

CHAPTER 1

IN a newly painted weatherboard house, removed by two kilometres from the rural township of Kastany, Dolly Montague's demons returned to wreak havoc. Her parents heard her screaming and, when they ran to the hallway, found her squatting in the corner, crying, gripping her head as she rocked a little on her haunches.

They had witnessed the impact of these visitations while she slept but had little experience with her sleepwalking. With some uncertainty, they helped her up and back to bed. Her mother lay with her, comforting, and when the whimpering subsided, left her to sleep and returned to her own room.

In the morning, Dolly woke with only snippets of terror, but she remembered something of her parents' involvement – and that scared her as much as her nightmares.

In her waking hours, her bedroom was a protective bunker; its walls lined with bookshelves jammed with many works of history, literature and art. Dolly had a special scholastic bond with her father and wanted to follow in his professorial footsteps. To this end she had dreamed of doing

a student exchange in Europe – a dream that had seemed to be derailed by a viral epidemic that shut down the world. The lockdowns had been eased lately, however, and Dolly was once more buoyed by the prospect of expanding her academic horizons and seeing the world. But her ‘mental health’ issues had become another barrier – at least in the eyes of her mother.

Dolly crept towards the kitchen.

‘This has got out of hand,’ she heard her mum say. ‘At least when she was going to school, sure, she had some nightmares. But not like this. She had to get up early then. She had a regular pattern, structure.’

‘The lockdowns are diminishing,’ her father responded. ‘I’m sure she will get back to normal.’

‘No. I don’t think that’s all it is. I really don’t want her to go to Europe.’

Dolly was scheduled to stay with a family in the Netherlands next year – just six months away. She had overheard angry exchanges between her parents on the subject, but this morning, she felt her father, Mark, measuring his words. Clearly, he did not want another fight.

‘I really believe it will be good for her. Look, I will miss her terribly, as much as you will, but she will learn so much and she will be away, for a while, from things here that might be triggering her problems,’ he offered.

Eavesdropping on previous arguments, Dolly would hear her mum accuse her dad’s opinion of being selfish. That father and daughter had a special bond through their academic interests. That he wanted her to go to Europe to relive his own youth there – to mirror, report and recapture. But she held her tongue this time.

Dolly returned to her bed and lay, analysing her nightmares – and in fear of them. They had not affected her

so severely before, apart from a few sleepwalking events, as she felt somewhat protected in her room. The walls were almost entirely lined with hundreds of titles. She loved books; she loved studying English, linguistics and history, as her father had. The thick buffer around the walls also contained biographies, poetry and fiction and offered some insulation from the horrors she imagined outside.

Most nights, without leaving her bed, she ran, fell, and stumbled in her early sleep, shrieking at the harmful intentions of spectres and demons. In her private fortress, Dolly was usually able to jolt herself awake and lie there until morning, fearful of dozing. On a few occasions, when attacks from the underworld were so vivid and frightening that she scrambled too quickly for waking, she would find herself in another part of the house or, on one occasion, outside!

She lay in bed late into the morning. The past night, after previous weeks of poor sleep, had left her exhausted. When she heard the front gate slam shut, she pulled herself up to the window with some effort, to see Jess marching off towards the town. It had been a cold night and she could see frosting on the trees, grass, her fence and the farm railings across the road.

Her dad had made breakfast and she could hear him washing up and slowly undertaking other chores, she knew, in the hope she would enter the kitchen and he could gently initiate a conversation about her *problems*. She avoided the kitchen and, pushing her bike across the yard, noticed him, with a concerned expression, sipping his mug of tea.

Mark and Jess were Dolly's parents. She loved each of them in different ways and bonded in different areas. With her dad, it was academia and he had been a strong supporter of her desire for a European exchange to mirror what he

had done. But lately, his support was slipping. Where he had previously debated with her mother in Dolly's favour, she could see he too, was wondering if his daughter was developing serious issues that would forbid her living with a family, she did not know, in a foreign country. In desperation, Dolly either trivialised their concerns or reacted so angrily and offended, that they temporarily dropped the subject.

Once out the rear gate, Dolly rode slowly towards the wetlands, disappointed and angry with herself.

On the winding track, she was high in the bush, above the cyclical flooding upon which the trees and wildlife depended. Despite the winter cold, Dolly was wearing her usual shorts, high-top sneakers, and t-shirt. Strong legs powered the bike through soft ground towards the river. Beyond her book-insulated bedroom, Dolly would often retreat to the wetlands to hide out, recover and ruminate.

