

When the Mountains Roared
by Jess Butterworth

WHEN THE MOUNTAINS ROARED



That night I dream the moneylenders surround the ship with deafening motor boats and break in. They surge on board, trampling our belongings and dragging Dad, Grandma, Polly and Joey away. Suddenly the scenery changes and I'm all alone on top of a snowy mountain. I wake sweating and out of breath. Through the darkness I hear the comforting rumble of Grandma's snore below me. Then I pick out Polly's lighter breathing, almost a whistle. I have to lean over the side of the bed to check on Joey. I see the familiar lump in the pillow case and know she's there.

I won't have any chance of getting back to sleep unless I know Dad's still there too. I switch on my keychain torch and climb down the ladder. It gently creaks. Along the corridor, I ease the door to his cabin open and tiptoe towards the bed, but halfway across the room I bump into a chest of drawers. A glass tips and crashes to the floor, splashing my toes with water. I jump. Polly barks from my room.

'Who's there?' Dad shouts, leaping out of bed.

'It's me,' I say. My voice sounds very small. He switches on a light.

'What are you doing sneaking around, Ruby? Haven't you got us in enough trouble with that kangaroo?'

I try to tell him about my dream, but the words don't come. I stare at my hands instead.

He sees my face drop. 'I'm sorry,' he says. 'I didn't mean that.'

'What's all this noise about?' asks Grandma, bustling in. She stops when she sees me. 'What are you doing awake, Ruby?' Joey bounces in behind her.

I don't know what to say so I stay quiet and kneel to stroke Joey's chin.

'You were probably worrying about Joey,' Grandma says and looks searchingly towards Dad.

Dad shakes his head. 'We can't keep it. I'm sorry. The last thing this family needs is more drama.'

They both turn to look at me and Joey, who bounces on to my knee and lies across my lap.

'Maybe a joey is exactly what this family needs,' says Grandma.

Dad presses his fingers against his forehead. He gazes between us.

Joey nuzzles into my arms and I hug her close to me.

Dad's expression softens. 'I can't believe I'm saying this but fine. If you make it to India without anyone finding out, you can keep it.'

'Really?' asks Grandma.

'But you two are taking full responsibility for it, all right?'

'Thanks, Dad,' I say, standing with Joey.

He puts his arm around me and squeezes my shoulder. 'We can take shifts to make sure it stays hidden. Luckily we only have one more day.'

Grandma nods.

'Deal,' I say.

I hardly leave the cabin the next day, and spend hours playing with Joey and watching over her.

'We're arriving in India soon,' says Grandma, bringing me a sandwich in the evening.

She packs the last of her clothes in her suitcase while I eat.

Joey's fast asleep and one of her ears pokes out the top of the pillowcase and flicks back and forth.

A while later Dad rushes in. 'I want you to see this,' he says, grabbing my hand and leading me up to the deck as we pull into the dock. He leaps up the stairs two at a time. 'Look,' he whispers.

It must be the middle of the night, but the city is awake below us in a sea of lights. I've never seen so many. Anticipation flutters in my chest.

As we get closer, streetlights illuminate a market bustling with people and cars. Flickering fires dot the sides of the roads. The air is humid, unlike the dry desert I'm used to. Polly follows us on to the deck and sniffs the air.

Later, as we disembark, we have to queue to pass through X-rays and metal detectors. It's chaotic and people bump into each other to get in line. I stay close to Grandma and Dad. Police stand guard with guns tucked under their arms.

I pause before the exit and cling to the rail with one hand. The air is sticky and I feel dizzy from the height. I push away thoughts of Joey being found and Grandma going to prison.

'You okay?' Dad asks, turning.

I nod and step after him.

I notice Grandma has taken off her jewellery. We all ignore the bag on the inside of Grandma's coat holding Joey. I hope she doesn't wriggle too much. Polly waits patiently by my side. After Grandma places her suitcase on the X-ray, she leaves her coat on and walks through the metal detector. I wait with Dad. My breaths are quick and loud.

The machine doesn't beep and the security guards wave her through.

She did it.

We follow her and collect our bags from the conveyer strip together. Grandma takes my hand and squeezes it.

'Stop,' says an officer.

My heart leaps.

'You didn't take off your coat,' he says to Grandma.

'But I've already been through,' she says.

He points back towards the conveyer, blocking her way.

'Is this really necessary?' asks Dad.

The officer nods sternly.

Grandma rests her suitcase by her feet and unbuttons her coat.

Joey's underneath. Adrenaline races through my chest.

Grandma slides off the coat and the bag containing Joey at the same time. She gently drops the Joey bag next to the pile of suitcases on the ground.

I glance at the officer. He hasn't noticed the bag.

'I'll look after your luggage while you go back,' I say, rushing forward and scooping up the bag with Joey.

Dad steps in front of me and unzips a suitcase, pretending to search for something, blocking me from sight.

Grandma hands the officer her coat. 'There you go.'

They walk back and he places it on the conveyer and asks her to step through the X-ray again.

Polly stands guard next to me and Joey, as if she can tell we need protecting.

The officer waves Grandma past and she joins us.

