



BLACK

DOG

SUMMER

MIRANDA



SHERRY

UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT
EXCLUSIVE EDITION FOR EXCLUSIVE BOOKS

BLACK
DOG
SUMMER

MIRANDA  SHERRY

August 14, 2014

Fiction * 228x145mm * 304pp

HB * 9781781859575 * £10.00

XTPB * 9781781859582 * £10.00

E * 9781781859568

Publicity: Becci Sharpe

becci@headofzeus.com * 020 7553 7982

Sales: Victoria Reed

victoria@headofzeus.com * 020 7553 79908

Other: info@headofzeus.com * 020 7253 5557

BEFORE

I had just put the coffee on the stove when they came.

I remember washing out the mugs at the sink. I paused when I caught the whiff of something strange slice through the coffee scented warmth of the kitchen. The smell was bitter, a waft of pungent onion mixed in with alcohol. I stood for a moment with the washing up gloves still on my hands and tried to place it.

‘Morning, Monkey.’ Seb said, drawn from his bed by the friendly morning bubble of our old Italian-style coffee pot. He scratched his stubble and yawned widely.

‘Morning. You sleep OK?’

‘Not too bad. I’m getting better at being alone in that bed, but not much.’

‘Simone with be back in a week, Seb.’

‘I know.’ He said and grinned, ‘I’m pathetic, aren’t I?’

‘Please, I bet she’s waking up in her icy bed in Scotland right now and missing you just as much.’

I turned back to the sink just in time to catch a dark spot of movement in the yard outside the window. ‘That’s strange, this must be the first Sunday in living memory that Phineas and Lettie didn’t set off to church at dawn.’

‘No, they left.’ Seb said through another yawn. ‘I heard them take the bakkie out early this morning. I think the world would have to end before Lettie would permit them to miss a Sunday service.’

‘Then who was-’

‘Jesus!’ Seb yelled and I spun around to see a strange man hurtle through the open doorway. For a second, my eyes locked on the intruder’s. They were very wide open in his dark, sweat streaked face, the whites yellowed like the sweat patches in the underarms of an old t-shirt. His gaze flicked from mine to the thick splintered plank of wood that he held in one hand and before I could even draw breath to scream, the yellow-eyed man

had slammed the wood into the side of Seb's head and sent him sprawling across the kitchen floor.

And then two more men came through the door.

And then I screamed.

CHAPTER ONE

When I was alive, I had hair that was white in summer and the colour of dead grass in winter and long, too-skinny fingers that, early on, earned me the nickname ‘Monkey’. Now, I no longer have fingers of any kind, or nails to break when helping Johan and Phineas fix the wire fencing around the perimeter of the farm, or any fences to fix, for that matter.

But something seems to have gone wrong with my dying.

I always thought that when the moment came, I’d follow the light or join the stars or whatever it is that’s supposed to happen, but I have been dead for three sunrises, and I am still *here*.

I try going as high up away from the ground as possible to see if I can pass a point where things will suddenly snap into place and a tunnel will open and there will be a big glossy sign saying ‘Afterlife. Exit ahead’. From way up here, Southern Africa looks like a creature that’s rolled over to expose the vast curve of a mottled brown belly with a grey tracery of veins. Far off in one direction, I can see the white frill of surf that borders the dark turquoise of the Indian Ocean.

But there’s no sign, no snap, no tunnel. Nothing.

I go higher; high enough to see where the layer of blue above me turns into black, but the only thing that changes is the noise. It gets worse.

The noise. It has taken me a while to work out what the whispering, humming, singing, screaming awfulness comes from, but now, on my third day of not being Sally anymore, I think I have it figured out. The noise comes from Africa’s stories being told. Millions upon millions them; some told in descending liquid notes like the call of the Burchels Coucal before the rain, and some like dull roar of Johannesburg traffic. Some of these stories are ancient and wear fossilized coats of red dust and others are so fresh that they gleam with umbilical wetness and it would seem that, like me, they’re all bound here, even the stories that are full

of violence and blood and fury, and there are many of those.

At first, I couldn't distinguish one story-thread from another within the solid roaring wall of sound, but now one of them seems to have separated itself from the rest. It is a pale, slender thread with an escalating alarmed tone, like the call of a Hornbill looking for love. This small story has my living blood still in it: I can sense it pulsing through the body of my sister (who now sits weeping at her dressing table) and fluttering alongside the tranquilisers in the veins of my daughter as she lies between the white and blue sheets of a hospital bed.

It's just one story amongst millions, and yet it has become so loud now that it drowns out the others. It is howling at me, raging, demanding my attention. I look closer to find that this small, bright thread of story weaves out from the moment of my passing and seems to tether me to this place. Perhaps this is why I have not left yet. Perhaps I have no choice but to follow the story to its end.

Yes, it screams, follow me. Listen to me.

It does not stop screaming.

And so I look for an opening, a beginning to grab on to... I try Gigi first, but my daughter is lost and floating on a chemical sea and is not, it would seem, present in the story herself right now. In the hope that she'll be back soon, I stay and watch her chest rise and fall beneath the ugly hospital gown they have given to her to wear.

But Gigi remains absent, and the story howls at me again, even louder. It is unbearable. I have to move on.

I try my sister, Adele, but regret, like a too-thick, synthetic blanket on a sweltering day, is wrapped tight around her. It reminds me of the ones that the women waiting for taxis by the side of the road in Musina would use to tie their babies onto their backs. It is olive green with blotches of brown and the occasional sharp starburst of ugly red, and it prevents me from getting close.

Liam?

I find him sitting in the exquisite molded leather interior of his latest Mercedes. The car sits stationary inside the closed up garage and its solid white doors are locked. The keys are not in the

ignition, they have fallen to the carpet beneath Liam's feet and rest beside the clutch pedal like silver puzzle pieces waiting to be solved. Liam's head, with its ever so slightly thinning spot on top, is pressed into the steering wheel and his whole body shudders as if it is trying to climb out of itself. He is weeping. His grief is a sharp, raw shock and I recoil. Fast.

Not Liam.

Just then, Liam and Adele's daughter, Bryony, steps out of her bedroom and onto the sunny upstairs landing. My niece is barely recognizable. The last time I saw her she was a tubby two year old with shiny cheeks. She is eleven now, and her skinny legs poke out from beneath the skirt of her freshly ironed school uniform.

Bryony is so filled up with the urgent desire to be part of a story that I can feel it like a heat radiating off her skin. I am startled to find that I can feel right inside her too: I can touch the raw ends of all those tender-vicious young girl thoughts. For a second I pause, uncertain, but Bryony is my way in, and the story is demanding that I follow.

I do.

CHAPTER TWO

Bryony stops. Normally she would go downstairs to the kitchen to get some breakfast, but after a moment's considering, she walks in the other direction, heading for her parents' bedroom doorway at the end of the passage.

The morning sun beats through the muslin blinds of the bedroom window, making the room look like it's been pumped full of golden gas. But there's a small, dark spot right in the centre of it: Adele. To Bryony, her mother looks older than she ever has before, her skin almost greenish against the black fabric of her top. She looks just like Granny in that photo hanging on the wall on the landing.

Adele sits at her dressing table and looks at her greenish self in the mirror before lifting a tissue to wipe at her lower eyelids; first one eye, and then the other. The skin beneath her eyes is already pink and stretched looking as if it has been scalded, which it very well might be, considering how corrosive salt is and how many tears she's squeezed out. There have been so many tears since THE phone call on Monday that Bryony is sick to death of them.

Aunt Sally wasn't sick to death; she was murdered.

Bryony wants to say 'murdered' out loud, just to see how it feels, but that would only set her mother off again and Adele probably doesn't have enough moisture left to get her through the funeral as it is. Bryony leans her spine hard into the corner of the doorframe and concentrates on the feeling of her toes sinking into the soft cream carpet.

Golden morning light. Wipe, wipe, wipe under the lower lashes. Pink, burnt skin.

'You shouldn't wear mascara today, Mom. If you're so worried about it. You know you're going to cry some more, so just don't wear it.'

'Don't be daft, darling.' Adele's voice sounds thick and clotted from the crying still waiting behind it, 'None of the women in our

family can go a minute without mascara; we look like a collection of albino lab rats. You'll understand when you're older.'

Bryony looks down at her bare toes. There's a small scratch on the left big one that looks like a smile, especially with the two small freckles above it. She wiggles the smile toe. Adele doesn't know that Bryony has tried mascara already. She'd been expecting a dramatic transformation from stubby-lashed child to devastating teenage beauty, but it *had* just looked as if she'd dunked portions of her face into some kind of deadly black glue. It took the whole rest of that afternoon to get it off and she still went down to supper looking like someone had punched her in both eye sockets.

'Aunty Sally didn't wear mascara, and she was a woman in your family.' Bryony clamps her jaws together too late and the words swim out and gravitate towards the dark spot.

Actually, it's been so long since Bryony saw her Aunty Sally that all she can really picture when she thinks of her is a pair of balloon-y lilac trousers that look like a nappy gone wrong. Aunty Sally was wearing them in an old photograph that Bryony found at the bottom of one of the kitchen drawers when they were pulling out the old units and putting in the new, shiny ones that Adele ordered a few months ago. In the picture, her mother looked smiley in a luminous way that Bryony has seldom seen on her actual face. Her arm was around Aunty Sally's shoulder, and between them both was a little girl with two plaits and freckles on her nose. The little girl was holding onto the lilac fabric of Aunty Sally's pants, twisting it into crumples with her small, chubby fingers. Bryony knows this is Sally's daughter, Gigi, and she's been told that she and Gigi once sat underneath Granny's dining room table and ate a whole jar of peanut butter, but try as she might, she can't remember it. The purple-pants picture is the only photograph that Bryony has seen of Aunty Sally as a grown up, which is strange, because there are quite a lot of family photos hanging alongside the one of Granny on the landing wall. Bryony couldn't tell whether Aunty Sally was wearing mascara in the picture or not, but she figures she wasn't. Adele mentioned the fact often enough in a tone that implied that it was some kind of insult to her very Adele-ness. *I fail to see how 'finding' one's self,*

becoming a vegetarian and living in a 'spiritual community' to cuddle abandoned animals entitles one to waft around looking like a bag of faded washing. When Adele saw Bryony studying the photo, she'd whipped it away with dark look in her eyes that halted Bryony's indignant whine at once.

