

'SURPRISING, BEAUTIFUL, UNIQUE ...

I'M IN LOVE WITH THIS BOOK!

KATRINA NANNESTAD

Dragon Skin

The background of the cover is a vibrant, colorful sky transitioning from a deep blue at the top to a bright yellow at the bottom. The sky is filled with various star patterns, including small white dots, four-pointed stars, and larger, multi-pointed stars. In the center of the sky, a large, glowing, circular object with a scaly texture, resembling a dragon's skin, is visible. A young girl with short brown hair, wearing an orange shirt and purple shorts, stands on a red dirt hill in the foreground, looking up at the glowing object. She has a small green dragon perched on her shoulder.

KAREN FOXLEE

MULTI-AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
LENNY'S BOOK OF EVERYTHING

‘I’m in love with this book. *Dragon Skin* is surprising, beautiful, unique. The characters are wonderfully drawn – tough but vulnerable, hurt but hopeful, damaged but strong. They’ve lodged themselves in my heart forever.’

KATRINA NANNESTAD



‘*Dragon Skin* is a book to make us believe in mysterious openings and infinite possibilities. It reminds us that love is what we need to save things.’

EDWINA WYATT



‘I loved this story. It’s a delicate, heartwarming tale of friendship, healing and hope.’

BREN MACDIBBLE



‘*Dragon Skin* explores what it really means to love, to nurture and to let go. This book will make your heart burst with courage and hope.’

LEANNE HALL

Dragon
Skin

KAREN FOXLEE


ALLEN & UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

First published by Allen & Unwin in 2021

Copyright © Text, Karen Foxlee 2021

Copyright © Illustrations, Dale Newman 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or ten per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to the Copyright Agency (Australia) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin

83 Alexander Street

Crows Nest NSW 2065

Australia

Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100

Email: info@allenandunwin.com

Web: www.allenandunwin.com



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 76052 610 8

For teaching resources, explore www.allenandunwin.com/resources/for-teachers

Cover and text design by Hannah Janzen

Cover and internal images: (stars) © Midnight Grim/Creative Market

Set in 13 pt Bembo by Midland Typesetters, Australia

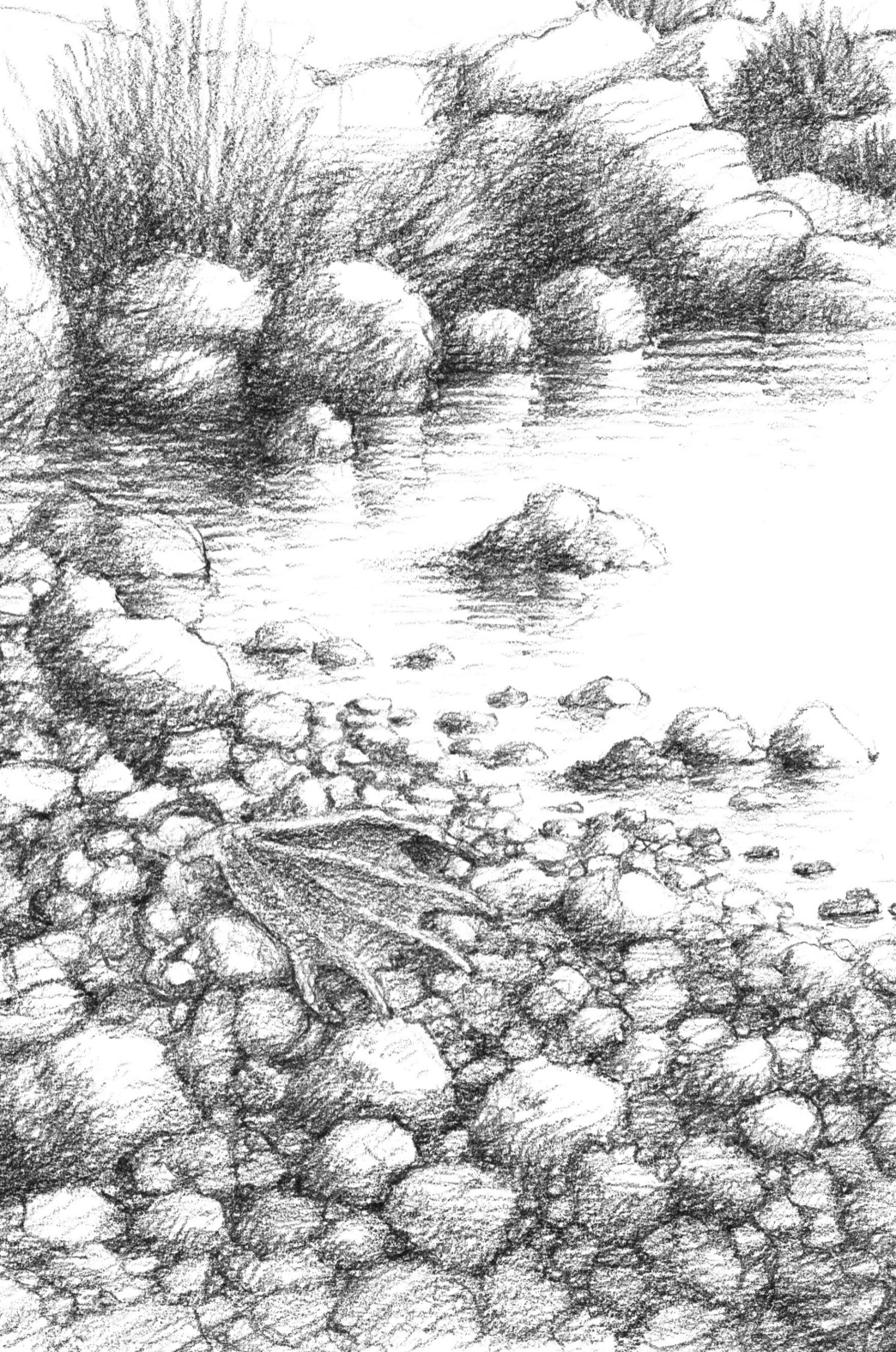
Printed in May 2021 by C&C Offset Printing Co. Ltd, China

