

SUGAR TOWN QUEENS

MALLA NUNN

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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To Auntie Maureen. For everything.

1

White stars dance across my field of vision. The blindfold is tied too tight and I want to rip it off. Instead, I sit and try to rub the goose bumps off my arms. It's cold inside our one-room house; the cracks in the corrugated-iron walls wide enough to let the air in from outside. It's winter, so we have stuffed rags into the spaces we can reach. I shiver and wait patiently for the two surprises that my mother has planned.

The thing is: not all surprises are good.

"Happy fifteenth birthday, Amandla." My mother, Annalisa, who refuses to be called Mother in any of South Africa's eleven official languages, unties the blindfold and hands me a bowl of lumpy porridge decorated with multicolored sprinkles, icing sugar, and whatever canned fruit was in the cupboard. This year's fruit is pears in syrup, a step up from last year's ancient mandarins. Loaded porridge is the closest I will ever get to a birthday cake: a blessing. Annalisa is a terrible cook and a worse baker.

“Thank you.” I take the bowl (surprise number one) and our fingers touch; hers pale, mine brown, both with long fingers, elegant, waiting for jewelry, or a piano. In another life, maybe. Our room is too small for a piano and there is no money for jewels.

“Today is extra-special for two reasons. It’s your birthday, plus . . .” She takes a deep breath and cups my cheek with a shaky hand. “Last night, I had a vision. It was wonderful but we have to do our part to make it come true.”

The lumpy porridge sticks in my throat and stops me from cursing. Annalisa’s visions have taken us into the cane fields to sing to the stars at midnight. They have told us to eat eggs, and only eggs, for four days in a row. They have led us into the heart of a storm to wait for the lightning to send us instructions. The instructions never came.

My mother is out of her mind.

The lightning was eight months ago. Every night since, I have prayed for the spirits to leave Annalisa alone and go whisper directions to someone else.

“Tell me what we have to do.” I use a fake calm voice to mask the anxious feeling gathering inside my chest. I have to stay cool and make my next move carefully. “But hurry. I have to get to school.”

“Hands over your eyes,” she says. “Here comes the second surprise.”

I cover my eyes and peek through the space between my fingers as Annalisa walks across the cracked linoleum floor in

black tailored trousers, a white silk shirt, and a cropped leather jacket with silver buckles. This is her best outfit. This morning she will disappear into the city of Durban and come home with bags of the basics: socks, underwear, soap, and a special something for my birthday.

“Open your eyes now.” She pulls a piece of blue material from her wardrobe and holds it up with a flourish. “Look. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“It” is a folded bedsheet with two holes cut in the fabric for the arms and another, larger hole, for the head. The material is stained and held together by stitches that zigzag in different directions. She drapes the sheet dress across the foot of my cot as if it is made of raw silk and sewn together by cartoon birds with golden needles.

“If you wear this . . .” Her pale skin glows like there’s a fire burning out of control inside her. “All our dreams will come true.”

No. All my nightmares will come true.

“Which dreams are you talking about, exactly?” Annalisa’s dreams can be anything. A brick house with ocean views. A holiday under swaying palms. Cold lobster rolls chilling in a fridge for when the temperature rises . . . if only we had a fridge instead of a cooler.

“Wear this dress,” she says. “And your father will come back to us. Blue was his favorite color. You see?”

No, I do not see.

My father is not an actual person. He is a collage of blurred images thrown together by Annalisa in the half hour before we

go to bed. Less now than when I was little. She would whisper that father was tall as a lala palm and black as a moonless night. He wore a sharp gray suit with a blue tie, iridescent like peacock feathers. He loved to dance, and he stole her breath away when he kissed her.

No matter how pretty a picture she paints of him, there is only one thing that I know for sure about my father.

He is doing fine without me.

“Is he here in Sugar Town?” He isn’t, but I ask just in case. I have to be sure, even though I hate that there is still a tiny shred of hope left in me that he is out there somewhere.

Annalisa smiles wide, and her lips stretch tight across her teeth. “He’s not here yet, but he’ll come when he sees your blue dress.” She grabs my hands and squeezes tight. “The wind will carry the message to him quicker than a text. Get dressed now. It’s time to leave.”

Today is Friday; a school day. On school days, I wear a uniform. Blue skirt or pants, white shirt, black shoes, and white socks. A black sweater or a black blazer for now in winter. Nothing fancy but Miss Gabela, the principal, is clear about the rules: No uniform, no school. Annalisa’s magic sheet will get me suspended, *and* it will frighten away the few friends I have. This is the last day of second term, but the scandal of the blue sheet will survive the holidays and live on to haunt me for the rest of the year.

No thanks. I’ll pass.

“Hurry.” Annalisa tugs at my nightgown. “Lift up your arms and put on your new dress, there’s a good girl.”

“It is not a dress.” I pull away. “It is a sheet with holes in it and I won’t wear it. Ever.”

“You have to wear the dress.” Annalisa’s smile disappears and her expression turns dark. “It’s the only way to get him back.”

We stand face-to-face, breathing hard. Mother is a few inches taller than me with fine blond hair and pale blue eyes that remind me of the sunlit ocean. She is delicate, with slender limbs and narrow hips while I am all bumps and curves. What did the nurses think when I slipped into the world with different skin, different hair, different everything from Annalisa? They must have wondered how the two of us fit together. Sometimes, I look in the mirror and I wonder the same thing. Who am I, and where do I fit in?

“Put the dress on,” Annalisa says. “Do it for me. For us.”

Annalisa angry is scary. Annalisa with a bottomless darkness welling up inside her is terrifying. I see that darkness well up now. More resistance from me and she’ll tumble into it. She will curl up and sleep for days. She won’t talk or eat. I have been to the bottom of the well with her once. I will never go there again—if I can help it.

“Here. Give it.” I take the sheet from her with jerky movements and point to the mirror hanging to the right of the sink. “Don’t forget your lipstick.”

“Of course.” Annalisa digs through her faux-leather hobo bag that acts as a portal to another dimension. At different times she has pulled out an orchid bulb with dangling roots, an owl feather, five mother-of-pearl buttons, a vintage Coca-Cola

yo-yo, and a porcupine quill. I'm surprised my father isn't in there, too.

She takes out a tube of Moroccan Sunset, her favorite color, and leans close to the mirror to put it on. The moment her back is turned, I grab my school uniform out of the bedside drawer and push it deep into my backpack. I slip the sheet dress over my head and bend low to tie the laces of my school shoes, working up a plan to switch the dress for my uniform somewhere. Somehow.

Got it.

"Lil Bit and me are meeting early to finish up an assignment in the school computer lab." The "lab" is a room the size of a cleaning closet. One door. One window and the faint smell of bleach coming up from the concrete floor. Come to think of it, the room might, in fact, have been an actual cleaning closet before the donated computers arrived from a Christian school in Denmark. "Got to run."

"Lil Bit and I," Annalisa automatically corrects. "And we're not finished yet. Sit and I'll do your hair. It has to look the same as in my vision."

Shit.

"Fine." I take a seat and work through next steps. I have a plan. For the plan to work, I'll have to leave home five minutes before Annalisa, and then I'll have to run; not my preferred activity. But run I will. Today I will be the great sprinter Caster Semenya—strong, fast, and focused.

Annalisa wraps a curl around her finger, remembering. "You got your father's hair, that's for sure. Don't ever straighten it."

