



belief in magic,
belief in imagination, and belief that
there is a 'turning point'

KEVIN PRICE
KUMAKANA

A
GRONUPS
TALE

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CONTENTS

Part One
Splitting Apart

Part Two
Retreat

Part Three
The Receptive

Word List

Characters

Part I
SPLITTING APART

Chapter 1



Lavender Jensen's imagination has a habit of being troublesome. Her mother has diagnosed it as a disease with more killing power than avian flu. Her father calls it imaginitis. Not contagious, although curable. Apparently.

But Lavender Jensen's imagination is not like a light switch to be turned off and on. It's her coping mechanism when other kids behave like dicks. Like when Selena Graham and her coterie of up-themselves-rabbits stuffed tissue paper in their bras to make it look as though they had bigger tits and Lavender said she only saw 'mobile mole dwellings'. The fight that followed brought on a firestorm of criticism from the adults in her life for what, when it was all said and done, were pretty mundane offences. Imagination to the rescue. It comes to the rescue when boredom threatens. It has been heavily indulged for the past few days.

She'd spent several days watching two magpies that perch high in the trees at the edge of the great forest, chortling back and forth like matrons snickering at the school gate. She'd formed the opinion that these two had a healthy business conjuring spells. Their tree—and those surrounding it—rises like a column in the rampart of a great fort, forming part of a landscape that sits idly, waiting, as the crackle of their leafy crowns tosses whispered incantations to the winds, passing on the myths and legends of dark days and forgotten languages. Lavender's mind had no escape from this bush bewitchery.

Under the direction of these two birds, hidden eyes watched her. Sly, spectral, movements crawling on her skin as they stared out from shadows that consume the light. Eyes sunken in the cheeks of hungry owners that slink through the understorey in search of food and sanctuary. The birds posted their twitter-feed of the goings-on in the murky depths of the forest in a cavatina so captivating that it generated an irrepressible urge in her to break the rules and nose around the void behind the giant trees.

They perched in the lowest branches of a high high karri tree. They changed their tune at every attempt she made to throw her ball. She was well aware that she was totally unco but did they have to be so snide about it? Everyone had to start somewhere. Just because sport wasn't Lavender's strong suit, at least it staved off the boredom. Just because *they* didn't understand didn't mean it was a complete waste of time. She shot them a glare and headed down the hill to retrieve her ball. Her last throw left it near a bit of scrub that was well wide and short of her target.

Lavender Jensen had limited tolerance of those who had limited tolerance—the kind who usually have something to fear. Perhaps the magpies felt threatened by her ball's awesome powers. That must be it! Because the ball had power beyond anything they could possibly know—ten times anything they had. Just wait, I'll show you.

She was thirteen years old. A single wave of glossy hair fell to her shoulders. The fine strands separated when the wind picked it up and the sun struck its ends, and brandished red and golden flashes among the Lindt-brown. She was midgety compared to her friends, and watched every day for the growth spurt that would see her catch up to them. Lately, though, she did notice that her jeans were shorter in the leg and her tops short in the arm.

But not tighter around the chest. In her morning studies of her reflection in the mirror, she hoped her small breasts and too-narrow shoulders wouldn't get left behind when the spurt came. She was—at least according to her mother—beautiful, with eyes whose colour she was named after, her fine nose finishing in the slight upturn she'd inherited from her father. But her beauty was spoiled by a small population of itinerant pimples that had begun showing up on her chin and forehead. At first she tried to blot them with splotches of make-up, but it was always a shade away from her skin colour, spreading like a stain across her dial.



The forest surrounded a farm that was twenty-six kilometres by winding dirt road from Denmark. This pretty seaside hamlet on the south coast of Western Australia sported little more than bare commercial necessities and a smattering of tourist traps. The farm may as well have been a thousand kilometres from anywhere because it was completely surrounded by a forest about the size of the country of Denmark.

