

Extract from *Monster* by C. J. Skuse

Sebastian, my good-looking big brother with the shaggy blond hair. At twenty-two, he was six years older than me and he was good at it too. He'd taught me how to ride a bike, defend myself, drive a car and tie my shoelaces. Seb had tried to make me unafraid of life. Now, the only thing that made me afraid was not knowing where he was. If he was still alive.

Was. *Is*, I meant to say. He *is* still alive. His heart *is* still beating. I couldn't begin to think of him in the past tense.

Saturday came, Saturday went. Sunday came with a screaming headache, and went with more crying, this time into the Che Guevara t-shirt that I'd nicked from his room at exeat.

Sunday lunchtime, Mum called—still no word.

I found myself volunteering to do things away from everyone so I wouldn't have to look at the pitying faces, deal with the questions, talk to anyone about anything. I offered to clean the storage sheds in the Pig Yard at the back of the tennis courts, pull up weeds in the formal gardens, salt the drive, walk to Bathory village for provisions, just so I could sob without some infuriating arm coming round my shoulder. I wanted to work and walk until I was too tired to think. But it was impossible not to think.

I had looked up Colombia in the Reference Library. It had over 1.14 million square miles of land. Two thousand miles of coastline. Rainforests. Deserts. I found encyclopedia entries about tribal tales: mythical beasts that ate backpackers whole. Drug cartels who hacked off human heads with swords. Tourists going missing and never being found. Paranoia set in like bacteria and mutated over everything. I clung on to the one thing I knew—that I didn't know anything.

I'm all right. Stop worrying. Worrying gets you nowhere. I heard him in my mind. I wanted to believe it.

I was in the field at the top of the drive, walking the school Newfoundland, Brody, when I saw it again. And again, all was silent. The birds had stopped.

The monster.

It was three fields away, a large black shape stalking through the long grass. Definitely too big to be a farm cat. I waited. In a couple of blinks, it had disappeared into a thicket of trees.

No one alive had seen this thing for decades. There had been sightings, scratch marks on tree trunks. Blood on the odd rocky outcrop on the moor. The odd fruit-loop venturing onto the moors, trying to track it, to no avail. I had seen it twice inside of a week. Why me?