'You're right,' Adele now says, and runs the tissue under each eye again, absorbing the new sparkles of wetness. 'She didn't wear any, did she?' and then her forehead crumples and she drops her head into her hands, 'Oh God. Monkey.'

Bryony looks away. She wishes that she still had that photograph. Adele used to often say that Auntie Sally had 'let herself go', and Bryony now imagines those billowy lilac pants rising up into the sky like an escaped helium balloon.

'Addy?' The slam of the front door and the sound of her father's voice float up from downstairs. 'You ready, doll?' Liam's voice grows louder as he climbs and his shoes make padding sounds on the carpet as if he's carrying something heavy. For a second, Bryony considers dashing to her bedroom so as not to see the weird colourlessness that has taken over her father's face since THE phone call, but she waits too long.

THE phone call happened just as the family was sitting down to supper on Sunday night. It was chops, which Bryony likes, and mielies, which she hates, and she was just thinking of ways to get out of eating hers when the phone rang. Adele muttered about people knowing better than to phone at supper time and went to answer it, then the family heard a strangled howl sound and Liam shot out of his chair and raced out of the kitchen. Tyler and Bryony looked at each other. Tyler's eyes were so wide that Bryony could see white all around the blue bits. Then, from the telephone table in the lounge came snuffling and shouting sounds and crying and then the sound of Liam leading Adele upstairs.

It was only after Bryony had finished both her chops and her Greek salad with extra olives stolen from Adele's plate that Liam returned to the table and announced: 'Guys, I've got some bad news. Something terrible has happened to Monke- I mean, Auntie Sally. She's... she's dead, I'm afraid.' When he said it, Bryony's head went all buzzy and she had to lie it down on the table very

quickly. She stared at the bright yellow teeth of her uneaten mielie with a weird, thick feeling in the back of her throat that made her think she might throw up. She didn't, although with the stench of mielie that close to her nose it was a near thing. The whole time, she couldn't stop thinking about billowing purple pants.

'Where's Gigi?' Tyler asked, and Liam told them that their cousin was unhurt and was 'in good hands'. This made Bryony think of that song about the man who's got the whole world in his hands, and how big your hands would have to be to have the whole world in them.

Since the news of Auntie Sally's death, the house has filled up with choked whispers and secrets. When Granny died from a stroke two years ago there was loads of crying and lower-lash wiping, but no heavy, white-faced, open-eyed silences. Also, nobody threw things. Yesterday afternoon when she was supposed to be doing her homework in her room, Bryony heard Adele shouting and the sound of glass breaking. Later, when she snuck into her mother's bathroom after the storm had passed, she saw that in her rage, Adele had smashed all her little jars of expensive skin lotion. Bryony had never even been allowed to touch them, and now the bathroom tiles were covered with thick glittering glass slices and gobs of pastel cream. It smelt like vanilla and roses and being clean and Bryony stood there for quite a while just breathing it in.

Since THE phone call, the house is also full of shadows. Bryony noticed new ones this morning in between the throw cushions on the sofa in the lounge with the flowers printed on it, and behind the side plates in the newly renovated kitchen cupboards when she reached in to get out a cereal bowl. Even though it's only been four days, Bryony can't remember what the house was like before the shadows arrived. They're everywhere.

'Hey Bry.' As her father comes up the stairs he gives Bryony a smile that looks only half defrosted. 'Mrs Ballentine is going to be taking you to school this morning, OK?'

'I know, Dad.'

'Well get your shoes on, munchkin.' He says, and then when he sees Adele wrinkling her black linen suit at the dressing table:

‘Ah, doll.’ He sighs and goes over and rubs her back with one golf-tanned hand. She flinches at his touch, which causes a little worm of worry to burrow through Bryony’s guts.

‘It’s going to be OK, Addy.’

‘How is it going to be OK?’

‘Jeez, I don’t know, doll. It just... it will be in time. You know. These things... happen.’

‘What? Massacres on a Sunday afternoon? Only in this bloody country.’

‘Shush, Addy.’ Liam increases the force of his back rubbing and glances up at his daughter but she’s looking at the carpet. She swipes one foot across the rug making a darker curve in the pile. The word ‘massacre’ leaves a new black blotch in the golden bedroom and makes her think of mascara again. She knows it’s a word she’s heard in History class, but just can’t, for the moment, remember what it means.

‘Come on, girly-pie, shoes on. Go and make sure your brother is ready for school.’ Liam says in his no-nonsense voice. Bryony turns and leaves the crumpled tissue, the scalded eye-skin and the dark stink of that heavy word behind her.

I pull myself free. It’s a struggle, because Bryony has become sticky (like the boiled sweets that Gigi used to suck and then take out of her mouth to glue to the sunny kitchen window when she was little and we still lived in Johannesburg), but I finally manage. From up here, the spun ice strands of some merciful Cirrus clouds hide the Wilding house from view.

I remember those silly purple pants. I eventually cut them up into a skirt for Gigi when we were living on the farm and new clothes for a growing girl were hard to come by.

The last time I set foot (a real, flesh and blood one) in the cloud-hidden Wilding house, I was wearing a tie-dyed wrap-around skirt in shades of turquoise that I loved despite it’s dangerous tendency to flap open in a strong wind. Whenever I wore it, I would have to walk very sedately so as not to upset it too much, and speed was out of the question unless I wanted the world at large to get an eyeful of my panties.

But that afternoon, I ran in it.

I remember Gigi's squeal of surprise when I scooped her up off the floor of the lounge where she'd been playing with toddler Bryony, and then her look of concern when she saw my tears. *What's the matter, Mommy?* Although she was too heavy to carry in such a way any more, I clutched my daughter to my hip and ran.

As I swept through the front door, the hem of the skirt flew up and snagged onto one of the hinges. For a moment I was caught, legs bare, sobbing, and fumbling with the fabric whilst trying to keep my hold on Gigi. That is when I looked back and saw Adele. She was watching my struggle from within the safety of her immaculate kitchen and her face looked smooth and white, like hard bone. She did not come to help me, or call me back and say that no, it was alright, she'd made a mistake, was just being silly. She did not rush to embrace me and tell me that she didn't mean it and that of course I was welcome here, and please forgive her for saying the things she'd said. No, she just watched me as I fought to free myself from the clutch of her front door, her eyes burning fury from behind that that still, ivory coloured mask.

I had to tear my skirt to get away.

It is blissful to be out of the story. Up here, every delicious cold mouthful of Africa's cloud breath buoys me higher, and families of swallows swoop and glide inside me. But I cannot taste ozone and feel the birds without also hearing the relentless roar of the story tide. It only takes a moment before the call of that one, insistent little tale begins to build to an unbearable crescendo.

The story tugs at me like a brass hinge with threads of turquoise fabric caught between its teeth.

Bryony is impatient to get to school and revel in the recent celebrity status that a murder in the family has given her. She twitches and shifts on the squeaky leather backseat of Mrs Ballentine's car, and barely waits for it to stop before flinging the door open and sliding out onto the pavement. Before Carryn, (who is only in Grade five and lisps) can even *think* of walking next to her, Bryony dashes through the school gates.

As soon as she's in, she slows down to a trudge and makes her way up the drive towards Miss Botbyl's classroom with her eyes down and her shoulders bent over to indicate just how burdened she is under the massive weight of despair. The fellow inmates of Class 7B waiting in the patch of sun outside the classroom all rotate their heads towards her approach like a family of inquisitive meerkats.

Bryony, now centre stage, stops and allows her school bag to slip to the floor.

'Hey, Bryony.' Amanda's long straight ponytail shines like strands of sticky toffee in the sun. She takes a step towards Bryony and the lesser meerkats swivel their heads to watch. They're always watching Amanda. Bryony's convinced that a fairy godmother cast an enchantment spell on Amanda when she was born because everything she does is somehow just that little bit shinier than everyone else. *It's kind of sickening how unfair it is.*

'How are you doing today?' Amanda asks.

'OK, I guess.' Bryony keeps her voice low, as if the energy of talking is taking its toll.

'Shame.' Amanda mutters and puts a soothing arm around her shoulder. She smells of Pantene shampoo and toothpaste, and Bryony's stomach flips at the great and wonderful Amanda's touch.

'The funeral's today.' Bryony adds.

'Oh my God.' says Stacy, coming up on her other side and breathing more toothpaste into her face. 'That's the grimmest.'

'They're not going to have one of those open casket thingies are they?' Tsolophelo asks, stretching her lips over her braces in order to bite them.

Seeing as her parents have not actually told Bryony how her Aunt was killed, and enthused by her classmates' thirst for details, she made up a tragic little tale in which Aunty Sally was shot in the neck and bled to death in minutes (they did the arteries in Biology last term). Now she wishes she'd given herself some story-telling wriggle room. A stabbing would've been much more gruesome. 'It's a closed casket.' Her whisper implies a corpse too horrifying for family members to bear.

‘If it’s today, why are you at school? Why aren’t you going?’

‘Mom won’t let us.’ This much of her tale is true. Adele says that funerals are unsuitable for children, and wouldn’t even let them go to Granny’s funeral last year. Bryony had been secretly relieved to be banned from it. Crying in front of people makes her feel strange and skinless, like anyone can see inside of her.

‘My mom said that it wasn’t just your Aunty that got killed on Sunday.’ Angel pipes up in an eager voice. ‘It was a whole bunch of people that lived on that farm in Limpopo. It was in the newspaper and everything.’ The sides of Bryony’s head feel suddenly cold and it’s not because she can’t stand Angel (who once wouldn’t let Bryony join in on a game of Running Red Rover once when they were in Grade Three) but because Aunty Sally’s murder was in a newspaper. She had no idea.

Bryony leans her back against the wall and shuts her eyes. The conversation now seems to be coming from a long way away.

‘It was an animal rescue centre that they raided, my mom said. Did you ever go there and play with the rescued animals, Bry? Were there baby lions? My brother had an iguana once but it started to get aggressive and my mom made him give it away.’

‘Shut up, Angel.’

‘My mom says that all the farm killings in this country are actually a jellyside and something should be done.’

‘A what-i-side? What are you on about?’

