

Stitches: A Novel
and
“If it didn’t hurt, I probably wouldn’t do it”: A Freudian Exploration of Creative Practice in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Cathleen Davies’ *Stitches*

by
Cathleen Davies
Student Number: 100048109

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Cathleen Davies, 100048109, Creative/Critical PhD Abstract

Creative: *Stitches*

Critical: “If it didn’t hurt, I probably wouldn’t do it”: A Freudian Exploration of Creative Practice in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Cathleen Davies’ *Stitches*

Stitches is a novel about body modification and identity, in which two characters undergo an extreme body swap through cosmetic surgeries, raising questions on identity, gender, consent, modification and mutilation. In this multi-voiced absurdist horror novel, we see several first-person perspectives contend with their own embodied experiences of existence within a patriarchal world considered via a combination of Freudian psychoanalytic thought and phenomenology.

In the critical analysis to this project, I consider Practice as Research through a Freudian lens, applying questions on the Practice of Gothic Creative Writing through iteration, autobiography and intertextuality, and Freudian ideas of the death drive and the Uncanny. In doing so, I present a critical analysis of *Stitches* and its creation, as well as offering a reading of the creative process involved in the making of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and finally I consider a third-person PaR literary analysis of my characters’ psychoanalytic motivations in the creation of their body art. Through this multi-layered approach I demonstrate the uncanny interconnections between authorial inspiration, self, and character.

Together, the two pieces of Creative and Critical writing demonstrate the reliance of Research on Practice and Practice on Research as they interlink to become this Creative-Critical PhD thesis.

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Stitches

Prologue

Pete was our leader and he did alright. If ever you got lonely sitting on the cattle grids looking for something to poke with a stick, you could always find Pete in the woods nearby. He was never alone. He had his pals knocking about every second of the day, which made you wonder when Pete ever went home, if he even *had* a home. We never really thought about it too much.

That night we were gathered around our meeting tree. They call this kind of tree a 'weeping willow,' but that sounds dead girly to me, so I just call it 'the tree'. It's a good spot. Quiet and safe. When it's daytime there might be people walking their dogs. Sometimes, older kids came to drink beer, playing rock and roll on their transistor radios. That summer, everyone was listening to 'Good Vibrations' by The Beach Boys. Those high-pitched harmonies made my teeth hurt.

We were here on account of Miss Lily. She was pretty and nice and she smiled whenever she saw any of us around the neighbourhood. Miss Lily taught in the nursery school and remembered every little ankle-biter that came through. She had a big smile with front teeth you could fit a penny through. Pete had his own gap too, but his were where his teeth had been bashed in. He'd taken out his front teeth on purpose. Well, I suppose we'd done it, really. He ordered us not to stop, no matter how much he screamed. That was a couple of years back, when we were maybe eight or nine. Me and Tommo held him by the arms while Spikey sat on his legs. We'd lost a lot of our baby teeth already, but Pete was still waiting. I think he got bored of seeing us jiggling them about with our fingers, pushing them flat with our tongues. Pete used to grab his front tooth with two fingers and go: 'Look. Will you look? It's moving.' So we all looked, and even tested with our own fingers, but I couldn't feel anything move. You had to agree though, 'cause that's what you did with Pete. 'Yeah,' we'd say. 'Any day now.'

But Pete got tired of waiting. He told me, Tommo, and Spikey that he wanted it out.

'The constant wobbling's keeping me up at night,' he'd said. We all nodded but I still couldn't feel anything.

So, we tied a string to a door and slammed it. Nothing. I attached it to my bike and rode off but Pete just fell over and got dragged right along with it. It was decided then that enough was enough. We were getting this tooth out the old-fashioned way. Since we didn't have any pliers, it would have to be with a stone.

Me and Tommo had the arms, like I said, which meant Spikey had the legs and the job with the stone. He'd found a big one 'cause he thought that'd do it the fastest. The stone wacked down again and again on Pete's mouth. He cried like a little baby and we had to fight to keep his arms still while he kicked. We'd been told not to stop till it was done, so we

didn't. Pete lost one tooth out clean, and the other one was snapped in half; a diagonal line dwindling to a nasty point on one side.

'Aw, Pete, I'm sorry, mate. I'm really, really sorry,' Spikey said right afterwards. See, Spikey looked all tough with his sticky-up hair and his bushy mono-brow, but he wasn't. He was soft, really, when it came down to it. Pete was wailing. There was so much pain he couldn't really talk right. He got up, covering his mouth with his hands, crying even harder when he pulled them away and saw blood on his palms. We all felt pretty horrible about it. None of us wanted to hurt him, but you couldn't say no to Pete.

We'd worried about it for weeks. Tommo kept butting into any long silence with: 'but he *told* us to. He *told* us to do it,' and we knew then that we'd all been thinking about it again. I mean, he *had* told us to do it. Didn't stop us feeling bad, though.

The big teeth never did grow in. The gap stayed. I suppose it would have all been for nothing, except Pete grew fond of it. The first few weeks his lips were swollen and bruised, but after that went down I guess he looked a bit of a yob. Me and Tommo were forgiven quite quickly. With Spikey it took a little longer. Pete used to put his arm around Spike's neck and pull him close to his shoulder to rub his hair, but I could tell the grip was too tight. He always stroked the pointed bit of his left, front tooth with his index finger whenever Spikey started to speak. Pete claimed he'd never cried, that we'd remembered it wrong.

'The pain weren't so bad,' he later claimed. 'I've dealt with much worse pain than that before.'

So I guess it all worked out in the end. Still, I kept having these nightmares where I'd cough out my teeth into a big pool of blood. I still felt ill whenever Pete smiled for too long.

He was smiling too long at us all now. There we were, the whole gang of us by the weeping willow, sat in a semi-circle round Pete who leant against the tree bark.

‘Why did we have to do that?’ Toby asked him. Toby was a little one, still in short-trousers, nose-picking and dirty, with milk-bottle glasses that made him look cross-eyed.

‘You didn’t have to,’ Pete replied. ‘It was your choice.’

Toby shifted on the ground. He picked up a twig to drag it through the dried mud. You could tell he was annoyed because he didn’t know that disobeying was an option. He was right as well. It wasn’t one.

‘I suppose so,’ he said. ‘But I liked her.’

Pete was sitting at the root of the tree, dirty blond hair hanging round his ears. He held tightly onto a chubby, green bottle of Highland Park whisky. None of us boys cared about liquor because it tasted vile and made you sick, but we knew we’d grow up one day and be big enough to want to drink it by the gallon. There was no getting older for Pete though. He sipped slowly and got his hands sticky, which was funny in a way ‘cause he was trying to be a grown up and sugar-sticky fingers are as kid-like as you can get.

‘You liked her?’ Pete said. ‘Well yeah, we all liked her.’ He kept laughing, all forced like, hoping we’d join in too. Tommo did. Tommo had this high-pitched sort of laugh that made me want to hit him. I stayed quiet, only managing to force a smile.

‘Let me tell you why you liked Miss Lily. Was she nice to you? Did she give you sweeties at nursery? I bet she said you was bright for your age, yeah?’

Toby shrugged.

‘Well, Miss Lily did all that stuff for me too, and more. I used to sit outside her porch on my bicycle. She left her house in the morning to get to school, all sandals and pretty bracelets. I said to her: ‘Hey, Miss Lily! I hear you’ve got good chocolate.’ She laughed a little and said, ‘Oh, honey, you have to be in my class for that.’

I told a little fib then, said my mum and dad didn't let me go to school, that I didn't have any pals or anything. Girls won't tell you this, but they love it when you're sad. Not too sad, but a little bit. She put her hand on her hip and said: 'Well, okay then. Just this once.' Because she had the sweets right there in the little canvas sack of hers, see? Just rolling around in the bottom. She pulled out this purple one. In the shop they call it a hazelnut kiss. I said: 'This is sweet and all, but when can I get a real kiss?' and she laughed properly then, right from the gut. She said, 'Boy, you sure are gonna be a heartbreaker one day.'

Pete paused then. We stayed quiet. T

he worst part of having to stay a kid forever wasn't the teeth or the liquor. That stuff doesn't really matter in the long run. It's the girls. That's what really gets Pete down. Me and Tommo just turned eleven, but Spikey's nearly twelve. They talk about girls a lot, so I know it's not just me. Thinking about kissing and touching them makes me feel weird, but in a nice way. If I was told it couldn't ever happen, I'd be gutted too. Poor Pete. He rallied, though, carried on with the story.

'Anyway, one day I go round in the morning for my regular kiss, and there's this car in the driveway. This *stupid* Ford Cortina with a square roof, all freshly washed, the doors practically *squeaking* they're so clean. So I'm asking, whose car is this, huh? Well, the good thing about Miss Lily is that she's got this tree in her back garden. You all know that, right? It's how you got in.'

'That's right, boss,' Tommo shouted. Pete looked right at me then and I gave a little nod.

'Course you did. And where does the window by the tree go?'

He was looking at me but Tommo answered again.

'Into her bedroom, Pete.'

‘Exactly! Right into the bedroom. And I see her there. She’s with the gardener, they’re under the bedsheets. She doesn’t see me because they’re both asleep. One of her legs is out of the covers and I can see her toenails are painted red, and she’s as naked as the day she were born. He’s got an arm thrown over her. One of the branches banged against the window. It work up Mr Gardener a bit, but all he did was kiss her head. Anyway, I crawl back down and I wait for her to wake up. I’m there for a few hours. Man, I always hated that gardener. He was nosy, you know? Always asking me where my parents were, why I wasn’t at school.... I hated that. It was obvious he wanted Miss Lily to himself. Well, hey, I guess he got her in the end. Good for him.’ Pete scoffed. ‘Eventually she sees me out front from her kitchen window. She comes out to throw me a chocolate. ‘Here for your daily kiss, Pete?’ The man’s in the doorway watching this, shaking his head and frowning at me, as though I’m the one with the problem. I point to him and I say ‘Hey, looks like he gets all your kisses.’ And can you believe her? She laughs at me. She looks me in the face, and she laughs and says ‘Oh, Petey, don’t be jealous! You’re still my special little man.’’

Pete scoffed, jerked his arm up, spilling whisky out of the bottle. I watched it splash on the dried mud. We were all dead quiet. There’s not much you can say to a story like that.

‘So anyway, that’s why we killed her. Now you know. Go play.’ He drank from the bottle again. Glug. Grimace. I looked around at Spikey and Tommo. Tommo was staring straight ahead, nodding, but Spike looked at me and I could tell we were both thinking the same thing. Pete’s lost his marbles. This has gone too far. But what would ever happen to Pete? He was never the one to get his hands dirty. It’s me and Spikey that would get it if we grassed on anyone. After all, we were the oldest, or at least we looked like it. There was no choice but to ride it out.

The little kids got up. I could see some of them were on shaky legs, especially Toby. He must have really liked Miss Lily. He was probably still little enough to remember how

nice she was at school. She probably taught him how to read. We watched the little ones jump on the pile of leaves we'd all helped build. Toby didn't jump like the others did. He tripped and stumbled over something in the leaf pile, but he kept his balance and walked off without looking around to see what'd hurt him. Probably for the best. His little tumble had revealed the long, grey toes of Miss Lily with their shocking red nails stuck on like jelly. I quickly smoothed the leaves over her, like I was pulling a blanket down to stop her getting cold, but that didn't matter 'cause she was going stiff already.

Pete called for me, Spikey, and Tommo. We shuffled forward a little, sat down next to him by the roots of the tree.

'Listen lads,' he said, near slurring. 'We need to go to the end of the river now, where it's deep and the little ones don't play. There's some more stuff I need to tell you.' Me and Spikey helped him to his feet, yanking one arm each. He wasn't too heavy, but it took a while to walk there, what with all his lurching and wobbling. At one point he had to stop and vomit and I saw it dripping onto Tommo's old shorts, leaving a splattered orange stain. Clumsily, he took them off, losing his balance a few times. He looked around at all three of us before his eyes settled on Spikey and he smiled.

'Give us your trousers,' he said.

'What?' Spike asked.

'Well, you don't expect me to wander about in my drawers, do you?'

