

From As She Fell

Chapter One

Monster

They'd been warned not to swim in the waterhole. Dad told stories of the monster that lived there, that liked to gobble up little girls. Dad was known for telling stories, he'd told Mum a good one to get her to marry him, she said. Marybeth looked at Julene to see if she believed him, but Julene was watching Mum, who just took a long drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke out with her eyes closed.

It was Saturday, and Dad sipped his beer, leaned back in the wicker chair, pencil scratching on the pages of his notebook – 'doing the numbers', he called it.

'Wasting money on the horses,' Mum said.

Dad's cattle dog, Max, sat in the corner, gnawing leftover chicken bones. Marybeth had read somewhere that dogs shouldn't eat cooked bones, that a piece might splinter off and choke them, but he was a mean old dog and always snapped at her when she walked past the back of the ute, so she didn't say anything.

Julene sat on the floor by the coffee table, carefully painting her nails a pale pink. At fifteen, she was seven years older than Marybeth. Her small, white teeth, slightly inward facing, now biting her bottom lip, gave her face a mischievous softness, balanced the grown-up assuredness of defined cheekbones and pale, brushstroke eyebrows. Marybeth was on the couch, her heels on a cushion, pink-tipped toes held apart by the squares of toilet

paper Julene had rolled up and put between them. Her fingernails were too bitten down for polish, Julene said. 'I'll do your toenails. But wash your feet first.' Marybeth liked to ride her bicycle barefoot, up and down the driveway, rubber tyres crunching over the dirt, metal squeaking as she pushed the pedals. She thought about the things she'd seen in books – white, fluffy snow and reindeer, pirate ships and oceans, worlds far away from the stilted Queenslander and the bare yard with the peeling fence, the flat stretch of road leading to town ten kilometres away. On the other side of the house, beyond the overgrown paddock, the treeline at the edge of the national park and, beyond that, the waterhole. Marybeth figured the polish would be dry by now. She wiggled her toes and the pieces of toilet paper fell out.

Julene had their mother's hair and Marybeth had Dad's. Brown, like chocolate, he winked. Brown like poo, whispered Julene, but with a giggle. Julene let Marybeth get into bed with her at night when the monster from the waterhole came up over the rocks, crawled across the yard and made the branch of the wattle tree outside their window scratch the glass, *ratatata* down the shutters.

'It's just the wind,' Julene would say. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. The monster isn't real.'

But Marybeth could feel it waiting. Dad wasn't always there to protect them and Mum went to her away place, so she knew that the monster could come right through the front door.

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The louvres were open but there was no breeze. Crickets chirped in the heat. The peppercorn tree cast a shadow on the wall.

'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

The bedcovers were bunched down at their feet. No matter how hot it was, Julene's feet were always cold, and she liked to warm them up between Marybeth's legs.

'A ballerina,' said Marybeth. 'I'll dance to Mum's music.'

'Ballerinas don't dance to Patsy Cline,' said Julene. 'They dance to classical.'

'What's classical?'

‘It’s violins and piano, but no voices.’

Marybeth didn’t think she’d like dancing to music without any words, but maybe it wouldn’t matter if she danced to the wrong kind of music, as long as it was Mum’s favourite. Julene could dance to anything. She and Mum would spin and dip and sway around the kitchen until they were both breathless and laughing, Mum leaning on the table and saying ‘I’m too old for this’ as Julene continued to twirl, lifting up her skirt.

‘You’re too old for that,’ said Mum. ‘Put it down.’ But she was smiling.

Different smiles for different people. Head ducked, teeth hidden, smiling with her eyes for Dad. Chin up for Julene and her eyes really looking, taking her daughter in, the light coming back into her face. A ‘skipover smile’ for Marybeth, because it reminded her of flat rocks skipping across water, leaving ripples behind. She felt like one of those ripples, trying to catch a stone as it passed, to grab hold of something solid.

Watching them dance, Marybeth sat on the kitchen counter and drummed her heels against the cabinets in time to ‘When I Get Through With You’. Sunny, pink-faced gerberas stood tall in a glass vase on the table. Mum’s hair was in curlers. Marybeth wasn’t dancing with them, but she was here, in the same kitchen, with the warm sun on her shoulders. This was her third-favourite thing, waiting for the moment when her sister looked over and grinned.

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Blue and white sky. Grass bleached dirt-yellow in patches. A white dress. ‘Walkin’ After Midnight’ on the stereo and Mum drinking her special water out of a wine glass. Marybeth ran across the backyard after her sister, who was so much faster on long pale legs.

Julene stopped and turned. ‘Slowpoke,’ she said.

Marybeth reached out and took her hand. They ran across the paddock together, their flip-flops *slap, slap*, slapping the ground. Mum’s music was far away now. They had time. She wouldn’t call them until dusk. Dad had slammed the door of the ute hard when he left so he’d be gone for hours, maybe days. It was hard to tell. Marybeth squeezed her sister’s hand and tried to keep up, gripping the rubber between her toes.

Once they were beyond the treeline there was less chance of Mum seeing them. Marybeth squinted in the sunlight as they walked along the track. The branches above didn't shade them much from the light. When it got too narrow Julene let go and they went single file. A flash of red as a bush turkey darted away, skittered into low woody shrubs. The path was steep as they got closer to the waterhole, as though it were trying to choke them back and then – just when it seemed like they couldn't get any further – fresh air as it opened out onto rock, damp and slippery in places. The water was a dark, dirty green. Exposed roots twisted and clung as trees leant away from the sloping rocks. The way their branches hung over the water made Marybeth think of a family looking down into a well. Birds chattered, called to each other from the trees.

