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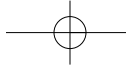
Michelle Superle

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Dream DOG

illustrated by Millie Ballance

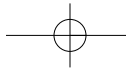
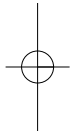


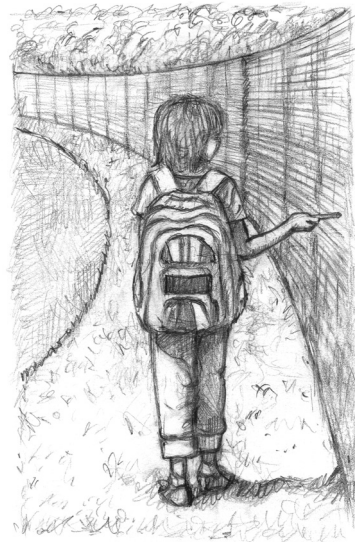
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For (Please send dedication)—MS

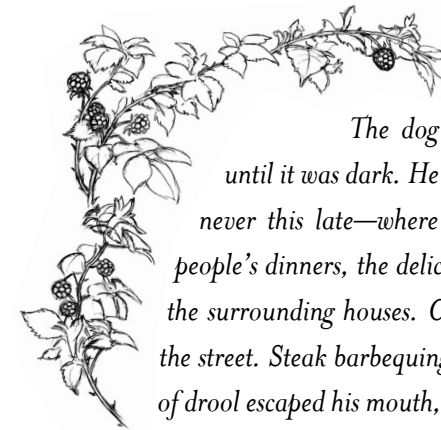
For Nutty and Angus—MB





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Prologue

The dog waited in the backyard for her until it was dark. He was anxious and hungry. She was never this late—where was she? He could smell other people's dinners, the delicious food smells wafting out from the surrounding houses. Chicken next door. Salmon across the street. Steak barbecuing a few houses down. A thin icicle of drool escaped his mouth, and he sighed and put his chin on his paws.

He spent the whole night outside, something he'd never done before. It was scary sometimes with the shadows shifting and the bushes rustling. He'd been brave and stopped himself from howling, because that's the kind of dog he was. In the morning, he heard the neighbours leaving for work, one front door and car door slamming after another. Soon the street was quiet with morning stillness. And she hadn't returned yet.

He nosed at the back door, hoping it would open. He peeked into the house through a low window, but nothing had changed since yesterday morning. He barked, once, but nobody came.

The dog was very worried now. He had to find her. He trotted through the yard and slipped through the loose fence boards into the woods. He wandered all day, though he didn't find her. But he wouldn't give up

Chapter 1



SAM

AS SOON AS SAM HUDSON walked through the door to her house, she knew her favourite meal was cooking for dinner. Of course. It was Tuesday—stew day. Sam loved chicken stew, but she clenched her fists. If only something exciting would happen. Something different. Something she couldn't predict by the day of the week. Something that would make her life—*her*—less boring.

It drove Sam crazy, the way her mom organized every corner of her life. Sam was only allowed to choose the clothes she wanted to wear and which books she would read. And *nothing* she said to her mom made her listen. "Don't worry about making decisions. You're only eleven. Leave that to me—it's my job." It made Sam feel like there was an iron band clamped around her throat.

While Sam stood there inhaling the damp smells of salty chicken, carrots and celery, Mom materialized from upstairs. Sam's small delight in the stew smells trickled away. Even when Piglet, her West Highland terrier, launched himself at Sam and quivered with happiness that she was home, Sam felt her throat close.

"Hi sweetie! What did you learn today?" asked Mom, as she did every afternoon.

Sam dreaded this moment. If her answer wasn't thoughtful enough, Mom's forehead creased and her lips tightened, releasing a snaky knot that twisted in Sam's stomach.

Sam liked learning stuff at school, but she just didn't like *talking* about it. Talking about it made her feel all itchy, like ants were running up and down her legs. But Mom wouldn't leave her alone until Sam came up with a good answer. She smoothed her hands along Piglet's silky back, thinking.

"Well...we took a nature walk in the woods and learned about how the plants and animals and bugs all work together."

"Excellent!" Mom clapped her hands. "The interconnectedness of an ecosystem relevant to our own biogeoclimactic zone!"

Sam sighed. Mom was always like this. It was just a nature walk. Sam didn't say that she had really been looking around the woods for spiderwebs covered with dewdrops.

"Come on, Sam, snack time for you. We've got to feed your brain!" said Mom.

Sam sat at the kitchen table, munching her way through crunchy apple slices spread with almond butter. She wished they were cookies and Kool-Aid, but that would never happen because Mom only believed in healthy food. As usual, Piglet waited for the bits Sam didn't want. His little paws bounced up lightly onto her legs. He made her smile, and then her smile widened.