Spikey rolled his eyes, but he unbuttoned his trousers. Pete was always playing games like this, trying to show off that he was boss even if Spike was the biggest. When he took off his trousers, I tried not to notice the thick, wiry hair on his thighs, his calves hairy and strong like a grown-up's, the noticeable bulge where I definitely wasn't meant to be looking. Pete noticed it too, and scowled. He rolled up Spikey's trousers at the bottom, had to grip the

waistline since he didn't have a belt. Well, you can imagine how slow we were walking then, but eventually we got to the deep part of the river. We sat on the bank with our bare feet paddling. It was nice and cool, which was good because I was sweating like a maniac.

'How old are you, Spikey?' Pete eventually asked.

'Eleven.' Spikey bit his fingernails.

'Getting on a bit, aren't you?' Pete said. Spikey shrugged. That's the only real response he could have given. A denial would have been an obvious lie, but if he agreed it would seem like bragging. Pete handed him the whisky bottle. Spikey shook his head.

'I don't like it, Pete. You know that.'

I couldn't blame him. I could see the specks of gunk from Pete's throw up floating on the top like fish food.

'Oh come on,' Pete said. He was grinning now, the big gap in his teeth drawing all of my attention. Again he fingered the broken leftie. His eyes were wide, and I knew he was in one of those moods where he could get scary fairly sharpish. Spikey saw it too. He took the bottle. He raised it slightly in a cheers motion, then took a swig. I'm sure he copied that from *Whiplash* or something, trying to look cool. It didn't matter though because he still spluttered as it went down.

'Oh dear,' Pete laughed, slapping his own thighs. Tommo joined in grinning and giggling too and, again, I forced myself to smile. 'And you said you were a grown up!'

'I never said that,' Spikey said. He took another sip of the bottle, this time managed not to cough. He was proud of that, I could tell, but it was a mistake. Pete's face looked like murder.

'Yeah, but the thing is people don't *like* growing up here. This is a spot for kids.'

‘I’m still a kid,’ Spikey said. ‘Way more than you are.’ Pete smiled at that. I was glad. It was clever on Spikey’s part to make Pete feel like a grown up. Me and Tommo weren’t saying anything. It wasn’t a conversation for us and I wondered why we had to be here too.

‘I’m not a grown up,’ Pete said. He chuckled a little to himself. ‘I’m not grown up enough to be with Miss Lily. I’m not grown up enough for any woman. I can’t get a job or money without stealing. I can barely hold my liquor. And after all of that, I’ve still got my milk teeth.’

None of us knew what to say. It was the first time he’d ever said all that in front of people.

‘I’m sure your front teeth will come in soon though, mate,’ Tommo eventually stuttered, but that wasn’t the right thing to say. We were all being honest, and Tommo just dragged us back into our stories. Pete didn’t respond to Tommo though, his attention was all on Spikey.

‘You got any milk teeth left, Spike?’

‘Yeah, I reckon so. At the back, maybe.’

I bet he was lying. I was sure he’d lost them all.

‘Well, why don’t we get rid of them?’ Pete asked. ‘Make you a full grown up sooner rather than later.’

Spikey went pale. I reckon I did too. It was funny, in a way. He looked just like Miss Lily did when she realised we weren’t messing around and she was really in trouble. Goes to show, really, whether you’re a little boy or a grown woman, when you know something’s coming for you that’s really going to hurt, you still go pale, you still look weak. All eyes turn into shillings.

‘Nah, Pete,’ Spikey spluttered. ‘Nah, I’m happy to wait. Teeth take ages to go and I’m still only eleven.’

‘It’ll be quick,’ Pete said. ‘I didn’t even feel it.’

We knew that was wrong, but there was nothing we could do once Pete got going. Fair play to Spikey, he just nodded. I could tell he wanted to cry, but he didn’t.

‘I think it’s better to wait, let them grow in normally,’ Tommo attempted, a little pathetically. ‘You don’t want to end up with nothing to eat with...’

‘Didn’t you hear him? He said he wants them out,’ Pete said.

Tommo faltered, then finally nodded too.

‘Get the arms,’ Pete said to me and Tommo. We did. Spikey lay back pretty easy.

‘I’m really sorry, Spikes,’ Tommo whispered, but Spikey just turned his face away. I decided then, if Spikey struggled I was letting go. He didn’t ask for this and it wasn’t fair.

Pete sat on top of him, straddling the waist. He’d picked a massive rock, but I could tell from his face he didn’t choose it for its quickness. Spikey turned his head to the side so he could get his molars, and he clenched his eyes shut tight as though that would stop him feeling it, but it didn’t matter. Pete didn’t go for the mouth.

I let go of Spikey’s arm out of shock, but at that point it didn’t really matter anymore. It took maybe two bashes for his skull to cave in. The nose bone pushed up into the brain, the right eyeball popped from the edge of the rock and introduced me to a fluid I hadn’t known existed. He’d lost his teeth, no doubt of that. There were at least four embedded in the roof of his mouth. I looked over at Tommo. His face was a shade of white I’d never seen before. When I looked back at Pete he was still sitting on Spike. I expected him to be panting like they do in the films, but he wasn’t. He seemed calm. I looked at Spikey’s face and threw up.

It wasn't really a face anymore. His head wasn't head shaped. Nothing was the right colour. I thought about deflated balloons.

'Throw his body in the river,' Pete said to us. 'Make sure to drop him in the end with the rocks.' I got up. Me and Tommo grabbed an end of Spikey each and swung him in. His bare calves were still warm, still hairy, a red mark round his ankles where his socks had dug in. I'd seen those legs a thousand times, but now he was dead he didn't seem like a person anymore. Maybe that was because he didn't have a face, I don't know, but it didn't feel like Spikey I was flinging into the water, just an awkward, heavy doll. I didn't even bother looking to see if he sank to the bottom.

We walked back through the woods with Pete, and he told us that we'd done a good thing, still clasping Spikey's trousers with his right hand.

'We all did him a favour. Spikey didn't want to grow up. He didn't.' Quietly, we agreed. Pete had this way of making the most lunatic stuff make sense.

We left Pete by the meeting tree. He touched my arm as we were walking away. He hugged Tommo because he was still crying, his shoulders shaking up and down, but he just extended an arm out to me. I let him grab my elbow. His thumb moved in circles on my arm. It was nice. Miss Lily's body still rested under the leaves, like she too was winding down for the night, getting snuggled up. I didn't know what Pete was planning for her body. I didn't want to ask.

That night I crawled into bed, my body shaking. Spikey was only a few months older than me and I knew what was coming next. I was starting to get hair down there too. I wasn't speaking because my voice was creaking and groaning all over the place. I'd been looking forward to being a man one day, maybe even getting a woman, but that night I sucked my

thumb while I slept. I curled up on my side, rocking back and forth, back and forth. I just didn't want to grow up.

Primary Care Commissioning

PMC Complaints

06/07/2017

NR —

Dear Dr —,

Thank you for contacting the PMC complaints team regarding your experiences at Rompecabeza Hospital. The commission have read your statement concerning the treatment of Cindy Reynolds and the person referred to as 'Creature A'. We at the Private Medical Care Board take complaints extremely seriously, as such we have investigated the issue and established that **no further action is necessary at this time.**

Having completed our investigation, it has been confirmed that all medical treatment undertaken by Cindy Reynolds has been approved by her primary guardian, with appropriate written consent. With regards to Creature A, Rompecabeza Hospital has fulfilled their legal bureaucratic duty to take on guardianship after the creature was declared ward of the court upon its discovery. Decisions taken on Creature A's care and medical treatment are now the responsibility of the hospital's Chief of Medicine, who has demonstrated all appropriate legal documentation. On reviewing said evidence, the commission has to come to the conclusion that there is no reason to believe any of the treatment currently being undertaken is superfluous, or harmful to the patient.

If you would like to appeal this decision, you may contact your local MP or Health Service Ombudsman. Alternatively, you are free to hire a private lawyer.

The PMC team is conscious that this complaint arose from a moment of heightened emotion when choosing to renounce your position as General Physician at Rompecabeza Hospital. With this in mind, it is recommended that the complaint be dropped to prevent later issues regarding personal employability.

Regards,

Kathie Walker

Private Medical Care Board, Complaints Division.

Chapter One

The Doc

I hoped it wasn't tongue tonight. Not that there was anything wrong with Raul's cooking; God knows it was far superior to my own, (before I met him I'd subsisted on Pot Noodles and microwave meals) but my shift had finished late again, and I wanted something *normal* for a change.

Internally, I scolded myself for being so judgemental. Tongue was 'normal' (whatever that meant) to plenty of cultures. And really, if I found myself eating offal more often than I'd like to after a full-day of colonoscopies and cleaning abscesses, it was my own fault. I'd said on that first date eight years ago (Christ, had it been eight years already?) that I adored adventure. At the time I was in my mid-twenties, hair bleached from the sun and still indignant about the cruelty of the world. Back then, I truly believed I might be the type to attempt a different cuisine every day, the type who would happily spend my nights sleeping on tarpaulin. Now, I wanted a gallon of pasta and pesto, an awful reality TV show, and an early night tucked up in my comfiest jammies.

I rang Raul on hands-free from the carpark.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m on my way home now.’

‘Late again,’ he tutted.

‘Late, sweaty and covered in blood.’

‘Life in the abattoir! They overwork you, you know?’

I pictured him waving around his arms about in that effeminate way of his and smiled to myself. Of course, I wasn’t really overworked. I had more flexibility in Rompecabeza Hospital than I’d had in years, which was a small consolation considering I couldn’t stand the place.

‘I was just wondering what you fancied for dinner,’ I said, manoeuvring around the roundabout, cursing the traffic lights they’d installed on an already nightmarish stretch of road.

‘Oh, don’t worry, I’ve cooked. You best hurry as well, I’ve been picking at your plate for a while now.’

‘Oh, you’ve cooked. Super! What are we having?’

‘Chireta, and it’s getting cold.’

Chireta, I pondered. Which one was chireta?

‘Actually, if you’re stopping by the petrol station a bottle of wine wouldn’t go amiss.’

‘Red or white?’ I asked.

‘Oh red, absolutely. A chianti if they have it.’

I flinched. Chianti didn’t bode well.

‘Okey dokey!’ I said, as cheerfully as I could muster. ‘See you soon.’

By the time I'd pulled into the garage, I'd decided that whatever Raul had cooked, I'd close my eyes, feel the texture, and savour every bite. I'd think of those who rely on foodbanks, and even those poor old biddies I look after all day with their little silver trays of aeroplane food, and remember that I was so lucky to be in my cushy, middle-class position eating the disgusting, but culturally rich, meals prepared by my loving partner. Still, when I picked up the wine I also grabbed a six pack of Walkers Ready Salted. I wasn't a total martyr, after all.

Chapter Two

The Chief

5' 5", BMI above average, no history of blood disease, age twenty-five, a smoker (regrettably), with a few major injuries including the loss of both feet and, at my design, an open rib-cage. Infuriatingly, she would die soon, though I'd asked The Prince to keep her alive. Open-heart surgery is complicated enough without the patient going into shock. She was unconscious now at least (she wasn't during The Prince's removal of her feet) but I was in no position to complain. The Prince was indulging me, allowing me into his family home – a home he shared with his mother no less – and from the way he was smiling it was clear he thought we were brethren. It was useful to allow him to live under such delusions.

Her heart was still beating. I could see it working, pumping blood to her quickly failing organs.

The monster I'd been building lay on a parallel gurney, its chest cracked open, waiting to be assembled. The circulatory system was one of the trickiest parts of this, each vein and artery intricate in their connection. I lifted her heart from its chest cavity. It pulsed in my hand as though it were its own singular being and for a brief moment I nearly laughed,

my own heartbeat increasing in anticipation, the two of us beating in unison. I was overcome with inspiration and experienced something akin to a spiritual transcendence before The Prince brought me sharply back to reality:

‘Let the obituary read that she was kind and warm-hearted.’

I could see then how he pictured himself: an intellectual genius working away in his faux surgical mask. I pretended to laugh.

Carefully, I placed the heart inside my monster’s empty space. It lay there, wet and alive. With my needle and thread I began stitching each vein, my hands shaking at the intricacy. I stood back and watched it for a moment. Would it keep beating? Would my monster have a heart? The thumping continued and I knew it was a success. I folded the ribs atop my achievement as though I were closing a book.

Under strict concentration hours of labour can pass like minutes, and before I knew it I’d administered the final stitches. I was neat this time. Too often in the making of my creature I’d been clumsy and haphazard, desperate to see the final product and retire to my solitude. I glanced over at The Prince now, slumped on his stool with a scalpel, shaving layers of skin off the donor’s foot as though he were peeling an apple.