They took off their flip-flops, slipped them on their wrists, and carefully picked their way around the edge, climbing over rocks and loose stones on all fours, using their hands to cling and pull themselves up onto the flat part at the top. The ledge was about twelve feet up, twice as tall as Dad and a bit more. The rock sloped sharply down to the water below. Once, Julene had swum down as far as she could, and hadn't been able to touch the bottom.

They stripped down to their underwear. Julene liked to jump where the slope was steepest, chalky orange boulders turning black with wet, or dark green where moss crept across the streaked rock. She always went first. The surface of the water blinked where the sun touched it. Marybeth watched her sister approach the edge. Julene hesitated, making sure her footing was secure before the moment Marybeth saw her decide to dive, and her face relaxed. She bent at the knees, then pushed off, hard. For a moment, it was as though she hovered above the water with her arms stretched out like wings, legs together, her body arced, before the waterhole pulled her down. Just before it swallowed her, at that very last second, she pointed her arms out in front like a superhero. The green turned white in her wake. She waited. Julene's sleek head broke the surface. She sputtered and wiped her face, treading water.

'Okay,' she called. 'Your turn.'

Marybeth felt the rough rock beneath her feet, steadied herself, then jumped as far away from the hard, jagged wall as she could, clutching her

knees to her chest with one arm and holding her nose with her other hand, eyes squeezed shut. The shock of the cold. The water sucking her under. She flailed for a moment, then kicked to the surface. Julene was already climbing back up to the ledge.

Marybeth followed, stones and twigs digging into her feet. When she reached the top, she lay down in a patch of light. She liked how the sun lit up individual leaves from behind, gave them sharp edges. She closed her eyes and the light flickered red behind her lids as she listened to Julene dive, again and again.

They made sure to dry off before they went home. So Mum wouldn't know.

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Marybeth could hear them through the wall.

'You don't ...' Words muffled by a clinking of dishes, Dad's low murmur.

She couldn't make out what they were saying. A bug outside the window threw itself against the porch light.

'Promise you won't tell,' whispered Julene.

'But Dad said ...'

'He doesn't understand.'

Marybeth chewed at a cuticle, pulling until she tasted blood. She pushed her fingertips into her palms.

'Please Marybeth.'

'What if they come in and check?'

'They won't.'

'But what if they do? What ...'

'You can say you don't know. You were asleep. I'll wait until you're asleep. But they won't.'

Footsteps in the hall. The bathroom door slammed.

'Okay.' Marybeth was scared of Dad finding out Julene had snuck out, but she was more scared of her sister going quiet and of being alone.

'Pinky promise,' said Julene.

They linked little fingers. *Bat, bat, bat*, the bug flew at the light. Dad's

voice was louder now. Marybeth wriggled closer and put an arm over her sister's waist, pressed her ear against the cotton shirt.

'Too hot,' muttered Julene, but she let her stay.

Marybeth listened to the *thud, thud, thud*. Fast and steady. Her second-favourite thing.

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'Where's your sister?' Mum was shaking her awake. 'Where is she?'

'I don't know.'

'Where *is* she?' Mum squeezed her arms, too tight.

'Sweetheart,' Dad said, reaching out.

'Don't touch me.' Her mother jerked away from both of them, walked out of the room.

Dad made the phone call. Men came and sat in the kitchen with serious faces.

'We'll find her,' they said.

'Probably run off,' Marybeth heard one of them mutter. She had promised, so she tried not to tell them. But the minutes passed so slowly and the weight of Mum's pale, worried face was too much for her to carry alone, too much, and so she broke her promise.

'I think she went to the waterhole,' she said, the words sticky and bitter in her mouth.

The men started their cars, doors slamming, sharp orders. When they had gone, the house was quiet. Mum sat at the kitchen table and lit a cigarette, her back straight and still. The gerberas drooped over the edge of the vase, a few pink petals scattered on the laminate.

Marybeth wanted to say she was sorry, to lean into her mother's body. She thought about Mum brushing her hair, cool fingers skimming her neck, tucking rogue strands behind her ears, the long, steady strokes soothing, comforting. Her favourite thing. Marybeth's stomach would unknot as she leaned back into her mother's cigarette and lemon scent. She quickly walked to the bathroom. Her blue hairbrush lay next to the sink; it had some of Julene's blonde hairs in it. She picked it up; it was smooth, wet from the counter.

‘Mum?’ She took a few tentative steps into the kitchen. ‘Can you plait my hair?’

Her mother didn’t answer, but a muscle in her cheek jumped as she stubbed the cigarette out in an ashtray; its final breath of smoke floated and disappeared. She stood up and Marybeth sat on the chair. The vinyl seat was warm. Mum scraped the brush through her hair, pulling gently, untangling the long brown strands. The air between them was hushed and hot. It felt different, empty, and Marybeth was afraid. The brush clattered onto the table, and it had to be Mum’s fingers in her hair but the nails were sharp, almost scratching, as she slowly raked them through, and Marybeth imagined claws, something wet and ancient, its maw gaping wide.

‘Mum?’ she whispered.

‘What?’ Her mother’s voice was tired.

Marybeth breathed out.

But she knew; she had felt it, that something else had been in the kitchen with them. Something else was in the house. The monster was here and it had broken her favourite thing.