Dolly never ceased to be uplifted by the dramatic opening where, with an orchestra of birdsong, the bush revealed beautiful shallow lakes. Known as the Jippersomme Wetlands, the usual flocks of rosellas and finches were there this day and cockatoos screeched a greeting. A lone wallaby bounded through the shallow water. Ibises trod mud and ducks dived, while swans and pelicans glided by like elegant watercraft. The sun was high enough to reflect the huge eucalypts on the lake's surfaces.

The track took her to the edge of the bush, eventually, where she stopped and rested her foot on a fence rail. In a paddock, cows grazed, maintaining social distancing, living a life of permanent lockdown.

Dolly drank in the sensory experience that recent bad weather had disallowed and stared at the distant mist, wishing to view the mountains where she longed to be. She knew the smells and sounds of nature, combined with

vigorous exercise, helped her settle down. A flock of noisy corellas accompanied her towards the lake. She tried to immerse herself in the natural world that she so loved, but her mind kept drifting back to the issue with her parents and her desire to get to Europe.

She was full of contradiction and irony, she knew. She enjoyed the way the weak winter sun burnt off the dew in the paddocks, creating steamy ground-mist and was fascinated by the fog that rolled down her creek on its way to the river. But at nighttime, fog and mist was where her ghosts, her witches and her demons emerged. It was fog that fuelled the worst of her nightmares. Even during the day, while she enjoyed the scene of surface mist and its creation, she pedalled to a higher track and left—before it *touched* her.

Dolly had been described as ‘highly intelligent’, ‘wise beyond her years’, but ‘unstable’ by her teachers. ‘Bipolar’ by a neighbour.

Although he had enthused originally, her father admitted now, it was unfortunate she was studying the two world wars with their mustard gas, trench warfare horrors, and the Blitz. All this right before the pandemic lockdowns, with their distance-from-home checks and curfews. The feeling of imminent apocalypse was mostly behind her now though and the line of trucks awaiting entry at the border town had long been allowed passage. But Dolly had difficulty, a therapist had told her parents, distinguishing reality from imagined horrors at the best of times and the nightmares had not dissipated.

The uneven path followed the creek to a point where it forked and, in recent months, Dolly would take the shorter left-branch alternative to town. She had not mustered the courage to take the right-hand route in a very long time – the route to where the creek met the river at the bridge on the

edge of town – the scene of her most worrying experience. A dreadful secret. The source of much guilt and not a little shame.

In more innocent times, she would pause at the bridge. There, across the road, stood The Anvil, where she would stop in for a cheerful catch-up with Klaus.

Dolly had a new resolve this day. She had an angry determination to take the right fork in her life. If she was to regain an image of strength and responsibility with her parents, then first she had to find that in herself. She forged onwards to the bridge, a team of corellas marching with her overhead.

The Anvil was an old log and stone building, where business had evolved over the century, from farrier and forge to an engineering one, mostly maintaining farm equipment and steel gates. Klaus, the owner, and surrogate grandfather to Dolly and her two cousins, referred to by locals as the smithy, still performed some forging and shodding on occasion. She knew Klaus had already gone to the mountain and the clanging she could hear was, she presumed, created by her Uncle Lennie.

Beside The Anvil, a 100-year-old spreading peppercorn tree looked out of place, framed by the indigenous flora. But it protected the structure from the damaging Australian sun in summer and the howling gales of winter. It was also said to be a sacrificial anode for the white ants that might have otherwise attacked the building.

Dolly was aware the fog was creeping along the river where it wound behind The Anvil and she had determined not to look to that sinister place. But alas! She glanced. And, as if the underworld haunted, tested her day and night, a figure appeared. White-caped, it arose from the riverbank and disappeared behind The Anvil.

In her panic to escape, Dolly missed the pedal on her bike

and gashed open her ankle on the chain cog. The pain was intense and she quickly felt blood in her sock as she sped away. The pain, however, seemed to jolt some reality and she realised the white-clad figure was most likely Aurora. Not a ghost, not a demon, but someone she needed to avoid, nevertheless.

‘Terrors upon terrors,’ she muttered as she pedalled along Main Street. She crossed the road to avoid Kafé Kastany. A quick glance confirmed her suspicion that her mother would be seated at the window, with a mug of coffee and, what was now a regular, look of anxiety. She would see her daughter speed past and the look would darken.

Aunt Meredith, Jess’s sister, worked there most days. Merry, she was called ironically, as she was anything but merry. Dour was the usual description the locals gave her.