‘It’s finished,’ I said.

‘Thank heavens. The ennui was unbearable.’ The Prince rolled his eyes. I took off my gloves, wiped the sweat from my forehead. ‘And what now?’ he asked.

‘I’m leaving,’ I replied. ‘You should too. If it wakes up, leave the doors open. Someone will find it eventually.’

‘I should think not, this is private property.’

‘Well then drive it somewhere.’

‘Where on earth...’

‘Somewhere inconspicuous, I don’t know. The point is it must be found naturally. It’s important not to draw too much attention to ourselves.’

The Prince nodded, but I noticed some erubescence. I knew then that I must have some control over him. Here he was doing something he didn’t want to do because he believed I had authority. This was beneficial.

I drove home with the windows open, hearing the wind rush past me and I smiled. Now, the research could really begin. Best of all, I needn’t have to deal with The Prince any longer, a relief beyond comprehension. Still, I couldn’t help but pity him slightly as I pictured the terror he’d experience when the thing finally opened its eyes.

Chapter Four

The Prince

I was shattered! My whole head felt congested. Nervous adrenaline kept me functioning during that moment of intense stress, but unfortunately the rush lingered and I was left jittering. Despite having been awake for well over twenty-four hours, my anxious heartbeat's pitter-patter would not let me rest. I hoped The Chief would, at least, be grateful.

I sat on the low wall bordering my rose garden. The flowers were arranged in tidy rows, the whites, reds, and yellows (the latter always so gaudy!) as neatly arranged as the lines of a flag. My favourites were those with swirling pinks and reds inside the petals, looking like sticky ice-creams. While my senses were somewhat dulled by my exhaustion, I still recognised the beauty of the early morning hours which most days I preferred to sleep through. Morning dew mingled in the warm air and made it taste all that much sweeter. I nursed the coffee I'd instructed the gardener to fetch me. It was comforting having something warm to hold, and I thought I may as well make the intrusive beggar useful for something. Staff, much like the adrenaline, linger longer than I'd prefer. My mother says I must show

them more gratitude, but then she's hardly a mother Theresa herself, preferring to hire illegals who don't have enough sense to sniff out exploitation. The turnover here is quite high.

The monster had been deposited. What few instructions were left for me, I hardly understood. 'Drive it somewhere inconspicuous,' The Chief had said. Ludicrous! But somehow, I managed it. I thought a rural area would be best. Farms are often empty, remote, and ominously loud at night with the honks and grunts of encaged swine. A cattle prod managed to persuade the thing out of the van. The last I saw, it was running far across the fields at exceptional speed. I didn't worry too much about the creature. It wasn't really my project after all, but I didn't like the idea of having something traced back to me when I hadn't derived any of the thrill associated with the risk. Still, this was all a part of our professional exchange. We helped each other, The Chief and I.

The sun had long-risen and I felt my heart gradually slowing in response to the morning tranquillity. The tweeting of birds was becoming irritating and I looked forward to a long sleep wrapped in my silk sheets, freshly washed.

The sound of crunching gravel distracted me and I scowled. Disobedient pedestrians often snuck through our gardens. The gates were locked, but the eager always found a way around it, boosting themselves over fences or crawling through holes in hedges. I recognised this particular girl. It wasn't the first time I'd seen her. Usually I glimpsed her in the afternoon light, but never this early in the morning. Her make-up was freshly applied. She was at the age where she didn't realise how beautiful she was, and caked on orange-cream to fit in with the other trollops with bad skin and poorly-dyed yellow hair. I did find her painted lips appealing, although I doubted they'd last beyond her first sip of water.

It was early and I was too tired for a conquest, but I enjoyed watching her and hoped that she might catch my eye. She didn't. Her headphones planted firmly in her ears, her eyes

planted firmly on the floor, she chewed her painted lips, smiling slightly, daydreaming in that way of teenage girls. Judging by her backpack and sensible, black shoes, I supposed she was a student. I hoped she had a uniform beneath that long, winter coat of hers.

Enough dwelling! It was time for a long, hot bath and a well-needed sleep. Still, the girl had piqued my interest. The schools would close at what? Three? Four? That gave me plenty of time to rest before engaging in my nightly flirtations. She turned a corner and was no longer within eyesight. She was something to look forward to, at least.

Chapter Five

The Victim

It was dark. When I opened my eyes, I thought they must still be clenched shut. Perhaps I'd gone blind. A sob tried to escape me, but I muffled it. I didn't remember exactly what had happened, but I knew if I had any sense I'd be terrified.

I hoped I was dreaming. Things like this didn't happen in real life, I thought. Occasionally, they might happen in your subconscious, and you'd snap out of it feeling slightly ashamed that you'd thought up something so disgusting in the first place. I'd had my fair share of nightmares. Nightmares where I was going to have a baby, nightmares where I couldn't move and there was something in the corner watching me, nightmares where I'd killed someone and had to go on the run. Sometimes the dreams were so vivid that I would convince myself it couldn't be a dream even *while* in the process of dreaming. I'd feel the weight settling on my chest, and when I'd wake up I'd feel sad and scared. Then I'd look around and realise that actually, I was at home in bed, the ceiling still covered in posters, the duvet still warm and snuggly. Within about ten seconds all that fear would drift away and I'd

find myself completely indifferent to the dream, already forgetting it, thinking instead about low-cal breakfasts.

That didn't happen this time. No matter how much I willed it, I simply couldn't wake up. I lightly tapped my cheeks and was comforted to know I could feel it. There was no air movement where I was. I guessed that meant no escape. No light meant no windows. Even at night, there's the moon.

There was concrete beneath me. The walls felt like exposed brick, which might've been homely if it wasn't so *dark*. I couldn't see, but I could feel. Hard floors, hard walls. I had a headache like I'd never known before. Because of how much my head was hurting I didn't really notice the scrapes on the backs of my legs, but when I stood up I quickly became aware of them. My clothes were torn. I felt sick. If I'd have eaten, I'm sure I would have vomited, but I was only capable of retching which didn't relieve the nausea. When had I last eaten? Lunchbreak, it must've been, sharing pasties and sausage rolls on the park bench with the girls, throwing the end away demurely because I could never finish a full steak bake. Who knew when I'd get to eat again?

I went along the walls with my hands. Hard. Hard. Hard. Cold. A new material, smoother than brick. Metal. A door. I crouched down on my hands and knees to look underneath, but there was no light there either. I sat near it hoping that if it opened I'd be able to rush out quickly. I felt along the floor for something I could use as a weapon and found my school bag thrown into the corner of the room. As slowly as possible I tried the zips, terrified to make a noise. There was everything there, my purse, keys, phone, books... I felt over the phone screen carefully. It was cracked. Maybe broken. I went to turn it on, then stopped. The light. He'd come back if he saw it. I put the phone inside my bra, clasped between my sternum and the underwire, and kept my keys between my knuckles, just in case.

The floor appeared bare at first, until I felt something soft roll under my palm. I held it close to my eye and squinted. It was a familiar material, maybe half the size of my palm, flimsy and soft. There was something else near it, the same material, but short, stubby, solid. I rubbed it, uncertainly. Then I felt the toenail.

I didn't know I was screaming. I just heard something new and shrill. When I realised it was me, I stopped. I was going to die here, that I was sure of.

At the sound of the scream a light came on from underneath the door. I heard steps coming down, then a clanking as the metal door squeaked open. The sight of the man appalled me, but it sparked something in my memory. He had been chasing me. Yes, he had been chasing me. The Prince.

'Ah wonderful,' he smiled. 'You're awake.'

Chapter Six

The Doc

‘I’m opening another bottle.’

‘Absolutely not, I’ve got work tomorrow.’

‘Oh, come on! When do you ever get a night off?’ Raul smiled, his left cheek dimpling.

‘Practically never, so it’s futile starting an alcohol dependency now.’ I was trying to be jokey and light-hearted, but I was never very good at being playful. I always ended up sounding strict and uptight, even though I really never intended it.

‘Fine then,’ he rolled his eyes. ‘No more wine.’

‘Get one yourself, love.’ I rubbed my foot on his lap. ‘Stick the kettle on for me if you’re going in the kitchen.’

He patted my shin, and I shifted for him, then allowed myself to stretch out further on the sofa. In my twenties, I’d detested laziness, but since working at Rompecabeza, nights off had become about BBC Two: TV quizzes, cooking shows, and posh couples relocating to the

countryside. Occasionally, if I was feeling particularly academic, I'd watch the news. The news was coming on then and I heard the familiar *dong* that let me know it was time to drift off to dull murmurings of economic travesty. Evenings off were my time for anything mindless that I wouldn't mind forgetting by the morning.

'You should be drinking wine while you're still able, anyway,' Raul shouted from the kitchen. 'When we *do* get pregnant, you won't be allowed for at least a year.'

I ignored him, too tired to respond.

'Shift up.' He'd returned, but I was too exhausted to move.

'Can't we cuddle?' I asked, moaning slightly as I opened my eyes. He smiled. Raul always enjoyed it when I acted a little bit pathetic.

'Sure,' he said.

I moved towards the edge of the sofa. Raul placed his glass of wine and my camomile tea on the coffee table, and squashed in behind me. I lifted my head so he could place his arm beneath my neck. No doubt I'd forget about the tea until it was already cold.

'That's better.'

At work I had to be brisk and competent, but at home I could be soft, two glasses of wine in my belly, full from the dinner *he'd* cooked, wrapped up in big, hairy arms like a spoiled, indulged princess. I rested my eyes again for just a second, dwelling on the loveliness of it all.

'Darling, wake up. It's your hospital.' I hadn't thought I was really asleep but when my eyes opened they were full of blurs. The light made white worms crawl over my field of vision, but I recognised The Chief's octogenarian face.

'What?' I mumbled.

His face was blown up, wrinkled and watery eyed, next to a quote that was read out by the reporter. I couldn't help but notice a hint of admiration in his tone, which I immediately resented:

'Whoever this person is we know they deserve to be kept safe. A hospital is safer than a prison, and a tranquiliser dart safer than a bullet.'

A different news anchor's face appeared on the screen with a tense-lipped smile.

'Wise words there from Rompecabezza's Chief of Medicine Dr Francis Steiner. Now, what's so unprecedented about this creature is that we're not sure if it's even human, isn't that right, Jane?'

'Yes, amazingly that is correct. According to official hospital reports...'

What bothered me the most about my intense hatred of The Chief was that no one else shared it. He kept working and refused to retire despite appearing to be a second away from death himself. I felt sure he could be replaced by a more sympathetic database system. His face flashed on the screen again, and I flinched. He was far too angular, his eyes a watery blue, his teeth too small for his mouth. His voice was always disturbingly monotonous even when describing a traffic pile-up or a tower-block fire, as though it were simply an inconvenient influx of patients. At first, I'd taken it for professionalism and even attempted to emulate it, but recently I'd started to recognise it for what it really was – plain indifference.

'Aren't you excited?' Raul asked.

'What's even happening?'

'Weren't you listening?'

'I was asleep.'

‘They found a weird *thing*. I don’t know what it is, the footage made it look huge, like a Yeti. Anyway, they’re treating it at your hospital.’

‘Why? Why are they treating it there? Who’s the guardian? Where did they come from?’

‘Well, that wasn’t mentioned, I don’t think.’

‘And of course, I find out from the news and not from a phone call or a work email. I mean, honestly, what happened to doctor/patient confidentiality? Over here painting him as a brave hero, what sway does The Chief even have to make this standard procedure? I swear he is the most ridiculous, incompetent...’

‘Well, let’s calm down a little. Isn’t he doing a good thing here? Like he said, it’s better than the jail, or the *zoo*, as some people suggested. What else were they supposed to do?’

I sank my shoulders down, not realising I’d been so tense.

‘I just hate working there. It’s the weirdest place I’ve ever worked and I’ve been all over...’

‘Different countries in war-torn Syria, yes Miss Doctors-without-Borders, but you keep telling me it’s terrible without telling me what’s so terrible about it.’