One hour. She had one hour to do whatever she wanted. It was Tuesday, which meant that after school she'd gone to her hour-long computer tutoring session at Mr. Fremont's house. Soccer practice was later that night. Mondays were piano lessons, Wednesdays and Fridays were Tae Kwon Do and Thursdays were Girl Guides. On Saturday mornings Sam had swimming lessons and on Sundays there were soccer games, which she hated. Plus, after dinner there was forty minutes of homework per night, and twenty minutes of either piano or Tae Kwon Do practice. Mom wanted Sam to be well-rounded, whatever that was supposed to mean.

But here was a sliver of time stolen from her schedule. Sam could almost feel the soft deep couch in the living room, Piglet tucked up against her. Soon would come the sweet slipping feeling of disappearing into a book's world. Right now she was reading *Anne of Avonlea*. She melted right inside Anne's adventures—adventures that could *never* happen in her own world, especially not with her mom watching and hovering and organizing everything.

But Mom had other plans.

"Sam, you need to clean your room," she said firmly. When Mom used that tone of voice it was useless to argue with her. Actually, thought Sam, it was *always* useless to argue with her. She tried anyway.

"But Mom! I'm so tired. I just want to hang out on the couch for a while."

"No, Sam. Your room is a mess. Up you go. I'll check it before dinner."

Sam filled up with jangling, crackling energy. Bolts of lightening should shoot out of her eyes, she thought. Then she could set her mom's shoes on fire so she'd have to dance away, like a witch in a fairy tale. But nothing happened. Sam swallowed hard against the tightness in her throat and stomped up the stairs as loudly as she could. Piglet trotted silently behind her.

When she got to her room, Sam slammed the door and leaned against it. Her room wasn't *that* messy. What would happen if she didn't tidy it? She scanned the clothes on the floor and the toys in the corner. Her book was here! She could read after all.

Sam opened the book. She waited for the world to melt away. Usually the creaking of the house, the faint distant hissing of traffic on the street outside, the rustling of the trees, all disappeared in seconds. Today, nothing. Sam sighed. She was too restless. Piglet nuzzled, looking for pats. But still the iron band squeezed Sam's throat.

Then a movement in the window caught the corner of her eye. Sam threw down the book, startling Piglet into a yap, and walked over to the window.

Something big and black was standing in her backyard, looking up at her. It was standing in the middle of the grass, in the wild backyard, all alone. Wagging its tail. Where had it come from? Forest tumbled down into the yard, with thick bunches of ferns, salal and blackberry bushes that bears sometimes snacked on. Was it a bear? Sam felt her heart beat faster with excitement.



Chapter 2



SAM

SAM STARED AT THE BLACK CREATURE. This wasn't a bear. It was a huge dog.

The dog stared up at Sam steadily and insistently. She tried smiling at it. The dog wagged its tail in response. But that was crazy—there was no way it could see her up here.

Sam made a decision in one heartbeat and deposited Piglet on her bed. He couldn't shimmy down the rope ladder with her, and anyway, he would be a menace with a new big dog in the yard. He'd just yap his silly head off. Sam needed to be stealthy.

Sam pulled her fire-escape rope ladder out from under her bed. It would only be the third time she'd used it: once to practise during a Hudson family fire drill, and once just a few weeks ago when she'd sneaked outside. Maybe to run away. She'd chickened out that time though.

This time was different. As soon as Sam's feet touched the ground, the dog was there. Its tail wagged so hard she thought it might fly right off its body. Sam crouched down. "Good dog, come here, good dog."

The dog seemed to be smiling. Still wagging, it gently sniffed Sam's hands and face. Sam looked sideways at it and lifted her hand to the dog's head. It nuzzled into Sam and butted its head up into her hand. She patted and stroked, patted and stroked.

Sam finally stood up to take a good look at the dog. It was male and had long black hair and brown eyes. He looked like a loveable golden retriever, except black and twice as big, which was BIG. His head rested on Sam's shoulder.

The longer she stood there patting him, his breath steaming over her cheek, the more a feeling of peace flowed through her. The dog radiated an air of happy calm. Sam's earlier feelings of restlessness drained away. The muscles around her throat unclenched so that the horrible tightness eased and melted. They stood there for what seemed like ages. Sam wanted the good feeling to last forever.

Maybe the dog could be hers. Her new amazing dog. *That* would be exciting. She knew she should tell

her mom. But Mom would only send the dog to the pound. Maybe somebody else loved the dog and missed him terribly? *No*. Sam shoved down the thought.

