

TO KILL AN ALSATIAN HOUND

by

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*He that passeth by and meddleth with strife belonging not to him,
is like one that taketh a dog by the ears.*

—PROVERBS 26:17

There came a scream from upstairs.

Every tenant at Mosilita had stopped to listen.

At least, so it seemed to Lyanna. Cloistered in the bottommost unit of the building and all by her lonesome at the dining room table, it was the only way she could explain the ensuing silence—a silence so severe, she'd nearly mistaken it for sudden deafness.

The only thing telling her otherwise was that turbulent whooshing in her ears, the sound of startled blood retreating behind a pounding heart.

All else was still.

The draught that usually kept the dining-room tablecloth swaying dropped; the backdoor, with its rusty, arthritic hinges, ceased its wonted whining; the hum of the refrigerator, the whirr of the fans, the drip-drip-drip of the dribbling faucet...silenced.

The house was holding its breath.

And Lyanna, too, had been stricken by the same petrification—unblinking, brows raised, taut hand stuck hovering a pencil over question six in her Nation Workbook: *Who started the fire?*

Sound returned to the world with a hefty *blam!*

Kayla had flung open her bedroom door. Hands buried between her shimmying legs, she sped through the front house, circling the coffee table three times before rushing towards the bathroom. “Christ! She still in there?” she asked, baulking at the still-empty seat beside Lyanna at the dining table. She pounded on the bathroom door. “Come out!”

“Doan rush me,” yelled her little sister from inside.

Kayla groaned and gyrated back to the front house.

“Who turn on da TV?” Aunty Sharon’s voice rang strong from her bedroom at the back of the apartment.

“Is just me, Mummy,” returned Kayla.

No sooner than the toilet flushed, Kayla dashed the TV remote to the side and vaulted the couch. She nearly bowled Kiara over from the speed with which she flew by.

“De girl *so* extra,” said Kiara as she returned to her seat. Noticing Lyanna’s reticence to chaff at Kayla’s expense, she asked, “Wha’ happen to you?”

How you mean? You ain’t just hear that? was what Lyanna wanted to ask her alltoo-unruffled friend, but lingering fear seized her tongue. Kiara snapped her fingers in Lyanna’s face. “I talking to myself?” After shaking off the affront, she picked her pencil up and continued her work.

Lyanna, meanwhile, kept agape.

From the chilly insouciance billowing from Kiara, Lyanna might've thought she'd gone mad, that it'd all been a hallucination. But, not a moment later, the scream came again.

Kiara's pink bobbles clanked as she whipped her head around. Sending her voice to the front house, she said, "Second time fuh de evening?"

"She trying to break a record," said Kayla, now by the window, peering out. Kiara flitted over and joined in her sister's maliciousings.

Then emerged Aunty Sharon, bonneted and robed, from down the hall. She entered the living room scratching her posterior. "Wha' wanna peeping at?"

"Upstairs at it again," whispered Kayla, whose ear was pressed against the windowpane.

Stupse. "You mean she out here offsetting de good Lord peace—*again?*" Aunty Sharon moseyed up to the window.

"Is bashment?" asked Uncle Freddie as he too scurried in. "Lemme get piece there, do." He took his portion of the window. It was a perfect picture: Mummy and Daddy on the outside, the two sisters sandwiched in between—a whole family of Malicious Pearlys. "Careful who wanna get up with, understand?" said Uncle Freddie to his girls, suddenly stern. Kayla rolled her eyes. Kiara, meanwhile, looked as clueless as Lyanna felt.

When Kiara returned to the table, Lyanna—finally un-petrified—barraged her with questions: "Who was that?"

"De woman upstairs."

"Wha' woman?"

“De one upstairs. You is be here every other evening. You telling me this is you’ first time hearing she? She always hollering out.”

“Why?”

Kiara shrugged. “Das *grown-people* business.”

She returned to her workbook. Lyanna watched her, watched them all as they resumed their afternoon goings-on, unbothered, already forgotten.

Was it only her, she wondered, who’d been listening for if... *when* it would come a third time?

The evening went on, and to Lyanna’s surprise, it never did come again. Though, when a car horn blared outside, she did flinch, indeed thinking it was another cry of distress from above. But she quickly realised it was just Mummy who’d—finally—arrived and the girl nearly cried from the rush of relief. In a flurry, she gathered her school supplies from the table, kicked on her shoes, and bounded out the door. She buckled her seatbelt as soon as she got in the car, not even stopping to give Mummy the usual peck on the cheek. She was too keen to get away from Kiara’s obviously-haunted home. But, of course, Mummy and Aunty Sharon *had* to have their post-babysitting confab, so the car stayed in park.