Merry would be cleaning up after the few midmorning customers and Dolly pictured the scene as she rode towards her cousins, out along the North Creek Road. Merry would know Jess was agitated, wearing more than her newly acquired frown and rapping her fingers on the table. Despite her aversion to personal matters, Merry would know she was expected to join her sister at the window and listen. They were not close as siblings and seemed polarised in most areas – even their appearance. Merry was tall, dark, gaunt, and solemn; Jess was blonde, shorter, slightly curvier and, until recently, usually smiling.

Merry was under no illusion her sister had moved to Kastany to support her after her marriage breakup. Jess had to quit her job and Mark left behind a professorship to take up the lesser role of a high school teacher. Merry knew it was to avoid the harsher metropolitan pandemic restrictions to some extent, but moreover, to obtain some quietude for their misfit daughter. She brought two coffees to the table and got a cardboard tray of cakes from behind the counter.

‘Here, these are yesterday’s. Take them home for Mark. He likes them.’

‘Thanks. I might take them as a peace offering. We had a fight this morning, or during the night, rather.’

Merry lifted her mug and replied, ‘Oh. Nothing serious, I hope?’ Jess weighed her sister’s words for authenticity. She had left her more sympathetic and understanding friends behind in the city. In a small place like this, her cynical sister was all she had.

‘Dolly is registered for this student exchange to the Netherlands next year, as you know. I don’t want her to go. It’s a constant source of quarrelling and I don’t believe she is telling us everything, or the full extent of her problems.’

She discussed the ‘night terrors’ with a little reluctance, as she found Merry too often critical of Dolly. But the latter surprised her by saying, ‘I am really grateful for the tutoring that she has done for both the kids. They’re doing really well because of her.’

‘Oh, she loves doing it. She really wants to be a teacher like her father. She loves academia; she’s cut out for it. But then she excels in all of her work, which is why she wants to go to Europe. To *develop*, as she says.’ *That and the superior ski-training*, Jess thought, but hesitated to add. She wondered if Merry resented the fact that Dolly went to a private school, where she got the better education and was able to enter the Interschools Ski Competition.

‘Klaus has gone,’ said Merry. ‘I’m taking the kids up tomorrow morning.’

‘Good. I am demanding that we go tomorrow as well.’ It was a week before the interschools and Jess wanted Dolly to get some practice in. ‘That will make her happy and, more importantly, it’s a change of scenery.’

‘I do hope they have grown up a bit, though. I don’t want the police coming to the lodge again, like the other time.’

Jess pondered the fact that Dolly was such a contradiction; she had numerous fears and phobias but was capable of performing dangerous and illicit pranks – especially when she was with *those other two*.

While Jess resented having to play the diplomat game with her own sibling, she started by asking how Merry and the kids were coping. Emotionless as she was, Merry took it as a financial question.

‘We’re okay. I only get part-time here, but Lennie pays child support.’

‘But the kids, they’re coping with the separation?’

‘Yeah, they’re fine,’ Merry answered, sounding as if it might be a silly question. ‘Carl is with Lennie a lot... went to work with him today. Maggie sees him a bit.’ Merry looked uncomfortable with anything that might lead to a discussion of *emotions*. ‘Be good to get away from here for a while, though, kids need a change. Klaus has arranged work for me at the Froster.’

‘I saw Carl at The Anvil, as I went past. Helping his dad. Grinding metal,’ said Jess. *Carl standing recklessly in the path of flying sparks*, she thought, but did not say. *The sparks that would one day start a bushfire*, according to Mark.

‘Yes, he seems to spend more time with his dad now than when we were married.’ Merry paused in thought for a moment, then asked, ‘Anyone else there?’

‘Not that I could see.’ Jess thought it a strange question, as the other cocked her head, attempting to peer obliquely at The Anvil.

Dolly would usually stop at the second-hand shop to peruse the basket of used books for a new title, but this time, anxiously, she fled straight past. She pedalled hard along the gravel road out to her cousins' place. En route, she recalled the previous night's parasomnia.

In her nightmare, mustard gas was a foggy virus, seeping down through Europe and Asia, killing millions of people. She had scrambled from her bed to get to higher ground. In the hallway, she had looked at the Clarice Beckett prints on the wall and screamed – the mist infusing Beckett's scenes had become gas. It had arrived in Australia! Too late to get to higher ground. She had reeled back from the prints and wailed until her parents came and led her back to bed. She thought she remembered her mum wiping her forehead with a damp cloth and uttering comfort.

Near the top of the road Dolly was aware of the proximity of the river to her right, which had wound back on itself. The river that flowed to the bridge – the bridge beside The Anvil where Aurora had just appeared and where the fog, most mornings, shrouded the memory of her terrible secret.