I tutted. I couldn’t explain, except to say that no one smiled and when I was there I couldn’t bring myself to smile either. It was windowless and cold, not necessarily always in temperature but in *feel*. The rest of the world disappeared as soon as I stepped through the doors. I found myself speaking more formally just to fit in. Yellow lights and squeaky shoes were a feature in near enough every hospital I’d ever been in, but somehow it seemed even *more* yellow, the shoes even squeakier, and everyone was always sweating, damp with

anxiety, particularly the patients. I once complained about it to The Nurse when she was on the ward. ‘They’re sweating too much. They must be uncomfortable.’

‘Yeah, mate, they’re sick,’ she’d replied.

‘It’s just weird,’ I said. Raul reached over me for his wine.

Chapter Seven

The Nurse

I prefer a needle to a gun, but I’m old-school like that. Got four in my nose alone. When I pout, I can feel my septum piercing brush against my blue face mask. I used to have all sorts of masks to wear to work: Cheshire Cat smiles, big clown faces. My favourite were a

screaming mouth with an open, black palate and the tops of the fingers traced onto the cheeks. The Doc told me off, though. Said I were scaring the paediatrics. Fine then, I'll be boring.

My first were my belly button. I were about twelve. Clamp and needle. No pain whatsoever, hardly even felt it. Rubbish.

The next were better. Mate's bathroom, two ice-cubes and a needle coated with anti-bac hand gel. She swore she'd been trained professional. Had she fuck. Weeks of Savlon that thing took, and it swelled up like a big, ol' balloon. Ugly, little thing, but I liked it. Won't tell you where that one is: common decency prohibits.

Even though most places are more accepting of piercings and tattoos in the workplace, I still get grief from The Doc, which is funny because The Chief don't give a shit. I thought he'd have a problem since he's about 100, but it's The Doc who's got me putting masking tape all over my face like I'm in PE, for fuck's sake. Ah well. Least the pay's good. Better than wiping arses in the care home. Plus, in private hospitals, we get all the freaks.

I weren't allowed to say owt to anyone outside the hospital, although obviously I rang up Rubes the first chance I got. I weren't meanna be working with The Monster, but I made bloody sure I would be. Can get away with murder if you just act like you're meanna be somewhere, like everyone else is pissing you off and getting in the way.

'Excuse me, mind, thank you, I've got a patient to attend to,' I'd say, scurrying them other nurses out the room. The delusion of authority is a powerful thing.

Huge dude, he were, all rotten and raggedy. He smelt like the mice our old tabby used to bring in, the ones that got stuck under the fridge so we didn't find them for weeks. Ugly too. Yellow skin, dark eyes, big dilated pupils. The whole of him were like an old Halloween decoration.

The other nurses were dead pissed off with The Chief, all like, ‘*Why did he bring it here?*’, ‘*Why int it at an NHS hospital if there’s no one to pay for its treatment?*’, ‘*How are we meant to handle this with no training?*’ Wusses. Scared of the big, bad monster. True, he screamed like a banshee, but I thought he were cute in a way. I felt bad for him, like. I wouldn’t like to go anywhere where I didn’t speak the language, looked dead different, and everyone were sticking sharp things in me all the time. No wonder he lashed out, poor bugger. I weren’t as soft as The Doc, though. She were a bit OTT if you ask me.

While he were all drugged up I took the chance to look at him. Stitches everywhere, big and ugly, mismatched eyes, unsymmetrical in every sense. I wondered what happened to him, why he were like that. He were delirious from the tranquilisers and only managed to let out a growl. I could see him watching me out the corner of his eyes, trying to swat me away like I were a fly.

‘What are you?’ I asked him, but all I got were another moan in response. ‘Whatever,’ I continued. ‘Welcome to the mad house.’

Chapter Eight

The Chief

A tough morning. The interviewer had a mild case of halitosis, and hospitals are breeding grounds for germs. I wished people would take advantage of the free hand sanitizer before thrusting microphones into my face. Nobody smelt ethanoic enough for my taste.

‘Hey there, Frank, a word please. Perhaps we can talk in my office?’

The manager of the HR department was 5’4”, balding, verging on the obese, which he attempted to hide with high-waisted trousers, constantly jerking them up to reveal a bulge of seemingly average proportions.

‘Must I?’ I asked.

‘You must.’

‘Very well then.’

We walked together towards his office waving at everyone he pretended to know, giving an impression of popularity which crumbled under the contemptuous gaze of The

Nurse. He opened the door for me, and I stepped into the windowless admin room he called his office. Behind me, he shut the door.

‘Right then, step this way. Mind the mess,’ he added, chuckling. I glanced around. The place was spotless excepting a few piles of papers, no doubt meticulously well-maintained. Office admin have a low tolerance for disarray in comparison to surgeons. ‘Now, you’re not in any trouble if that’s what you think.’ He laughed again in an attempted show at comradery. ‘No? Well, okay you are in a *bit* of trouble. We *do* need to have a talk about protocol.’

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘It’s tiresome.’

‘Well, that may be, that may be. But the reality is, you can’t really cut illicit deals with the police to release a potentially dangerous patient without contacting the HR department and fellow members of medical staff first and foremost.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, for starters, we’ve not even had time to glance over the appropriate paperwork for this situation.’

‘Is there appropriate paperwork for this situation?’

‘Of course, Frank. There’s appropriate paperwork for every situation.’

‘Well then how do I move forward? Should I hold another press conference? Send it back into police custody? Surely, that’s frightfully inconvenient.’

‘Oh, absolutely. I wouldn’t insist on anything that drastic. That would involve too much backpedalling.’

‘What then?’ I asked, irritated.

‘What we’ll have to do is *pretend* we’ve understood and approved of the situation all along. We say it was handled with the correct bureaucratic means from the outset. We’ll have to do some backdating, a little bit of manipulation, but I imagine it should all be okay in the end.’

‘Then why am I here?’ I asked. ‘It seems you have a solution planned already.’

‘For your wrists slapped!’ He hit a ruler against the desk for emphasis and let out a laugh, which I did not reciprocate. ‘No, but seriously, you do have to consider the correct protocol in the future. We really couldn’t possibly have you bringing in every monster that’s found wandering the streets.’

‘What about the ones in pig farms?’

‘Droll, droll, but yes, no, the guidelines make it quite clear that it is wandering monsters found *anywhere*, provided they don’t have parents or guardians, and particularly if they’re non-verbal or below the age of consent. You *must* contact the HR department.’

‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ I muttered, standing to leave. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me, I have patients to attend to.’

‘Of course, of course, no rest for the wicked,’ he chuckled again. ‘Oh, by the way, Frank, I suppose this isn’t very professional of me to ask but well, I can’t help human nature and it really has been on my mind since I saw the broadcast... Then again, I don’t suppose you could tell me anyway...’

‘I’m in a hurry,’ I said.

‘Right, yes, well, I just wondered. What *is* it?’

I smiled. I couldn’t wait for the day I could answer this question with openness and pride. It’s a prize, a scientific marvel, a beauty, a testament to my skills as a surgeon, a hope for so many, a start of a new future, a legacy, a legacy...

‘We haven’t the foggiest.’

Chapter Nine

The Monster

White. Red. Green.

Pain. Pain. Pain. Cold.

Doc. Happy. Warm. Sleep. Calm.

Black.

Chapter Ten

The Chief

He was 5'8". Pale in an anaemic, incestuous way, reddish hair, small eyes, BMI perhaps on the larger side of average. Non-smoker, presumably no recreational drug-use, although he had the enlarged pupils of someone on amphetamines. Sociopathic? Likely so. Fetishistic, almost definitely. I was cynical about the idea that there was something intrinsically perverted about him. I felt instead that every sordid element of his sexual deviancy stemmed from the thrill of power rather than any genuine attraction. A fascinating, if frustrating, character.

It's impossible to derive any useful information from The Prince regardless, and I detested our meetings. It had to be after dark, interrupting my circadian rhythm so that by the time The Prince drove up I was already cold and tired, ready for a rest. The moonlight shone through the shattered windows and rusted doors of written-off cars. Walking past I accidentally brushed the back of my hand against the trunk of an old ambulance. The rust stained my skin a choleric brown before I wiped it away with my handkerchief. I worried about tetanus.

The Prince was more concerned about the potential media circus. If anyone caught him meeting up with an old man in a junkyard, periodicals would certainly begin to talk, he said, although I had my doubts that anyone still cared about the comings and goings of aristocracy. The Prince maintained that the working classes were awed by the likes of him, but that hadn't been my experience. I couldn't see why he didn't just come to the hospital, but apparently he held a certain fondness for the abandoned, industrial atmosphere.

'How tall is she?' I asked.

'Tall, I'd say. Nearly as tall as me.' He threw a spark plug up and down, playfully.

'5'6"? 5'7"?'

He scoffed. 'How the bloody hell should I know?'

'And I don't suppose you could tell me her weight either.'

'I can tell you all about her body, if you'd like?' he asked.

I suppressed a sigh.

'I care much more for the parts, as you know.'

'I'm not going to trade her for parts,' The Prince said. 'Her parts are the things I like most. Anyway, you've got your man. Why do you care?'

I shrugged. I'd taken great pains to make my monster male, even though the body parts were mostly female, but I'd started to develop a vague notion of perhaps creating it a female companion, seeing if the creatures could breed. This was perhaps overly ambitious and I didn't want to tell The Prince in case he viewed it as an excuse for us to socialise even further.

'Her feet fit,' he said. 'That's what's most important. I'm keeping her.'

‘And not killing her?’

‘Well, perhaps eventually. If I tire of her.’

‘You’re getting reckless. This girl has a routine. A family. They’ve reported her missing. You’re not playing with vulnerable prostitutes anymore.’ I shook my head. ‘If you’re not more careful, it’s inevitable that you’re going to get caught.’

The Prince shrugged. He shifted himself up onto his car-bonnet, tilted his head back in thought.

‘Nothing that can’t be covered up. It would sound like a ludicrous conspiracy theory if anyone tried to publish it. Besides, she ought to have been more careful.’

‘*More* careful?’ The Prince was bad company, but watching him justify his actions never failed to interest me. ‘How so?’

‘Walking home, by herself, when there’s a crazed killer on the loose. Dressed like a Japanese schoolgirl, no less? What did she expect to happen?’

‘Well, presumably not this. It would be verging on obsessive paranoia to assume this.’

‘Well, when you leave a car door unlocked...’

We were quiet then. There was no business to conduct and I could have easily left. I wondered why I continued to have these meetings with The Prince and I intuited that this would be the last. I had no further use for him. Still, I lingered. Companionship is hard to come by in one’s twilight years.

‘My goodness,’ The Prince said, smiling to himself contentedly. ‘Aren’t the stars sparkling tonight? Astonishing.’

I glanced up, wondering what he expected a star to do if not sparkle.

Chapter Eleven

The Prince

She couldn't stop her phone from shaking. It felt tacky, like something out of a cheesy, horror flick. Maybe she'd watched too many of those ghastly things. I suppose that's why she started the way she did:

'My name is Cindy Reynolds,' she said, choking back tears. She was whispering. It would have been hard to hear her if her face weren't so close to the camera. I could only see half of her, the mascara smudged into her left cheeks, her nose red from cold or crying. 'My name is Cindy Reynolds, and I'm going to die down here.'

She started to weep properly then, the kind of choking sobs which mutate the mouth into something ugly.

'He's got me. He got all the others too, I know it. I can see them everywhere. Their blood is on these walls, they... Look...'

She stood up and turned the phone-camera around. It was dark but with the new light I could just about recognise the cellar.

‘This,’ she was still shaking, ‘is someone’s toe. The toes are everywhere, all scattered. And this is some kind of skin, I don’t know. I don’t want to touch it.’

A heel, I thought, rolling my eyes. It’s obviously a heel.

‘Dad, if you’re watching this, I love you. My sisters. My friends... Oh God, I miss you so much. You have to save me,’ she was crying still. ‘Please, you have to save me.’

I placed the phone down and wondered who she expected to find it, how she imagined it would make it out of here in the first place. Oh well. It was unfortunate.

Cindy had been sticking to the cellar corner while I watched her little video. She stayed in the corner to get as far away from me as possible. I dropped her phone, stomped it with my oxfords. I was surprised she didn’t yell out. I suppose she’d passed hysteria, and now there was a kind of acceptance. There was no recovering from this. Therapy would not help her now.

‘It’s done,’ I tried to comfort her. ‘I don’t need to hurt anyone else now. I finally have the right foot. My fairy tale ended with you.’