‘Jellyside. Haven’t you ever heard of it?’

‘Isn’t it like when lots of people get killed or something?’

‘No man, that’s jealous-ide.’

‘Ja, use your logic... you kill people when you’re jealous of them, right?’

‘I guess.’

‘So, it’s got nothing to do with jelly.’

‘But what about those poor animals? Do you think they’re OK if all the people are dead? Do you think someone’s feeding them?’

‘Oh shame!’

‘Bryony?’ Amanda suddenly right up close again. ‘Hey guys, I think Bryony’s going to faint.’ Bryony lets nameless hands help her down to sit on the cement floor of the corridor, not even

caring that her skirt has ridden up and everyone can probably see her pants. She is thinking about how she always wanted to go and visit her Aunt and her cousin at their exciting sounding animal rescue centre in the bush, and was sure that she would one day be able to convince her mother to let her. Now she never will.

Bryony's nostrils are suddenly, inexplicably, filled with the floor polish and butternut smell of her Granny's old house. For the first time, she remembers the way the folds of the embroidered table cloth had made her feel like she and cousin Gigi were in their very own private, lacy tent under the dining room table. She remembers the stolen jar of peanut butter. The ends of Gigi's plaits had ended up all glued together because she'd kept twisting them with her sticky fingers.

She tries to imagine what Gigi must look like now that she's fourteen, but she just keeps seeing peanut butter smeared on freckles and a red corduroy skirt that was once handed down to her when Gigi grew out of it. It had itched.

Bryony bursts into tears; huge, uncontrollable ones that pump and slime out of her. The circle of girls around her opens up a little. This kind of crying is dangerous and everyone knows it.

'Someone call Dommie. Is she here yet?' Dommie is Bryony's best friend and at the sound of her name, she cries even harder.

'I think we should rather get a teacher.' That's Tsolophelo talking. Bryony can hear her still struggling not to spit through her new braces.

'Hey Miss Botbyl's coming!'

'Miss Botbyl, Bryony's crying.'

'Bryony?' She hears the click of high heels on cement. 'Alright, sweetie. Come along to the sickroom with me. We'll get you a tissue and some sugar water. There we go. Up you get.' Strong hands and the smell of perfume and suddenly Bryony's on her feet. She opens her eyes to see her hated school shoes swimming next to Miss Botbyl's elegant pointy ones. 'I'll be back in a moment, girls. Please take your seats and get your homework out. Amanda, I'm leaving you in charge till I get back.'

'Miss Botbyl?' Bryony asks as her teacher leads her through the now quiet corridors towards the school office, 'What's a

jellyside?’

‘I’ve no idea. Some kind of pudding, perhaps?’

‘Oh. OK then, what’s a massacre?’ Bryony asks, thinking back to the way the word hung like a rotting black flag in the sunny bedroom that morning.

Miss Botbyl doesn’t answer, but her arm tightens round Bryony’s shoulder.

Gigi has moved. Her left arm is higher up on the pillow than it was at my last visit. Her eyes, however, are still closed. Bruised grey eyelids in a pale grey face on a cloud white pillow; she looks like a child made of storms.

I keep expecting to feel pain at the sight of my hospitalized daughter, I’m waiting for it, but anguish, it seems, is one of the things I need a pumping heart to experience. Just like I’ve been doing with Bryony, Liam and Adele, I observe Gigi from a clean breathless place unmuddied by emotion.

She’s not here with me, listening to the stories, and she’s not *in* the story, so where have the storm winds taken her? There is no one to ask, and no time to find out.

Follow me the story howls. It screams. There’s no way I can ignore it.

Sticky threads.

Bryony.

The garden smells of sprinklers and soil and the soft, almondy scent of the fuzzy little yellow balls that blossom on the acacia tree.

‘*Noun: the indiscriminate, merciless killing of a number of human beings, or a large-scale slaughter of animals.*’ Bryony whispers it a little louder now that she’s outside, but the words seem no more real. Earlier, when they’d arrived home from school and Tyler had vanished into the bathroom for one of his mysterious, lengthy episodes, she’d braved his off-limits bedroom, scowled at the picture of a woman with her top slipping off that he’d recently made into his laptop’s desktop wallpaper, and Google-searched the word ‘massacre’. She then had to look up the

word ‘indiscriminate’ as well, but luckily, Tyler stayed in the bathroom for a *really* long time.

So now she knows. She expects to feel different, but she doesn’t. Also, she still has no idea just exactly how this dictionary definition relates to her Auntie Sally in her billowing purple pants. Bryony balances on the cobbled border that edges the flower bed, challenging herself not to touch the earth on either side as she walks along it, following the route it makes all the way round the side of the Wilding property. The further she gets from the too silent house where her mother weeps behind one blank door and her brother listens to his iPod and looks at pictures of girls in bikinis on the net behind another, the better she is able to breathe.

But the word still follows her. It follows her all along the boundary wall, round the side of the house, and to the spot where the big black plastic wheeled dustbins are housed in neat, wooden cabins to hide their unsightly functionality until they’re ready to be wheeled out on Tuesday and emptied by the garbage-collecting men. Bryony hoists herself up onto the smooth slats of the dustbin house, and walks carefully on the joists so as not to go crashing through onto the bins beneath.

She shuffles to the wall that borders the neighbouring garden and peers over the top of it. She sucks in her breath, because right there, kneeling on the floor in front of the plate glass window of the back room she uses as a home office, is Mrs Matsunyane. Bryony knows that Mrs Matsunyane’s first name is Lesedi because that’s what is said on the letter that landed in their postbox one time by mistake, and also, thanks to her previous spying sessions, she’s heard Mr Matsunyane call out to her.

To Bryony, Lesedi looks too young and lovely to be a Mrs anybody. She wears Levi jeans and tackies and colour-coordinated tops and dangly earrings, and her hair hangs in long glorious licorice braids down her back.

Bryony’s convinced that there’s something *special* about Lesedi. She has often noticed the strings of earthy tribal beads that she wears around her ankles, and she’s sure that there’s something interesting hiding around Lesedi’s neck too, because when she leans forward, there’s a pointy bulge beneath her top.

Today, Lesedi's top is yellow, and Bryony can see that she has accessorised her outfit with some kind of special white makeup around her eyes and a lovely headdress of dangling beads that shiver when she moves. However, because of the way her neighbour's furniture is arranged, she still cannot see what exactly it is that Lesedi is fiddling with on the hardwood floor at her knees.

And then, Lesedi looks up. Not at Bryony, who gasps and ducks below the top of the boundary wall, but directly at me. It should not be possible, but she stares straight at me with still dark eyes that seem to gleam between their rows of curly black lashes. How does she see me? Am I a faded photocopy of my old tall, blonde Monkey shape? Am I a patch of shadow, a sliver of light? Lesedi doesn't let on, merely lowers her head in a slow, respectful nod of greeting.

With that nod I am suddenly baked red earth that has been pounded by dancing feet. I am warm aloe sap that drips from a rip in a leaf like slow-running wax from a candle. I am the petulant 'go-away' call of a Grey Lourie and pulse of a thousand drums.

But when Lesedi looks away, the sensation is gone.

Liam comes home from work early, and the hello hug he gives Bryony, who has been waiting for his return, is brief and distracted. 'Where's Ty?' he says, dropping his briefcase beside the front door.

'In his room.' Bryony slides her bare foot over the porcelain hall tile and listens to the squeak it makes.

'Go and call him, Bry.'

Adele comes out of the lounge. The two smoky ovals of her sunglasses, which she seems to have given up taking off at all since the funeral, flash in Liam's direction.

'Tell him we want a family discussion.' Liam says, and brushes his palms down the pockets of his suit.

'About what?'

'Fetch your brother, Bryony. Now.'

'OK, OK, I'm going. Jeez.'

'And don't say Jeez.' Adele calls after her as she runs up the

stairs, 'it's common.'

'Dad says it all the time.' Bryony mutters, bashing on the 'keep out' sticker on Tyler's bedroom door. *Maybe if I keep thumping it, it'll finally peel off.* Tyler's iPod is blaring through the wood at the top of its little synthetic lungs. 'TYLER!'

'What's the goddamn panic?' Tyler wrenches the door open. He's still wearing his school shirt and trousers and Bryony doesn't know how he can bear to; her uniform starts coming off in increments from the moment she gets into the car for the ride home.

'Dad's home and he wants a family discussion.'

'Oh shit.' Tyler swears a lot. Liam calls him the *angry young man*, but Bryony doesn't see what on earth he's got to be so cross about half the time. 'OK then, little one, let's get this crap over with.' He follows Bryony back down the stairs and then the two of them stop, just near the bottom, as if about to pose for a family photograph.

'Right, guys,' Liam shoves his hands deep into the pockets of his charcoal suit pants. 'We need to have a little chat about your cousin Gigi.' Bryony thinks of the little girl with the plaits in that photograph and worries the edge of the stair carpet with her toe. Half of the smile scab came off earlier in the garden, and the toe-face is disappearing. 'I know you've been concerned about her welfare, and I'm sorry we've been keeping you in the dark about this whole ghastly episode, but there have been all sorts of... things to sort out.' Liam glances towards Adele with a strange, fearful look on his face. Adele doesn't notice. She's too busy staring at the floor through her sunglasses.

'I guess we've been trying to protect you lot from the worst of all of this.'

'The worst?' Bryony says.

'Where is she? Gigi?' Tyler asks.

'She's been transferred from a hospital in Louis Trichart to one closer to us. She's at the Sandton Clinic at the moment.'

'Hospital? But you said she wasn't hurt?'

'She's not injured, but she's in terrible shock.' Liam says. 'She's currently under sedation.'

‘They’ve had to knock her out with drugs?’ Tyler shakes his head and sits down on the bottom step.

‘She’s just... well, understandably she’s feeling very lost and alone right now.’

‘I bet.’ Tyler starts picking at one of his toenails and Bryony gives him a little kick to get him to stop. It has no effect.

‘I need you guys to be a little mature about all of this, OK? This girl has had a very hard time, and up until now, she’s had no one to turn to.’ Liam glances at his wife, but she continues to avoid his gaze. ‘But all that’s about to change because, tomorrow, Mom and I are going to be fetching her from the hospital and bringing her home.’