As Aunty Sharon chatted with Mummy through the car window, curiosity kept Lyanna’s attention on Mosilita. The moon—bright and yellow—crested the slender building. Tufts of clouds surrounded its tiled roof, forming a head of steely grey hair atop the stoney structure. The windows across the complex’s face were lit in such a way that it seemed the building was smiling. Its eyes were the two rooms on the top floor, its nose the one just below,

and the line of windows that marked Kiara's apartment at the bottom made the mouth. The sight of this bewigged, smirking house was so silly, all thoughts of toe-curling screams had utterly vanished.

A lithe silhouette filled the window of the second floor. The thin figure moved with a spectral grace. So subtle, it seemed, in one gentle breath of the wind, she'd be gone. She was joined by another. A heftier, more substantial shape. This one did not move with such ease. He beckoned her with a mighty hand. She yielded to his embrace. Then their dance began.

The greater phantom twirled the lesser, round and round like so much ribbon. Her slender arms flailed like grassy wisps in tornado winds. She wrapped them around him, leapt, contracted, drummed his chest. He lifted her by the neck and, suspended aloft, she writhed before collapsing. Her return to standing was slow, sputtered, like a bird's first flight after a crash. She spread her winged arm, wound it up, and *wham!*

Lyanna gasped.

She'd slapped her dance partner across the face.

The pair hung frozen in the window light, seemingly as shocked as Lyanna by the violent end of their *pas de deux*.

Quietly, the light inside the room died, and the darkness consumed the dancing shadows.

Night air coursed through the now-vacant window, lifting the gossamer curtain, and the shadowy room seemed to be breathing. There was a shortness to its breath, an unease.

The sound of Mummy turning on the ignition brought Lyanna's senses back to her immediate surroundings. "...it getting late, in truth. Doan lemme keep you nuh

longer,” said Aunty Sharon, yawning.

“Alright. Thursday then.”

They drove off, leaving Mosilita behind them.

#

There was little sleep had in Lyanna’s bed that night. Every time she’d gotten near to dreaming, she’d hear it. That scream. Clarion and blaring. As raw and guttural as when it’d first rent the air. And, just like that, she’d be upright, clutching her heaving chest, telling herself *it’s just a memory, it’s just a memory, it’s just a memory.*

#

Lyanna was quite proud of her hiding spot. There were few places around Kiara’s home that wouldn’t have been too obvious to the three of them. But when she discovered the plant pot on the second-floor terrace—the one standing sentinel atop the staircase at the side of the building—she knew, here, they’d never find her.

And right she was, for she spent what felt like forty days and forty nights there, stooped behind the terracotta, disguised behind the holey leaves of the Monstera. When her legs began to burn, she realised maybe she’d done too good a job.

She now spied on Kiara and Joshua through chipped balusters, watching as they scrambled around the gravelly lot below like a discount Sherlock and Watson.

“Where this girl is?” asked Joshua, scratching his peasy head.

After scanning the vicinity once more, Kiara shrugged and finally conceded defeat:

“I tired o’ this game. Let’s go back inside.”

Not fair! Lyanna sprang up from the force of her indignation. She was about to head down and tell them off for their poor sportsmanship, but a clamour brewing behind caught her ears.

“Get away!”

Startled, Lyanna fell back into hiding. It’d come from the woman in the window ahead. Though outside was much brighter than the last time she’d seen her, Lyanna recognised her ghostly shape immediately. Her back was to the window, and she held something behind it, like a surprise.

Lyanna couldn’t tell what it was. She could hardly see anything from this insectile vantage point. And with each step the woman took forwards, the less was visible. Holding on to the planter’s rim, Lyanna tiptoed in her squat, increasing her height. Beyond the woman, a man with a dour expression loomed. That was probably why she’d had a gift. To pacify this grouchy Goliath...*her dance partner*. Perhaps he was still upset at what she’d done. Lyanna rose just a little higher on her toes to see exactly what she’d had for him.

Her breath hitched. *A knife*. Huge. Like the kind Mummy used to butcher the chicken on Saturday nights.

“Kiara! I find she!” Joshua pointed at her from the bottom of the stairs. She gestured fervently at him to hush, but it was no use; he only got louder as he hurried up to meet her. Not wanting to get caught eavesdropping, Lyanna scooted forwards, retreating out of eyeshot. She tucked herself in a ball beneath the window. She waved Joshua down as he reached the landing.