I had attempted to show her before, but she wouldn’t look. Now, she couldn’t walk to my chambers to see.

‘Does it hurt?’ I asked her.

She glared at me, her golden hair sticking to her face.

‘I can still feel it. I can still feel it like it’s there, but it’s not there anymore.’ She spat on the floor near my shoe. Distasteful. If there was one thing I couldn’t stand, it was unnecessary rudeness. ‘They’re coming now,’ she told me. ‘They’re coming for you.’

It was best to leave her to her own delusions.

It had been worth it. Above the fireplace, her foot was displayed. It fitted the shoe exactly, as though I'd made it just for her. All the others hadn't fitted, and now they were scattered on the floor, bumped from first place, left to be swept up by my Haitian maid. I still liked them of course, but they didn't belong centre-stage. They weren't allowed the privilege of a shoe. I lifted the ornament, careful not to drop it, for it was so delicate, so fragile, much easier to break than an ankle. I kissed the top where the skin was showing and was delighted to find it was already cold.

Chapter Twelve

The Doc

The stitches between his limbs gave it away. At first we all thought it must be an awful case of abuse, a quadruple amputee cut up and sewn back together, some Nazi-esque experiment, we had no way of knowing which parts made the original man. This trauma, I argued, may have rendered him speechless. But every part of him was riddled with decay and soon I couldn't deny that there was no original. He was man-made. A reservoir of a person.

‘They call him ‘The Monster,’’ The Nurse whispered to me, smiling mischievously.

I tutted. ‘How cruel. Poor thing.’

‘What’s up with him?’ she asked.

‘His stitches are infected,’ I said, instead of answering what I knew she meant. ‘We need to make sure we’re keeping him clean.’

‘And studying him,’ she added.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Immediate medical care comes first.’

Studying. Honest to God, it seemed everyone was too afflicted with morbid curiosity to bother treating boring ailments. I was convinced that this was The Chief's doing.

Immediately, I felt protective of him. I'd convinced the other staff to get rid of the restraints because I saw absolutely no need for them. He'd started to show signs of trust around us, even reciprocating my compassion. He realised we soothed his burns as best we could and that the drips we gave him stopped the pain. Once, as I was checking the burns on his torso, he placed his large hand over mine. I had no idea why, but my eyes filled with tears. I smiled at him, hoping he understood that I was happy. He seemed calm.

The Chief called me to his office when he'd first arrived.

'Modern science hasn't seen a case like this in decades. It holds so many possibilities for understanding human development. If we can just get it...'

'He,' I said.

'Excuse me?'

'He.'

The Chief looked at me, confused.

'The creator clearly intended to make him male. He has all the... characteristics shall we say.' Again, that strange formality. I'd never had a problem with the word 'penis' before, but with The Chief it felt like swearing in front of your grandmother.

'And why is that relevant now?' he asked.

I shook my head as though to say I didn't know, because I knew The Chief would never understand.

Chapter Thirteen

The Victim

‘You silly bitch, what have you done?’

The sirens were getting louder, heading in our direction. The Prince was even paler than usual, and I felt a little thrill at being able to cause him fear. I hoped he might kill me. I could rest in the knowledge that this really was the end now. He looked as though he wanted to and I smiled, knowing that if I was going anywhere, I’d be sure to drag him down with me.

He couldn’t kill me in the traditional sense, anyway. Sure, he could’ve hacked into my skull with an axe if he felt like it, but it wouldn’t have done any good. Cindy Reynolds was already dead and gone. I’d never be the same again. How strange that I felt something like relief.

Chapter Fourteen

The Nurse

Assisting surgery always makes me crave burgers, so I popped into *Bobby's* for a Double Cowboy Deluxe and a gallon of coke. I love *Bobby's* 'cause it has the bloodiest beef in town, but also 'cause our Rubes works there.

I'd say Ruby were my girlfriend if I didn't mind sounding like a wet rag, but I do, so I won't. Not sure if her name's even Rubes, to be honest. I found a letter in her flat addressed to a 'Rhian', but when I asked her she said she'd been called Ruby ever since her mam caught a glint of red in her eyes during a Sunday sermon. I'd met her under her stage name, Rubella, doing that sort of lace and leather burlesque that makes men feel sick and get hard all at once. But when she weren't staying up till 4am with red, glitter pasties on her tits, she were the best skating waitress in *Bobby's* wholesome establishment. Unskilled labour, my arse. Who else can carry two full trays of milkshakes and fries, on roller-skates, and all for minimum wage? Well turns out not that many people which is why she's still there even after she went batshit and frisbee'd a tray at the jukebox for playing 'Suspicious Minds' one too

many times, shattering the glass and making a small child cry. The jukebox still works, but it's never been the same since.

Just my luck, as I stepped in she whizzed past me with a tray of dirty plates, saying:

'Oi oi, fancy seeing you here.'

'Now then trouble,' I grinned. 'I'd like your biggest, beefiest, bloodiest burger to go please. I am simply famished.' I said this all sexy-like, throwing my hand to my forehead. She skated over, grabbed me by the waist, still balancing the tray.

'Oh yeah? Sure I can't interest you in a hot, 12-inch, spicy Italian?'

'How about a warm, *moist*, slice of apple pie?'

She moaned at that, I like to think only half-joking, and went in for a snog.

It's sort of a joke, sort of not, this sexy, flirty thing we do. It's mostly just done to wind people up, but there's something in it. It's not like we always shag with the curtains open.

'Ruby, please, you're on shift.' Poor Mr Abdalla sounded more tired than firm. I think with all our lesbo dramatics we'd worn him down. The man thought he'd find the American dream in bloody Norfolk, now he were left with a horny stripper running the shop.

'Yeah, yeah, alright,' she said. 'You in a hurry, babe?'

'Nah.'

'Wanna have your dinner here? My shift's over in thirty if you wanna hang out.'

'Go on then.'

I met Rubes accidentally on a club night. I can't remember who I'd come with, some boring bastard from a dating app. I missed her performance, which were probably a good

thing because if I saw her on stage before I met her I definitely wouldn't have had the guts to speak to her. Instead I caught her in the smoking area with a sprained ankle after some cunt had fallen into her and broke her heel. She were fuming.

'Fuck d'you think you're doing?'

He shrugged drunkenly.

'You just fell.'

'What?!'

'Heels too high, and that.'

'Bitch, I run marathons in heels twice this high. You fucking pushed me.'

'Nah...' he slurred, but all shifty and guilty-like.

I dropped my fag to help her (generous considering the outrageous cost of a packet of straights), wiped my hands on my jeans.

'Here, lemme see.'

'Who the fuck are you?' she asked, all aggressive.

'I'm a nurse.' She settled in then, let me touch her. 'Can you clench your toes?'

She nodded, but winced as she tried.

'And turn your ankle round?'

She did. It were bruised but basically fine. With RICE she'd be reet. I wouldn't have even bothered with A+E, personally, they'd just fuck her about for hours then tell her to rest it anyway. If I hadn't quite liked the look of her, I would've dropped it there and then, told her to stop being so bloody dramatic, but for some reason I kept turning her ankle round in my hand, pulling faces like I were worried, like her ankle were made of glass.

‘It might need strapping up.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ she stood up and stumbled. ‘Fuck, alright. Someone tell Karl to get me a taxi.’

There were something impressive to me about the way she could handle the crowd. Course, at the time, I didn’t know she were a performer. I thought she were just some girl dressed up for a club night, all scarlet and sparkling and taking no prisoners. I suppose that’s why I palmed off the bastard I’d come with; I told him to get me a drink, watched him rush off inside to the bar. Never saw him again, poor bugger.

‘Right, here’s the thing,’ I said, thinking with my lady-boner. ‘Either we can stick you in a taxi to A+E at 3am on a Saturday night and you can sit in a room with vomiting wreckheads for 12 hours before they strap you up, or you can come back to mine and I’ll do the exact same thing in five minutes and send you on your way, what do you reckon?’

Ruby stepped forward, stroked my face.

‘I think I’ve found my guardian angel, babes.’

Course, the next day she were back in the skates and I got a burger and three orgasms for the effort. I tried to convince her she weren’t well enough for work, but very quickly I realised I weren’t the one in charge. Not that I minded. I liked her far better in charge, especially when she were bringing me burgers.

Rubes bought over my plate and slumped down opposite me in the squeaky, red booth. Without her wig, her hair was ginger and wispy, escaping from her scruffy little bun.

‘How’s tricks?’ she asked me.

‘Bloody and boring, you know how it is. How’s *Bobby’s*?’

‘Busy and... ballachey.’

‘Ballachey?’

‘I dunno, I was trying to think of another B.’ She nicked a chip from my plate and tucked in. Cheeky bitch. ‘How’s the monster?’

‘Adorable. We got him reading books now. He likes *The Gruffalo*.’

‘Cute, cute, do they know what he is yet?’

‘Nah,’ I shrugged, chewing my burger. ‘Definitely made up of body parts but like, they all work? Like they’re dead but they’re not? It’s mental. Never seen anything like it.’

‘So what, someone took off all the arms and legs and then like, put them back?’

‘Yeah, but no. They’re not just put back on, they’re from different places. Like, he’s massive, yeah? But the limbs are all skinny and different shades and that. And his face is all odd bits, his head, his organs, even his digits don’t match. It’s a patchwork nightmare.’

‘Patchwork Nightmare: good band name.’

‘I’ll tell him.’ I took another bite.

‘Pretty sick though, innit?’

‘Oh aye, yeah, it’s cool as shit,’ I said with my mouth-full.

‘No, sick like, disturbed. To think someone would go and do something like that.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, vaguely. ‘I mean, not all that sick though. Like, what about Craig?’

‘Pervey Craig?’

‘No, my brother, Craig. You know the one I told you about with the leg?’

‘What about him? Hey, save me some.’ She took my burger out my hands to demolish the last few bites. Cheeky, cheeky bitch.

‘Well, if you can put body parts together and they all work, and someone’s *missing* a body part... Well, it’s not much different than a heart transplant really, is it?’

‘You said your brother was good with his prosthetic, though.’

‘Yeah, I know, but still.’

When the food were done, we left. Rubes grabbed her leopard-print coat and trotted off with me down the street, eyes down, looking for broken glass. She always went barefoot between jobs. Between skates and stripper heels, who wouldn’t crave the feel of sole on ground?

‘So, true crime and chill or slasher and fuck, what do you fancy?’ Rubes asked me.

‘Mate, let’s switch it up. True crime and fuck, get freaky with it.’

Her red lips split into a grin.

‘I like the way you think.’

Chapter Fifteen

The Prince

Upon hearing the sirens, I knew I must maintain an illusion of calm. Locking Cindy in the room behind me, I climbed the concrete steps of the cellar, trying not to think about the centuries-old wine our family has been storing in those racks for a special occasion. If Cindy's little plan worked, I'd never get to taste them.

I locked the second door behind me, the one leading to the landing. If they deigned to search there, the forensic evidence would be overwhelming, although that too would hardly matter with Cindy down there limping.

I intended to open the door swiftly, looking appropriately befuddled, when I was gripped by a dreadful realisation. The foot was still on the mantel. I turned to dispose of it, ignoring the hammering at the door. The sweeping lights first brightened and then darkened the room a grotesque electric blue.

I ran to our parlour where our mahogany cabinet displayed our many crests and trophies. Cindy's foot was there in the beautifully carved crystal ornament, hidden amongst our more conventional achievements. Thankfully, our Haitian cleaner had done a good job

disposing of the less enjoyable feet. She'd been recommended by our legal advisor and I did enjoy her. French exclamations of devastation always sound more poetic.

If I had sense, I would have thrown the dastardly thing down the loo. I'd have shoved it in a blender, whizzed the evidence away and poured it down the sinkhole, but I couldn't. I recalled the satisfying click when the foot had fitted just perfectly into the shoe, the bespoke shoe I'd designed down to its pointed toe and arching heel. Too beautiful to lose, I quickly buried it beneath the ashes of the fireplace. It was painful to dirty it, but needs must. The knocking was becoming more insistent. I saw myself in the mirror. Dishevelled. There was no other word for it. I smoothed my hair back before I realised I'd look slightly more endearing with it mussed. It wouldn't do to appear too calm when facing an avalanche of unwelcome authority.

In the end, it wasn't even I who opened the door. A servant permitted the barbarians.

'Gentlemen, may we help you?'