Finally Adele looks up at Liam, but her eyewear makes her expression impossible to read.

‘To stay.’ Liam adds.

‘The night? Where’s she going to sleep?’

‘For God’s sake, Bryony.’ Tyler says, ‘the poor kid just lost her Mom and just about all the other people she knew, and now you’re worried about her invading your bedroom?’

‘What other people?’ Bryony says, thinking ‘*the indiscriminate, merciless killing of a number of human beings*’.

‘Aunty Sally and Gigi lived in a sort of commune, remember?’ Adele finally speaks. They all turn to look at her as she brings a fresh tissue out from behind her back, almost as if she’s performing a magic trick. She wipes under the sunglasses, and they jog up and down with the motion of her hand ‘There were quite a few people living all together at that animal sanctuary place, Bry, and it wasn’t only Aunty Sally who died. It’s very sad. We’re very lucky that Gigi wasn’t there when... it happened.’

‘Did anyone else survive?’ Tyler asks. Nobody answers. ‘Come on, guys, I know you’re trying to protect us and all that, but one quick Google search and I’ll find out anyway. We can’t be the only people in the country that don’t know.’

‘There were two domestic workers out at church, and another woman, Aunty Sally’s best friend, who wasn’t there when it happened. She’s very fortunate to be overseas at the moment.’ Adele says.

(Simone. Of course, I remember. She left to attend a conference at Findhorn in Scotland just over a week ago. Simone has shiny brown hair; Simone dripped lavender essential oil on my finger that time I burnt it so badly. I remember sitting in the kitchen on a winter morning, clutching a mug of tea and watching her teach Gigi how to do yoga sun salutations on the stoop. Their breath made little frosty clouds in the cold air and tendrils of steam rose off their fingertips as they lifted their hands above their heads. So Simone is alive in Scotland. She's not in the story. Not yet.)

'But all the rest were killed?' When Bryony speaks the words out loud, they don't sound quite real, and she has to bite back a burst of inappropriate laughter at the weight of them.

'So, how many people -?'

'I hardly think that we need to discuss this now, Tyler.' Liam says.

'And Gigi's coming here?'

'We're her family.' Liam rubs the new lines on his forehead and swallows hard, 'And she needs a stable environment.'

'Is there no one else she can go and stay with -?'

'Christ, Bryony!' Tyler shouts, his face going red to match the fresh pimple that's brewing on his chin.

'I didn't mean I don't want her to stay.' Bryony retorts, 'I was only asking. It's not like you've ever hung out with her either, or anything. I bet you can't even remember what she looks like. She's practically a stranger.'

'She has nowhere else to go, don't you get it?'

'OK, calm down, both of you.' Liam's face is all sharp lines and no colour.

'I know this is a lot to take in, kids.' Adele says, 'And I am well aware that it was us-' a sharp glance from Liam makes her pause... '- mostly *my* doing that kept you cousins from getting to know each other properly, but I can't take back the past.'

'No.' Liam adds, and with that he suddenly leaves the room, marching through to the kitchen with stiff, controlled strides.

'I owe my poor sister, and Gigi is coming to live with us, and that's the way it is, alright?' Adele finishes. She is shaking. The tissue flutters in her hand.

To live? Thinks Bryony.

‘Alright.’ says Tyler.

‘Alright.’ Bryony’s response is a small uncertain echo.

The spare bed in Bryony’s bedroom is so hidden under an avalanche of clutter that if you didn’t know, you’d never suspect that there was a bed under there at all. When Dommie sleeps over, the girls usually just haul everything off it and then dump it all back on the next morning. Sometimes they don’t bother, and the two of them curl up on the floor in a pile of sleeping bags instead. Bryony takes a step towards the puffy rubbish dump of a bed and notices that her hockey stick is buried within the madness. *Jeez, I haven’t played hockey since last year.*

‘Staring at it isn’t going to get the job done.’ Bryony turns to see Adele standing in the doorway with a pile of clean bedding in her arms. Over the top of the blue duvet cover with the cherries printed on it, her eyes are finally sunglass-free and more burnt looking than ever. Bryony wishes that her mother would suddenly smile because, although she knows that Adele used to smile quite a lot, she can’t seem to remember what she looks like when she does.

‘That’s my favourite duvet cover.’

‘Oh please Bry, you haven’t used this bedding set since you were about seven.’

‘But it’s still –’

‘Come on, get tidying.’

‘Can’t Dora just do it tomorrow?’

‘Your absurd mess is not something that Dora should have to deal with, Bryony; we’ve talked about this before. She’s employed to keep the house clean, not to be your personal picker-up-er.’

‘I know, but it’s going to take all night. And there’s school tomorrow.’

‘I am very well aware of that. If it takes you all night then it takes you all night. Perhaps this will teach you to put your stuff away properly in the future.’ Adele marches in, places the pile of linen on Bryony’s bed, then goes over to the cupboard and wrenches it open. ‘Good Lord, Bryony.’

‘What?’ Bryony glances at the jumbled collection of old toys, puzzle pieces and books on her cupboard shelves.

‘You know very well what.’ Adele opens the remaining built-in cupboard doors and then stops, staring. She lifts her hands to her face, and for a moment, Bryony thinks she’s going to burst into tears again, but she doesn’t. She just stands frozen.

‘Mom?’

Nothing.

‘Mom?’ louder, this time.

‘Right.’ Adele says, and lowers her hands. ‘I’m going down stairs to get a couple of bin bags. This pile of endless junk is ridiculous. We need to get half of it out of here and clear up some space for that poor child.’

‘You’re taking my stuff? But it’s my stuff!’

‘Good gracious, girl.’ Adele lurches towards her daughter, and Bryony steps back until her legs are pressing against her bed. ‘People are dead, do you understand? My sister is dead, and her daughter is going to need a sodding cupboard to store her goddamn clothes in, alright?’ Adele, unlike Tyler, hardly ever swears. She’s never hit Bryony, either, but it sure looks like she’s going to take a crack at it now. Bryony swallows down a chunk of fright.

‘Yes Mom.’ Adele’s face is so close that Bryony can see white and pink blotches all over it as if someone has melted up a bag of marshmallows and spread them on her skin.

‘I’m going to make it up to Sally.’ Adele’s voice trembles as she stumbles towards the doorway. ‘Dear God. Somebody has to do SOMETHING.’ The shout stabs right through the sound of the news channel on the TV downstairs and the thump of Tyler’s music from next door, which stops mid clang. The whole house seems to breathe in. Bryony is too scared to move. She hopes that if her mom starts throwing things like she did in her bathroom the other day, she doesn’t break the crystal heart bowl on her dressing table that Granny gave her for her ninth birthday; it’s about the only thing of Granny’s she has.

Adele grips the doorframe and sags her head against it, her fingers yellow and hard looking, like uncooked pasta.

‘Mom?’ Bryony whispers.

Adele pulls back her head and lets it fall, crack, against the wood. Bryony’s stomach heaves at the sound it makes.

‘Mom?’ Tyler is suddenly out of his sanctuary and standing beside his mother. ‘Please don’t. Please don’t hurt yourself.’ He tries to take her hands to unstick her from the doorframe, but she isn’t budging. Over the top of her disheveled hair, Bryony notices that her brother’s blue eyes look just like their old cat, Mingus’ did that time she tried to bath him when she was five.

A sob boils up out of Bryony and she runs out of the bedroom and past them both, hurtling straight into Liam who has come running up the stairs.

Bryony stares at her father. There are a hundred questions flying up her throat, but her mouth is too dry to move, and they all smash into the back of her teeth, unasked.

‘Stop it, Adele.’ Liam commands, pushing past his daughter and gripping the sides of his wife’s head to stop her slamming it back into the door frame. His hands on either side of her quivering, blotched cheeks look very strong and brown. ‘For Christ’s sake.’

‘She’s just upset, Dad-’ Tyler hovers close to his mother, his hand still resting on her arm.

‘I know she’s upset. We’re all fucking upset, but we’ve just got to pull ourselves together and deal with what is.’ Liam is breathing hard, eyes shiny like glazed porcelain.

‘You’re not fooling anyone.’ Adele hisses back at her husband through tight white lips, ‘You put on a nice act, Liam, but *you’re* the one who’s really losing their grip.’ She pulls her head out Liam’s hands, nearly smashing into Tyler, who jumps backwards and out of her way as she whirls around and storms into the master bedroom. The door closes behind her with a deliberate click.

‘Dad?’

‘Tidy up your room, Bryony.’

CHAPTER THREE

My daughter enters the story at last, but only just.

She's out of the hospital bed, standing and walking from Liam's car towards the yellow glow of the porch light that illuminates the oversized wooden front door, but I still cannot feel her. It must be the tranquilisers making her consciousness dull, like an old bathroom tap covered in calcium scale that could do with a good polishing up.

Gigi.

The first thing that Bryony notices is that her cousin no longer wears her hair in two plaits. In fact, her hair is so thin that there doesn't seem to be enough of it to make even one, decent pony tail. It is the exact colour of the carpet in the downstairs study, and hangs down on either side of her thin face like over-washed curtains that have gone limp from too much sun. She is wearing jeans and what looks like a pyjama top under an old dressing gown. It's way too big for her. Bryony thinks that she looks like a bag lady.

Gigi's eyes flick up once, twice, towards where Bryony and Tyler have been standing and waiting at the front door ever since they heard the car pull up.

Bryony glances at her brother, and, as if on cue, they both step aside like a pair of hotel porters. Tyler's cheeks are red. Bryony wants to say hi, but she doesn't. Tyler clears his throat.

'Alright then, Gigi, in we go darling. I've made up a lovely bed for you in Bryony's room. You remember Bryony?' Adele seems to be trying to fill the silence all by herself. Gigi doesn't say a word. She's stopped moving.

'Up you go, sweetheart.' Adele urges, coming up behind the stalk thin girl and putting a hand on her shoulder. Gigi jumps and Adele makes a little gasping 'oh' sound and whips her hand away.

'What's the hold up?' Liam's voice, like his wife's, is super chirpy. He walks up the path behind them, carrying Gigi's suitcase.

‘Let’s all go inside, shall we?’ Gigi sort of falls forward into a walk again, and passes between Bryony and Tyler like a solemn ghost. Bryony breathes in the sharp sour smell of hospital disinfectant.