“I won’t.” No lie. I will keep my kinked-up curls, not because they tie me to an invisible man who haunts our lives, but because straightened hair is an imitation of white hair and I am not white. I am brown with a snub nose sprinkled with freckles. I have hazel eyes flecked with green. I’m a genetic mutt. And I am happy to let my hair be.

“Today, your hair will be a halo,” Annalisa says. “That way, your father will see the angel that we made together.”

On a normal day, she plaits my hair into a single French braid that dangles between my shoulder blades but today is not normal. Today she pulls the metal teeth of an Afro pick through my springy curls to make a bumping ‘fro that casts a shadow onto the kitchen table. It is huge. An alien spacecraft could crash-land on the surface of it and sustain no damage. Beyoncé rocking a Foxy Cleopatra wig has nothing on me. The style is loud and proud, and damn, I gotta admit that it is impressive.

“Last and best of all.” Annalisa dips her hand into her bag and pulls out a tiara. An honest-to-goodness rhinestone tiara with BIRTHDAY PRINCESS spelled out in fake pink diamonds. Hideous.

“You bought this?”

“Of course not.” She anchors the tiara to my head. “I found it lying on the side of the road. It’s ugly but it’s perfect for today. The stones will catch the light and the light will fly over the hills to wherever your father is.”

I can barely breathe I am so angry. The ‘fro I can deal with, but the sheet dress and the tiara are too much! Instead of

screaming, *It's my birthday! Be normal. Just this once*, I make a list in my head. Lists soothe me. Lists are anchors to rational thought. Lists are how I survive.

This morning, I will:

1. Keep calm.
2. Run fast.
3. Get help.

“Catch you this afternoon . . .” I grab my backpack and rush to the door that leads to the lane. Annalisa blows me a goodbye kiss and tucks a strand of blond hair behind her ear. I am stunned to see her so cool and elegant. She belongs in a magazine and I wonder, for the millionth time, how she ended up in this tiny house on a dirt strip that runs between Tugela Way and Sisulu Street. The lane doesn't have a real name. “The lane between Tugela and Sisulu” is description enough for the bill-collectors to find us. When I used to ask Annalisa where she came from, she'd say, *Next door and a million miles away*.

I don't ask anymore.

2

I step outside our one-room house and into a small patch of dirt that murders every plant that's planted in it. Our front yard is a graveyard for living things. Behind me, the corrugated-iron walls of our home glow like a sunrise and rocks and old tires hold down the flat tin roof.

Annalisa calls our room “snug,” as if the word alone has the power to change the fact that we have a single light bulb dangling over the kitchen table and a rusty tap with an off-and-on-again water supply. It's the twenty-first century but we live like the people in black-and-white photographs from the 1950s.

“Ah, shit,” I whisper under my breath. The lane is busy with people on their way to work—or on their way to look for work—in the city. Children skip to school and stray dogs trot between houses, sniffing for scraps. I stand paralyzed in the yard. If I cross the lane I will be seen in my blue sheet. If I stay frozen, I will be seen in my blue sheet. Either way, the word about me will spread like a grass fire.

You heard about that white woman's daughter? Dressed in a sheet. Big hair like an exploded watermelon. Wearing a crown. A crown! Madness runs in the family, my sisters.

The sound of keys rattling inside our shack gets me moving. I sprint out the gate and across the lane. The world around me blurs into shapes and sounds. Mrs. Mashanini's blue front door is all I see. Behind the blue door is sanctuary. I run for it although I've never been inside before.

"Mrs. M!" I pound my fist against the wood. "It's Amandla. Please open up. I need your help."

A long moment passes. Footsteps shuffle across a grass mat and the door opens a crack. Mrs. M's blind aunt peeks through the gap and her blindness spares her the sight of me sweaty and wild-haired.

"Yebo?" she says in Zulu. "Ubani?"

"It's Amandla from across the lane," I answer in Zulu, and check over my shoulder. Our front door is still closed but any second now, it will open. Annalisa has a bus to catch and she is never late. "Auntie, *please* can I come in?"

Blind Auntie steps back and makes space for me to squeeze through. Three children and a woman sleep tangled together on a pullout bed squashed against the wall. Mrs. M's daughter and grandchildren: refugees from a bad husband and bad father who was never home anyway. Six people in one bedroom. Somehow they all fit.

"In the back." Blind Auntie leads me through the room to a narrow kitchen with a woodburning stove and old wooden crates nailed to the walls for storage. Mrs. M, a tall Zulu

woman with a tight-knit Afro, scoops seeds from a small green eggplant the size of a brussels sprout. She's busy and my being here is awkward. In the six years that Annalisa and I have lived on the lane, we have never entered her house. Annalisa prefers to keep our neighbors at a distance.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Mashanini, it's just that . . . uh . . ."

"Your mother had another one of her notions." Mrs. M takes in the whole of me without a flicker of amusement. She is also a retired nurse who keeps an eye on the neighborhood. When Annalisa and I returned from that night in the cane fields, Mrs. M smiled at me through her window, but I looked away.

"Yes. One of her notions." A blush burns my cheeks and the roots of my hair tingle. It shames me to remember Mrs. M watching the two of us dragging ourselves home in the rain barefoot and soaked to the skin.

"Are you here for the day or just for the time being?" Mrs. M asks, and I get the feeling that, if I decided to stay for five hours, she'd somehow find a space for me to sit and wait.

"Just for the time being. I brought my uniform to change into. When my mother leaves, I'll head off to school."

"Auntie, go see if Miss Harden is gone," Mrs. M says, and I wonder how a blind woman will know. Yes, she knits scarves for the children at the Sugar Town Orphanage without dropping a stitch but that's different from spying on our house across the lane.

She shuffles out of the kitchen, and I have to ask: "Mrs. Mashanini, how will she know?"

“That one can hear a pin drop in Zimbabwe,” Mrs. M says. “If your mother is home, Auntie will know. If your mother is gone, Auntie will know. Put on your uniform and get ready to run. You don’t want to miss the first bell.”

I shrug off the blue sheet dress and pull on my school uniform. Standing half-naked in a strange room for even a short while, should embarrass me. Strangely, it does not. Mrs. M sips tea and spreads the eggplant seeds onto a piece of paper to dry. She worked in the emergency ward of the Inkosi Albert Luthuli Hospital for twelve years. A round-hipped brown girl in plain cotton undies is nothing compared to what she must have seen on the wards. Babies being born. The tragic aftermath of traffic accidents. Bones shattered by gunshot wounds. Death delivered by the hour.

“Unyoko akasekho,” Blind Auntie says. *Your mother is gone.* She sits at the kitchen table and takes up knitting the last panel of a scarf made with leftover red, pink, and brown yarn. “But your tap is dripping. Mr. Khoza, there by the red roof? He can fix it.”

Mr. Khoza. Short legs. Wide chest. Bald head. Twin daughters. He lives four doors down from us, but we don’t talk. We nod hello in passing. That is all. *Why make friends,* An-nalisa says, *when we’ll be leaving Sugar Town soon?* That is my mother’s dream. We’re no closer to leaving now than the first time she said it. I can’t even remember the first time she said it.

And now it is my dream, too. At night, I lie awake and I imagine the wide road that will lead me away from the dirt

streets and back alleys of Sugar Town. At the end of that wide road is a brick house with picture windows and separate rooms. On the kitchen table is an invitation to a cousin's birthday party and, on my mobile phone, is a long list of family names and contacts. The house is a safe place for friends and the network of aunts and uncles who exist only in my imagination. Best of all, the house is built in the middle of a far-off town where the color of my skin doesn't mean anything, a town where I am at home in my roundness and my brownness.