“Who you gine stab?” The sonorous voice weakened Joshua’s knees and, trembling on all fours, he crawled over to Lyanna. “I say ‘Who you gine stab, woman?’”

The question hung in the air above. Lyanna’s heart doubled tempo each second it went unanswered, as though she were the one supposed to respond.

There it was again. That scream from last week. It was followed by the sound of steel clanking on tile.

“Dog! Stinking dog!” bellowed the woman.

“Be quiet, foolish bitch.” The man’s voice rolled like a growl. “I should really put you out. First you say you gine burn down de place, now you walking ‘round like Zorro?”

“No! Lemme go! Lemme go!”

Her pleas faded into the house until, finally, there was silence.

“Wha’ happen? Why wanna breathing so hard?” asked Kiara; Joshua and Lyanna had practically rolled down the stairs.

“Upstairs...” panted Lyanna.

“Somebody nearly get stab just now,” blurted Joshua, also breathless.

“Who? How you know? Hurry up and tell me, wanna!” In breathy, frenetic bursts, they filled her in.

“How wanna know de knife was fuh de man, though?” asked Kiara. “It could be de dog she was trying to kill.”

“De dog?”

“You ain’t tell me she holler ‘dog’ over and over?”

Nodding his head, Joshua said, “I ain’t even think ‘bout it like that. My mudda is call my fadda so all the time, so I thought she meant de man. But you making sense, for real. De man say”—he looked around to see if any adult ears were by—“*bitch.*” He’d shaped his mouth around the word like it was a poisonous vile. “My fadda tell me da mean female dog. So, you right. Probably a dog them up there fighting with. Probably a pit bull. Or Akita.”

“But why would they be trying to kill a dog?”

Kiara looked at her like the answer was obvious. “Lyanna, be real. You see them things? Them could turn and bite yuh easy-easy. Them *want* killing.”

Joshua and Kiara carried on about the dangers, or lack thereof, of dog ownership. Lyanna, meanwhile, drifted, struggling to make sense of one unaccountable detail: she could’ve sworn pets were forbidden at Mosilita.

#

That night, Lyanna didn’t even try to sleep. Harrowing images were flashing across her mind like a Lovecraftian slideshow. Images of yellow eyes, sharp paws, and gnashing canines. She distracted herself by tuning into the song of nightfall: crapauds chirping, cars dashing homewards, tree leaves sweeping the pane. When the sound of a distant howl descanted above the chorus, she slapped her hands over her ears.

It was no use, though, for the image was already planted.

She could see it now, the howler. Its amber eyes burned through the shadows of her mind. It stalked the dark, the broken chain of its metal leash trailing behind it on the path, hanging entrails swinging from its smoking maw as though suspended on a gibbet.

It howled again, dropping its meal, and rose on its hindlegs. It rose and rose like it would never stop rising. It took the shape of a man.

Crying, Lyanna flung her sheet aside and leapt off the bed.

She knew it was silly. Such things did not exist. But what else would explain those screams?

The sound of her mother's laughter drew her thoughts from lycanthropy.

She ran to Mummy's room. She had to tell someone. She couldn't let another moon pass knowing her best friend was living beneath *le loup-garou*.

She reached for the doorknob. The door was already ajar. She sidled in. A whistling wind crept in from an open window ahead, lifting the gauzy curtain up to the ceiling. She tapped Mummy's rising-and-falling duvet. It stopped moving. She pulled back the covers.

Mummy lurched out of sleep screaming.

Only, it wasn't Mummy at all. It was the woman from the window.

Lyanna woke gasping in a sweat-soaked bed.

#

Aunty Sharon was conked out in the front house, and the girls—bored, unable to hear the TV over her thunderous snores, and too lazy for outdoor play—found their idle hands rummaging through her closet.

Kiara cantered around her mother's room in a pair of hoof-like heels. Lyanna had to stopper her laughter with both hands. When Kiara donned one of her mother's hats and

began to ape Ms. Trotman from church, she could no longer contain it; the laugh rushed up from its cage behind her ribs, blasting from her mouth unbidden.

Feet shuffled outside the window, and their laughter yielded to silence. A susurrus of voices seeped through the frosted, downturned jalousies.

“...police, but...”

“...trying to help...”

“...whose fault...”

