



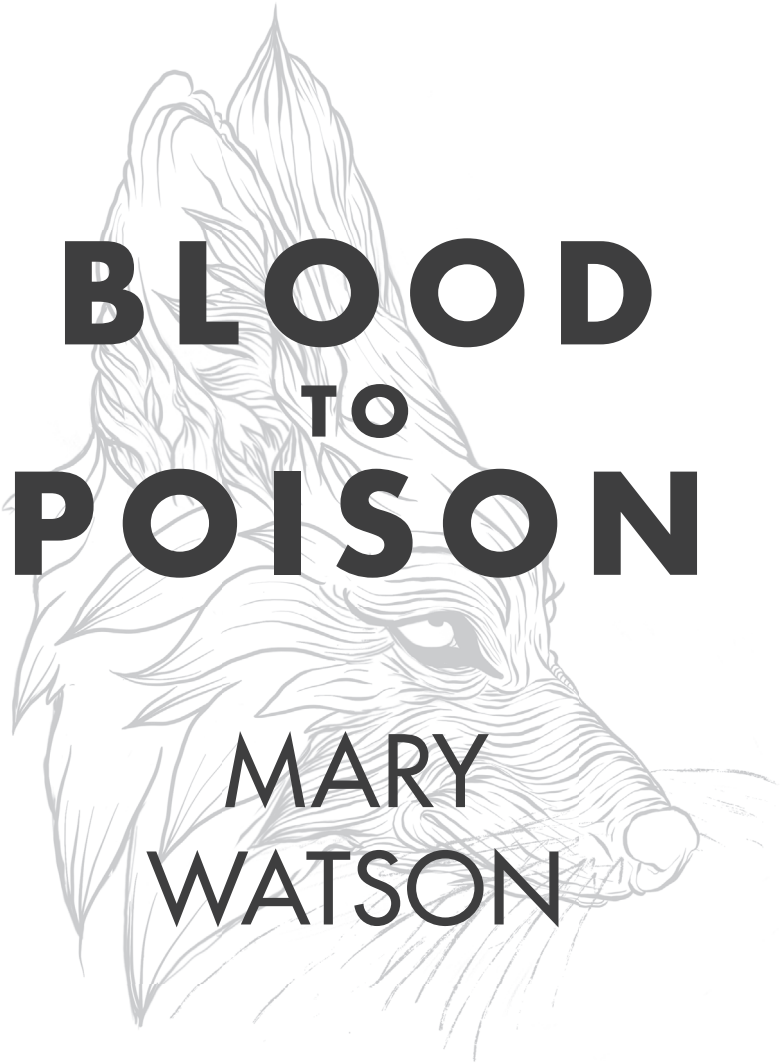
MARY WATSON

'A gripping,
immersive story'
LOUISE O'NEILL

FURY
WILL
TURN
HER

BLOOD
TO
POISON

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BLOOD TO POISON

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For my sisters' daughters, Zadie and Tracey.

*Remembering the women who came before us, those we loved
and those whose names we do not know.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In my family, there is a story of a curse. My aunt died tragically when she was twenty-one years old and we came to believe that her rose-gold pearl ring was cursed, that it brought hardship, or worse, early death.

I realise now that cursed or not, the ring became the embodiment of a terrible trauma. It was more than just a ring; it stood for loss and grief across four generations. *Blood to Poison* was inspired by this cursed ring – the possibility of magic, of curses and devils, has been inscribed in how I see the world from a young age. But mostly because the ring connected my family in an intensely emotional way. When I held that ring, I felt the loss of my aunt, even though she died before I was born.

Blood to Poison is about a curse that forges emotional connection across generations. But the book reaches deeper into the past, to an enslaved ancestor, and the characters are linked by past traumas that reverberate in the present. Like Savannah, enslavement is almost certainly part of my own family history, and the book's underlying themes of trauma and historical rage resonate deeply for me.

Before I started writing, I had useful conversations about what it means to incorporate these very difficult real-life traumas into a story about a girl who discovers magic. What I

heard was this: these are our stories and they should be told. It would be easier for me to explore these themes by writing literary fiction, a quiet reflective piece. But the challenge I took on with *Blood to Poison* was to take this story with all its implicit trauma and work it into a young adult romantic fantasy, and to do so sensitively and without compromising the real suffering that makes up the undercurrents of this book.