‘Hi.’ Bryony croaks out at last, but Gigi doesn’t look her way. She doesn’t seem to be looking at anything but her feet. And then suddenly, *everyone* is looking at Gigi’s feet. Bryony and Tyler at their sentry posts on either side of the hallway, Adele with her plastered on smile and pink eyes at the front door, and Liam, shifting his grip on the handle of the bulging suitcase: one red rubber flip flop flopping down on the Persian entrance hall rug, and then the other. Flip flop, flip flop. Stop. The Wildings hold a collective breath. Gigi sways a little in the middle of the hallway.

‘Oh darling, sorry!’ Adele says, dashing forward like a tour guide, ‘I didn’t tell you where to go. We were just about to have supper in the kitchen, how does that sound?’

Gigi doesn’t say anything. She just continues to stare down at the floor from between those lank, dirty hair curtains. The cord of the dressing gown is damp at the end from where it must’ve trailed on the wet grass during the walk from the garage to the house.

‘We’re having spaghetti bolognaise.’ Bryony says, and then immediately wishes she hadn’t. It seems like such a stupid thing to say to someone who you haven’t seen in seven years and whose mom was just murdered. Gigi doesn’t seem bothered, though. In fact, she doesn’t seem anything. She has not moved or spoken, or even glanced around at the house. She just stands and sways. Adele gives Liam a desperate what-shall-we-do look.

‘I bet Gigi isn’t really hungry.’ Tyler finally speaks, ‘Are you?’ Gigi shakes her head. Finally, something she seems able to respond to.

‘You want to go up to bed?’ He asks, and she nods.

‘Oh well, I suppose...’ Adele gives another brittle smile.

‘I’ll take you up.’ Bryony says, and Adele turns her lighthouse beam on her daughter.

‘Lovely, Bry. You do that. Up you go, girls.’

‘Come, it’s this way.’ Bryony says to the dressing gowned ghost as she heads towards the stairs. When Gigi turns to follow, Bryony

notices that her cousin's eyes are the same kind of blue as her own, only dead looking. The skin around them is grey.

The journey from the front hallway up the stairs and to her bedroom seems endless, the shuff of their feet on the carpet not quite loud enough to cover the thumping of Bryony's suddenly nervous pulse.

'This is it.' The room has been tidied to within an inch of its life and has never boasted so many unused surfaces, but Gigi is still looking at the floor and doesn't notice.

'You can have that bed.' Bryony points to the spare one which now looks warm and delicious with the cherry print duvet on it. The cover still bears a faint crease down the middle from where it has been folded up in the cupboard ever since Bryony discarded it for being too baby-ish. The one with the red swirls she has on her own bed looks too bright, all of a sudden, the red reminding her of an over-ripe tomato that's gone all mushy.

Gigi shuffles across the floor, steps out of her flip flops, and climbs into the cherry-duvet bed, hospital-sour, wet-corded dressing gown and all. Her eyes slam closed. Her eyelids twitch and then go still. *If she wants to never wear mascara like Aunty Sally, Bryony thinks, she won't have such a problem because her eyelashes are brown.* It would seem that not *all* of the women in her family are albino lab rats. She stands at the doorway and stares at her cousin. Gigi looks younger than a fourteen year old should look, somehow, and too skinny. She also has hardly any boobs which Bryony thinks must be a pretty big disappointment. *I hope mine get into gear a bit more than that by the time I'm fourteen.* She gives them a tiny squeeze to check if they've started yet, and although it hurts, there's nothing to pinch but skin.

Suddenly, Bryony is very aware that if those grey eyelids fly open, Gigi will see her staring with her hands on her non-existent chest. It occurs to Bryony, then, that this will probably never ever be just her room again. She and Dommie will have to sleep downstairs in the lounge when her friend comes over and Bryony will have to do all her boob checking and toenail picking in the bathroom from now on. It's a horrible realisation.

She switches off the light and turns to leave but then pauses,

holding her breath, to see if she can hear Gigi breathing. She can't.
Great. I'm going to be sharing my bedroom with a zombie.

Bryony sleeps. In her oversized sleeping shirt that has been washed and faded over time to delicious softness, she turns over and sighs. Bryony dreams of a field of cherries (not regular ones that grow on trees, but small perfect pairs of them suspended on a field of blue, like her old duvet cover). Each time she tries to pick a cherry to taste it, it dissolves into lint between her fingertips. A little distance away she sees Lesedi from next door, dressed in full tribal gear like an extra on that TV show about Shaka Zulu, gathering the fabric cherries and plopping them into a woven basket with no trouble at all. Bryony tries to call out, to ask Lesedi how she does it, but her voice is nothing but breath.

On the other side of the room, Gigi, lying beneath her own blue cherry field, doesn't snore or snuffle or make a single sound. Her dreams, if she has any, are still off-limits to me.

CHAPTER FOUR

During break, Bryony and Dommie sit on a sunny patch of grass beside the tennis courts to eat their packed lunches. They kick their shoes off, despite it being against the school rules, and push their white socked toes through the wire diamonds of the chain link fence.

‘She still hadn’t moved a single muscle when I finally went to bed last night.’ Bryony says, looking out towards the pine trees that block the tennis courts from the road. ‘Even when I turned on the light.’ The dark prickled arms of the trees move against the blue of the sky.

‘She sounds weird.’ Says Dommie, and takes a bite of her sandwich. She always has lettuce and cheese on seed loaf, and Bryony doesn’t know how she can stand to have the same thing every single day. Today, Bryony’s got Marmite on hers, which is dull but workable, and she certainly would not complain to Adele about anything sandwich related at the moment. Her mother is still lower eyelid wiping like crazy.

On top of the tears about Aunty Sally, and the strange fury that has gripped her mother since the tragedy, Bryony can tell that Adele is already starting to get stressed out about zombie Gigi. This morning at breakfast she heard her ask Liam: *is it healthy for her to just carry on sleeping like that?* And he said: *It’s probably the drugs, Addy.*

‘It’s probably the drugs.’ Bryony says, and Dommie’s brown eyes go big.

‘She’s on drugs?’

‘Not like dagga or anything; just medication ones from the hospital.’

‘Oh.’

‘When I left this morning she was still sleeping.’

‘Doesn’t she have to go to school?’

‘I don’t know. Probably not for a while, what with her mom

dying and everything.’

‘Shame, hey.’

‘Ja.’ Bryony agrees, shaking her head, ‘Shame.’ She tries to echo her friend’s sympathetic tone, but she just keeps imagining Gigi breathing out that horrible chemical smell into her bedroom all day. *Ick.*

‘Does Gigi being there mean you’re not coming to my house this evening?’

‘No of course I’m coming; it’s Shabbat.’

‘Ja.’ Says Dommie and gives Bryony a long look. ‘Of course.’

For the first time in as long as Bryony can remember, Tyler has not shut himself up in his room as he usually does the moment they arrive home from school. Today, he hovers on the landing outside her bedroom as if waiting for something. He’s still wearing his school shirt and grey trousers, but his feet are bare, and for the first time, Bryony notices that his toes have a few long hairs on them, like her dad’s.

Tyler peers around the door frame, and watches Gigi sleep for a moment.

‘Same position?’ Tyler whispers.

‘Same position.’ Bryony replies.

‘Wow, that stuff they gave her to zonk her out sure does the trick, hey?’

‘Ja.’ They glance at one another, and then both suddenly have to duck out of the bedroom to let loose a gale of snorting, spluttering laughter.

‘Shit.’ says Tyler, trying to stop himself, ‘We shouldn’t be laughing.’

‘Are we not allowed to laugh ever again now?’

‘No, man. It’s just, well... is she alright, just lying there like that? I mean, she hasn’t eaten anything since she got here last night.’

‘Looks like she hasn’t eaten anything in a while.’ says Bryony, peeping around the doorframe once more. Above the cherries, Gigi’s ribs rise and fall, rise and fall. *If she wasn’t wearing that gross gown I could probably count them from here.*

‘Shouldn’t we wake her? What do Mom and Dad have to say about it?’ Tyler asks, and Bryony shrugs.

‘This morning, Dad just said it was the drugs.’

‘Ja, but still...’

‘And Mom’s in her room.’

‘Crying again?’ Tyler asks, glancing towards their mother’s closed bedroom door.

‘Ja.’

‘Shit.’

‘Let’s just go downstairs and watch some TV.’ Bryony rubs one foot against the other, itchy to be away from the ribs and the cherries and the chemical smell.

‘I really think we should wake her.’

‘What, are you nuts?’

‘She can’t just lie there for days and days, Bry. What if she needs the loo or something?’ The look Tyler gives her stops Bryony’s giggle in its tracks. ‘If she doesn’t eat it could be serious.’

‘She smells.’

‘Bryony!’

‘Well she does. Of hospitals.’ Tyler rolls his eyes at Bryony and she watches as he pauses for a moment, clearing his throat and straightening his shoulders. Tyler steps into the bedroom, and in a few short strides he is at the foot of Gigi’s bed. Bryony stays rooted to post by the door, twisting the hem of her t-shirt between her fingers.

‘Hey there.’ Despite the throat clearing and shoulder straightening, Tyler’s voice still comes out all wobbly. He reaches down and gives the raised bedding over Gigi’s toe a gentle nudge. ‘Hey, Gigi?’

Her eyes open. (For the briefest of seconds I can sense her vivid purple swirl of confusion and panic.)

‘I think maybe you should have something to eat or something.’ Now that his cousin’s enormous blue eyes are open and staring right at him, Tyler’s shoulders are not quite as sure-looking. ‘Or something.’ He pulls at the buttons on the front of his white school shirt. Gigi’s expression is utterly blank. ‘Um, I’m Tyler.’

‘I know.’ She breathes. It is the first time she has uttered a word

since her arrival the night before. She blinks, swallows, and then shifts herself up a little on her elbows. Her collar bones stand out like the handles of a bicycle beneath her pale, freckled skin.

‘I could get you some toast.’ Tyler says, encouraged, but Gigi’s eyelids have already gone heavy, her brown lashes poking out of red rims covering up the blue within. ‘Or maybe just a glass of milk?’

