

## “Never let the outside in”

*The night was at its darkest point. Out of the forest crept a creature with lichen skin and as it sniffed the air, its milk-white eyes blinked. It caught a scent and scuttled on its many legs through the dead, dry grass, following the fragrance of sleep and dreams.*

*The house stood quiet. The creature leaned down to the gap under the door, licking the air with a lizard tongue. The Old One slept nearby and the creature tasted the tang of long-ago memories, flavours of pumpkin and wool. It searched the air for more. The creature could taste burned wood, scorched earth and ash. The girl who dreamed of fire was there.*

*Its belly rumbled and the creature breathed in deep, until finally its tongue tingled with the zest of new grass, warm milk and sorghum biscuits. The small boy dreamed too.*



*The creature licked its lips and sucked the dream through its sharp teeth, but the empty hunger in its belly still roared. It wasn't enough. Always hungry. Always thirsty.*

I awoke with a start.

My hair and pillow were damp with sweat. I felt it drip, spider-like, down my skin. I caught snatches of my dream before it disappeared. I'd dreamed of Mama again, the memory fluttering helplessly like a moth trapped between a pair of hands. I'd tried to get into our old house as smoke had pushed against the window, but the door had been locked from the inside.

As the nightmare faded, I could still taste charcoal grit in my mouth.

*Why is dreaming so exhausting?* I would give anything to have one dreamless sleep.

Even though the room was dark, Kaleb's soft breathing made me feel less alone. I stretched out and reached for Tau. Curled up at the end of my bed, he grumbled as I tickled his back, but he didn't wake up.

Closing my eyes, I tried to drift off again, but I couldn't shake the feeling there had been something else that had woken me.

I sat up and pulled off the blanket that had



become entangled in my legs. I always kicked out fiercely when I had nightmares. Sometimes Granny Uma shook me awake if I was calling out.

But not tonight. Her snores could be heard from the other room.

I listened, breathing quietly.

There were the usual night noises. The skitter of a mouse across the roof beams, and the cricket hum from outside. A churring call of a nightjar sounded from the needle-thorn thicket. *Is that what had woken me?*

I eased myself out of bed and crept over to Kaleb's crib. I peered in. My brother slept peacefully, his arms and legs sprawled across the mattress.

I turned to go back to bed.

Then I heard it.

A sound from outside the cottage door.

Frozen in place, I listened over my hammering heartbeat.

*Something* was crying. But it wasn't the sound of an animal.

"A baby!" I whispered in the dark.

I stepped silently across the room, feeling every lump and bump of the floor under my bare feet.

The baby cried out again.