“Turn off de fan. I can’t hear,” whispered Lyanna to Kiara. And what a difference that made:

“...take it, the noise.” It was the reedy voice of Mr. Selman, Kiara’s landlord.

Who was he talking to?

“I—. I—.”

“I doan mind business that doan mind me, but—.”

“Please.” Her voice was tender and plaintive but direct as an arrow. “Please. It won’t happen again.”

“It can’t. All this noise... I’m sick of it, sick. Everybody is. Can’t find no peace with all this noise. Everybody always asking me wha’ happening: ‘Who is that screaming so?’” The girls exchanged a knowing glance. Lyanna manoeuvred her eye line to see if she could get a better view of the scene. No luck. All she could see of the hushed exchange were two pairs of slippered feet. If only Kiara lived on the third floor, they’d have the perfect view. “Look, I doan know what he does to you—.” *The dog.*

“Nothing. He’s fine. *We* are fine.”

“Mhmm. I hear you. All I gine say is better sort out matters soon, or I gine have no choice but to ask you to leave. De people want quiet.”

There was a pause.

Then, finally: “Amos, I promise you...they shall have it.”

Kiara wound the window crank. “*What* are you doing?” mouthed Lyanna. Kiara shushed her.

It was just enough. She’d opened the window just enough that the scene was now within view. Lyanna traced the woman’s spare frame from bottom to top. Her eyes, wide with anticipation, would twitch and shutter each time they passed over one of the myriad cuts and bruises pocking her plum-coloured skin. When they reached her face, Lyanna bristled.

Her eye. Her lip.

Mr. Selman dragged his feet across the marl as he left. The woman remained. Her vacant eyes were affixed to the empty slot of air he’d left behind in his wake. They were so glassy, like pockets of deep water near overflowing. They closed. It was a laborious task, closing them, so swollen and red they were. Her knuckles, too, scarred and raw, tightened into a fist.

When her eyes reopened, they were not the same pair. No more calm, quiet puddles, but black bubbling geysers, steaming and threatening to blow. She bit down on a cigarette. There really was no use for the match; she was so hot, her breath would’ve been enough to light a flame.

The girls withdrew to Kiara's room. They sat in solemn silence at the edge of her bed, staring holes through the tiled floor.

Evicted or eaten. What a doleful fate. Lyanna couldn't stomach it. Why wouldn't Mr. Selman do anything? Why wouldn't Aunty Sharon or Uncle Freddie? Were they too frightened to face him? But they were the adults. *Ugh!* Even Little Red Riding Hood overcame the Big Bad Wolf.

"You see she face?" Kiara finally asked. Lyanna, wishing her answer could've been *no*, nodded. Her throat was rough as sandpaper. Too dry to talk. "What kind o' dog could do all o' that?" She'd not yet told Kiara her suspicions. "It would have to be real, real big. She got Clifford in there or what?" She swallowed hard. "I doan know why she doan poison it or call de R.S.C.P.A. or something."

"De R.S.C.P.A.?"

"Yeah. Where they put all de bad dogs."

Lyanna had never heard of this place, this jail for criminal canines. And perhaps, she realised, neither had the woman.

She rushed into the front house.

"Where you going?"

She returned with the directory, note paper, a pencil, and a hopeful gleam in her eyes. She jumped onto the bed and scoured the yellow pages until she found it. "What are you doing?" asked Kiara, arms crossed.

"Did you mean the R.S.P.C.A.?"

"I ain't just say so?"

Once Lyanna finished copying down the number, she showed Kiara the note:

CALL HERE FOR HELP

426-3077

~~THEY WILL TAKE HIM AWAY~~

“It’s for the woman upstairs,” said Lyanna, noticing Kiara’s quizzical expression.

“Maybe she doan know de R.S.P.C.A. could help.”

“And how she supposed to get this?”

The plan had been simple: leave the note in her mailbox. However, once they made it to the upstairs porch, they encountered an unforeseeable hitch. The woman had no mailbox.

Lyanna’s hope deflated. Note in hand, she paced around Kiara who was shaking her head in a way that said *I told you so*. She needed to think of something fast, before someone found them up here, before the creature picked up their scent.

“Hand me de paper,” Kiara demanded.

Lyanna put her finger to her mouth, reminding Kiara that this was supposed to be a clandestine operation. Kiara took the note to the window. The wooden louvres framing the door were closed, laid so flat and tight they resembled one long solid plank. They were nailed shut too, so despite her most Herculean efforts, she couldn’t squeeze the note in.

