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Black Dog Summer

Written by Miranda Sherry

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BLACK DOG SUMMER

MIRANDA SHERRY





UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT
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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 it's 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 Aunty 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, Aunty 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 Aunty 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 Aunty 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 accesorised 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 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 is 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 shluff 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.