'Welcome to India,' says Dad, proudly.

We step on to land with a border collie, a joey kangaroo and a taxidermy python, and my insides are yelling with delight that we all made it.

'This way to the train station,' says Dad, pointing.

We follow him into the bustling market, rolling our suitcases behind us and weaving around rickshaws and motorbikes. We pass stalls selling colourful bangles, bindis and shawls. Stainless steel pots and pans clink as a man unhooks a pressure cooker for a customer next to us. A cow lies in the road, swishing his head back and forth to avoid the flies. The smell of fried bread wafts over the crowd and I spot oily *parathas* cooking at the side of the road. Chatter fills the air. A girl with short hair and yellow sandals passes me and smiles and I feel a twinge of excitement. Perhaps making new friends here won't be as hard as I thought.

A tree, at the edge of the line of shops, twinkles with fireflies and I stop and stare.

'Will you look at that,' says Dad in awe.

Grandma beckons for my camera and gestures at me and Dad to stand together.

'Smile,' she says.

And for the first time in a while, I do.

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CHAPTER EIGHT
India

I catch my first glimpse of the Himalayas the next day as we turn a corner in the taxi. After an overnight train journey and a bus ride, we're leaving the plains of the Punjab and climbing into the winding pine-covered foothills of Himachal Pradesh. The mountains span across the horizon, jagged and snow tipped. I can't take my eyes off them.

We get higher and higher, driving around hairpin bends until the driver stops in a small town. Buildings, several stories high, line the main road. Red monkeys chase each other along balcony rails and people sip chai in the cafés.

'This is as far as I can go,' says the taxi driver, stopping in front of a fruit shop overflowing with hanging bananas and baskets of papayas and limes.

Dad's glancing at the map in his hand. 'It's a bit further, isn't it? There's a road that curves slightly to the left. I think it's that one.' He points to the left fork in the road.

The taxi driver opens his door.

'But it's at least another ten-minute drive,' says Dad. 'On the map it looks like you can keep going.'

'Sorry,' the driver shakes his head apologetically. He closes the door, opens the boot and unloads our suitcases. 'You'll have to get someone else to take you the rest of the way.'

We stand at the side of the road with our luggage and watch the driver pull away.

The air is crisp and clear.

'I bet the road gets worse,' says Dad. 'He probably doesn't want to scratch his car.'

Grandma nods in agreement.

We stand outside a dry food store, next to baskets of spices. I recognise the bright yellow turmeric, dried chilies and the scent of cinnamon.

Two rickshaws fly past and Dad waves them both down. 'Durga mountain,' he says.

A strained look appears on the first driver's face and he shakes his head at the words before the rickshaw rattles away. The second driver purses his lips and follows.

'Wait,' shouts Dad after them, arms in the air.

'Are we going to have to walk?' I ask.

'Let's ask in the shop, darling,' Grandma says to Dad.

Inside, I gaze at the shelves of biscuits hungrily.

'Why do you want to go there?' asks the owner, filling a sack with dried kidney beans.

'I'm managing the new hotel there.'

He eyes us warily. 'You won't find anyone willing to go up there but you can hire my donkeys to carry your bags.'

'Thanks,' says Dad. Relief flashes across his face.

'You're not coming with us?' asks Grandma.

'I have to look after the shop. Bring the donkeys back when you're done.'

Outside, he fastens the suitcases to the harnesses on two donkeys.

'Follow the road,' he says. 'Take a left at the top and continue on the footpath. You can't miss it.'

The donkeys' hooves clomp on the tarmac. We wind up through thick pine forest, leaving the town far below us until we're surrounded only by trees, high in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Polly runs up and down panting, thankful to stretch her legs. I'm carrying Joey and she pokes her head out of the pouch and sniffs the air, her nose wrinkling.

I catch glimpses of a building through the trees.

'Is that it?' I ask, jogging ahead.

'Must be,' Dad shouts after me.

The building comes into view and my stomach drops. I wasn't expecting this. The hotel is an abandoned two-story building with boarded up windows and a rusty blue tin roof. It's surrounded by a chest-high wall covered in overgrown climbers and weeds.

A boy in a long coat sits on the wall wearing a rigid woollen hat with a flat top and vertical stripes across the front of it in earthy colours.

He stands when he sees me. We meet eyes, his are deep and dark. He's almost as tall as Dad. Probably a year or two older than me.

A big mountain dog with a fluffy tail waits by his side.

Polly rushes forward to his dog.

'Come back,' I call, but they're already sniffing each other, tails wagging.

'Praveen, right?' says Dad, catching up to me and approaching the boy. He shakes his hand. 'We're leasing the hotel from Praveen's father,' he explains to me.

'Hi,' says Praveen. 'My father apologises he can't be here but he asked me to show you the place.'

'Is this it?' I ask, staring at the dishevelled building.

Dad nods.

'I expected it to be more ...' Grandma searches for the right words. 'Ready for guests.'

'We'll have it up and running in no time,' says Dad, but I hear his voice waiver.

Something moves in Praveen's front coat pocket and I look closer: two baby goats snuggle inside giant pockets on his chest. Their tiny heads poke out of the top with pink noses and floppy ears. One makes a high mewling sound.