But the dog was filthy. Sam's hands were covered with black muck. There was mud dried onto the dog's long, feathery tail fur, and his whole coat, which should have been silky and shiny, was tangled, dull and sticky.

It was the filth that gave Sam the clue. This dog was lost! He had nobody to take care of him. Her heart pounded faster. *She* could help him. The thought filled her with a strange hopeful feeling. It would be an adventure to rescue a big mysterious dog.

"What happened to you? Somebody must have really hurt you. You poor thing! You must be hungry. Would you like to stay here?" she asked him.

His ears rose up and tilted forward like sails. His whole body wagged.

Sam's stomach flipped. She could do this. But Mom could never find out. She would be in *huge* trouble if she got caught. And what if somebody *was* missing him? It was really bad to sneak around behind your parents' backs. But still...the dog was so...right.

The thing she had always wished for was happening. For the first time in her eleven years, something exciting had finally trotted into her boring life.

. . .



STELLA

Stella Sylvan woke slowly, slowly, like she was crawling out of a black pit. She opened her eyes and looked around. White walls, blue curtains, green trees, brown dresser and lamp. She blinked. These were not *her* walls, *her* curtains, *her* trees, *her* dresser and lamp. Stella's heart began to pound and she struggled to sit up. It pounded harder when she realized she couldn't.

Where am I? How did I get here? Why am I here?

She tried to call out, to shout the questions, but she couldn't do that either.

"You're awake!" A nurse walked into the white-walled room.

Stella looked at her, the pounding of her heart filling her ears and a hundred questions crowding her mind.

"Oh dear, you must be surprised to find yourself here. Let me explain what's happening."

Stella breathed.

"First, let me introduce myself. I'm Nurse Green. Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Sylvan."

She reached across and picked up Stella's limp right hand in hers.

"You're at Birchwood Retirement Home, Mrs. Sylvan. You had a stroke about a week ago, and you were in the hospital. Now you're here with us. Right now you're completely paralyzed, but you may regain some range of motion over time."

Stella blinked. She could hear the words Nurse Green was saying. She could not connect them with herself. But they did explain those white walls, those blue curtains, her no-words, no-moving new world.

"So you're going to stay here with us for a while, and we're going to take good care of you. You don't have to worry about anything—we'll do everything."

But I don't want...

"I know it's hard, but please try not to worry. You've got the best possible care. You have nothing to worry about—just focus your energy on getting better. Can you think about that?"

Stella stared at the cheerful young woman, who had not one single grey hair on her head.

"Now, we must establish some way of communicating. Right now that will be really challenging. Let's start with blinking. Can you give me one blink for yes, and two blinks for no?"

Stella realized she now had a vocabulary of only two words.

"Mrs. Sylvan? Will you blink once for yes if you understand me?"

She blinked once.

"Okay—and do you remember how to say no?"

She blinked twice.

"Great! I'm going to take that as a yes you do remember how to say no: with two blinks. Wonderful. We're going to get along just fine."

Stella blinked once.

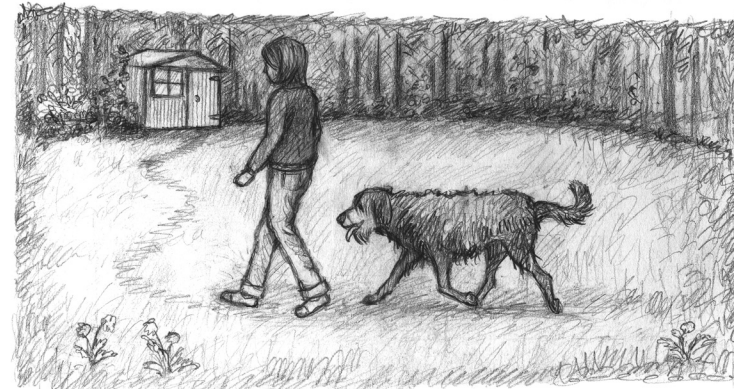
"I'm glad you think so too! Okay, I'm going to give you a few minutes to think about all of this. I know it's a lot of information. I'll come back shortly to take you to the common room. It's lovely there—all sorts of friendly folks."

She was gone in a whisk of cheeriness, leaving Stella alone with a mind full of new and hideously unwelcome thoughts. Then the worst one came:

But what about my dog?



Chapter 3



SAM

SAM STOPPED WRESTLING WITH HERSELF. She was going to keep this dog.

"I'm going to help you. I'll give you everything you need. Come on..."

The dog wagged.

She didn't have much time. It would be dinner soon, and there was a lot to do. She quickly started up the yard toward the woods where a small shed hid behind the first row of trees. Sam's parents had used it for storage until their garage sale a few months earlier. Lately it had stayed empty; there was no way