At the heart of *Blood to Poison* are two things: Savannah's anger, along with the understanding of this anger as something that links her to previous generations, and the figure of Hella, the ancestor who'd been enslaved during colonial times. When planning this book, I was feeling a constant low-grade fury – at lying politicians, disinformation, at how racism was becoming more overt, the way misogyny was manifesting as violence. While I was writing, angry South Africans took to the streets to protest violence against women and the high rate of femicide. I was researching slavery in colonial Cape Town, learning again about the appalling conditions that the enslaved endured, and finding connections between these two driving strands. Black anger is frequently dismissed or weaponised, women are branded irrational, and this story seemed an opportunity to open up conversations around anger. When I spoke to others about feeling angry all the time, I was surprised how often the response was, *So am I*.

For those unfamiliar with South Africa, it's a complex country with a difficult past. It is a vibrant, diverse place and the characters in the book reflect this diversity. I grew up during apartheid, the oppressive political system that entrenched white

domination, where the small details of my life were determined by the colour of my skin – I was forbidden from certain beaches, benches, train carriages, living in the leafy suburbs, attending well-resourced schools and so on, because they were ‘reserved for whites’. White was elevated, considered the norm – TV, magazines, sport, etc. were populated by white people, all in a country where white is the minority.

Like many South Africans, I am scarred by this past and it affects how I talk about race today. Some readers might find it strange that I don’t explicitly label race in this book. It didn’t feel right here. It’s partly a resistance, from growing up in a time where everyone was defined by race, where these labels were used to oppress. Apartheid’s strategy was to divide and conquer, to dehumanise through othering. I don’t believe we can simply ignore race, not when there is so much to mend, but my instinct is to distance myself from the language of apartheid.

I find the terminology difficult: Savannah and her family, Inez and her family, Mama Daline, Quinton, amongst others, are all what is called ‘coloured’ in South Africa, the official apartheid term, and one that doesn’t carry the same meaning outside of the country. It is the label applied to me. A complex term, it is both contested and embraced by people in my community, and I didn’t feel there was room to explore the topic with any nuance here. Many of us identify as black (or Black – my preference when referring to myself is not to capitalise; both are used in South Africa) while acknowledging colourism and recognising those classified as ‘native’ were disadvantaged more severely during apartheid.

This is a book about magic and witches, self-discovery and love in its many guises. But, under the surface, it is also a story about how trauma is passed down through the generations. The story is inspired by the very real historical trauma and injustice of enslavement and discrimination in South Africa. Writing it required a careful balance between the need to tell stories sensitively and the need to tell stories. I have tried to find that balance and I hope you will enjoy the story.

Mary Watson

1

BABY

I am troubled by a memory that never happened.

We're running, Freda and I. She's ahead, her long hair streaming. The night is unnaturally bright, but not because of the stars. Freda turns to me, holding out a hand:

Faster, Savannah.

My bare feet beat the hard earth. Fear tightens my chest.

I glance behind me and see the world burning. The orange blaze, the hidden depths within the curling flames.

And from those depths, something comes for us.

I reach for Freda, grasping at her billowing nightgown. She looks back again and her face contorts with terror.

That is where the memory ends.

It feels real. But we've never escaped a fire.

Freda, my aunt, my second mother, was killed in a car accident nearly ten years ago. It is an impossible memory.

*

‘Savannah, you gonna hang in the doorway there all day?’ Solly says from behind the shop counter.

I ignore him. I have the devils in me today. Restless. That’s what Minnie always says when I get like this: Savannah, you have the duiwels in you. Come here. Sit still. *Kry jou rus, meisiekind*. Get your rest, girl.

From the doorway of the corner shop, I look out on to the empty road. The sun is high in the afternoon sky and, in the distance, cloud covers Devil’s Peak. I’m here for the sugar, to fuel me as I study for another exam. Just three more papers, then three glorious months of summer break.

I take a step forward, then hesitate. The memory felt more real today.

I’m holding the jelly babies I bought, but I can’t eat with devils dancing inside me. I turn back to where Solly leans on his elbows, watching me. He’s beginning to grey at the temples.

‘All that sugar you eat.’ He shakes his head at me, like he isn’t the dealer who feeds my addiction. ‘It’s gonna kill you one day.’

‘Can I return them?’ I hold up the jelly babies. ‘For a refund?’

‘You opened the bag.’

‘Small details, Solly.’

‘You ate some.’

‘Is that a no then?’

‘Go home, Savannah.’ He raises his newspaper, blocking my view of his face. On the front page is a picture of a smiling woman. *Stabbed seven times*, the headline screams.