I think that escaping from where we are is going to take longer than my mother imagines. Right now, though, being here inside Mrs. M's house, Sugar Town isn't so bad.

"Sit, Amandla. Auntie will do your hair."

I wrestle the tiara from the whirlwind of Afro curls and sit on a low stool next to Blind Auntie, who stops knitting and runs her fingertips over the contours of my skull. She parts my hair down the middle, a first. Then I feel her fingers working in rhythm. It's firm but gentle—no hair pulling, but nice and tight. My breath matches the rhythm of her fingers, until suddenly, she's done. She has plaited the sections into two chunky braids that dangle over my shoulders. Another first. When she's done, she pats my shoulder and goes back to knitting. I'd love to see what I look like, but asking for a mirror is rude, so I don't.

"Go, now," Mrs. M says. "Or you'll be late."

"Thank you. For everything." The words come out stiff and embarrassed at having to ask for refuge inside an already

crowded house. *Nothing comes for free*, Annalisa says. *Favors have to be paid back one way or the other*. How will I repay Mrs. Mashanini's kindness? My pockets are empty. Mrs. M sees my awkwardness.

"Neighbors help each other, Amandla." She pours her aunt a mug of red bush tea, adds six teaspoons of sugar, stirs, and adds another scoop to make seven. "That's ubuntu."

Ubuntu. We learned about it in primary school: the Zulu idea that a person is a person through other people. We are all interconnected in a living, breathing ocean of compassion and humanity. If that is true, then Annalisa and I are the anti-ubuntu: two individuals who live in the community but are not part of it. Maybe it's better that way for everyone.

Social interactions are awkward. Annalisa's voice might drift off when her memory hits a blank spot. Or visitors might be held prisoner by a ten-minute lecture on how to brew the perfect pot of tea. Or she might suddenly stare at the ground. Or at the sky. Or just walk away.

"Come by anytime, my girl. Bring your mother," Mrs. M says. "My door is always open."

I nod, speechless, and creep through the narrow front room, afraid of waking the sleeping children; all under five and too young for school. A strange feeling burns in the pit of my stomach. Not from the lumpy birthday porridge, which was all kinds of wrong, but from Mrs. M's simple *Come by anytime, my girl. Bring your mother*. Mrs. M knows Annalisa is strange—and she doesn't care. And now her daughter has crashed into her

house looking for help. Despite all that, her invitation stands. *Anytime, my girl.*

Outside, the lane is quiet, the sun's rays slant over the rusted rooftops. On either side of me, Mrs. M's winter garden glows green with broad beans, thyme, and winter gem lettuce. Today will be long and hungry with just that spoonful of porridge to keep me fueled.

"Amandla!" Mrs. M is right behind me. I turn and she puts a piece of steamed corn bread with butter in my hand. "Go!" she says. I run without even saying thank you.

The bread is still warm.

Brown, white, and mostly black teenagers pack the schoolyard outside a low classroom building painted with sunflowers on the outside and rolling ocean waves on the inside. Lil Bit, my best and only real friend, waits for me in the shade of the parsley tree where the poor but ambitious students gather.

"What happened?" Lil Bit's gaze narrows on my face, all-seeing. "Your hair looks amazing but you're sweating a river."

Lil Bit's real name is Esther, but she hates that name and Lil Bit suits her better anyway. She is a "little bit" of a girl: dark-skinned and slender as a dancer. Inside her delicate skull, her planet-size brain is always thinking and making connections. I don't need to pretend with her. I lay it all out:

"Annalisa had another vision. She cut up an old blue sheet and tried to get me to wear it to school. The sheet was meant to bring my father back. Blue was his favorite color, apparently."

Lil Bit is the only one I tell about Annalisa's highs and lows. We are both only children. We both have parent problems. I have my mother and her visions. Lil Bit has her father, the Reverend Altone Bhengu, who was caught behind the church altar with a teenage girl named Sunshine. Both of them were naked. That was a year ago, but the scandal is still fresh. Together, Lil Bit and me spend hours plotting a path out of Sugar Town to the University of KwaZulu Natal in Durban, fifteen kilometers away on the map but an epic journey for two girls with no money.

"I think it's nice," Lil Bit says, and I raise an eyebrow.

"Which part is nice exactly?"

"My mother wants my father dead. First, she'd cut off his legs and make him crawl through the streets to beg for forgiveness. Then she'd dump his body in the bush for the wild dogs to eat. Your mother loves your father and she wants him back," Lil Bit says. "That was the nice part of your story."

"I guess . . ." I can't imagine what it would be like to have Annalisa tell me a bedtime story about wild dogs feasting on my mythical father's corpse. I get a love story, instead. Pale girl meets dark boy under a sky full of stars.

We move to the far side of the parsley tree and into the shadow of a concrete water tower with Nelson Mandela's face painted on the side. This is our place, set apart from the others and right under Nelson's beaming smile. Nelson Mandela, aka "Madiba," is our patron saint. He gives us hope that one day, the South Africa he dreamed of will come to pass. His

dream is slow in coming. Money and race divide us. The rich are still rich and the poor are still poor and none of us is truly colorblind. Not yet. The black kids give Lil Bit a hard time for hanging out with “that colored girl” instead of “one of her own.” The white and mixed kids do the same to me. Old habits die hard, I guess.

“Happy birthday, Amandla.” Lil Bit hands me a brown paper parcel tied with twine. “If you don’t like it, I’ll get you something different.”

I have my first genuine smile of the day. “Thanks.” I untie the string and carefully peel open the brown paper wrapping. Lil Bit is poor like me. A gift from her is worth more than the money that she spent to get it. My breath catches at the sight of a square sketch pad and a set of high-quality graphite drawing pencils. Nothing this fine is for sale in Sugar Town.

“You shouldn’t have.” I hug her and then I hug the parcel to my chest, torn between delight and guilt. “You could have been caught.”

“Please!” She snorts with amusement. “This girl never gets caught, Amandla. The lady in the store followed me around for ages but she had no idea who she was dealing with. The Lightning Thief.”

Lil Bit has a quick brain and even quicker fingers. Her talent for theft borders on the supernatural and, much as I’d like to scold her for taking stupid risks, I aim to keep the sketch pad and pencils. They are perfect, and now they are mine. Besides, Lil Bit only “shops” in the city on special occasions and never

here in Sugar Town where the store owners scrape by on the thin trade that comes through the doors. She's a thief with a conscience, which helps to ease mine.

"Thanks again." I pull her into another quick hug as the morning bell rings. "I love my present. You're the first person I'll sketch."

She shakes her head, *Not me*, and her lack of confidence is painful. I want to tell her that the Bible is wrong; that the sins of the father are not visited on the daughter. Reverend Bhengu's sins are his alone. She is Esther Junia "Lil Bit" Bhengu, a separate and sovereign being with a heart and a mind that are all her own.

"I want to try to capture your inner criminal," I tell her as we walk side by side to class.

"Sorry, my sister. I have to stay invisible. It's the only way to be free."

3

After school, Lil Bit waits outside the girls' toilets while I pull the blue sheet dress over my uniform. Meeting Annalisa straight off the city bus is a birthday tradition, and if she were to see me not wearing her magical outfit, she'd get upset and start asking questions. Resigned to being stared at, I slip on my blazer and step out into the yard. Lil Bit whistles low and laughs.

"Tuck the sheet into your skirt and button up your blazer," she says. "When your mother gets off the bus, pull the sheet out and let it hang over your uniform. If she asks, tell her that Miss Gabela made you wear the blazer. That way she'll never know that you went against her."