She'd been dumped here three weeks ago. Apart from her, there was only her father. No friends within cooe. Where she lived normally, in a comfortable southern Perth suburb, the biggest shopping centre was only a five-minute walk away. Here, her mobile phone didn't have a signal, and there was nothing to do, except throw her ball or help her father in his displaced-animal shelter. Not that she minded being around animals—that was actually fun—but the daily slog of chores wasn't an ideal summer holiday activity—certainly not when you're a stone-age away from real living people.

She would need a lot of imagination to survive this summer. Not for the first time, a desire to disappear into the blackness of the forest swept over her. The magpies were strangely quiet.

She held her ball up at them as though it were a weapon, brandishing the eleven signatures that adorned it—the signatures of the champion Australian cricket team. Her grandfather, once an international cricketer, and ever since, an armchair expert, had given it to her.

'Eleven of the greatest ball magicians who ever lived,' he said. 'You know what that means?'

She shook her head.

'It's got all of their magic.' His eyes sparkled as he thrust it into her hands, his face bearing his lop-sided grin with its speck of white spittle nestling in the corner of his mouth that didn't open. 'It's their magic that makes the ball fly, and if you practise hard enough, you'll fly too.'

The word *magic* hooked her.

For as long as she could remember, she'd believed that magic solved problems. Her mother humoured her. Her father said she was suffering a bout of imaginitis. But she held to her beliefs, convinced that she felt the ball's magic every time she carried it. She could feel it pushing back as she squeezed it, its warmth radiating into her hand, urging her to carry on, to learn its great gift. She wasn't too sure about the flying bit—she imagined it

often, soaring above the trees, dipping and rolling. But that was sure to take a lot of practise. First she needed to discover the spell to make the ball fly. At the moment all it did was dribble along and plop ...

Wait! That's it! The magpies are scared of the ball's flight magic. She lined up a throw toward the fence, closed her left eye, squinted with her right across the top of the ball, sighted one magpie's chest dead centre and willed herself to knock it off its perch.



The fence separated the forest from the farm. It ran east–west, plunging down a steep rise to a gully beyond sight, its top and bottom wires removed to allow animals easy passage. A firebreak—long overdue for grading—divided it from the trees. An old logging track, now partly regrown, started at the top of the crest and served as a dark doorway into the forest.

Her mother had told her how the trees shaped the forest—the karri, among the world's tallest, and the tingle, with its massive girth, one of the largest. She told her that their bark hid spiders with sixty-five million years of history. Some of these trees grew nowhere else on earth. But her mother didn't stop at that.

'There are secrets and legends far older than any recorded history,' she said. 'In an old language, this was called the *Kumakana*—it means the place of the great beginning. As far as forests go, this one is about as old as they get.'

Her mother was an animal-anthropologist and knew a lot about this stuff. When Lavender was little—several years before they'd bought the farm—she'd told her about the forest. Lavender's mother had been called to identify a large pile of bones that had been discovered in some hidden location deep within the forest's secret heart. It turned out to be a mass grave of Tasmanian devils—proof, among other things, that they once populated Australia's southwestern forests. The mystery, though, was why so many bones, and what caused the deaths.

The discovery created problems, though. Lavender had been dumped at the farm with her dad for these holidays because her mother had taken off to Adelaide to attend a conference on the Devil Facial Tumour Disease that was devastating Tasmania's devil population, threatening their existence. She didn't know when she'd be back. She seemed to think there might be a connection in her discovery that could lead to a prevention and cure. When there was science to get involved in, her daughter occupied some place far, far away. She wasn't a bad mother, just one whose priorities could change in a nanosecond. One minute Lavender was looking forward to a holiday just chillin' in her room, and the next she was removed to this remote outstation.

Her dad was tall, with that academic stoop that goes with the shape of a university professor. Wiry grey hair curled around his forehead like filigree, and he maintained his beard in a permanent three-day growth. His lips curled at the edges in a hard-worn smile that pinched miniature furrows from the corners of his almond-shaped eyes. His glasses perched well down his nose, affording his hazel eyes the choice of viewing over the lenses or through them, depending on his mood. He'd accepted a university research grant to establish his animal shelter, working to rehabilitate indigenous animals into the forest and

reduce the impact of feral populations. It was important work and it dovetailed nicely with Lavender's mother's great find.