'Where is she?!' a police officer thundered. Well, I was hardly going to offer directions, was I?

'What on earth is going on?' I asked, attempting to seem surprised.

'My, my!'

I turned to see my geriatric mother in her silk dressing gown atop the staircase, her hair held in place with various clips and curlers. It was rare to see her without make up and I found it unsettling.

'What a circus!'

'You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You do not have to say anything...'

‘I beg your pardon,’ I stuttered. ‘What is this about?’ The officer turned me in order to cuff my wrists. She looked aggressive, wide shoulders and short hair. A lesbian, evidently. Too ugly to bother hurting, but abhorrent all the same. ‘Well really, is there any need?’

‘We traced Cindy Reynold’s phone,’ the lesbian said. ‘You need to tell us right now where you’re keeping her.’

‘What? Who? I’m terribly sorry to disappoint you officer, but I’m afraid I don’t even know who the girl is.’

She ignored me. ‘Tell the paramedics the suspect is apprehended. They can come in’.

And come they did, rushing like aphids to a rose bush, dashing from room to room. Their lack of care disturbed the chandeliers. Diamonds shook above me, precarious icicles, un-falling snow.

‘We need to find a loft,’ one young paramedic shouted. ‘It was dark. We need somewhere dark.’

‘Is it possible you made a mistake?’ my mother said, and I realised with surprise that she too was cuffed. The clever dowager was adding a sweet, little wobble to her voice. She was only in her early seventies, not quite as vulnerable and geriatric as she was pretending, but it would no doubt help our case. ‘It could’ve been the neighbours, for instance? They are a crude sort. There was that awful incident with a dog and a fence post.’

I suppressed a smirk. The nearest neighbours were a mile away either side.

The paramedics came clattering down the stairs. Walkie talkies crackled and fizzed with disappointing news as they realised there was no sign of Cindy on the grounds either, and I wondered exactly how many people were here. I’d no doubt Cindy would be down there screaming, but to no avail. Of course, I’d soundproofed.

‘Look, I implore you, if that girl is missing you really can’t be wasting your time here,’ I attempted.

‘And does this not seem over-zealous?’ my mother added, foolishly dropping her doddering voice. The lesbian was slightly more sympathetic with her:

‘The police have to search the whole grounds, and in a place this large...’

‘You flatter us, thank you. Georgian,’ I interjected.

‘Been in the family for centuries,’ Mother added. ‘Looks just the same now as it did then. We feel it’s important to hang onto the historic *bones* of a place.’

‘DCI,’ a paramedic shrieked from the parlour. I knew then, of course, what she’d found. I shut my eyes in irritation. How on earth would I wriggle out of this one?

In her dirty hands she held the foot in two flat palms, as though offering it to a particularly morbid stallion. I knew consequences would be inconvenient, but the sight of a young girl shaking, holding out a filthy, decapitated foot stimulating non-the-less.

‘Oh, this is ridiculous, that could be anyone’s foot,’ I attempted.

Looking around for support I saw nothing but disdain. My mother kept her face still, but I could tell from the slight shift in atmosphere that she was apoplectically disappointed. And still, the little green ants hurried, right to left and left to right, attempting to find the girl whose heart and ankle I had effectively, and permanently, broken.

Chapter Sixteen

The Monster

The Doc reads me stories. I like them. My favourite is *The Gruffalo*. He looks like me. The Doc does voices. I laugh and laugh. She's funny.

I get stories that are longer now. I like words that start with P because that's like my name. There's one book with a girl called Pippi with pigtails and long socks. I pointed at her on the door of the book.

'That's me!' I said. The Doc thought I was silly.

'Why?' she asked.

'Her name starts with P.'

'Well, that's very sweet, but I must say you don't look much like her.'

I didn't know what that meant either.

Sometimes, when I can't sleep and The Doc isn't there to read to me, I tell my own stories in my head. When I do that, I pretend I'm Pippi. We both don't have parents. I would like a monkey.

When I get better, I want to live in a house too. Maybe with The Doc. I still hurt, but not too much anymore.

Chapter Seventeen

The Doc

I worried about how healthy it was to involve myself so closely with a patient. I wished I didn't feel so embarrassingly maternal. I'd never felt that way before, brushing Raul off when he raised the topic of children until he eventually just presumed my silence was agreement. Still, as I found myself gently shushing and stroking the hair of this poor, inarticulate man, I couldn't help but feel like maybe we could try it. Maybe, after everything, I'd been convinced.

I suppose childlessness was my way of rebelling. What could you do to irritate staunchly-Catholic parents? Well, become a doctor of medicine and refuse to get married, of course! No nice church wedding, no lovely man with a safe job, no little grandbabies. Textbooks! Lecture halls! Gay friends! Promiscuity! And to top it all off, a nice foreign boyfriend, ten years older than me with a funny way of speaking.

‘Hey now, Raul’s Catholic too!’ I’d protested at the time, but I knew that was provocative. My parents had no problem with race as far as they were concerned, but gosh, couldn’t I find a nice Irish boy?

Two of my sisters had babies with nice Irish boys, so my mother is perfectly satiated now. I always inwardly scoffed at my family for being so conventional, but now I wasn’t so sure conventionality was a bad thing.

Maybe I could have it all. Or maybe it was just my time of the month.

Chapter Eighteen

The Prince

There is nothing more detestable than the sensation of loneliness when one is not alone.

I had half expected to be killed on arrival. I pictured my companions large and muscled, with blueing tattoos and stitched up scars. I'd been hoping my notoriety might give me a sense of status. After all, in most corrective establishments it is probable that I would have killed the most people. Unfortunately, I was never able to find out where I lay within the ranks of mass-murderers. The power I had once so happily depended on became my downfall.

The days stretch and mean nothing. Surprisingly, it is the small comforts I miss the most. Never before have I slept in a bed so narrow nor so coarse. Still, it's the sun I miss, the smell of lavender wafting through the windows from my garden, the gentle sounds of leaves swaying on the poplar trees. In prison, I mostly hear flatulence.

If I have known this was where my family planned to place me, I would have certainly cause more of a scene.

‘Mummy,’ I’d said during my brief stint in custody. ‘I simply cannot understand why we don’t just make this go away.’

She sat opposite me at the visitor’s table, her face cold and unfeeling. Her anger was palpable. I’d besmirched our good name, she felt, and she wanted me to know she felt it.

‘It’s a ghastly business. We might have been able to conceal it had you not been so dismally careless.’

‘Careless? I’d like to point out that you were entirely unaware of my...’ I paused. I’d never found it an easy thing to name. ‘... habits, until this most recent conquest.’

‘Oh, petal, you can’t really believe that?’

‘I most certainly can! You gave no indication of understanding or caring, and you definitely displayed no knowledge of them!’

‘The feet element was a shock, I must admit.’ She grimaced.

‘It wasn’t *only* about their feet, mother.’ This was the wrong thing to say. I’d meant it as a defence, but it sounded more like a brag. If only I was more skilled with articulation, I may never have fallen into degeneration so readily. My mother raised a hand.

‘There’s really no need for me to know anything further.’ She paused, tapping her manicured claws against the table. I knew then that she was anxious. An excellent sign. This was the confirmation I needed that I still had her on side. I suppose that demonstrates the power of maternal love. It would have been significantly easier for her to have me estranged. Had I been in her position, I can’t promise that I wouldn’t have done just that. Still, we were a family, and families protect their kin.

‘Do they know about the trade?’ she whispered.

‘What trade?’

She winced, looking around to ensure she wasn't heard.

'With the old doctor. Do the police know?'

Now this did surprise me. I'd believed our operation was thoroughly covert. She rolled her eyes at my expression.

'Oh, don't be so shocked. You were never subtle. I've been having our Cuban maid clean up after your messes for years.'

'Haitian, I believe. Well, the police aren't aware anyway.'

My mother sighed.

'Nor the press. Thank heavens for small mercies. All the same, a girl survived. The public are demanding consequences.'

I rolled my eyes.

'The public are always demanding something. It's frightfully tiresome.'

'Hmm, well, not all is lost. With your title, I'm sure there'll be no need for you to end up in a dreadful, maximum-security hell-hole...'

'I've yet to be found guilty, lest we forget.'

'We can shake some hands, sort something better for you, I'm sure.'

'Excellent. Call it a drug induced melt-down, I'll go somewhere in the Alps for a while. The cucumber water will do me good.'

'Not quite, darling. Unfortunately, no one wants to see you comfortable. It is really rather important that you suffer.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake. Why not hang, draw, and quarter me now if that's the general feeling?'

‘While there have been some calling for that, I’m afraid it’s not a viable option.’

‘Oh, you’re afraid, are you?’

‘We, as a nation, are civilised. It’s possible to argue that a regular prison may be too dangerous. A sensitive boy of your calibre wouldn’t possibly cope in such a place. And what with the press and your title... I believe we can find somewhere slightly more palatable.’

I gave her what I knew was a winning smile.

‘That I would thank you for.’

‘I must ask,’ and here my mother paused, looking uncomfortable, ‘there has been some speculation... I suppose it hardly matters now, but you weren’t involved with that dreadful transsexual business were you?’

I pursed my lips in offence.

‘Don’t be absurd.’

‘Jolly good. I thought so. All the rest have all been women, so. We’ll find you somewhere manageable. Not pleasant exactly but...’

‘Palatable?’

‘Palatable. Quite.’

If you had asked me then what my dear mother had meant by ‘palatable’, the furthest thing from my mind would have been rampant paedophilia. The look on these men’s pathetic, drooping faces, having wasted their best years in a cycle of mundanity and degradation, was enough to drive the strongest willed to insanity. My humiliation was total and complete.

And so it went. Day-in-day-out in this insufferable place, the same dull conversations. The men had resigned themselves to empty existences. Time circulated around the terrible

food, the card games they played, the brief walks outside where everyone moaned about their respective bodily complaints. People were even shy to discuss their crimes, perhaps the only interesting element of prison.

‘Moment of weakness,’ they would grunt whenever asked. What could be more sickening about a malevolent act except the refusal to stand by your own malevolence?

The clinical greyness of the place left me with something akin to the winter blues. I suffocated my cellmate just for something to do. There was little struggle. He had lived here for forty years, as he often liked to say, although when asked why he would glare indignantly and respond (again with that phrase) *a moment of weakness*. One moment and forty years of punishment? I could only assume it was something horrendous. There wouldn’t be many tears at the news of his demise.

His death had the desired effect. I was to be moved from the paedophile’s paradise, and placed in solitary confinement. I’d thought stepping away from the community I’d so detested would be a holiday, but the boredom quickly degenerated into hallucination. Bricks turned into the rough skin on the bottoms of feet, but when I rubbed my cheeks against them in hopeful ecstasy, I felt only a harsh scraping on my face. The scrapes turned to scabs for me to pick at, dolefully. Good Lord, it was almost a relief when the inquest came.

Another twenty years. Another flurry of photographs with my ankles manacled together. I was informed that soon, I’d have a new bunkmate. I had little hope they would be any more interesting.

I did toy with the idea of killing all my bunkmates so consistently that they had no choice but to grant me a single boudoir, but the thought of the awful seclusion room with nothing but time was enough to discourage me. And they say retributive justice doesn’t work.

For that moment of suffocation, though, I had attained that gorgeous, morbid thrill I missed so terribly. It would have to be enough for now.

Chapter Nineteen

The Victim

I could hear my sisters. They were different notes, high-pitched and whiny against the recognisable, low rumble of my father. I didn't hear what they were saying. I'm sure I could've if I concentrated, but I didn't want to concentrate just then.

Whenever I manage to fall asleep, I get nightmares. Before my stupid family came and woke me with their medley of voices, I'd been dreaming that The Prince was chasing me. I was running through the thirty foot poplar trees on his estate and the foliage was growing more and more unruly. The hedge sculptures, in reality so meticulously maintained, were scraggly as untamed pubic hair, and as I ran they scratched at my eyes. My left foot caught a root and I tripped. The Prince was right behind me, standing with a hacksaw. The root tightened around my ankle, and the saw was going back and forth, back and forth across the bone but I was too shocked to cry out, and then I woke up.