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



www.karenfoxlee.com

For my sister Ruth





ACT I



SHE DIDN'T WANT TO GO HOME AND THAT'S why she found it. If she'd gone home through the newly dark roads, washing her feet in streetlight pools, she would have found her mother in the kitchen making dinner looking scared. Matt would have come home and the screen door would have slammed hard and his tool bag would have crashed down on the kitchen bench. They would have flinched, her mother and her, waiting, but everything would have been normal.

She was the kind of girl who liked to dig with a stick in the dirt though. She liked to upturn things, searching for treasure: rocks, old bottles and silvery

wine cask bladders, toothbrushes, coins, the carcasses of handbags. These strange things were swept up and snagged at the riverbend and left to dry once the water was gone. A wallet emptied out and brittle. Parts of a saddle. A belt buckle with the insignia of the silver mine.

She knew all the creek's white rock, all its blond grass and bleached trees. She knew the sun going down, the galahs screeching, rising and settling, rising and settling in the trees. She sat with her feet dipped in the waterhole and watched the night approach. The waterhole was a small deep pool of water that never dried up. It remained there even after the river flooded and then dried out to its normal self; a skin of stones and silt cracked into a million scales.

Mika always said, *Whatever you do Pip, take your feet out at night because that's when the bunyip comes out.*

She drew her feet out and sat in the dusk. Her stomach whined. Mika was a long time ago. Mika was months and months and months ago. The lights came on in the houses behind the trees. She felt the warm air against her wet legs. She waited for the part

when the last ray of sun hit the creek stones, a brief moment when the whole riverbed shone and then was swallowed up by shadow. She promised herself she'd go home after that.

Only it was in that moment that she found it.

It didn't look like much at first, a scrap of something, fabric maybe, a snakeskin twisted around a stick perhaps, but that last wave of light caught it directly, shone it up bright, a burst of pinks and golds and greens, a small fire. Then was gone.

'Hey,' she said to herself and to the brand-new night. She was up, striding towards the spot just metres away, with her digging stick. 'Hey,' she said, softer, because she knew. She knew exactly what it was.

Later, she'd think about it over and over. When they were leaving and knew they'd never go back home again. When she'd grown that other skin. She knew what it was before she stood up. Even before she saw it shining there. She'd *always* known it.



SHE KEPT ITS SMALL HUSK OF A BODY CLOSE to her chest as she walked home through the streets. She made a cradle with her T-shirt and nursed it there. It was the size of a small kitten, hairless, a little lump for its belly and legs curled beneath. There was a tangle of something on its back, like fishing net. It was half-dead. Almost dead. It made a sound as she nursed it, a dry leaf sound, a dying sound. 'It'll be okay, Little Fella,' she said to it. 'It'll be okay.'

Her house was three streets from the creek and her feet could have walked her there by themselves. All the houses were the same, each and every one. Mining company houses with pale corrugated skins,

six cement stumps and one small patio. Each house she passed, the outdoor air conditioners shuddered and hummed to themselves. Some evenings that's all you could hear; air conditioners thrumming and out on the highway the road trains coming in from the desert sounding their horns.

She passed the Lees' house, keeping her head down and the thing wrapped up in her shirt. Mrs Lee, watering her buffalo grass in the dark, saw her though.