Her mother, though often here, had said quite emphatically that she didn't intend to live at the farm. She and Dad weren't separating, she'd said, just living in different places for a while. How exactly, Lavender wondered, was that not a separation?

At first, the discovery caused great excitement. But, about a year ago—around the time her dad got his grant and moved to the farm, her mother went quiet on the subject and wouldn't talk about it any more. The big find was suddenly hush-hush. Apparently silenced by something called *secret business*.

Her dad hadn't said much on the subject, which wasn't unusual in itself—he didn't have a lot to say on most subjects. The only thing he seemed really firm about was that she was forbidden to cross the fence—a rule she broke three days ago when she rescued a joey at the edge of the bush, an act of disobedience that brought on a hell-storm severe enough to melt a polar ice-cap.

What was she to do? The joey was injured. Isn't that what his shelter was for? But her father didn't see it all quite that clearly.

'It was dangerous,' he'd said, looking across the tops of his glasses.

She hit back.

'Dad, it's just bush. It's not likely to swallow me up.' She made an action with her arms, mimicking a hippo mouth chomping down on some poor insignificant creature.

'Yes I know it's just bush. But you can get lost in there—it's full of unexplored areas and hidden dangers.'

He tried to be rational. Firm.

She was anything but rational. Loud.

'Ugh! It's not like there are tigers waiting to pounce, or wolves ready to gobble me up on the way to Grandma's house, or three bears living in a cosy little cottage I'm going to stumble into—'

'I'm not talking about an imaginary world. This forest has very real dangers—'

'All I did was rescue an injured joey at the edge of the forest. I didn't even go in! You're acting like that was a bad thing.'

'It could have been if the mother was nearby. You haven't seen what a kangaroo can do —'

'Well, she wasn't. This time it's not *my* imagination running riot. You should listen to yourself!'

Anything he'd had to say after that was swamped by the wall of sound from the earbuds that she jammed into her ears as she stalked from the kitchen.

That was two nights ago.

Now, as she stood on the rise holding the bright yellow magic ball, she wondered about

the magpies, and the eyes that stared out of the murk, and the shadows slinking between trunks, and the dissonant undercurrent of the forest's dangers. What made her father such a dick at times? She didn't need to be treated as a kid any more. He had no idea.

The earbuds were new and they rarely left her ears. It was her third set this year—the first had gone through the wash when they were less than a week old, and the second, within a month of replacing the first, crushed under the wheel of the car when dropped unseen from the back seat. Her father had bought these, threatening that it would be the last time. They were expensive, sat perfectly on her ears and sounded amazing. She knew he meant it.

And when she complained about there being no signal for her mobile, he simply pointed to the wall and said, 'There's a phone.'

'I can't text my friends on that.'

'Have a conversation.'

'Who has conversations? Dad, me and my friends don't have conversations, we text.'

'*Me and my friends?* Surely you mean my friends and I.'

Nitpicking about language was another of his favourite pastimes.

'No. I mean *me*, and my friends.'

Old people. Old ideas. Old beliefs. And she was stuck with them. For the whole summer.



Lavender Jensen hooked her hair behind her ears and bunged her earbuds into them. She hit the play button, cast a defiant look into the nearest karri tree, her yellow ball gripped tightly in her right hand, left the rise and headed past the house.

As she rounded the end of the house, another building, about ten metres from the property's boundary fence, came into view. Part of it was the remains of a single-roomed, stone logger's cottage, built some time in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It now had a new roof, a concrete floor had replaced its original earthen one, new internal walls divided an office, a locked medical supplies storage room and a surgery. There was a food store as well as six sheltered pens.