Gradually, I started to slip into consciousness and I felt the crisp, white sheets, and heard Cilla's voice telling Cherry to be quiet 'cause she'd woken me, which was ironic because it was really Cilla's scolding that had woken me. I felt a rush of peace as I realised it

was all just a bad dream. I thought about what I'd have for breakfast before school, and I wondered if there was any fresh fruit in or if I'd have to choke down sugary cereal, and then I realised it couldn't be breakfast time because they'd already tried to give me lunch at the hospital, and I must have still been a little bit asleep because I could still feel the root wrapped round my ankle, and why was I in hospital?

I always started screaming at that moment. It rushed back to me, the horror of it all. The Prince had got to me and I'd never run from anything again.

I'd been waking up screaming for about two days now. I wished they'd just leave me to it, but I heard my dad shouting for a nurse, heard Cilla's outraged 'what the fuck', and the sound of trainers on the squeaky linoleum as the nurses ran towards me. I was jerked up, lights shone in my eyes, which I flinched from, batting away the hands that surrounded me.

'Sake, she's bloody fine,' The Nurse said and I couldn't help but feel oddly grateful for her intervention. 'Y'alright?' she asked me impatiently, in the same way she always did.

I managed a nod and leant back against the bedframe with my eyes closed. I clearly wasn't going back to sleep, but if they thought I was awake they'd try and speak to me and I couldn't cope with that. I heard The Nurse explain to my family that I often woke up screaming and it was nothing to be afraid of.

'She's scared, but it's nowt painful for her.' She sounded almost sympathetic when she spoke to them. More sympathetic than she usually was anyway.

'So she's doing it for attention then, basically?' Cherry said, and no one admonished her.

Cherry always claimed that I was, '*doing it for attention*,' in a snotty kind of voice. It didn't even seem to matter what *it* happened to be. Anything negative, or positive for that matter, was only ever done 'for attention'. If I dressed up I was doing it for attention, if I

dressed down it was for attention, if I cried in my room silently, hoping that no one would hear, Cherry came in and insisted I was only doing it for attention. My dad always defended her, which drove me mad. The first time I came to him as a little girl in floods of tears over Cherry's bullying I expected he'd be furious, but instead he seemed frustratingly superior. 'Come on, Cindy,' he'd said to me, one hand rubbing my back, the other resting on my knee. 'You must know what's happening here. You're a very pretty girl and Cherry, well, she's a little jealous. You mustn't take it to heart, love.'

In my hospital bed, I flicked my eyes open to look at her. Her plump face was fixed in a scowl, her mouth twisted and still, she glared at me. I closed my eyes and turned to face the other direction. If I could speak I would've asked my father: *Are you serious? I mean, really. Surely, she's not still jealous now.*

Chapter Twenty

The Nurse

Why did it always have to be in the bloody morgue? It were freezing and grimy down there, and the overhead lights only partly lit the room. Patch were sat in front of us on the metal table and The Chief were prodding and poking at him, as per. The Chief never speaks to Patch, even though his talking's dead good now. The Doc reads to him. Fairy tales. She thinks it's best to start slow and see how he gets on. The Chief wanted me to get her on side with the whole experimenting thing. Wait, sorry...

'Not experimentation. Education. This kind of thing could be invaluable for innumerable generations. Imagine no more amputations, the world that would be created, post-war, post-trauma. Diabetes would no longer be the terrifying thing we think of now. This is science, humanitarianism. Try not to think of it as experimentation.'

I didn't care what he called it. He wanted to sew a dead foot onto a live body. That's an experiment to me. I thought about them stories The Doc read Patch about shoes that gained control of their owners, danced them into madness. It seemed stupid but I thought,

don't get her a bloody dancer's foot, whatever you do. Our poor Cind'll be spinning round in circles. The whole thing sounded mad to me, but The Chief reckoned Patch were the answer to all her woes. He paraded him in front of us like we were at a university lecture and he were a lecturer displaying a medical marvel to this lonely audience of one. I guess a medical marvel were what Patch were to be fair. And I did get excited when I thought of the possibilities.

'You can see the body parts are dead, decaying even, and yet somehow they still function appropriately.' The Chief hit Patch with a patella hammer and his knee kicked. 'It has reflexes. We know it's capable of experiencing pain. Perhaps even pleasure.'

'You feel pleasure?' I asked Patch.

'I feel happy sometimes,' he said. The Chief looked annoyed.

'Now, what we're dealing with here is an improvement in linguistic comprehension. Interesting, but for another day. Right now we're looking into the needs of Cindy.' He lifted the ankle high in the air and examined the cross-stitches.

'These are crude,' he said. 'Sloppy.'

'I'd say they're professional,' I said. The last stitches I'd administered weren't even so neat. Then again I'd been distracted. I'd just seen to Cindy and she always gives me the creeps. Them eyes, so bloody tortured all the time. I wanna tell her: *'Love, I didn't chop you up so how about a smile for god's sake'*. Can't say that, though. The Doc'd call a disciplinary.

'No,' The Chief said. 'These were done in a hurry.'

'How can you tell that?'

The Chief glared at me. He didn't want me here, I knew that. I were just a means to an end. He wanted The Doc really, but now he had to avoid her because he'd stopped Cindy's physiotherapy. When I told The Doc about it she got so mad she went red, actual red, no exaggeration, like a little plum tomato. I had to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing. The Chief avoided her for the rest of the day, and while the wusses at the nurse's station complained he were never around, I always knew where I could find him. In the freezing, bloody morgue.

He twisted Patch's leg to the side so he could examine the stitches round his Achilles heel.

'Ow! Pain!' Patch said.

'One second.' The Chief twisted further.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Doc

The hospital was becoming a refuge for damaged and broken things. It was The Chief who organised it all, of course. The saviour complex he'd had tickled with Patch needed to be itched thoroughly again. I'll bet he jumped at the chance as soon as he heard about her. Young, beautiful, unipedal... a guaranteed way to get himself back in the news.

Cindy Reynolds could speak, although she chose not to, staring hatefully at everybody and refusing to cooperate. If they'd found her earlier they could've saved her foot. Any later, she'd be dead from the infection. Thank God she'd kept her phone. The Prince hadn't thought about data plans in his grand, perverted plot. That's the problem with murderers, these days. They haven't quite got to grips with the 21st Century.

We dealt with the residual limb, cleaned out the infection before it spread, and kept the bandages clean. The morbid curiosity among the staff was as bad as it was with Patch. They'd stopped calling him 'The Monster', thank God, and given him a name, albeit a horrendous one more appropriate for a dog.

People lingered around Cindy's ward trying to catch sight of her, all deluded in thinking that they might be the one who would finally get her to open up. It was a pointless pastime, any idiot could see that she wasn't going to speak. Or at least, that's what I'd thought until the day she spoke to me. I was trying to keep her spirits up, ridiculous as it sounds.

'There we are, just lift that up for me, lovely. Well, it looks like your bloods came out fine, no sign of infection, and your ankle is healing up nicely. Do we need more painkillers? No? Fantastic. Well, don't forget it's good to keep it elevated for your physiotherapist. Dr Karen is fantastic. I've never seen a blood clot yet with her in charge. How are you feeling?'

I asked her this every day, and never expected an answer. Still, it felt polite. There was no reason to treat her with any less respect just because she was choosing not to speak. That day, though, she did.

'I can feel it.' There was an accusing, bitter edge to her voice. 'I can still feel it. It's cold.'

I nodded, trying unsuccessfully to mask my shock.

'Phantom pain is very common after an amputation like this. It will go away, but if you need extra help I can get you a compressor.'

'I can feel it round my ankle,' she said. 'I can feel his hand gripping me. I can feel the handsaw going through the bone.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Cindy. It must be just terrible for you. I'll up your pain killers and I'll let Dr Karen know...'

'I feel his tongue licking my toes. I still feel him.'

‘Right,’ I said. ‘Okay.’ I paused for a longer time than was perhaps professional. ‘I’ll get that compressor ordered, and we’ll see what I can do to help make you more... comfortable.’

She didn’t reply after that. She didn’t need to. Instead she smirked and I felt, perhaps unfairly, that Cindy had intended to unsettle me. I could understand why she might feel this way. A problem shared is a problem halved, after all. She probably didn’t want to be the only person alive with these horrific visions of The Prince in her head. Now she wouldn’t be.

I’ve been in the medical industry for over fifteen years and experienced a great deal of trauma. I’ve seen bones twisted at unimaginable angles, heard screams of abject agony, watched blood spurt from snipped arteries, and found maggots crawling in open wounds.

To this day, Cindy Reynolds is the only person to see me shudder.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Nurse

‘Right, I’m gonna give you a mild sedative because The Doc said you’ve got phantom limb. If I stick this in you, can you promise you aren’t gonna wake us up screaming in a couple hours?’

Even though I were being friendly, Cindy still looked like she were gonna spit in my eye. I waited for a response. Fuck it, a shrug or a nod would’ve done. Nothing.

‘I’ll take that as a yes then!’ I fiddled about with the IV, went to stick it in her arm. ‘You’ll feel a little prick, but you’ll be used to that by now.’

Cindy snatched her arm away, left me staring at empty space.

‘What the fuck is that meant to mean?’ Her eyes blazed.

I couldn’t believe it. A full sentence, and an aggy one at that! Typical that first time she opens her gob it’s to act like a psycho.

‘I mean your arm looks like a bloody pincushion. What do you think I mean?’

She relaxed then, offering her forearm, stretching it out to be cooperative.

‘Whatever,’ she said.

I applied the tourniquet and started tapping the vein. It were a nightmare getting blood out of Cindy. It were concrete running through her arteries.

‘Your veins aren’t very springy,’ I said, more to myself than her.

‘Great,’ she scoffed. ‘Another thing to hate about my body, then.’

I rolled my eyes.

‘It’s just a vein, mate. Drink more water.’

I stuck the needle in. She were quiet, and I were sort of hoping that she might’ve decided to go back to being silent, but no, off she went again.

‘Yeah well, you don’t know what it’s like.’

‘To be chopped up by a psycho with a foot fetish?’ I asked. ‘Nah, that’s a pretty unique experience, babe.’

She laughed at me then, all nasty like.

‘That isn’t what I meant. I mean, sure that was the peak of it, but I’ve always been stared at. Touched without permission. Punished for a body I’m told I’m worthless without. I hate it.’ She shook her head at me. ‘You wouldn’t get it.’

I slammed on the tubing.

‘Mate, are you on about the universal female experience?’

‘What?’ she asked.

‘Stared at? Sneered at? Touched without permission? You aren’t special, princess. We’ve all been gawked at by weirdos. We’ve all had that creepy, handsy uncle and the mam that looks the other way. I mean, you’re splashed all over the papers and that, sure, and maybe that makes you a bit special because the rest of us just have to grow up and get over it, but please don’t go around thinking you’re extra tragic, because I’ll tell you for free that you aren’t.’

I’ll be honest, it were probably a good job I’d already sedated her, otherwise she might’ve gone for me. I focussed back on the drip.

‘I’ve lost my fucking foot,’ she said.

‘Right, well yeah, fair enough, I suppose.’ I taped the tubing carefully to her skinny arm with her shitty veins, careful not to look her in the eyes. The Doc were right, my bedside manner did need work. I stood up, secretly praying that she wouldn’t grass on me, thinking up a version of events that might seem like a plausible denial, when she called me back.

‘Hey, did that actually happen with your uncle?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said. She scoffed. ‘It were my step dad, actually.’

We was both quiet then for a bit, hoping that the other one were gonna speak first. There weren’t really much else to say, though.

‘I’m never going to let it happen to me again,’ she said eventually. ‘Not ever.’

‘Yeah?’ I asked. ‘Well, good luck to you, love.’

Cindy probably weren’t gonna grass on me, I could tell. I wheeled my trolley away again, then I ducked into the supply cupboard for a little cry. I hadn’t had to do that since training. Weird. Oh well.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Doc

‘It’s absolutely ludicrous. Does he want her to suffer? I swear if anyone else allowed an underage patient to just *stop* their physiotherapy based on some silly whim, they would be forced to...’

‘Forced to what, exactly?’ Raul was eyeing the bottle of wine, aware that I’d moved onto my second glass before he’d finished his first. I took a breath.

‘Forced to justify it. They would have to tell people why they were making such a contentious decision. All I keep hearing is that it’s what the patient wants...’

‘Well, that should be the end of it surely?’