'What are you doing out so late again, Pip?'

'Nothing,' said Pip.

Mrs Lee raised the hose and sprayed water after Pip's feet. 'Hope you're not stealing Mrs Watson's pawpaws again?' she called, laughing. Pip was already running, turning the corner to home.

Pip wanted to stop, to look again at its dark withered shape, but she didn't. When she'd glanced at it beneath the first streetlight home, her heart had swelled and it had been a sorrowful rushing inflation. She needed to help it soon or it would die.

'It'll be okay Little Fella,' she whispered, opening the metal front gate as quietly as she could. She needed

a plan yet a plan evaded her. There was no plan for someone home late carrying a nearly dead dragon.



‘Pippa,’ shouted her mother. ‘Don’t you try to sneak past me!’

She must have heard Pip’s footsteps in the hallway, even though Pip had tiptoed. Pip ran the last steps to her room and pulled a hoodie from a drawer and made a little nest for the creature on a shelf in her wardrobe.

‘Pippa!’ This time it was even louder.

‘I’m coming,’ said Pip. One last glance at the thing lying curled there. ‘Ouch,’ she said because her heart had done that thing again. That big thing. An aching swell like a kicked toe grown fat. Could kids have heart attacks the way old people did? She shut the wardrobe as her mother appeared at her bedroom door.

‘Ouch?’ said her mum, looking at Pip standing there holding her heart. ‘What? Are you hurt?’

‘No,’ said Pip.

‘Where’ve you been?’ Softer, her eyes moving to Pip’s dirty legs, the scratches over her shins, and then

up to her tear-streaked face. ‘Creek again? Seriously, Pip. You know we’ve talked about this.’

‘Sorry,’ said Pip.

‘It’s a school night.’

‘I know, but school is nearly finished.’

‘It’s so late. It’s dark for god’s sake. You’re ten.’

‘I was just sitting there,’ said Pip. ‘I forgot time.’

That wasn’t true. She never forgot time. She knew every single moment of time at the creek at dusk. The shadowy stripes of the silver box trees falling down into the lap of stones. The sun dipping down to wink behind the bent branch of a ghost gum, the number of rises and falls it took for the galahs to go to sleep.

‘I promise,’ Pip said, not even sure what she was promising.

‘He’s not coming back,’ said her mum. ‘He is *not* coming back.’

‘I know that,’ Pip whispered.

Pip took the embrace her mother offered; a sweaty, gym pants, gardening-smell hug. She must have been trying to save her dying roses again. The angry moment had passed. Her mother could never stay angry for long.

‘It’ll be all right,’ said her mother. ‘It’s okay to be sad. Don’t hang out there at night. Okay? Hanging out in the dark doesn’t change anything. Quickly, shower. I’ve made spaghetti.’

‘Okay,’ said Pip.



At the dining room table, Pip twirled her spaghetti.

‘It was hot,’ said her mum, sitting opposite, ‘about an hour ago.’

‘I’m not complaining,’ said Pip.

She was wondering if the dragon was still alive in the little hoodie nest. It had been after the world’s fastest shower. She’d peeked into the wardrobe and seen its little belly rising and falling, heard its ever so small rasping breath. The sorrowful swelling in her chest almost lifted her off the ground. She was wondering how to save a dragon.

Stay calm Pip, Mika said quietly in her head. Keep your nerve. Eat your spaghetti and think. What do you need to save a dragon?

Relief made her sink back into her chair. She was

always so glad when he spoke to her. Just when she thought he'd gone for good, there he was.

Remember that time we saved Ursa? Mika said.
Remember?

Kittens are different to dragons, she silently answered him.

'Eat up,' said Mum. 'Look you're hardly even touching your dinner and it's so late and Matt will be home soon if you don't hurry and what will he say if he sees you still sitting here eating dinner and not in bed?'

It was a rhetorical question. Pip needn't have answered. Matt liked Pip in her room with the light off and the door closed so he could have her mum all to himself. He didn't like any competition. Competition made him angry.

'He'll go off his brain.'

That was the wrong answer. There was the glimmer of tears in her mum's eyes.

'Eat up, okay?' she said.

Pip, you are going to need medical supplies and food, Mika said. *Sugary food. Sugar helps sick things.*

‘I’m going as fast as I can,’ Pip said to her mother.
‘I mean, spaghetti is the least fast-eating food there is.’

Her mother laughed.

‘God, what am I going to do with you?’ she said.

‘Don’t know.’ Pip smiled back, mouth full of spaghetti. But she was thinking about the dragon in her wardrobe.

ALSO BY KAREN FOXLEE

Lenny's Book of Everything

Ophelia and the Marvellous Boy

A Most Magical Girl

OUT NOW




ALLEN & UNWIN