‘A glass of milk?’ Gigi makes it sound as if Tyler has just offered her a litre of fresh pig’s blood. Her voice is thin and empty, like fat free dairy. ‘No thanks.’

‘OK...’ Tyler shifts from one bare foot to the other and Bryony wonders if that patch of her bedroom carpet is going to have a gross cheesy boy’s foot smell in it from now on. Not that it matters, seeing as it is not, strictly, *her* room anymore.

‘So you’re too old for milk?’ Tyler says, smiling, ‘Tot of whisky? Bottle of beer?’

The corners of Gigi’s mouth move as if she just might smile, but it seems her face is too heavy for that. She closes her eyes and flops her head back against the wooden headboard with a clonk. It must hurt, but she doesn’t seem to notice.

‘Don’t drink milk.’ She whispers. Those bruised eyelids twitch. Tyler stands with his hands shoved into the pockets of his school trousers and waits at the bottom of the bed.

‘Gigi?’

Nothing. He shrugs and turns away.

‘Zombie.’ Bryony mutters as Tyler walks back towards the bedroom door.

‘What?’

‘She’s a zombie, Ty, I’m sure of it.’

‘You’re impossible, Bryony.’ He grins, shakes his head. ‘It’s just the tranquilisers.’

‘How much longer will she be on them?’ Bryony imagines Gigi crashed out in her spare bed for years, gradually growing older and older, her hair eventually covering the pillow and growing down to join the carpet on the floor beneath. *Sleeping Beauty, only in a saggy dressing gown, and minus the ‘beauty’ part.*

‘Dunno.’

'Ty?' 'Bryony says, before her brother can shut himself up in his room again, 'If Mom stays in her room until supper, tell her I'm at Dommie's, OK? I have to get there before sunset.'

'You know you're not Jewish, right?' He says, smiling, his eyebrows lifted up and lost in the floppy blond of his fringe.

'I *know*.'

'You're sure the Silvermans don't mind you gate-crashing their religion every week?'

'I'm not gate-crashing, Tyler, Mrs Silverman invited me.'

'Once. She invited you once. I don't think you've missed a single Friday night dinner at their place since August.'

'So?'

'It's just weird.'

'*You're* the weird one.'

'You going to convert or something?'

'Shut up.' She turns to hide her red cheeks, and starts running down the stairs.

'Good Shabbos, Bryony.' Tyler calls out after her.

'Shut *up*!'

The afternoon hangs still and yellow and full of the sound of ticking clocks. Bryony is tired of staring at the motionless Gigi, and it's still too early to go to Dommie's house, so she balance-walks along the cobbled flowerbed border in the garden once more. Today, her journey takes her all the way out of the front gate. She shuts it behind her, blocking out the garden, and stares up the street towards Dommie's.

It isn't a real street; real streets are not paved with russet coloured bricks in a neat herringbone pattern and dotted with wrought iron curlicued lampposts and street signs, but the designers of Cortona Villas had obviously been trying to capture the quaint charm of a Mediterranean village. They might have succeeded better if the entire complex had not been landscaped by someone who clearly had the wrong brief, because the plantings maintain a distinctive indigenous African flavour: spiky aloes, succulent elephant plants and pebbles cluster on the sidewalks, and between each two adjoining driveways stands a pale green

barked, white thorned fever tree.

Bryony hovers beneath the delicate fluttering shade of the fever tree that grows between the Wilding's driveway and the Matsunyane's. She drops to her haunches and fingers the warm white pebbles lying at its base. Soon she has a small collection, the most circular ones that she can find, and folds the front of her t-shirt up into a little pouch in order to carry them.

'The indiscriminate, merciless killing of a number of human beings' Bryony whispers, and with each word, she drops a round pebble into her shirt with a soft click.

'What've you got there?' The voice startles Bryony and she jumps, sending the pebbles tumbling out of the cloth and scattering across the bricks of the driveway. She turns to see Lesedi Matsunyane standing by her own garden gate and staring at her. She wears a long skirt with a picture of the Johannesburg skyline printed on it, and from beneath its hem, Bryony notes a pair of bare brown feet.

'Um. Nothing. I wasn't going to take them...'

'Interesting.' Lesedi smiles and walks closer.

'I wasn't-'

'The way the stones fell.' Lesedi comes beside Bryony to peer down at the scattered pebbles and Bryony breathes in the smell of warm soil and cinnamon. After studying the pebbles for a moment, Lesedi glances sideways at Bryony with a tiny frown line between her perfect brows. 'Hmmm.' And then, at last (I have been wondering if she will do so again), she looks up at me.

This time Lesedi's attention brings with it the ozone smell of approaching thunder and the sensation of a sun-warmed lizard skittering over my scalp.

'How did they fall? Why's it interesting?' Bryony asks, thrilled at Lesedi's fragrant proximity and the sudden mystery of the fallen pebbles.

'You have a guest?'

'Yes!'

'Hmmm.'

'How did you know we have a guest staying?' Bryony stares hard at the pebbles, but they just look like oversized mint imperials

scattered on the paving in no particular pattern at all.

Lesedi is about to answer, but she checks herself, and starts again:

‘I saw your Mom and Dad arriving home last night with a girl in the car.’

‘Oh. She’s my cousin, Gigi. I’m Bryony by the way.’

‘Pleased to finally meet you, neighbor-Bryony.’ Lesedi’s formal handshake makes Bryony blush, ‘I’m Lesedi.’

‘Hi.’ Bryony’s voice is a squeak.

Lesedi looks down at the pebbles again and the frown between her brows deepens.

‘You must be careful.’ Lesedi says in a soft voice, ‘Be careful.’

‘Of what?’ Bryony breathes. For a long still moment, nothing moves but the pattern of dappled shadow cast by the slender fever tree branches above their heads.

‘Of messing around with ‘communal area’ property,’ Lesedi says in a different tone. She smiles and walks back towards her garden gate once more, ‘the Body Corporate of this place is run like a military institution. You might get court marshaled for even *looking* at these stones.’

‘Oh.’ Bryony smiles back, wondering what a court marshal is.

‘Well, I’d better be on my way then, Bryony. See you around.’

‘See you around, Lesedi.’

The candlelight strokes the stems of the silver knives and forks and glints off the hairclips that Shane Silverman has borrowed from his sister to hold his yarmulke on. When Dommie’s mother waves her hands above the twin flames and then raises them to her face as if pulling the light right into her temples, an electric shiver races down Bryony’s spine and all the little blond hairs on her arms stand up on end.

‘Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu, melekh ha’olam...’ Bryony breathes in the throaty, mysterious words as Mrs Silverman sings them, and shuts her eyes. *Something magical is happening. I just know it.*

Bryony resents her parents for not being Jewish or, in fact, for not being Catholic or Native American or Zulu or anything

interesting at all. The annual, tense flurry of decorations, food preparations and arguments with extended family members over who's doing what at Christmas is no substitute for a connection to something ancient and powerful like the Silverman's seem to have. *So unfair.*

Bryony wants magic; and this low lit dining table with its plaited loaves nestling under lace napkins like fragrant babies waiting to be named is not quite the same thing as the Hogwarts Great Hall, but here at least, she can believe that such things are possible.

My intrusion on the Silverman's Shabbat dinner feels impolite, and I hurry to pull myself free of Bryony's story. The noise begins its relentless buzz the moment I leave the prayers and chink of cutlery on china, but I continue to head for the darkening sky. Straight away it rushes at me and pours right into me, filling me up till I am the entire horizon stretched from end to end across the earth.

Nocturnal creatures stir and step out into the cooling air to sniff at the scents that the day has left behind and I can almost feel the soft pressure of their footsteps: dusty paw pads, claws that dig, and the delicate, tiny-boned toes of mice.

At the rescue centre in Limpopo, out behind the kitchen, we used to keep a large chicken wire cage full of mice. Caring for them ensured that we could provide regular meals for the small wildcats, snakes and birds of prey that passed into our care, and with a bit of luck, out again and back into the wild.

When we first moved from Johannesburg to join Simone on her farm in the northern part of Limpopo, watching those silky little pockets of fur with feet at each corner dashing up the tree branches and ducking into the hidey holes of their enclosure was torture for me. All of that industrious living and whisker twitching, for what: to end up as nothing more than a mini meal for something with bigger teeth?

Even though Gigi was only six when we arrived, she had no such dilemma. I remember her in a tiny pair of denim dungarees and city sandals lugging a bucket of food from the kitchen to the

mouse cage, and then later that same day, watching Phineas feed a small selection of her charges to Bratboy, the milky-tea-coloured caracal whose arrival at the sanctuary had coincided with ours. Bratboy had been brought in with a raging attitude and a foreleg that had been horribly damaged in a gin trap. He had spent the first few days of our stay under partial sedation as Johan, the resident conservationist who had abandoned his veterinary practice in favour of tending to the creatures that Simone took under her wing, cleaned out his wounds and tried to reset his leg.

On the morning of Bratboy's first meal, Gigi had stood a sensible distance from the fence and watched the snarling cat crouch low, its muscles bunched beneath its caramel coat, and wolf down his living dinner. There was nothing but fascination on her round, recently sun-pinked face.

'You're a smart one, aren't you?' I overheard Johan say to my daughter a few days later at the caracal cage. Johan had that overly tanned, rough skinned look shared by just about every conservationist I'd recently met, and beside him, Gigi looked smooth and newly minted. 'It's not everyone that understands that ending up as lunch no way diminishes the little life in question.'

'Huh?' Gigi said, clearly uncertain about *diminishes*.

'That's why I'm not a vegan like everyone else at this place. Some things are lunch for other things, and those things are lunch for even bigger things. It's all just a part of the natural order of life.'

'Ok.' Gigi poked a slender piece of straw into the caracal enclosure and Bratboy flattened his tufted ears back over his head and showed her his impressive collection of pointed teeth. She bared her teeth back at the animal before turning to Johan. 'So will I one day end up as something's lunch?'

'Well that all depends...' Johan said with a serious look on his face.

'On what?'

'On whether I've had enough breakfast or not!' Gigi squealed with delight as Johan lifted her up with his scabbed, strong hands, and pretended to gobble down her dimpled elbow. Bratboy

snarled at them both from behind the wire of his cage.

Two months after that, a young man wearing a surf t-shirt and low-slung shorts arrived at the farm gate with a wounded wild dog on the passenger seat of his bakkie.

