polly cocks her head and looks at Dad. She whines as if she wants Joey to stay with us too.

Dad storms out of the cabin.

'What do you think will happen now?' I ask Grandma, mixing Joey's milk in the bottle.

'I don't know, dear.'

But I know what we're both thinking. If Dad tells anyone about Joey, they'll take her away.