'Are these your goats?' I ask.

'Yes,' he replies.

I reach forwards to stroke one.

'Hands off. You might scare them.'

I stop, taken aback.

Dad pushes the stiff gate open.

I hop on to the wall, pausing at the top and sighing. We really are in the middle of nowhere. Thick jungle and tall pine trees surround us on all sides and beyond it rise mountains and snowy peaks.

Grandma leads in the donkeys with our luggage and Joey.

We walk through the neglected garden, overgrown with giant daisies, purple orchids and orange lilies.

Joey squirms in the pillowcase and I stop to adjust her. My arms ache.

'What's in there?' asks Praveen.

'Nothing,' I reply.

'Is it a goat?'

'No, it's a kangaroo,' I say.

'I've never seen a kangaroo,' says Praveen, eyes widening and stepping towards it.

'Hands off,' I reply, mimicking him. 'You might scare her.'

Praveen laughs. 'Fair enough.'

He looks at me for a minute, then lifts one of the new-born goats out of his pockets. It's the size of a small chihuahua.

'They're twins,' he says. 'Be careful. They were premature and aren't feeding properly.'

I stroke its soft fur. It bleats and licks my finger with its long tongue before nibbling my hand. It tickles.

'How long since someone lived here?' Dad asks Praveen.

He shrugs. 'A long time. We inherited it from my Great Grandpa before I was born but we've never lived here - we have a house down in the village. My whole family lives there and my parents didn't want to be far away from them.'

'So it's just been sitting here, empty for years?' I ask.

He nods and unlocks the padlock on the front door, stepping aside to let us enter.

I blink, my eyes adjusting to the darkness of the hall after the brightness outside. Praveen breaks the wooden boards off the windows so the light can get in.

Dad opens his arms. 'Welcome to your new home, the soon-to-be Mountain View Hotel.'

I roll my eyes.

We walk through to a big room with a table and chairs, curtains and a giant fireplace. Everything is coated in a thick layer of dust. I can't even see the pattern on the tattered rug on the floor.

I open the curtains and moths fly at me. I sneeze; it smells of mildew. Dead flies lie in piles on the window sills, coated in spider webs.

'Nothing a lick of paint can't fix,' says Grandma bravely, heading off to explore.

Dad nods and runs his hand through his hair. I search for a light switch but don't find one. Cracks run down the stone walls.

'Ruby, come up here!' says Grandma, from upstairs. 'This can be your bedroom. We can decorate it however you want. I'll take the one next to it.'

There are eight bedrooms upstairs, three downstairs, and a big living area and kitchen and three bathrooms. The only room that looks like it has had people in it recently is the kitchen. There are food wrappers and a torch on the side.

'Who's been in the kitchen?' I ask.

'Mr Bhat and Mr Anand come here sometimes,' says Praveen.

'Who are they?' I ask.

'My hotel bosses,' says Dad.

'Where are the lights?' I ask. 'And the sockets?'

'There's no electricity,' says Dad. 'Yet.'

'Seriously?' I ask, shivering. I make a mental note to place a torch in every room. It takes preparation to hide from the dark.

It's no better in the bathroom; when I turn the tap above the sink it makes a glugging sound but nothing comes out.

'Where's the water tank?' Dad asks Praveen.

The water tank turns out to be a swimming pool sized pond in the garden full of murky green water. Dragonflies skim the surface.

'That explains all the buckets in the bathroom,' says Grandma.

'There's no way I'm showering in that,' I say, pointing at the water.

'Don't worry, Ruby,' says Dad. 'I'll go down to the village and rustle up some help tomorrow.'

I remember the looks on people's faces when we told them we were going to Durga mountain. I get the feeling no one wants to come up here. I can see why: there's nothing here but this wreck of a building.

Grandma soon discovers a cupboard with a hard broom and we spend the afternoon sweeping and cleaning. Praveen disappears and returns with bundles of wood and kindling. Then he climbs on to the roof and pokes sticks down the chimney to check for bird's nests.

'It'll get cold tonight,' he says. 'You'll want a fire.'

When he's done he harnesses the donkeys. 'I'll take these back to town for you.'

Outside, pine cones from the cedar trees crunch under my feet. Polly and his dog bark and chase after each other.

‘What’s your dog called?’ I ask.

‘Kuttani,’ he replies.

‘Wait,’ says Dad, rushing out from behind me. ‘I forgot to ask where the drinking water is.’

Praveen pauses by the gate. ‘The spring is over there,’ Praveen says, pointing to the path on my right. ‘And beyond it is the lower path to my village.’ He points again, this time to the path on my left. ‘Down there is bear rock. It’s a giant boulder that sticks out from the slope. Don’t ever go there,’ he says seriously. ‘It’s where the bears live.’

A loud rumbling echoes off the peaks in the distance. I watch as a cascade of rocks slides down a tall mountain. Only a few trees dot its rocky terrain. A cloud floats in front.

Praveen follows my gaze. ‘And up there is snow leopard territory,’ he adds.

I look up at the jagged peak and feel a shiver of excitement.