

**BLOOD  
TO  
POISON**



BOOKS BY MARY WATSON

*The Wren Hunt*

*The Wickerlight*

*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.*



# CONTENTS

<i>GLOSSARY</i>	xiii
1. BABY	1
2. OLD WOMAN	7
3. QUEEN	18
4. SHADOW	26
5. DEAD MAN	38
6. MASK	47
7. BOWL	54
8. TEETH	64
9. ORANGE FLOWER	72
10. POISON	82
11. DRUM	91
12. SNAKE	96
13. GOAT	111
14. BLACK FEATHER	119
15. SEASICK	128
16. WAX	136
17. PRIEST	147
18. HAT	159
19. DARK CLOUD	166
20. EGG	175

21. FALLING STAR	188
22. BLOODSTAIN	200
23. DARK ROAD	211
24. BLUE EYES	219
25. BEES	225
26. BLUNT KNIFE	234
27. GOLD	249
28. BAD MAN	258
29. BIG FISH	267
30. BITE	273
31. CAGE	290
32. FULL MOON	298
33. KEY	308
34. DEVIL	317
35. WATCHMAN	334
36. LADDER	343
37. COIN	351
38. THRONE	362
39. GRAVE	375

# GLOSSARY

*South African English is frequently mixed with words from the country's many languages. The explanations below refer to the contextual meaning in the book.*

**Athaan:** call to prayer; adhan

**Bakkie:** small pickup truck

**Befok:** crazy/wild

**Braai:** barbecue; refers to the grill that holds the fire, the cooked meat/veg and the event

**Dagga:** marijuana

**Doekoem:** refers to magic and sorcery (Cape Malay); doekoem is a noun and a verb: the act, the doing, and the person who does

**Doos:** idiot; there is another more explicit meaning

**Duiwels:** devils

**Ekskuus:** excuse me

**Fokken:** fucking

**Gaadtjie:** the guard on a minibus taxi who calls for passengers and collects money

**Goefed:** stoned

**Jintoe/hoer:** slut; whore

**Kak:** shit



**Kyk die Tinkerbell:** look at this Tinkerbell

**Loskop:** scatterbrained

**Mal:** mad

**Met die helm gebore:** born with the caul; having the second sight

**Moerse:** big (here: *moerse big*, which indicates very big)

**Naaiers:** fuckers

**Ou vrou:** old woman

**She's gonna moer him:** she's going to kill/hurt him (vulgar)

**Skief:** skew; askance (variant of skeef)

**Skrik:** (get a) fright

**Sies:** expression of distaste/disgust

**Stoep:** small raised platform or steps, usually in front of a house, like a veranda or porch

**Verlep:** wilted

## 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 pumps my legs.

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 when 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.

\*

‘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, 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 unmistakable, 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 Tinkerbell. 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.