"Brilliant!" I follow Lil Bit's instructions, glad to get back to a semi-normal state of dress and extra-glad that she's my best friend rather than my enemy. She'd get away with any crime she committed.

We walk through narrow dirt streets with tin shacks and identical government-built plasterboard homes crowding in on

either side of us. To the east, is a shipping container graveyard, and to the west, the endless fields of sugarcane that give the town its name. The sky is flat and vast above us and somehow, lonely. As if we needed reminding that we live on the fringe of a great city but are not a part of it.

We cross the outer limits of town and head for an isolated bus stop on the edge of the fields. Minivans run into Durban from Abdullah Ibrahim Street but the public bus that drops passengers off two kilometers from the center of town is cheaper. And, where Annalisa is concerned, cheaper is better.

“Here it comes.” Lil Bit points to the white coach moving through the young cane stalks. We step back into the vacant land behind us as the bus pulls up. The doors swing open. Any minute now a smiling Annalisa will appear, weighed down by shopping bags. Factory workers and sweaty dockworkers in dirty overalls pour out. No Annalisa. She never gets off the bus this late. I scan the windows for her. The bus is mostly empty now with only a few passengers left.

Then Annalisa stumbles down the stairs with strange, jerky movements. No smile. No shopping bags. For a moment I think she’s drunk but I know she doesn’t drink.

I forget about untucking the sheet dress and rush forward to grab her arms. “What’s wrong? Are you sick?”

She staggers and leans her weight against me. I stumble to the side and Lil Bit pulls me straight to help me regain my balance. We move away from the bus and into the vacant lot next to the road.

“No,” she says, straightening up. “Take me home.”

The bus pulls away and Lil Bit and me guide her onto the road that leads to Sugar Town. She walks slowly, stopping every few minutes to catch her breath. Her skin is even more pale than usual and her eyes are puffy and red from crying.

“What happened?” I ask with a lump in my throat.

“I need to lie down. I need to sleep.” She clutches her oversized bag to her stomach. “Did your father come home?”

“No,” I say. “He didn’t.”

“We’ll try again next year,” she says. “Next year he’ll come back to us.”

“Next year for sure.” I guide her into scrappy Makeba Street and I wonder if wearing the blue dress for real would have brought Father back to us and kept Annalisa from falling apart. It’s a stupid thought but it sticks in my head, the idea that whatever happened to Mother in Durban is my fault. I made this happen.

“Easy now,” Lil Bit whispers when Annalisa stumbles over the uneven ground. “Almost home, Miss Harden.”

“Just a few more minutes,” I tell Mother, who wears a dazed expression. “Keep hold of my hand.” I’m trying not to attract too much attention along Makeba Street but we get strange looks from a few people anyway.

Lil Bit and I steer her into the dirt lane that runs between Sisulu Street and Tugela Way. We pass Mrs. Mashanini, digging fresh chicken manure into her garden. She pulls off her gloves and rushes to the fence, concerned by Annalisa’s blank expression and slow steps.

“Is your mother sick, Amandla?” she asks.

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” I tell Mrs. Mashanini. “She got off the bus like this.”

“Let me see.” Mrs M comes out her gate into the lane. She grabs Annalisa’s wrist to get her pulse. “Steady,” she mutters, and gently cups Annalisa’s face between her palms, scanning and analyzing. “No physical injury,” she says. “Just grief. And sadness.”

I see it, too. A sadness as wide and deep as the ocean. How do I stop her from drowning in it?

“Time is the only cure,” Mrs M says, as if she’s read my mind. “And rest. Take her home. Let her sleep. Give her warm food to eat.”

I can do that. Me, cooking dinner at the stove while Annalisa grabs a nap between three fifteen and four is part of our normal after-school routine. “Thanks, Mrs. Mashanini.” I move quickly to our house and pull Mother through the yard. She stares at the red paint flaking off the front door with a faraway look. She’s here but not here. I take her bag and dig through it, searching for the key. My fingers brush against a thick stack of paper and I pull the bag open to see what’s inside.

“What in heaven’s name?” Lil Bit says over my shoulder.

In the bag is a wad of cash held together by a thin rubber band. It’s more money than I have ever seen at one time, though that’s not saying much.

“Standing outside with this kind of cash is asking for trouble.” Lil Bit checks the length of the lane with narrowed eyes. “Get in the house.”

True. I find the key and open the door. Inside, I flick on the overhead light, an extravagant use of electricity when it is still light out. The tin room brightens. Annalisa blinks and comes back to the present long enough to throw herself, fully clothed, onto her narrow cot. She snuggles down with a deep sigh. Her breath slows and, inside of a minute, she is fast asleep. I creep into the bedroom area, carefully take off her shoes, and place them neatly at the foot of the bed. The soles of Annalisa's feet are damaged, the skin covered in circular scars that look like miniature moon craters. I have never been told how she got them.

Lil Bit and I stand on opposite sides of the kitchen table with Annalisa's bag between us, fat with questions and secrets. How much money is there and where does it come from? Should I look inside or not?

"Yes, you should count it," Lil Bits says with cool logic. "Your mother won't know and I won't say a thing."

"You're right. She'll never know." I pull the cash from the cavernous leather bag and place it gently onto the table, as if the money is sleeping and might run out the door if I wake it up. Next, I pull out a crushed piece of white paper, lipstick, a pen, and a broken fortune cookie with the fortune missing. My usual birthday presents: a new "best dress," a new "best pair of shoes," and seven pairs of sensible cotton underwear are missing, along with the usual shopping bags.

"How much do you think is there?" Lil Bit asks as I flick off the elastic band holding the cash together. The rand notes are

soft against my fingertips. Not crisp like I was expecting. I flex my hands to stop them from shaking and I count. The bills are a mix of big and small denominations and all of them are wrinkled.

“Those notes look like a cow chewed them,” Lil Bit says. “Money from the bank is different. Cleaner.”

“Shh . . . I’ll lose count.” I build a pile of messy bills and make a final tally. “Forty-five thousand rand.”

“Enough to last a few months,” Lil Bit says. “If you’re careful.”

Living costs money. Annalisa works two days a week at Mr. Gupta’s law office, and stocks shelves at Mr. Chan’s Dreams Come True Variety Store once in a while. I never did the math before. Her wages are not enough to keep us in a one-room shack with two beds, a gas stove, and a pit toilet in the back yard. The money on the table must help to pay for our food and shelter and my school fees.

“Where do you think she got it?” Lil Bit asks as I snap the rubber band around the wrinkled notes with jerky movement.

“I have no idea,” I say. “She goes into Durban a couple of times a year. It might be to collect the money. I can’t say for sure.”

Lil Bit shifts in her chair, uncomfortable. She’s holding something back. Something big. Something I need to know.

“What have you heard?”

“Uh . . . it’s all rubbish, Amandla. Gossip.”

“Tell me,” I say.

Lil Bit hesitates. She rubs her eyes. The moment drags out in awkward silence. I was right. Whatever she’s holding back is big and she needs time to build up the courage to speak.

“Okay.” She traces a scratch on the surface of the table with her fingernail. “Here it is. People think your ma acts all posh but that she’s the same as the women who wait for customers behind the soccer stands at nighttime. The fact that she goes into Durban to be with men for money makes it worse . . . it’s like she’s too good for Sugar Town.”

“Oh my God!” I’m stunned by the news, and furious. If my father was white, the gossips wouldn’t cast Annalisa in that light. Madiba said that all relationships are equal in the eyes of the law, but things are different down here on the ground. A white woman who sleeps with a black man is a gold digger if the man is famous and a tramp if he’s not. Love and tenderness don’t come into the equation.