Chicken wire fenced the outside perimeter and cover. The entire complex, designed to accommodate a dozen or so recuperating animals—including birds and reptiles—measured about thirty metres by forty. This was her father's brand new, purpose-built animal shelter.

There were two ways to enter.

The original doorway in the stone wall led directly to the surgery. Lavender headed for a simple wooden-framed gate at the far corner. An ancient blackbutt stood in solitude about two-thirds of the way from the main house, the spiky grey fingers of its long-dead topmost branches stretched skyward above a wide and bushy skirt of healthy green leaves. A magpie sat motionless on a dead branch and watched her pass beneath.

She reached for the wire latch and was about to flip it open when something at her feet caught her eye. A bone about the length of a dessert spoon lay against the gate. She pulled the earbuds from her ears and bent to pick it up, leaving her ball on the ground.

It was thin and white, clearly old, but there was little decay. One end sported a knuckle. The other oddly rounded, as if it had been shaped by hand, and deep scratch marks patterned the length of it. She studied it, turning it over in her hand, trying to make sense of the markings, feeling the weight and running her finger along the polished length. How had it got there? The hairs on the back of her neck bristled and her gaze moved to the tree—and the magpie.

The bird eyed her but remained stoical on its perch. Pointing the bone at it, she sighted along its length like a gun barrel, made a sound she imagined to be a dull shot. Then she shrugged and, tapping the bone into her hand, disappeared into the enclosure. She didn't notice an object fall from her pocket.

The shelter only had one patient—the joey she'd rescued three days earlier.

She'd found it cowering beneath a bush at the edge of the forest, terrified, exhausted and bleeding badly from a gash in its right side. The right foreleg dangled and pain was obvious in its eyes. Her heart went out to the young kangaroo. She dashed back to the shelter, grabbed an old towel and rushed back through the fence. Her touch was feather-soft as she wrapped the towel around the animal and took it in. Her dad set to work straight away. She'd checked on her patient several times since that afternoon—feeding, watering, and holding one-way conversations.

She passed the pen and headed for the food store. Her dad was in his office working on his papers. She called to him as she reached for a container of kibbles.

'How's the joey?'

'Perked up a little.'

He didn't look up from his papers.

'Worked out what happened?'

'Fox attack I'd say.'

'How can you tell?'

'Canines. More than one set.'

'I've seen it,' Lavender blurted from the doorway.

Her father thought she was referring to the wounds and began a detailed explanation of the lacerations and contusions.

'No. The fox. I've seen the eyes,' she said.

He didn't reply.

'In the forest,' she continued, 'they watch me from the trees.'

Her father looked up from his work and stared at her over the lenses of his glasses.

'I've told you about going into the forest—'

‘I didn’t go in the forest.’

‘I think your imagination’s running away again. If you haven’t been in the forest and you haven’t seen the fox that looks at you from the trees, then how do you know it’s there?’

‘Don’t know. It’s just there—watching, smiling. Hiding in the shadows.’

‘Are you sure it’s not fairies? They’re here too, you know.’ He laughed. ‘Anyway, more than one fox attacked that joey—he’s lucky to be alive. I’ll have to set out some bait.’

‘What’s bait?’

‘Dried meat with a poison called ten-eighty. It occurs naturally in that plant—he pointed to a leafy branch on his shelf—doesn’t hurt native animals, but kills the ferals.’

‘That’s cruel.’

‘What is?’

‘You can’t go around poisoning animals just for doing what they do. Why do you have to control everything?’

‘I’m not controlling things. I’m helping indigenous animals re-establish their range—’

‘They’ll work it out themselves, Dad, that’s what animals do.’

‘Lavender, you’ve got to realise something. Out here is the real world, it’s not your fairy tale world. Animals aren’t like the ones in books—’

‘I’m not telling fairy tales, Dad. This place is weird. Magpies gossip about me, a crow watches me, and this joey came to me—’

‘The joey was hurt. It was escaping a terrible life-threatening danger. Do you know how dangerous foxes can be? You were lucky this time, but you should have come to get me. Next time you may not be so lucky. You come and get me—understood?’