“You’ gine break it!” warned Lyanna. Kiara ignored her and fiddled away. “Just leave it before somebo—.”

Lyanna froze.

They were being watched.

Eyes had emerged behind the glass panel atop the door. They were shrouded under a thick, furry ridge, but, still, Lyanna could discern their bestial secret.

The door handle jiggled.

“Hey!” barked a voice from the road. “Get off de people property!” It was Kayla, now getting in from work.

In one swift motion, Kiara leapt over the small rusty gated and peeled down the steps. Lyanna was right behind her. Her sister seized her arm as soon as she landed on the marl and dragged her straight to their mother.

Aunty Sharon didn’t even give Kiara the courtesy of dignity. Licks were served right out in the open. “You”—*bam!*—“must”—*bam!*—“learn”—*bam!*—“to”—*bam!*—“mind”—*bam!*—“your”—*bam!*—“business!” Lyanna tried to look away, but guilt made it impossible.

Not another word was spoken between the girls for the rest of the day. And there didn’t need to be for Lyanna to know Kiara was upset with her; the very air between them smouldered, laden with tension. But, as childish enmity was, this was short-lived. Tomorrow came, bringing with it a chance at reconciliation. When Kiara arrived at class the next day, she no doubt made her best effort to hold onto yesterday’s spleen. She’d soon realise she forgot her pencil, though, and—not wanting to beg stingy Denisha to her right or ask pencil-chewing Akeel to her left—she would turn behind her, to her friend she knew always had one to spare.

Come evening, they were joined at the hip once more. Serendipitously, it was the last day of school, and all the excitement of their new-found freedom distracted them not only from their petit conflict but from the very thing that kindled it too. And even as

Easter break rolled along, and Lyanna frittered away the days just downstairs the woman and the dog, there was hardly a thought about them at all, for it was silent at Mosilita. She thought maybe heaven had finally sent the woman a boon, perhaps an axe-slinging woodsman, perhaps a way of her own. And she really had begun to believe this.

That was, of course, until Easter afternoon.

The whole of Kiara's family and a few friends had been gathered at the apartment for lunch. They'd just finished eating and for dessert was the house specialty: gossip *à la mode*.

"National hero, my ass! Wha' she do fuh we?"

"Put we on de map, Uncle." This had come from Kayla.

Leaning forward in his seat at the head of the dinner table, Uncle Reggie rebutted, "Between you and me, is de forehead that bring in de fame. Head ain' brain but look how she gone from Westbury to Hollywood. Has to be de forehead. De extra space ain't there fuh nothing; that is genius right there so!" The adults broke out in uproarious laughter, and Lyanna and Kiara, clueless, gave each other a sidelong glance.

"The idea of national heroes is just outdated. Back in de day, with slavery and independence and ting, there was something to actually rally for. Now...? Wha' heroes we got?"

Back and forth they went, debating over trifles. Kiara, sitting to Lyanna's left, had long since fallen asleep. Lyanna—head yo-yoing, eyelids drooping—was on her way there too, but just as she was about to cross over to dreamland, she picked up a sobering snatch of conversation.

“...got she quiet enough up there.” It was Aunty Sharon talking now.

Uncle Freddie responded, “Yuh right. I swear she dead—that he finally send she tuh de grave.”

Then Kayla: “Nah, I see she Wednesday, when I was coming in.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. She seemed better, fuh real. I ask she how she doing. ‘I good. Just taking it easy. You know how it is.’ ‘Glad to hear it’ I tell she.”

“Good to hear,” said Aunty Sharon. “Good to hear, in truth. I’m glad enough for de peace and quiet. Thank de Lord for that.”

“That’s Him, for real.” Mummy’s sudden interruption brought all eyes towards their direction. “I’ve kept that young girl in my prayers. I tell Sharon just the other day, I don’t know what goes on up there with that man or what not, but I knew, whatever it was, God was going to handle it.” The room was rapt, like when Pastor Clarke delivered his sermons. “I mean, yes, you should help when you can, but sometimes people don’t want help, and sometimes your helping somebody gets in the way of them being able to glorify the word of the Lord, of them gaining a testimony.”

Heads nodded around the table, quiet, absorbing. Then came Kayla, exploding the reverent silence. “Can de church get an amen?”

A litany of mirthful amens sounded around the table.

The nattering went on a while after—until a yawn (*Thanks, Uncle Reggie*) seeped through a lull in the conversation. Then came the long-awaited: “Wait, I ain’ realise it was so late.”