‘They told me to bring her here.’ He said. He was pale and stricken beneath his tan. ‘I found her this morning out by the sheep pen. I think she might’ve been poisoned. I told my pa that’s it’s cruel to put out poisoned carcasses, but... old ways...’ He wiped his forearm across his face. He was close to tears.

‘Alright son, you did the right thing bringing her here.’ Johan lifted the brindled dog from the car seat. It was very young, and still small, wrapped in a peach coloured towel with floral designs on it. Its limp tail hung down from the incongruous folds in a thick black-tipped brush. He checked the creature’s breathing, and lifted its eyelids with gentle fingers to peer into the unfathomable brown depths. ‘Airway seems OK. She’s not too far gone. Maybe she didn’t eat much. Has she been convulsing? Bleeding from the mouth?’

The young man, really just a boy, shifted from foot to foot. ‘No bleeding. Convulsions, yes. She looked like she was drunk.’

‘Sounds like bromethalin. It’s in some new rat poisons. That possible?’

‘Yes. Pa has definitely used rat stuff for this kind of thing before.’ In Johan’s arms, the dog twitched and spasm-ed. Flecks of foamy spittle clung to her dark snout.

‘If it’s bromethalin, Vitamin K isn’t going to help, but she might still have a chance. I’ll need you to come with us.’ Johan, who since my arrival on the farm had been shy and painfully polite to me, started barking orders: ‘Sally. Quick.’ Johan carried the dog into the outbuilding that was set up as a rudimentary animal hospital. The frightened boy and I scampered behind.

‘Go play inside the house, Gigi.’ I said as my daughter followed after us.

‘Don’t want to.’ She gave me a belligerent look. ‘I’m staying.’

‘Seriously, Gigi, now’s not the time for your nonsense. I want you out of here in two seconds, young lady.’

‘No, we need her.’ Johan placed the creature on the table. The wild dog’s slender head knocked onto the metal surface with a clonking sound that made Gigi start.

‘To do what? She’s a child for goodness sake.’

‘Can’t give this dog any anesthetic. She’s got too much shit in her system already.’ The dog went into a stiff spasm again, and Johan seized the opportunity to wind a short length of bandage around the creature’s muzzle and tie it in a deft bow. It looked absurd, like her snout had been gift wrapped. ‘I need to get charcoal into her gut to absorb some of the poison, and fluids into her system to flush her out. I need to insert a drip catheter, fast.’ I stood frozen in the doorway as Johan rifled in a drawer for the correct drip. ‘Sally, I need you and the kid...’ He waved a hand at the boy.

‘Elias.’

‘You and Elias to hold her down so I can insert the drip.’ He lifted my daughter up onto the table beside the sick animal. The creature’s shaggy back was pressing into her chubby knees. ‘And I need Gigi to hold the needle in place while I strap it down.’

‘You’re insane! She’s six years old, Johan.’

‘Look, there’s no time to call Seb or Simone.’ He glanced across at Gigi as he tested the tightness of the bandage bow. ‘You OK with this, soldier? It’ll just be for a second.’ She nodded her head. Earnest. ‘When I say *go*, you need to press down here, on her leg, OK, just where the needle goes in?’ Another calm nod.

‘Elias, you need to put your weight here, on her shoulders like this, right? Anchor the head and the forelegs where I’ve wound the towel around.’

The boy nodded. I wondered if my face was as white as his.

‘Sally, hind quarters. Lots of weight, OK? She’s pretty out of it, thank goodness, but she’s likely going to struggle like a mad thing when I insert the needle. These guys can kick like fury. The towel should help.’ He pulled the end tighter, mummifying her back legs.

I obeyed, numb. The wild dog’s dusty fur was slightly sticky to the touch. Wirier than it looked. It gave a pitiful whine as soon as it felt our hands pushing down. I looked at Gigi, but her eyes were

fixed on Johan, trusting.

‘And GO!’ In a few, frantic, messy, scuffling moments it was over. The drip was in. Johan could now take some time to restrain the animal properly and make her more comfortable. ‘I’m going to give her a small dose of muscle relaxants to try and ease these convulsions. That should enable me to get a tube down her throat so I can get the charcoal into her stomach.’ I stumbled back from the table with my head swimming and blood pounding in my ears. Johan administered the meds with Gigi resting her small hand on the wild dog’s head and whispering comforting words into the twitching black, round-tipped ears.

‘Nice one, girls.’ Johan ruffled Gigi’s hair and turned to look at me. ‘We make quite an ER team, don’t we? The warmth of his smile made his eyes crinkle up like crazy in the corners. It was impossible not to smile back.

When Simone returned and heard of all this later that evening, she dropped to her haunches and pulled Gigi into a tight hug. ‘What a brave girl! Aren’t we lucky to have a pro like you helping us out here?’ Gigi nodded, pink with pleasure.

‘Yeah, I’m so proud of you, love.’ I said, but when I placed my hand on her warm head, she pulled away from me, scowling.

‘*You* didn’t think I could do it. *You* didn’t think I was good enough.’

‘Oh come now, Gigi, I was just being a worried mom. I wanted to spare you from seeing something awful happen to that doggy.’

‘Well I helped save her so there.’ She retorted, and flounced off to follow Simone into the depths of the house.

I blinked, unreasonably hurt and hating to show it.

‘Kids can be so harsh.’ Johan said. I whirled round. I didn’t even know he’d been in the room. ‘She shouldn’t talk to you like that. She’s no idea what a great mom you are.’ He leant back against the wall and gave me another of those warm crinkly smiles.

‘Please. I’m hardly a great mom.’

‘But you are. You’re...’ His gaze dropped to his feet. His boots were scuffed and stained, and there were burrs clinging to the laces.

'Johan!' It was Seb's voice, tinged with urgency. Johan raced out of the house, leaving me alone with prickles of tears in my eyes and a strange cold pulse in my temples.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the quiet before dawn, Gigi wakes. I feel her consciousness as a sudden sharpness in the room, as if someone sliced into a fresh lemon. And just like that, she's another way into the story, at last.

She blinks at the darkness, disorientated, staring up at the little glowing stars that Liam once glued all over Bryony's ceiling. Slowly, her thoughts gather and congeal into a hard little ball, and when they finally make sense, they erupt into the room on a wave of hoarse sobs.

When her body stops heaving, Gigi lies on her back, stomach aching, and for long, motionless minutes, endures the cloying feeling of her hot tears and sweat gluing her hair to the pillow until she can't stand it anymore. She flings off the covers and swings her legs off the bed; it is the fastest she's moved for days, and her head swims. She glares across the room in the direction of Bryony's even breathing and then launches upright, wobbling for a moment before heading off to find the bathroom.

I am struck by how the familiarity of my daughter has been altered into strangeness by the new sadness she carries inside her. She must be the same Gigi that used to sit in the gazelle enclosure with a book and polish off a whole bag of litchis, letting the spiky little skins and shiny pips build up into a pile on the ground beside her, but she is wearing my death like a dark shawl around her shoulders that makes her hard to look at and impossible to know. Again, I wait for that old stab-in-the-guts agony that used to come when I saw her hurt. But nothing. No guts to stab. Not anymore.

Gigi stands at the small bathroom window. The night air is a relief on her sweaty neck, and for a moment, she lets her forehead drop against the cold glass. She can just make out the cement courtyard at the back of the house, and skeletal metal tree of the washing line one story down. *If I fell, how many bones would I break?* She scowls and turns from the window. *Not enough.*

She digs trembling fingers into the ragged pocket of the dressing gown and pulls out the plastic vial of pills with its printed hospital label. She gives it a small shake, frowning at the sparse rattle. She should save the remaining tablets and ration them out slowly, but carrying this dark, aching *thing* inside her for even one moment longer is unthinkable. She uncaps the bottle and tips two little disks into her palm before popping them into her mouth. She's only supposed to take one, but one doesn't stop the dreams.

She drinks long and deep from the basin tap before tiptoeing back to bed.

'Elbows off the table, darling,' Adele has not made much of a dent in her 'Saturday Special' fried eggs and bacon breakfast, but this only means that she has more time to look around and nit pick Bryony's manners. Bryony removes her elbows from the yellowed pine with a sigh and glances at her brother, hoping to share a furtive eye-roll. Tyler doesn't notice; he's too busy shoveling forkfuls of food into his face as if he's in some kind of breakfast race. 'Don't gobble, Ty. Anyone would think I hadn't taught you any manners at all.'

'Jesus, Addy; it's Saturday, take a break, for heaven's sakes.' Liam snaps, and Bryony looks up to see him give his own, barely touched 'Saturday Special' a vicious stab with his fork. Her father loves bacon and eggs and weekend morning breakfasts; or at least he always did. Bryony glances at the empty chair and a hopeful-looking set of cutlery and an empty juice glass placed before it. No Gigi. Her absence at this table is so pronounced now that it is starting to become a solid entity; more real, in fact, than the sleeping girl in her bedroom upstairs.

'It's ridiculous, is all I'm saying,' Adele says.

'Addy.' The warning note in Liam's voice makes Tyler look up from his plate at last. Bryony takes a big mouthful of her toast in order to swallow down the flutter in the back of her throat. It won't go down.

'No, honestly, Liam. The child just cannot go on sleeping indefinitely. It's not healthy.'

'Healthy?' Bryony starts as her father rises to his feet. A smear

of vivid free-range orange egg yolk slimes across the tabletop behind his dropped knife and fork. ‘She was practically catatonic when they found her, Addy. She’d been hunched over her dead mother for who knows how long. The blood had dried over the both of them, for Christ sakes.’ The unmanageable chunk of soggy marmalade toast still squatting in Bryony’s mouth suddenly tastes like rusted metal.

‘Liam, not in front of -’

‘What do you want from the child? She’s taking the time she needs to recover; who are we to tell her when she’s ready to get up and face it all?’

‘Well it won’t be much longer.’ Bryony says, and everyone turns to stare at her. ‘I looked in the bottle of pills that I found on the floor by her bed. There’s only about four left.’

‘Right then, there you have it.’ Liam snarls into the heavy silence. ‘She’ll be up and about in no time, Adele.’