The insult cuts me up. Some people believe that Annalisa goes into town every couple of months to sell the only thing she has to offer: herself. Not only is she odd, she is also a prostitute. The loaded glances I’ve had my whole life take on a new meaning. The gossips think I might be the result of an accident with a stranger.

My face heats up and I want to hit something. If people knew Annalisa at all, they’d know how wrong that idea is. But they don’t know her. That’s the problem. She is a mystery even to me, and that lets doubts creep into my mind. The money is real and I have no idea where it came from. But I can’t bring myself to believe the rumors, even as a voice in my head reminds me that I know nothing for certain about Annalisa’s life before me.

“None of what they say is true.” I scramble to make words. “Annalisa wouldn’t let anyone touch her like that.”

“Rumors, like I said.” Lil Bit sighs. “It’s good that your mother doesn’t care about the gossip. My ma takes everything she hears about my father to heart and, some days, she doesn’t leave the house.”

I push the money away from me and the white piece of paper floats to the floor. Lil Bit picks it up and gives it to me, curious. I smooth the paper flat with my palm and read out loud. “*Saturday. 12-1 p.m. 211 Kenneth Kaunda Road, Durban North. Use the private car park entrance at the rear.*”

“Any ideas what it means?” Lil Bit asks, but my mind is focused on one simple fact. Annalisa has a secret life that involves sneaking through private entryways and coming out with a stack of money.

“Do you think it’s true . . . What people say?” I ask Lil Bit in a shaky voice. “Annalisa leaves home with an empty bag and comes back with a stack of notes. Explain that to me . . . I mean . . .”

“Shush.” Lil Bit holds up her hand like she’s stopping traffic. “Think, Amandla. If your ma can make that much money in one day, why are the two of you still living here? Why not go into town once a week and move the two of you out to a nice house with ocean views.”

“I don’t know anything about her, Lil Bit, not where she’s from or the kind of life that she had before me. I can guess that it was better than this, but that’s not the same as knowing anything for sure.”

Lil Bit turns the piece of paper and reads over the slanted letters. “This is your chance to find out. Check what’s at this address and go from there.”

Internet connection and electricity supply are intermittent in our township, not that it matters. Neither Lil Bit nor I own a mobile. Annalisa's old Nokia with the cracked flip screen might as well be a brick. It is always out of credit or power: usually both.

Lil Bit checks the clock on the wall. It's 3:42. "The school computer lab is open till four," she says. "If we run, we'll get there in time to do a search."

My arms and legs grow heavy. I live with Annalisa's strange turns and blank memories every day. Now I have the chance to fill in parts of Mother's story but I'm afraid of what I might find.

"I don't know if I want to know, Lil Bit."

"It's up to you, Amandla." She moves to the door. "At least once a day, I wish that my father's secret had stayed a secret. If it had, my mother would be happy and my father would still be living at home with us. We'd be together but . . ."

B·U·T. Three small letters that have the power to change whatever came before them.

"But what?" I ask.

"You either live in the light of the truth or stay blind in the darkness." Lil Bit parrots her preacher father. "Those are your choices, Amandla. Whatever you decide, I'll be waiting for you outside the computer lab till it closes."

She opens the door and a flood of afternoon light silhouettes her tiny frame. Her tight brown curls make a soft halo around her head. Give her wings, and she'd pass for an angel, but not the kind with a harp and a smile. No, Lil Bit is an angel of the avenging kind, armed with a fiery sword.

Goose bumps creep up my arms. Reverend Bhengu has left the township but his talent for laying down *the word* at the right moment lives on in his daughter, but amplified. Lil Bit is a powerhouse with the lights just turning on. When the time comes for her to shine, I hope I'm there to witness it. She turns and walks outside. She gives me time to make up my mind. I stay seated. My feet are too heavy to move. Dust swirls in the laneway. Lil Bit walks through the front gate and in the direction of school.

“Wait.” I jump up and rush outside.

4

We reach the computer lab stairs, sweating and out of breath but with enough time to look up the address in Durban North. I pull the crumpled paper from my pocket and silently ask Mandela on the water tower to give me the strength to deal with whatever I find out about my mother. A door slams and Mrs. Zuma, the thickset Zulu teacher who runs the learning extension program, locks the door to the computer lab in the library with a quick turn of the key.

“Wait . . .” Lil Bit puffs. “We have time. Five minutes at least.”

“Too late, girls.” Mrs. Zuma drops the key into her handbag. “It will take me five minutes to open the door and start the machines, and by then, it will be time for me to close up again. Go home. It’s Friday night and I have things to do.”

Arguing would be a waste of time. Mrs. Zuma is done for the term and ready to start the midyear holidays early. We have to find another way to get information. Lil Bit and me hang out with kids who have limited credit on their phones. Begging for

data is the same as begging for a cigarette on the street corner. It is a sign you've hit the bottom and Lil Bit and me won't do it.

"Have a good holiday," Mrs. Zuma says, and walks off with light steps. Two student-free weeks is a shot of summer sunshine in the dead of winter. She can't wait to get away.

"So much for that," Lil Bit says as a soccer ball sails over her head and hits my right shoulder. The ball belongs to soccer-mad Goodness Dumisa who plays goalie for the amateur Sugar Town Shakers.

"Hey!" Goodness yells from the yard. "Kick it back to me."

I kick the ball badly and Goodness laughs at my lack of skills. Sports is not my strong point. Sports and I are, in fact, sworn enemies that are forced to spend one torturous hour together every week at school. Lil Bit is faster and better coordinated than me, but not by much; it's another reason the two of us stay on the sidelines, both on and off the sports field. In contrast, Goodness is tall and lanky with dyed-blond braids and killer speed.

"The holidays started an hour ago and the two of you are already back at school, begging to be let in. What do you do for fun?" Goodness kicks the ball back to me, which I don't expect. She runs with a group of girls who, like her, are at the top of the social ladder. Her father, Mr. Dumisa, owns the Drinking Hole, a popular bar a block down from the Build 'Em Up timber yard, which he also owns. The Dumisa family is Sugar Town royalty. Lil Bit and I are, well, *not*.

"Amandla and me have fun." Lil Bit kneels down and reties her shoelaces. A classic sign of nerves. "We walk and talk and

read books and—” She stops short, realizing that every word she says confirms that we are dull bookworms who haunt the school library in our off-hours. She rushes to add, “Amandla needs to do an internet search. That’s why we’re here. Not for schoolwork.”

I appreciate her trying to save us from the broke-and-boring list that the other students have written us down on in their heads. It’s too late. We top the list every term. Every year. Goodness pulls the latest iPhone from her skirt pocket and swipes the screen. “The Wi-Fi signal is strong but who knows how long that will last? Use my mobile to do a search, if you want.”

Yes, I do want, but what if the address is for a topless bar or a charity that gives out secondhand clothes?! Being poor isn’t a sin but it certainly is a shame.

“Take it, Amandla. I promise not to look at the history.” Goodness holds the phone out and the fake diamonds sprinkled over the silver case catch the sunlight. Goodness plays soccer with the boys and gets right up in their faces if they question her right to be a goalie but the jeweled case reminds me that she’s also a township princess.

“Thanks.” I take the mobile and, a second too late to hide it from the others, I notice that my hand is shaking. After years of begging Annalisa for answers about her past, I sense that I might finally be near some part of the truth. Goodness steps away to give us privacy. It doesn’t help. I feel sick to my stomach.