I leave the shop. A car is parked beside the empty

playground, with two guys inside, smoking with the windows rolled down. Their eyes light up as they see me.

‘Hullo, girl.’ The words slide out, slick with oil.

I keep walking. Look straight ahead. I know how this goes.

‘Sexy lady,’ the man in the parked car sings. I make the mistake of glancing over.

He runs his eyes over my body, down my black cami, the short shock of grey tulle, my bare legs, red Converse. Makes a kissing noise. ‘Mm-mmmm.’ Like I’m something delicious.

I’m not angry. Not yet. But the duiwels want to play.

I step towards the car. He’s young, this guy, twenty perhaps. Something about him makes me think of an insect. A cartoon bug.

A metal pipe lies on the tarmac, near the tyre.

‘I like what I see, baby,’ Bug-Face informs me.

‘I don’t give a fuck what you like.’

‘You hear that?’ Bug-Face jerks a thumb at me and he looks at his friend.

‘Sies, girl.’ The other man, full lips and a goatee, runs his eyes over my body.

‘Can’t you take a compliment?’ Bug-Face tuts. ‘Still, I like them a little dirty. You know, you really pretty when you’re not so cross.’

He shifts in his seat, the hem of his T-shirt riding up. The shape of a gun is unmistakeable, even before I see the black handle at his waistband.

‘You should be more careful around here. A neighbourhood

like this.' He shakes his head. 'You just never know.'

What happens next, happens fast. The metal pipe is in my hand. The jelly babies are scattered in the road. I bring the pipe down on the hood of the car. The damage is disappointing, barely a dent. I swing back and hit harder.

Shards of glass spray everywhere. I hit again. Bug-Face shields his face with his arm, eyes wide. And again.

The other man scrambles out of the passenger side, but he doesn't come any closer. He's too scared. I want to laugh. People are emerging from their houses.

Kyk die Tinkerbelle. She's gonna moer him.

Arms grip me from behind, stilling me. The pipe is prised from my fingers.

'Let it go, Savannah.' The voice is gentle. Solly.

I'm trembling now. And embarrassed. Aunties have come outside. Small pieces of broken glass are trapped in my skirt. The skin on my inside wrist is red and mottled, even though I don't remember hurting it.

'The police are coming,' a woman says.

Bug-Face revs the car hard when he hears that; no one is sticking around for the police. His buddy jumps in.

'You'll pay damages,' Bug-Face shouts, jabbing a finger. 'Burns Road – you'd better bring the money.'

'I'll come,' Solly says to Bug-Face. 'Tomorrow.'

Their tyres screech as they drive away, burning rubber.

Walking home, Solly talks to me the whole time – about the shop, my exam the next day, if I'll resume dancing in the new year.

‘Has Kim set her wedding date yet?’ he asks, and I am so deflated that even this distant disaster, my mother marrying Quinton, doesn’t make my stomach knot with anxiety.

The duiwels are quiet. They’ve had their feed, and now they rest.

The fear hits me later that night. After I’ve endured my mother’s worried outburst, then her frightened silence. After I watched her seek comfort in Quinton’s arms, barely able to look at me. He stroked Kim’s slim shoulders, eyes on me, offering to take the money next door to Solly.

Lying in bed, in the quietest hours, I wonder if Kim ever allows herself to think: *My daughter is a monster. My daughter is cursed.*

There’s a story that’s been handed down the generations in my family. The story of a curse. The story of a woman so wronged that she burned with anger until it destroyed everything. The story of Hella, my ancestor, whose anger was passed down from mother to daughter.

I turn on to my side, rest my cheek on a cool spot of the pillow. In the glow of the outside light, the mottling on my wrist appears an orange red.

Hella had been enslaved, forced to work for a cruel family. Her anger grew until one day, it exploded out of her.

Hella cursed them.

You will die before you have fully lived.

She cursed them for every lash of the whip, every slap, every cruel word.

My anger will follow you.

She cursed the enslaver for his assault on her body, and his wife for looking the other way.

My anger will destroy you.

She cursed their ancestors, their children, the children of their line yet to be born.

You, your children, and your children's children. Until my rage burns out.

In the struggle, a fire had started. During the chaos, Hella fled, and around her the world burned.

She did not know she had his child growing inside her.

I think of Hella, running across hard earth, the dark night lit by the fire behind her. Running until she felt her heart would burst.

This story lives in my bones.