‘Oh! You’re such a control freak.’

She turned on her heel and headed for the joey’s pen, stuffing the slim bone she’d found by the gate into her back pocket. She would have mentioned it, but after this last conversation, she thought it would lead to an accusation of some other fanciful crime.

To make the joey’s pen more homelike, Lavender had added branches cut from shrubs and bushes, and spread a mixture of hay and sawdust around the watering bowl. Her dad told her to scatter the kibbles on the ground—he reckoned it was better than putting them all in a bowl because it encouraged the joey to scratch and use his injured paw. For the same reason, she wasn’t meant to hand feed him. Anyway, he was too shy to take from her hand, although it didn’t stop her trying. She’d left the internal doors open to give him the run of the whole enclosure, and, judging by the poo trail all the way to the gate, he’d made good use of it.

He was huddled in a corner of the pen. He looked *so cute*—Lavender’s personal favourite phrase for describing any young animal—with his front paw bound to a splint and supported by a narrow sling fastened behind his neck. The bandages and sling were

made from a special new biodegradable material, which disintegrated within a short time. Wild animals under veterinary care, her dad said, need to be kept in recuperation for as short a time as possible—especially a young one—and these new materials helped with faster rehabilitation.

The joey's eyes were large and dark as they regarded her from beneath long grey lashes.

She offered a handful of kibbles and talked softly, encouraging the animal to come forward and take a nibble from her hand. She called him Cutie, but pronounced it more like *Koo-tee*, and followed the expression with five clicks of her tongue: *tch-tch, tch-tch-tchuk*.

The animal's ears twitched and turned at the sounds. He looked her square in the face as she squatted a metre or so away, but remained still on his haunches, his tail flat on the ground behind him. She was patient and totally absorbed in the ritual. She had come to cherish the time with him. She wanted this young kangaroo to be her friend.

That was the moment she struck upon the idea of music.

Perhaps he would enjoy some music—she had all of the latest hits—hip-hop, rock, and a solid collection of pop tunes. She reached for her earbuds but the only object in her pocket was the long, thin bone.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, as she searched the ground.

The joey came alert and stood erect at her exclamation. He retreated a step or two farther into the corner. Lavender left the pen and retraced her steps to the food store. It wasn't there so she continued back toward the front gate. What she saw sent her heart plummeting to the pit of her stomach.

Before her, a metre or so in front of the gate, the magpie was leaving the ground with the earbuds trailing like noodles. Lavender raced through the gate, scooped her ball and her phone up from the ground and called for the bird to return as it headed for the fence and the treetops beyond.

She reached back behind her shoulder with her right arm as she ran at full tilt, and flung the ball after the retreating bird.

It shot from her hand like a cannonball from the deck of a ship heading directly for the bird. The bird slid sideways mid-flight and ducked as the passing missile continued on its soaring trajectory across the face of the sun above the tree line, and was then lost to sight on its way down.

'Hell!' Lavender called after the bird, her voice coming on the top of a loud pant as she tore down the paddock. 'You were lucky this time.'

The ball returned to the ground, striking a rock with a loud hollow *plop*, then bounced over the fence, along the firebreak. By the time she reached the fence, the bird had disappeared into the forest, swallowed by the shadows. The ball rolled to a stop near the start of the old logging track.

She pulled up at the fence, angry and frustrated as she fought back tears. She looked

through blurred vision back toward the animal shelter asking herself how she would ever explain the loss of a third set of earbuds ...

‘Oh no!’ she cried. ‘Shit, shit, *shit!*’

In her haste to chase the bird, she’d left the gate open and, as she turned toward the shelter, the joey emerged, glanced briefly at her, turned his back and bounded around the shelter toward the fence.

‘Oh, no! No!’