She stopped at a tree, just short of her destination, looking to ascertain that the neighbour's dog, Neddy, a cross between a German shepherd and something like a great Dane, was not in view. Or, more importantly, not barking. Among other things, she suffered from a form of misophonia – a panicked reaction to certain sounds. Hers was brought on by dog barking. On more than one occasion, it had caused her to get on her bike and leave. Although a cacophony of cockatoos screeched a warning and a loutish gang of magpies chortled in amusement, Dolly decided the coast was clear, and let herself into the house, calling out to her cousins.

Maggie sat at her desk, poised with a straight back and business-like attentiveness to her task. Her hair was groomed

and tied in a neat ponytail. Her white shirt and beige jeans were new, clean, and pressed. Dolly winced, remembering their grandmother's *feminine and lady-like* description.

On the odd occasion they visited Grandma. She had failed to hide her disapproval of Dolly, who had recently dyed her hair from brown to a red/auburn colour and shaved the sides. She had taken up Aussie Rules Football but had only been able to play a few games between lockdowns.

'Where's Carl?' Dolly asked.

'Dad's managing The Anvil. Took Carl to work with him today. Klaus has gone up the mountain.' Maggie raised her gaze to invisible mountains in the distance.

'I was hoping you'd both be here. We've got business to sort out.'

Maggie had opened her laptop.

'Speaking of Carl, I hate to admit it, but his on-the-ground sales, through school and at footy, are booming. Almost matching mine online.'

'Did you know Carl injured one of The Bandits when we played Goonung, and got into a fight?' Dolly asked her cousin, whose look said she couldn't care less.

'We'll have them to contend with up on the mountain, as if we didn't have enough to worry about,' Dolly added.

Carl played in the boys' team for the same club as Dolly and was known around the district as *the grinning larrikin*. He would charge through packs of players, injuring himself and others, in what his dad called kamikaze-style offensives. His headmaster referred to him as 'The Temerarious Terror'.

Maggie had the same curtness and sharp tongue as her mother and, while she and her brother were different in so many ways, she had his same fearlessness.

She showed Dolly the spreadsheet.

'Look! Those two surf shops in Sydney are averaging

around forty a week, mostly to skateboarders. The ski shops in Melbourne did a hundred last week,' she said. 'But look at this! Carl sold nearly eighty!'

'That's amazing,' Dolly responded. 'Well done, Carl.'

'There's a bag of cash under the bed,' said Maggie, then continued more assertively, 'The second item of business: WitchRings.'

Dolly cut her off. 'I told you we're not doing that anymore. It's closed.'

'It's not closed! I have sent out three more invoices. And we have to pay Klaus and Carl, and I have a say in it.'

'Are you crazy?' Dolly said, 'We have to wipe our hands and get as far away from that as possible.'

Dolly could see Maggie had no intention of complying or listening to reason.

'I saw Aurora,' Dolly added, 'coming up the riverbank, near The Anvil. She wouldn't go in there, would she? She wouldn't talk to your dad? She is scaring me now.'

Maggie laughed.

'If she goes in there, Carl will hit her with a blunt instrument – or a sharp one. He'll probably do time for *bitch slaughter*.'

'That's all we need. Maggie, we've done the wrong thing. This is bad.'

'Oh, drop it, will you? It's nothing. It'll be perfectly fine.'

'No. It's fraud. It's very wrong and she's blackmailing us.'

'Well, I'm not interested. Drop it. We made good money out of it. Once I've sent the last invoices and get paid, I can transfer Aurora her share. We can forget about it.'

'I don't think she will let us. She said she wants to expand, or else!'

Maggie would not back down. She looked up to her cousin in many areas but, when she was combative, she had a battle-hardened general's non-emotive determination.

With no resolution, Dolly took the bag of money, put it in her bike basket, and rode off. She was angrily mulling over the argument when she spotted her mother leaving the café. She wanted to avoid her for the time being, so quickly turned the corner and sped off home to her room, forgetting to go to the bank.

Apart from books, there was barely enough space in the room for her single bed and wardrobe. The bookcases arched at one point to allow a small dresser with a mirror. Stuck to it were photos of her and her cousins, skiing, along with pictures of the Netherlands and Norway – places she had never been, but desperate to experience.

Dolly had not slept properly for months and hardly at all during the past week. The fresh air and hard riding had tired her sufficiently. Insulated from the outside and with the winter sun lighting her room, just enough to forbid any possibility of ‘nighttime’, like a chunk of glacier calving off into the ocean and drifting away, she let herself slide into a deep coma.