Before guests began to rise, Aunty Sharon asked for hands to help clean. As soon as the words *help* and *clean* so much as left her lips, Lyanna cocked her head back and shut her eyes—a Pavlovian response.

She kept up this game of opossum until the clatter of plates being lifted off the table ceased. Then, she risked a peek into the quiet. There were still Coke bottles strewn about the table, leftovers yet to be refrigerated. It wouldn't have been safe to “wake up” just yet, so she resumed the charade. But hardly had she closed her eyes when, once more, they were opened. This time, however, was not on purpose.

She'd been assailed by the most pungent odour. A scent so rank, her eyelids involuntarily peeled back in offence. She followed the pong, sniffing it out with reluctant curiosity. Her nose took her around the dining room table. No where she went did it seem to lessen. Yet nowhere she went did it seem to grow. Even as she passed by one of Kiara's old drunken uncles who looked as though he never bathed, it choked her all the same.

It was everywhere, like the air itself had been replaced by this invisible, stinking substance. She followed it to the kitchen and, with a scrunched nose, asked the clean-up crew if they knew the source of this stench. *Sniff-sniff*. They each sampled the air and, strangely, all shrugged, claiming there was nothing off about it.

She headed to the front house where the smell had been particularly potent. But, just, like in the kitchen, no one seemed to notice it. They all carried on like normal: TVwatching, newspaper-reading, picture-taking. Even Mummy with her houndlike nose

sat on the couch, flipping through photo albums with Kiara's granny as though the smell of a thousand rotten eggs wrapped in old socks hadn't been wafting throughout the house.

Holding her nose, Lyanna returned to the table.

A prickly heat ran across her flesh like so many red ants.

Her heart beat apace.

She thought maybe she did fall asleep after all and had now been stuck in an uncanny dream.

She wanted to wake Lyanna to see if she too had been unable to smell it but was too afraid she'd say *yes*.

Unable to handle the scent that somehow only she could smell and the nauseous sensation that she may be going mad, she eventually convinced Mummy to leave early. While Mummy said her goodbyes inside, Lyanna opted to wait in the car until she was ready, thinking she'd find refuge. But even there the scent reached her. She rolled up the windows, turned on the AC. Finally able to breath, she scanned the vicinity for the source of the odour.

As her searching eyes jumped about Mosilita, she noticed the door of the secondfloor apartment was open. She wondered why. Since lunch, she had been wondering many things about that apartment: Had the woman actually done it? Was she finally free?

Did she really escape the belly of the beast?

As though summoned by Lyanna's thoughts, the woman emerged in the doorway.

Lyanna flinched at the sight of her; she'd found her answers.

The woman, eyes as vacant as a cadaver's, was braced and bandaged. She descended onto the patio, stepping into the gloaming. Her diaphanous red dress, flowing as though sewn from molten threads, set her skin ablaze. Like true flames, it tossed and swelled in the breeze, threatening to catch and consume everything nearby. Its crimson hue was accented by the pattern of wounds across her body—blood, like rubies laced around her neck, spangled across her face and arms, flesh-sprouted beads trailing unclotted to her bare feet.

She unwrapped the bandages on her elbow, revealing more crimson. She moved difficultly, as though her joints were igneous, as though the blood coursing through her were truly magma, searing, crystalising.

Hands akimbo, she gazed into the velvety, twilight sky. She beamed. When she headed back inside, she left the door open, leaving Lyanna with even more questions than when she'd first appeared.

A rapping on the car window broke Lyanna's pensive reverie. It was Mummy. Lyanna rolled down the window a tad, passed her the key.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, love. Was talking to Sharon," she said as she got inside. "What a day." Mummy buckled her seatbelt. "Happy to be going home, though. I too tired." She started the car. "Everybody seem to like de sweet bread, even though I left it too long in the oven."

Recognition sparked in Lyanna. *That's it!* Gas. She had been smelling gas. But where was it coming from?

Mummy put the car in reverse, and Lyanna took one final look at Mosilita, searching for any last-ditch answer she might find.

Upstairs, the woman had returned to the patio with a matchbox, a bottle of champagne, and what appeared to be a bundle of sage.

Mummy shifted gears. As they drove off, the woman began a lone dance.

Lyanna wondered what she was celebrating.

Later, when the gas was lit and turned to fire, it spared none; the building was consumed in its entirety.

At last, there was quiet at Mosilita.