She raced along the fence, hoping to cut the young kangaroo off before he too disappeared into the forest. She slipped through the wire, the slim white bone gripped firmly in her hand. The wire twanged as she pulled away from it. At the same moment, the joey crossed to the firebreak. In a desperate race, she headed for the entrance of the old logging track. She would have beaten the joey to it had a fluffy brown blur not bolted up behind her and caused her to stumble.

She recovered and stopped, panting hard. Right before her eyes the vanishing bum of a puppy streaked away—a yellow ball in its mouth, tail wagging like windscreen wipers in a cloudburst, and a joey in its sights.

The joey turned into the old logging track. The puppy stopped for a second, challenged Lavender with a look, sniffed at the ground, and then disappeared in hot pursuit of the joey with her ball locked firmly in its mouth.

‘Hey!’ Lavender yelled, turning into the old track and sprinting after the dog. ‘Stop, he’s hurt. Bring back my ball.’

The pup was fast. It scampered beneath the prickly skirt of a *balga* bush and was gone before Lavender could catch it.

‘Hell!’ She slapped the side of her head as she puffed to catch her breath. She looked around.

Tall trees and dense scrub surrounded her. And her house was out of sight. The pounding blood in her eardrums gradually gave way to clumping sounds from the undergrowth deeper in the bush. She studied the prickly curtain of bush that the puppy ran beneath and listened.

‘If this was a wand,’ she said, pointing the bone toward the sounds, ‘I’d turn you into a frog, zap Koo-tee back to the shelter, and turn that thieving magpie into a maggot. Damn it, look what you’ve done!’

The sound behind her came up fast.

She turned abruptly. A dark-skinned boy belted toward her through the long shadows. As she turned, her toe caught on a snaking vine and all that kept her from a nasty collision was the sidestep she took to keep her balance. He missed her by the mere skin of a grass seed.



As the boy swerved to avoid her, his sneakers found a bare patch of ground and he

skidded, landing heavily, sprawled at her feet. When he righted himself he was breathless and red faced, sporting grazes on knees and palms, to which he gave only cursory inspections. Trickle of blood seeped into the wounds on his hands. He smeared them on his tee-shirt.

‘Spot the dog?’ he asked, breathlessly.

‘Your dog?’ she asked.

His smoky dark eyes regarded her. Then his brown features split into a wide boyish grin that she didn’t appreciate.

‘Your dog stole my ball and chased my injured joey—and you should look where you’re going. You could’ve killed me.’

‘You’re standin’ there like a bandicoot on a burnt ridge.’

‘A bandicoot? I’m no bandicoot. What are you talking about?’

‘Well,’ he began, struggling to explain himself, ‘when there’s been a fire, y’get bandicoots and ... Look, it’s something my grandmother used to say...’

She observed him coldly.

He towered a head above her. His Harley-Davidson tee-shirt, black and loose fitting, was draped over baggy knee-length denim shorts. He wore his sneakers, scuffed and blackened, without socks. He studied her from beneath a strong brow, above which a shock of black hair exploded.

She pointed at the balga with the bone.

‘You’ve chased my joey into the bush,’ she said.

He looked at the bush. Then at her.

‘I wasn’t chasin’ a joey.’

‘It was sick, hurt—attacked by a pack of foxes. And now, your dog has gone after him.’ She waved the bone in the direction of the balga bush, shrugged and turned away so he wouldn’t see the tears welling in her eyes. She made to walk around the boy back toward home.

He stepped in front of her.

‘Wait. How d’you know it’s my dog?’

‘Do you see anyone else here looking for a dog?’

‘I didn’t say I was *looking* for a dog—’

‘But you are.’ And she waved the bone at his chest.

‘Hey. Watch where you’re pointing that thing,’ he said, turning toward the balga bush, leaning sideways as if it afforded him a better view. ‘In there, eh? A joey and my dog?’

‘Yeah I have to get him back. And my earbuds too.’

‘He took your earbuds?’

‘No, he took my ball and chased the joey. A magpie took my earbuds. But I have to get all of them back.’

He shrugged.