‘I’m not being insensitive to what she’s gone through, for God’s sake, I just worry about her lying there like that stoned out of her mind.’

‘Like a zombie.’

‘That’s enough, Bryony.’ Adele snaps, ‘Eat your breakfast.’

You eat your breakfast Bryony glares meaningfully at her mother’s full plate, but the grilled tomato makes her think of a scab and she looks away fast. *What must it feel like to be covered all over in dried blood?*

‘I’m not really hungry anymore.’ Bryony says, and Adele responds by making a horrible gasping sound and bursting into fresh tears. ‘But I’ll eat it anyway. It’s OK, mom.’ Bryony hurriedly picks up her half-eaten slice of toast, but Adele just shakes her head, squeaks the chair back from the table, and leaves the kitchen.

‘Well done, Bryony.’ Tyler mutters.

‘Oh can-it, Tyler,’ Liam says as he follows his wife out of the room, ‘stop being so goddamn holier-than-thou all the time.’

And then it’s just Bryony and Tyler and four plates of half-finished food and a stripe of late morning sunlight across the wooden table.

'I bet she's put a curse on us.'

'What are you on about now, Bry?'

'Ever since Gigi got here, all anyone can do is fight.'

'That's not *her* fault. She's not even awake. She can hardly be blamed for this family's bullshit.'

'I guess.'

'You're one weird kid, you know that? You always think someone's cursing someone.'

'So maybe they are.'

'Maybe you should lay off reading those books about witches and wizards and stuff all the time, it's turning your head.' Bryony watches her brother finish the last few mouthfuls of his food. She shifts on her chair, and the skin on the back of her bare legs stings as it sticks to the varnished wood.

'Did you know about the blood thing, Ty?'

'What?'

'About Gigi being covered in Aunt Sally's blood?' Tyler wipes his mouth and then tosses the crumpled paper napkin into the centre of his egg-streaked plate.

'No, I didn't.'

'How long do you think she was sitting there before they found her?'

'Listen, Bry, I wouldn't give it too much thought, OK?' The unexpected kindness in his voice causes a slithering feeling in Bryony's stomach.

'OK.'

'She'll be fine. We'll all be fine. Just put your head down and wait for the crap to pass.' Tyler gets up from the table and ruffles the top of his sister's head as he passes behind her chair.

'Hey! You're messing it up.' She says and removes the hairclips she put in earlier that morning; they are silver with yellow pineapples on them, a colour that Adele is always telling her she can't pull off. Bryony stares at the miniature plastic fruit for a moment, and then jams the hairclips into the pocket of her shorts. *Stupid.* She thinks. *Everything's just stupid.*

I leave Bryony sitting alone at the kitchen table.

Suspended within the centre of the story roar I feel around for another thread to follow instead; the house is full of them, woven tight in some places, and unraveling in others. I hunt for Gigi's, but again, the pills she's taken make it impossible to find.

I pick up a navy blue thread in amongst the tangle. This one feels familiar and solid and carries with it the faint smell of mown grass and aftershave. I follow it up the stairs and into Bryony's room where Liam is kneeling on the floor beside Gigi's bed.

'Gigi?' He whispers, but she sleeps on, lost in her chemical void. Liam smooths the grimy hair back from her forehead revealing a pale constellation of freckles. *Are you in there, Gi?* He finds the pill bottle on the floor by his knees and takes a moment to read the label. 'You're still OK, Gi, aren't you?' It's not a question; it's a plea.

You were always such a sweet kid, just like your mom. She was the sweet one and now...

The force of his feeling side-swipes me and pulls me under, a powerful wave that tumbles me till I rip my skin on grainy sea sand and there's a searing salty pain in my mouth, my nose and my lungs - I am drowning. Such grief.

Oh Liam.

I drop the navy blue thread. I flee the Wilding home as fast as I can.

The story-sound hisses at me like an enraged, trapped animal. I clutch at shadows, blind and screaming to try and block the noise as I race down streets, through shopping mall parking lots, around corners and across school hockey pitches, until finally, I stop.

I know this place.

The houses along the tree-lined street are old, nothing like the ones in Cortona Villas, but they have been brought up to date with expensive sandstone cladding, sleek brushed steel house numbers and electrified fencing. The house where Adele and I grew up is still surrounded by a large white wall, but the black iron gates that used to rattle when we swung on them as we waited for Daddy to come home from the office have been

upgraded to electronic ones.

I remember how cold the metal felt that one long afternoon in my last year of highschool when our parents told me and Adele that Dad had been diagnosed with cancer. I remember feeling weirdly disconnected from my body as I walked out of the house with this new, icy news inside me. I crossed the brown crunchy winter lawn, strode past mom's roses that had been pruned back to nothing but thorny sticks poking out of the flowerbeds, and stopped when I saw fourteen-year-old Adele clutching onto the gate and looking out at the street, just like she used to do when we were little.

She'd come outside in her slippers, and I could see the outline of her newly curvy torso through her thin jersey. She must've been cold.

I came up beside her and climbed onto the gate too. Her nose was pink and her cheeks were wet. She didn't look at me. A car drove past. Inside it, there were people carrying on their normal lives with no clue that our dad was sick and might die.

'Assholes.' I said.

'Yeah.' Adele agreed. She was shivering.

I shuffled closer, unwound half of my scarf, and tucked the one end around her neck.

'Thanks.'

'Sure.' My voice wobbled.

'I hate this.' Adele lent her forehead against the chilled metal bars.

'Ditto.'

'Nothing's ever going to be the same again, is it, Monkey?'

'No.'

'Think he's going to...?' I was glad she didn't finish her question. The word was as impossible to hear as it was to say. It hung between us and clung to us both, just like the wooly scarf.

'I don't know, Addy.' I put my arm around her shoulder, and that's how we stayed until the sky started to go orange at one corner. The bars of the gate had chilled our fingers into stiff claws. We walked back to the house holding onto each other to stop the scarf from pulling and strangling us both.

Now I plunge through the iron ribs of the new gate and into the green garden. The first thing I notice is that the Tipuana tree is gone. I remember the vast reach of its strong curvy limbs, the perfect thumb-print rows of leaves, whirling helicopter seed pods, and the exuberant yellow, crumpled-tissue-paper flowers that used to litter the ground beneath it.

Adele and I used to hate walking under the tree because of the foamy bugs that lived on the branches that would spit drops of insect goo into our hair. But it was fun to climb. I loved scrambling up as high as I could go and looking down over the surrounding gardens.

My most memorable Tipuana tree climbing occasion happened years after my bark scrambling days were done. I was already well into my second semester at University.

It was the day Liam challenged me to a climb.

Had we still been in high school, Liam would've been the jock, (he'd been captain of the school cricket team, for heaven's sake) and I would've been the weird, arty chick who read poetry, and we would probably never have exchanged a word, but although he was studying towards an LLB, and I was doing a Bachelor of Arts, we sat beside each other once in our only joint class: English Literature.

One afternoon, as I was walking home from the bus stop after lectures, I heard the grumble of an engine and turned to see a rather clap-trap old Ford Sierra slowing down beside me. Inside it was the gobsmackingly unattainable blonde god who'd sat beside me in Eng Lit 101 earlier that day.

'You live on this street?' He leant out of his open window and squinted against the sun.

'Ja.'

'Me too. Number 77.' He looked up at me, shading his eyes with one hand. 'Did you walk all the way from the bus stop?'

'Yeah, it's not so far.'

'I can give you a lift home tomorrow if you want, just meet me in the campus parking lot if you fancy a ride. Look for the dodgiest car in the lot.'

'Um OK.' My breath came in shallow little gasps.

‘K. See you then.’ He grinned and drove off.

The next day, I waited by his Ford Sierra, and as promised, he drove me home. The next day, he did the same. At first, we sat side by side in silence, but then, quite suddenly, we were talking. We talked about our classes at Varsity and the lectures we liked or didn’t like, the people we had been to school with, our families, our first pets, our first dates and just like that, we were friends.

Soon, Liam was parking his Ford Sierra in my parents’ driveway and following me inside the house, rather than dropping me off outside the black iron gates. Most days, he’d stay till just before dinner time.

After three months, we still had not run out of things to say to each other, although sometimes, the delicious torture of sitting beside Liam overwhelmed me, and I would go dry mouthed and silent. He smelled like freshly mown grass clippings, and occasionally, the fine golden hairs on his lean, tanned arm would brush against mine.

One afternoon in early May, while we were making the most of the end-of-summer sun on the sun on the stoep, Liam challenged me to a climb up the old Tipuana tree.

‘You’re on!’ I said, and we both jumped up, jostling into each other and laughing like kids as we ran towards the tree, racing to be first to scramble up the trunk.

‘I’d forgotten how much fun this is!’ I yelped as I swung myself up onto a swaying branch, my hands stinging on the uneven bark.

‘Wow, you’re like a total monkey-girl.’ Liam said, laughing. ‘I get the nickname now.’

‘Hey guys, what on earth are you doing?’ I looked down to see Adele standing on the lawn below. She smiled up at us, beautiful in her brand new sundress; her hair (so much thicker than mine) curled alongside the slender blue ribbons that tied over her shoulders to hold it up.

‘Watch out for the spitting bugs, Monkey!’ Adele called, but I was watching Liam. He was staring down at the curved shadowy gap between the bodice of her dress and her creamy skin in such a way that, for the first time in my beloved Tipuana tree, I experienced the nausea of vertigo. I tugged at my own, sensible,

high-necked t-shirt. I was pretty sure there were sweat stains in the pits. Monkey-girl.

'Hi Adele.' Liam grinned down at her and my nausea grew. Holding my breath, I shuffled my way along the branch and started lowering myself to the one beneath.

'Hey, where're you off to, Monks?' Liam said, 'You're not going to leave me here by myself are you?' I turned to look back up at him, my chest softening with hope, but his eyes were not on me: they were riveted on my younger sister who, although still in high school, was already more womanly than I would ever be.

I remember trying to graze away the hurt by pushing my fingers hard into the rough bark as I hurried to reach the ground, but I was biting back tears by the time my feet thumped into damp, bug-spitty grass.

When Liam and Adele officially started going out several months later, I told myself that it didn't matter. But every time I saw him with my sister, it was impossible to maintain the lie: I was in love with Liam Wilding and it was killing me.