“Here, let me do it.” Lil Bit takes the phone and types in the address, already memorized in her remarkable brain. I take a deep breath and wait for the bad news. Or the good news.

Or, knowing Annalisa, the *that doesn't tell me anything of use* news. My mother, the mystery.

“Oh . . . ,” Lil Bit says, her eyebrows raised. “Come see for yourself.”

She cups her palm over the screen to cut the glare and a fenced-off construction sight comes into focus. I sigh. An unfinished building makes perfect sense. Where Annalisa's secrets are concerned, nothing comes easy.

“Let's check the neighbors.” Lil Bit scrolls her finger across the image to search for clues to the building's identity. The Street View expands to show the entire suburb of Durban North with roads shooting off in different directions. Another swipe brings up a map of the entire KwaZulu Natal region, crisscrossed with main roads and rivers that run to the sea.

“Hellfire . . . ,” Lil Bit whispers in frustration, ever the preacher's perfect daughter. Goodness comes closer and holds her hand out for the phone.

“Let me see,” she says. “What are you looking for?”

“A three-sixty Street View of that address in Durban North.” Lil Bit inches away from Goodness who's sweaty from soccer practice. The move surprises me. Lil Bit is polite and hates to offend anyone, which makes her behavior unusual.

“Here we go.” Goodness brings up the picture of the building site and slowly rotates the image to the right. “Four floors at least. An elevator shaft. Steel scaffolding. Safety fences and portable toilets. The developers are spending serious money on the project.”

“How do you—”

“My brothers build things,” she says. “I know construction.”

The Build 'Em Up sells cement mix, iron sheets, bricks, wood, and wheelbarrows. There's a piece of Dumisa material in almost every building in Sugar Town.

“Can you tell what it is?” I ask.

“Nope,” Goodness says. “Just that it's being built right.”

Lil Bit shifts her attention from the screen to me. “Go tomorrow and see for yourself, Amandla. It's the only way to find out what's there. I'd go with you, but I agreed to look after the Naboni children from nine to one and it's too late to back out now.”

I groan. Mrs. Naboni and the other Christ Our Lord Is Risen! Gospel Hall ladies are vipers who are happy to gossip about Lil Bit's family on the street corners. Then they have the nerve to use Lil Bit as a free babysitting service. “*Say no to them,*” I tell her. Or at least make them pay for it. Babysitting is work. Mrs. Naboni has five children, all of them devil spawn.

“None of my business,” Goodness says. “But, depending on how long ago this image was taken, the building might already be finished. Take a shot at goal, brah. Get off the bench. It's the only way to win a match.”

This is the most that Goodness has ever spoken to Lil Bit or me. She is tough and loud and has three older brothers who guard her like she is made out of gold and the world is out to steal her. I admit to myself that sometimes I want to be her. Or at least be close to her. I'd love a brother. Just one. I'd love a mother other women rush to for advice and a house that doesn't let the cold in.

“Why are you being nice to us?” Lil Bit demands out of nowhere. “Are you bored with your real friends?”

I hit Lil Bit on the shoulder. “Girl, shut up!”

“It’s okay,” Goodness says to me. Then she turns to Lil Bit. “I talk to everyone,” she says, “but *you* don’t. The two of you are in your own little world. Too good for the rest of us?”

“You’re a Dumisa,” Lil Bit says. “You have no idea what it’s like to be us.”

Goodness rolls her eyes, like, *Please, child, you don’t understand a thing*. Annalisa says that *Into each life some rain must fall*. I bet Goodness has problems of her own that we will never know about. She bounces the soccer ball from one knee to the other for a long while. Lil Bit chews her bottom lip. I wait for Goodness to turn and walk away.

“I understand what you mean,” she finally says. “But being me isn’t what you think. From the outside everything is—”

A sharp whistle cuts across the conversation and we turn to find Mr. Mgazi, the school cleaner and night watchman, standing at the gates with his wife, who helps him sweep the classrooms and rake the yard.

“Out, my sisters,” Mr. Mgazi calls. “School is closed.”

Goodness tucks the soccer ball under her arm and dust smears across her school uniform. She doesn’t notice or doesn’t care.

“I’ll be working at the Build ‘Em Up or practicing at the field all through the holidays.” Goodness turns toward the gates and says over her shoulder: “Come get me if you want to hit up Miss Gabela’s lending library. I like books, too.”

“Sure enough,” I say, and Lil Bit grabs hold of my arm to stop me from moving forward. Goodness keeps walking and we stay still. “What’s gotten into you?” I whisper. “She was just being nice.”

“But why?” she whispers back. “What does she want?”

“I don’t know, but having a rich friend can’t hurt.”

“And what happens when she decides to dump us? Have you thought about that?”

Lil Bit might be right but it doesn’t feel that way. I say, “Who cares? We’ll still have each other. The two of us are enough.”

The words come out sweetly and with confidence but, deep down, they don’t feel right either. Goodness said that Lil Bit and me make up our own world. Friends with different voices and different points of view could help expand our “little” world into a bright, new universe.

“Walk me home.” I hurry Lil Bit through the school gates. Wanting more is dangerous. Wanting more will only lead to disappointment. I have to be happy with what I have here and now.

“Will you go tomorrow?” Lil Bit asks when we turn into the lane between Tugela and Sisulu. “Just to see what’s there.”

“Yes, I’ll go.” I decide to learn what I can. And there’s the matter of personal pride. How can I expect Lil Bit to stand up to the church ladies and be strong if I can’t get myself to Durban North in broad daylight?

“Come tell me what you find out,” Lil Bit says. “Sunday, after church.”

“Why wait? I’ll come straight over to your house from the bus.” I open the door and peek inside at Annalisa, still sleeping. “If Mrs. Naboni asks you to stay longer, tell her no. You have places to go and people to see.”

“It’s not Mrs. Naboni. Tomorrow is the one-year anniversary of Father getting caught with that girl. I need to make sure that my mother doesn’t do anything stupid.”

I understand difficult mothers and hard choices.

“Sorry about your ma. I’ll see you after church on Sunday.”

Lil Bit nods and walks in the direction of Amazulu Street, where she lives in a one-bedroom house that’s crowded with reminders of the Reverend Bhengu. Hymnals and military history books. The small desk where he wrote his sermons. The ashtray he used to stub out his cigarettes. His one vice, they thought. They were wrong. Lil Bit’s mother could sell it all but she refuses.

She needs to burn everything, Annalisa tells me. That’s the fastest way to heal a wound. With fire.

Lil Bit waves from the corner of Tugela Way and disappears into the pale shadows that fall across the broken shacks and the children playing football in the dirt. I rush inside and pull the new sketchbook and pencils from my backpack. The image of Lil Bit standing in our doorway earlier, backlit by slanting rays of sunlight, fierce and supernatural, is still sharp in my mind. I sit and I draw.

5

The Amanda Bollard Institute is six stories of brick and glass surrounded by a garden of aloes that blend together to make a living palette of reds, grays, and greens. It's beautiful. Nothing like it exists in Sugar Town. The word *institute* makes me wonder. An institute is for research and learning. An institute is where you go when that lump that you found growing inside your chest gets bigger and only a specialist doctor can fix it. When Annalisa or I get sick we line up outside the Sugar Town clinic and wait for hours to see a nurse, or if God is good, a volunteer doctor who wants an adventure.

There is no line outside the Bollard building; nor are there crying children with chapped lips strapped to their mother's backs. This institute is for rich people and we are not rich. Annalisa calls our secondhand clothing "vintage," but that doesn't change the fact that we keep our long-term savings in a coin jar. Why has Mother come to this place? Unless . . .