‘What’s so special about your ball?’

‘It’s magic.’

He looked at her as if she’d just claimed to have landed from the moon.

‘What kind?’

‘It’s a yellow plastic cricket ball with all—’

‘Not the ball. What kind of magic?’

‘Air magic.’

He shook his head and grinned, and pushed his way past the prickles of the balga bush. ‘That bone’s likely to have more magic than your ball.’

‘I think the magpie dropped the bone.’

‘The magpie?’ His brow furrowed as he looked at it. Then he flashed a grin and said, ‘Well, come on then.’

Lavender turned back in the direction of her home.

‘I don’t know. I’m not supposed to be on this side of the fence.’

‘Do you want to get your stuff back?’

And then he was gone.

He plainly meant that she should follow him into the forest. She hesitated. Already she’d gone further than she was allowed. But then she reasoned that she wasn’t all alone. Not really. And life wouldn’t be worth living if she went home without the joey and the earbuds. She alone cared about the ball. So she stepped past the balga, which gave her a sharp prick in the shoulder, and entered the forest.

She was confronted by a wall of springy ferns—the kind that snap back to their upright positions and slap you in the face after being pushed aside to pass through. A tangled web of vines snaked across the ground waiting on every step to trip her. She looked around but couldn’t see the boy.

She sang out.

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m trying to get your ball. It’s gone down here.’

Lavender picked her way through dense undergrowth, learning painfully fast which bushes had sharp prickles. Following the sound of the boy’s voice, she came upon a clearing ringed by trees with trunks like stove pipes. He lay on the ground on the far side, one arm holding a squirming puppy, the other buried up to his shoulder, his face contorted like a sun-withered paddy melon.

‘Hold on to Spot,’ he called. ‘Your ball’s down here.’

‘Where’s the joey?’ she asked, taking the dog from him.

Spot yapped and licked her face. She held him in front of her and scolded him. ‘Did you put my ball there?’

A wounded look crossed the boy’s face as he strained harder to reach a ball he could neither see nor feel.

‘It must be half way through to China,’ he grunted.

‘How come the dog’s name is Spot?’ she asked the boy. ‘He doesn’t have any spots.’

The puppy was plain—leathery light brown all over, with a tiny white tip at the end of its tail.

‘I’ve never had a puppy. Hello Spot. You’re so-o-oh cuddly!’

Squeezing the puppy affectionately, she stepped around the boy to see where he was trying to reach the ball.

They were on top of what appeared to be a steep gorge. She tightened her hold on a now resisting Spot, and craned her neck to peer over the edge.

‘I wonder where the joey is,’ she said, her voice small and distant as she searched.

She couldn’t see the bottom, or even the sides of the chasm below. Her gaze came to rest on a tree across the way and there, sitting in plain view, was the magpie with her earbuds strung from its beak. She pulled the bone from her pocket and waved it at the bird as though casting a spell. As she turned from the precipice to tell the boy, the ground beneath her feet gave way.

She began sliding, slowly at first, and then into free-fall. With no ground left to support him, the boy was catapulted into space.

‘Whoahh-aah!’

Their surprised screams were buried in the roar of tumbling earth and rocks.

Lavender rolled and slid with the crumbling ground, falling in a dizzy frenzy down a steep slope dotted with painful obstacles. At some point she lost the dog and went on tumbling. Sharp rocks scraped her arms and legs and loose stones pelted her in the back and head.

Then she came to an abrupt halt.

When she landed, the ground wasn’t as hard as she imagined it would be. It was covered in a thick carpet of brown leaves scattered over soft sandy earth. The boy had landed a split second before her and she landed on top of him.

‘Aagh—get off!’ he cried, wiping a mix of spit and dirt out of his mouth with the back of his hand.

Dust and grit rained about them.

‘That hole went right through,’ she told him. She stood and searched her legs and arms for signs of damage. ‘I saw your hand—my ball wasn’t there.’

He looked around. There was an edge to his voice. 'Where are we?'

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