Is Annalisa sick? Is she dying? Is her being here somehow my fault? My heart skips a beat and suddenly it's hard to breathe.

The one thing that scares me more than having to take care of Annalisa and her problems is losing her. I will not survive on my own in Sugar Town.

Stop. Lil Bit's imaginary voice cuts through the panic rising in my chest. *Take a breath and blow it out again, the way I showed you.*

After Reverend Bhengu skipped town with his pregnant, underage girlfriend, Lil Bit had panic attacks that left her curled into a ball and gasping for air. After the first attack in the schoolyard, we moved to the far side of the parsley tree, under the shadow of Nelson's smile, where she felt safe. It was there that she taught herself how to "self-calm," a technique that she found inside *Peace Within*, a self-help book that she shoplifted from Crystals and Candles, a hippie shop in Glenwood. *I needed help*, she said. *So I helped myself.*

I take a long, deep breath. Cars drive past on the road. Then I hear a minivan door sliding open and footsteps on the pavement.

"Thanks. You got me here in record time." Annalisa's voice drifts down the block to where I stand, tucked between two buildings. She's arrived. When I left her sleeping this morning, I wasn't sure that she'd keep the date written on the paper. And, much as I'd like to run to her, I hold still and wait for her to get ahead. As far as she knows, I'm helping Lil Bit weed her mother's garden. On the first day of the holidays! It's funny what some parents will believe if it makes them feel good about their children.

I pop my head out from the nook where I'm hiding and watch Annalisa cross the road. She lives in a township but

you'd never guess it from the confident way she moves through the world. The tall buildings and upmarket shops do not faze her. She grew up surrounded by beautiful things, I think. Her elegant accent is one hundred percent real, not put-on like some people in the township think.

She double-checks the address on the paper that I slipped back into her bag yesterday afternoon and stops to take a deep breath of her own. This is her first time here, too, but there's no way to tell how she feels about it. She turns into a small side street that leads to the rear of the Amanda Bollard Institute. Following her is the only way to find out what's going on.

A gap in the traffic opens up, and I cross the road with my heart hammering inside my chest and my mouth bone dry. Annalisa has disappeared into the building and it takes a moment for me to gather the courage to follow. My feet step one in front of the other, heavy and slow, like I'm walking through a river of honey.

A car horn brings me out of my thoughts. In the lane and inches from my right hip is a sleek black sports car with stylish cat-eye headlights. It is gorgeous. Even growling slowly next to me it sounds as if it's going a hundred miles an hour.

The driver flicks his suntanned hand to get me out of the way. I turn to the side to make room for the car and I catch a glimpse of him: a silver-haired man with a hard, serious face behind the steering wheel. He wears sunglasses but my instincts tell me his eyes won't be friendly either. A shiver runs down my spine as the car accelerates past me onto the main road. If I never see that white man again, it will be too soon.

A few steps ahead of me is the entrance to an underground parking lot with a security gate and two black guards on duty. The smaller of the guards comes out to meet me with a clipboard tucked under his arm.

“Name?” he asks, and my mouth freezes. Amandla Harden is not on the list. I know that for sure. Mother isn’t in the parking area or waiting by the elevator behind the guard’s station. I take the risk that her name is on the list.

“I was supposed to meet my mother, Annalisa Harden, but my, uh . . .” What could hold up a respectable girl from a respectable suburb on a Saturday morning? Swimming? Horseback riding? Target practice? I tell a lie with a splash of truth. “My art class finished late and I missed my bus.”

The guard double-checks the list while I wait. I’m torn between wanting to get inside the building and running home. How Lil Bit manages to stay cool while shoplifting is beyond me.

“Look. See her face?” the bigger guard, tall and broad across the shoulders, says to his companion in Zulu. “That one belongs to the queen. Let her in.”

“*Eish!*” The small guard makes a surprised sound and says in Zulu, “You are right, my friend. Imagine that. A house sparrow among the white seagulls.”

Okay. Now I am officially confused. Who is the queen and what do house sparrows and seagulls have to do with anything?

“Sixth floor. Room 605.” The big guard walks me to the elevator and pushes the up button. Despite his intimidating size and shaved head, his manner is gentle; a rare thing in a powerfully built older man. That white driver in his fancy car could

take lessons in good manners from this low-paid guard in a green uniform. I shrug the tension from my shoulders and I wait. Elevators, in my limited experience, are a hit-and-miss affair. Some creak and jolt. Others move so slowly that taking the stairs is a better option. This one arrives quickly and silently. The doors glide open smoothly. Goodness was right about one thing: this building was built right.

“Please tell the madam that Cyril sends his regards.” Cyril, the big guard, holds the doors open with a bright smile and I can’t help but check over my shoulder to see if there is someone else standing behind me. The lift is empty. The smile was meant for me, a stranger.

“I’ll pass your message on to the madam,” I say as the doors close and the lift shoots upward. Inside, the elevator has smooth stainless-steel walls and a single glass panel with the image of a mopani tree etched onto it in silver. The tree branches spread out over a hill, inviting tired travelers to come and rest in the shade awhile. The image serves no function but it holds my attention. It is art for art’s sake. A silky electronic tone chimes and the elevator doors open onto a hallway that smells of fresh flowers and antiseptic.

The white corridor is eerily quiet, unlike the Sugar Town Clinic, which rings with crying babies and old aunties complaining about the pain in their hips and knees. The Amanda Bollard Institute is posh compared to the clinic, but it is still a place for sick people, and all their hopes and fears.

A second wave of panic swells inside me and I beat it down. *Live in the light of the truth or stay blind in the darkness*, Lil Bit

said biblically. That's the choice I have to make. If Annalisa is sick, I want to know about it. If she's dying, I want to be present for every crazy minute of the time we have left together.

An arrow painted on the wall points the way to rooms 600 to 615. I follow the arrow. The hush gives way to a nurses' station. A skinny Indian nurse looks up and then goes back to her computer screen. I follow the arrow around a corner. A little farther and I see a large door in the quietest part of the hallway. It's hard to knock on 605 without knowing what's waiting on the other side but I raise my fist and rap my knuckles gently against the wood. The sound is loud in the empty space.

"Come in," a woman answers in a crisp voice that reminds me of Annalisa. I turn the handle and step into a bright room filled with fresh flowers. White roses bloom next to a flat-screen television. Red proteas decorate a glass table. Sunflowers glow yellow in the sunlight that breaks through the open curtains.

My eyes adjust to the bright and dark areas of the room, which is huge. On the right side and away from the window is a hospital bed, and sitting in the bed is a gray-haired old lady wearing a blue Japanese robe. Blood roars in my ears. The woman is a stranger but the shape of her face, the wide set of her mouth, and the sharp angles of her cheekbones are achingly familiar. She is future me, hooked up to machines and decades older.

And she's white.

My mouth opens and closes, like a fish on land. The woman's mouth does the same, both of us lost for words. I close my

eyes and open them wide again to make sure that I'm seeing straight. The woman is clear and in focus. She is real and she is right across the room from me.

"Come closer," she says. "Let's take a good look at each other."

I walk in a trance and stop halfway to the bed. The woman holds out her hands, but I stay where I am. Girls from my neighborhood do not run into the arms of strangers.

She drops her hands into her lap. "Do you know who I am, Amandla?"

My name, coming from her mouth, sounds delicate and rare somehow. *Amandla* is the Zulu word for *power*, but the way she says it, it's more like the name of a rare bird or a flower. No one in her world is called Amandla. I take three steps closer to the bed, pulled by an invisible thread.

"I'm your grandmother," she says when I stay quiet. "The other grandchildren call me Mayme but you can call me anything. Granny. Amanda. Whatever you like."

Annalisa told me I was named after the kindest woman she ever knew. An angel married to a gargoyle who keeps her locked in a stone fortress by the ocean. I thought it was a made-up story but now I'm not so sure. Amanda . . . Amandla . . . There's a connection.

I'm frozen. Delighted. Afraid. I don't believe her. Then I do. Then I *know in my bones* that this old lady is my grandmother.

A sudden new feeling wells up inside me. I am furious.

What the hell, brah? There are other grandchildren and another family that lives somewhere in rich-white-people land? My

mother told me nothing. Nothing. Nothing to prepare me for this. Annalisa's family. My family. And I never knew.

I think of all that I've missed. Birthday parties. Family dinners. Lazy Sunday walks that lead aunts and cousins back to the same house. A long wooden table with a seat reserved just for me. The stuff of my dreams.

"You must have a million questions," Mayme says. "Ask me whatever you like and I'll try to answer."

I do have questions. Maybe not a million but a few. I've been kept in the dark for fifteen years and screaming questions at an old lady in a hospital bed is not the proper way to get information. I stop and I breathe. Mayme tilts her head and patiently waits for me to say something. The silence between us grows. It's awkward but I don't know where to start. Then I clear my throat and decide to start easy and build up to the hard questions.

"How many cousins do I—"

The bathroom door opens and glass shatters on the tiled floor.

"Amandla!" It's Annalisa's voice. "You shouldn't be here. It's not safe. You have to leave. Right now."

Her hands twitch by her side and her body vibrates with fear. Of what, I cannot imagine. "Everything is all right." I talk her down. "See? It's just Mayme and me and we're both fine."

Annalisa steps over the broken vase and the pink lilies scattered across the bathroom tiles. She rushes across the room and grabs my arm hard. She tugs, red-faced and panicked. I dig in my heels. "You don't understand. You have to leave right now."

“I just got here.”

“There’s no time to explain. He can’t know that you’re here. If he comes back—” She frowns and the blood drains from her face. “You followed me . . . Did he see you come in?”

“Who?” I ask, more frustrated than angry. I’ve seen Annalisa face down rude men with an icy glare. Whoever she is talking about has turned her inside out.

“My father,” she says.

“I don’t know your father. What does he look like?”

“Silver hair. Suntanned,” Mayme says. “You might have seen him in the parking garage.”

Silver-haired and suntanned. I think of the white man who beeped at me in the laneway.

“I saw him and he saw me,” I say, and Annalisa’s fingers dig into my arm, deep enough to leave a bruise. I peel her fingers open. “Listen to me.” I keep my voice low, afraid of sending her into a panic. “He drove past me, but he didn’t see me. Not really. I was just in his way. I was nobody. He won’t come back because he’s already forgotten about the brown girl in the driveway.”

It’s a strange thing to say about the man who, it turns out, is my grandfather, but it makes Annalisa laugh. I don’t see the funny side. Annalisa and I are always the outsiders—why do we have to be? Wouldn’t it be lovely, just once, to live in the warm heart of things? To be part of a family.

“Everyone relax. Amandla, come. Sit by me.” Mayme pats a spot on the side of her bed, which is wider than my single cot. This time I make it all the way across the room, though I

remain standing. “I’ll order tea. Everything is better with tea and cake, don’t you think?”

Well, yes, though I am more interested in the fact that tea is being ordered and delivered to a hospital room. Maybe that’s how it’s done in city hospitals.

“Tea would be nice.” Annalisa retreats to the bathroom and bends down to gather the spray of pink lilies scattered across the tiles. “I’ll clear this up.”

I go to help but Mayme takes my hand. “Stay,” she says. “I’ll get proper help to clean up the mess.”

Proper is one of Annalisa’s favorite words. Proper tea is made with tea leaves and not with tea bags. Proper beds are made with “hospital corners” that keep the sheets tucked tightly to the mattress, like they are on Mayme’s bed—here in this hospital. Annalisa is religious about keeping our room clean and in order. She grew up in a house where everything was proper. I’ve always wondered where she learned to sweep, scrub, and make our beds so well. I imagine her as a little girl, following the maid around the rooms of a large house and making a game out of helping her to make the beds properly.

“What do you know about our family?” Mayme asks after ordering tea and cleaners via the telephone on her bedside table. As easy as that.

“Not much. When I ask Annalisa where she’s from, she says, ‘Close but a million miles away.’ I used to think she was hiding something but there are times when I think she doesn’t remember where she came from herself.”

Mayme nods, familiar with the sudden headaches that strike Annalisa when she tries to remember the past. I throw Mother a quick look, nervous about where this conversation might lead, and find her standing by the window with a bruised lily in her hand. She's caught in a moment, suspended in time. A thought strikes me. If Mayme is aware of Annalisa's fragile state of mind then, surely, she must be aware that we live in a settlement that's stuck between endless cane fields and a shipping-container graveyard.

"Have you been to Sugar Town?" I ask.

"No."

"Then you don't know how we live."

"Is that why you came here today, Amandla? To ask for money?" Mayme asks, and I flush hot. The money question comes out of nowhere. It makes me angry enough to spit. An old white lady thinks a township girl is out to rob her.

Tell me something new, brah.

"Listen, Granny . . ." I lean close, angry. "You don't know me, and I don't know you, so let me lay things out. I'm not here for *you*. I tracked Annalisa to this hospital because I thought she was sick. And why would I ask a stranger for money? I don't beg."

"Good for you." Mayme's face relaxes. "What's my name, Amandla?"

I blink, confused.

"Amanda. You just told me."

"My full name."

“I have no idea.”

“Harden is my maiden name. I have a married name, too. Do you know what it is?” *Jesus, help me, what does this woman want from me? Harden is Annalisa’s surname and mine also. Yes, me sharing my grandmother’s maiden name is odd, but how would I know how that came about?*

“We only just met,” I say, frustrated. “How would I know your proper surname?”

Mayme laughs. That drip bag attached to her arm must be filled with intense meds. Morphine or another mood lifter. Mrs. M would know exactly, but I can only guess. Two soft knocks come from the other side of the door.

“Tea, madam,” a woman’s voice calls out. “May we come in?”

“Of course,” Mayme answers, and two older black ladies in blue uniforms wheel a tea trolley into the room. Two more women, young and dressed in green uniforms, step around them and clean away the broken glass and flowers from the bathroom. The *proper* cleaners Mayme ordered. In minutes, the mess is gone and the women have vanished as if nothing had broken at all.

“Where would you like the trolley, Mrs. Bollard?” the older of the tea ladies asks in a deferential tone. That’s when it clicks. The answer to Grandma’s question comes to me in a flash. Mayme Amanda is the “queen” that Cyril, the parking guard, said I belonged to.

“You’re the Amanda on the front of the building. Amanda Bollard.”

“Correct!” Mayme says, and the older tea lady purses her lips to hear a girl address an elder by her first name. It’s not done. Normally, this is where I’d apologize to “Auntie” for offending, but I am still trying to digest the fact that my grandmother’s name is slapped across the entrance of a brand-new multistory hospital. Not a wing or a floor. The entire building.

Boom. The small guard’s strange bird comment suddenly makes sense. I am the sparrow and the Bollards are the white seagulls. And, judging from his surprised expression, I’m the only brown bird in the flock.