‘You don’t understand.’ I wondered how best to phrase this. It was difficult to say without crossing professional boundaries. Cindy had been on the news for weeks now, and

Raul could well deduce who she was if I gave too many clues. I'd had to stay incredibly quiet while we watched the news segment, closing my eyes and pretending that it wasn't happening, murmuring the generic '*gosh how awful*'s when I felt Raul's eyes on me. I continued: 'This girl is very young. She's vulnerable. I don't think she can be regarded as knowing what's best for her, and I can see how she'd be easily manipulated.'

'And you think The Chief is *manipulating* her?!'

'Well no, not exactly...'

Although, *yes, actually, exactly!* Only I couldn't say that now because Raul was looking at me like I was crazy and I knew I needed to pick my words carefully for him to see where I was coming from.

'I just think that other staff members should be informed about *why* he's making such a controversial choice in the treatment of a young woman, and I think we should be able to argue back if we believe this controversial treatment isn't the right thing to do.' I said each word slowly, and then stopped, feeling relatively proud. Yes, that should do it. That should make sure I'm understood.

Raul drained his glass.

'Well, I think if he's doing it, it must be for a good reason.'

'How can you possibly know that?' This was irritating now. I'd never been more convinced that something untoward was happening and instead I was being treated like a lunatic, by someone who hadn't even met The Chief *or* Cindy, who couldn't even legally be told the full details of the situation.

'He's a doctor!' Raul said incredulously.

'Yes,' I replied, through clenched teeth. 'As am I.'

I decided Raul could finish the bottle. I left the room to go to bed. Annoyingly, I wasn't the slightest bit tired, so I had to lie and face the ceiling for the longest time pretending to be in a grump before he finally stumbled in hours later, switching the lights on and then off again as he got ready for bed. Soon after, I could hear him snoring. I wished I wasn't so stubborn. If I had let it go and agreed to disagree, I might have had a nice night in front of the telly, but instead I'd opted for boredom and frustration with nothing but the ceiling and my own thoughts.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Nurse

‘Let’s see it then.’ Cindy’s eyes were big and wide and for once she looked like a normal seventeen-year-old.

I gotta admit, I proper love it when I’ve done summat weird and everyone’s gasping to see it. People can say what they want about body mods, but they all sit up when they see me. It’s worth all the lispng and the arse-ache recovery (no drinking, no eating, no smoking (as if)) just to see that reaction when you walk into a room.

‘Oh, I dunno,’ I said coyly, dragging it out, like. ‘I wouldn’t want to spoil your dinner.’

‘Come on! Please,’ Cindy said, pouting like a spoilt brat. You can tell how she got so many lads going mad over her with that fake, cutesy little thing. No wonder her daddy were so under her thumb. Unlucky for her, I just found it annoying.

‘Nah,’ I said. ‘Not if you’re not taking your medication like a good girl.’

She scoffed, offended because I were taking the piss, but she dropped the act. She shot back her pills and swallowed them dry, clearly attempting to look like a proper little rebel. *Oh yeah, you're 'ard*, I thought. Imagine thinking taking your prescribed medication was edgy. She opened her mouth to show me she'd swallowed them all.

'There. Happy?'

'Well, since you've been so good...' I said. She pretended that she weren't all that bothered, but I could see she were still desperate to see.

I stuck my tongue out quickly, teasingly, before recoiling it back in like a snake. Obviously, you can't see anything properly if I do that.

'Do it again,' she asked, her eyes getting brighter. I did, longer this time, letting the two split halves of my tongue dance up and down in a tiny undulating wave.

'Wow,' she said, her eyes all wide again. 'Did it hurt?'

I thought of the metal clamps keeping my mouth open, the shock of the needle as the piercing went in, the thin strip of wire breaking through the tongue, the metal bowl placed in front of me to allow the blood to dribble out, and I smiled.

'Only a bit, like'

'I want to do that,' Cindy said.

'Yeah,' I went, 'it's a shame you can't just click your fingers and have it done, ey?'

'No,' Cindy said. 'It isn't. I'd want it to hurt.'

*

Later, on our usual table, I told Rubes about it.

‘Cindy Reynolds wants her tongue split.’

‘Ha!’ she said with a mouthful of my chips again. ‘You’ve single-handedly corrupted the nation’s princess, well done.’

‘I know what a bloody nightmare.’

‘Why? I think it’s cool.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, it’s a bit funny that she might leave this place with a new foot and a face tattoo, but I wouldn’t want anyone tracing it back to *me*.’

‘Well, if anyone’s gonna get it in the neck it’ll be The Chief, right? The new foot is all his idea.’

‘Oh aye, I’m just an innocent little side-kick. Don’t worry about me.’ The red, neon ‘staff only’ sign reflected on Ruby’s glasses as she tucked into my steak sandwich. ‘Anyway, new foot or not, she’d better not get her bloody tongue split. I think she sees it as a glamorous form of self-harm but doesn’t actually get how much upkeep it is. This isn’t just something you do because you wanna seem tough and you quite like the look of it. It’s a lifestyle, you know. A commitment.’

‘How very unique of you,’ Rubes laughed at me. ‘In body mod, we bless. Amen.’

‘Look, when some little teen brat looks at ya and says “I’d want it to hurt”, all spooky like, you get a bit philosophical. Fuck off.’

‘She’s got a point though. Would you still do it if it didn’t hurt?’ Rubes asked me. ‘Like I’ve got tattoos and I like the pain. I wouldn’t get them *because* of the pain, but I do quite like it, you know, it’s hot. Would you still split your tongue if it didn’t hurt or would you not bother?’

When I thought about it, the spine piercings, the tattoos scratching on my skin like tiny nails, the sudden shock of a gun through cartilage, I realised all of that was what I loved. If I could click my fingers and be covered in tattoos, I wouldn't do it. You've not earned them then. There's something about the ritual that's important, something about standing up with your head bowed over a bowl of your own blood, staring into it like an opaque river, which really allows you to know yourself.

'You're right, if it didn't hurt, I probably wouldn't do it.' I shrugged. 'Maybe I'm a little weirdo too.'

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Chief

5'10", female, underweight, seventeen years of age, no family history of heart disease, and a lingering smell of BO which indicated poor hygiene. The Prince had told me she was perfect. 'The best fit!' he'd said. I hadn't expressed much interest in his search at the time, standing impatiently, eyeing the cooler, waiting for him to finish. Time-wasters are irksome, and his activities didn't titillate me as much as he thought they did. His 'work' was for pleasure. Mine was for science. If only I'd known then how important she'd be.

He'd very much traumatised her; that was evident. She slumped in her wheelchair, her hair wet with grease.

On the table my monster sat patiently, hands knotted together on its knee. I would have to do something about its speech. It says its first memory is of The Doc's stories, but it could be lying. An issue for another day.

‘How would you feel if we could replace your foot?’ I asked Cindy. She didn’t say anything, naturally. Her file read ‘selective mutism’, which might prove to be a hindrance for later study. ‘I don’t mean with a prosthetic, I mean with skin and bone. Flesh, Cindy. How does that sound? We could make you complete again. Imagine a life walking without crutches. You’d never have to unscrew yourself like a machine. Don’t you wish you still had a foot?’

‘I can still feel it,’ she said. I was shocked at her voice, how high-pitched and girlish it sounded. It was best to push onwards while she was cooperating.

‘I really want you to think about this, Cindy.’

‘It’s not a bad life,’ my monster said.

‘And your feet wouldn’t look like this.’ I gestured to its feet, yellow, mismatched and swollen. I hadn’t had much choice in body parts then and The Prince was particularly protective over his feet. ‘Yours will be pretty.’

In response to this, she shook her head dramatically before letting out a long and painful scream. It ricocheted around the room, and my monster, in distress, growled and hid its ears. I turned towards the lift-doors, slightly worried she’d disturb others, making a note to sound-proof the mortuary. Cindy slipped into hysteria often, it seemed, and sound-proofing would be a sensible precaution. Eventually, she stopped, the scream trailing away into a gasping sob.

‘Are you finished?’ I asked.

‘I don’t want to be pretty.’

‘Why is that?’

‘I want feet so dirty no pervert will touch them.’

The Prince had clearly surpassed my expectations. I nodded.

‘No one need touch them,’ I said, although that was untrue. Medically speaking we would need to observe them for a while. She nodded and for a second there was an understanding between us, a connection that I knew someone as unhinged as Cindy could never feel with The Doc, or even The Prince.

‘Start from the feet and move up,’ she said.

‘I’m sure that can be arranged.’

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Nurse

It were quite funny in a way. He never spoke to The Doc directly, but kept glancing over whenever she were in his eye-line. If I had to guess, I'd say he were sweet on her, but we're not in primary school anymore and I don't reckon The Chief knows how to fancy anyone.

Maybe he's got a weird fetish. He might like weeing on people or sitting under glass tables, that kind of thing. He definitely gives off foot-licker vibes. Might even be a foot-chopper, there's some of them about. There were this one lad I heard about, cut his leg off because it were a life-time erotic dream and he wanted to finally experience the thrill of it when he reached his golden years. Died of gangrene. Didn't have any regrets, apparently. Obviously, the doctor who performed the surgery went down for it.

Ever since Rubes mentioned it at the diner, I've been wondering if The Chief worries about prison. He must know he's getting up to some dodgy stuff, like. I don't think Cindy's

even consented to most of it. Well, she can't, can she? Not when she still hardly speaks, except to yours truly, obviously.

That's why he needs The Doc, see? With The Doc on side, she can make Cindy feel safe and secure, then The Chief can use her as his own little blob of playdough without worrying about the legal repercussions. When I'm down in the morgue chatting to Patch and thinking about what we're planning, I sometimes feel like a baddy in a horror film. I should have a hunchback and a limp. I agree with The Chief, though. Even if it looks dodgy on paper, what he's doing is good, there's no doubt about it. I just wish he'd been about for our Craig.

Our area where I grew up were called 'The Vineyards'. Bit mental really, because you couldn't find a patch of green for about three miles round, let alone any bloody fruit. I suppose they wanted it to sound fancy. Either that or they were trying to *encourage* the winos to come and get pissed in the kiddies' playgrounds. Anyway, when our Craig were little, some scumbags knocked him over when he were coming home from footy. Hit and run. They never did catch them. CCTV on every bloody corner, but you never get anyone done for anything proper.

Craig did pretty well. He survived, that's what's most important. Kids are dead versatile and he learned how to get on just fine with his prosthetic. He's not all that bothered anymore about the people that did it, but I still wanna string 'em up. It makes me so angry that nowt happened to them. Me mam's all forgive and forget, sees it as a blessing, test of strength and all that bollocks. By the time our Craig were in sixth form, he said he couldn't imagine life without the prosthesis. Said it were a bit of a babe magnet. Always knew how to put a positive spin on things, our Craig. He were the oldest, so I suppose he were used to being tough and that. Still though, if I could've given Craig my leg, I would've. I worshipped

him. He weren't mean like other brothers could be, and I never got any grief at school because they knew I were Craig's little sister, and he'd have you if you tried to mess with me.

So even though The Chief is a bit of a psycho and he doesn't think much of me, I've gotta be on his side. If you can fix people like our Craig so that they go about like normal, why wouldn't you? It's all red tape these days. *Is it humane? Is it safe?* I mean, I *know* that's important, but you know what's not humane and safe? Knocking over a nine-year-old when he's walking home from footy practice and leaving him as half a robot for the rest of his life. That's why I became a nurse. Everyone agreed that the paramedics were angels and I thought, yeah I can do that. I can be an angel. In the end nursing were easier to get onto, so there you are.

The Chief might not like me hanging about, but I don't care. Just like I shoe-horned myself next to Patch's bedside, I'll shoe-horn myself here too. I want to be a part of this. It's worth all the glaring and moody comments from Cindy bloody Reynold's. It's worth the doubts. For Craig it is, anyway.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Doc

Vultures, the lot of them. Pulling into the carpark, I found them clustered around the entrance, heavy camera equipment and sharp suits. What is it they were hoping for? Medical personnel to come forward with a full breakdown of Cindy Reynolds' condition? The gritty details of the girl's experience through blood-charts and vital signs?

Worse than the reporters were the conspiracy theorists. They always seemed to come in droves to stand in front of cameras and loudly proclaim that they didn't believe a word of it. 'I STAND WITH THE PRINCE', the posters read. Well, *they* may well stand with The Prince, but the poor sex workers he mutilated weren't standing anymore. So many spoke out about their missing friends and no one listened.

Some idiots seem willing to believe just about anything. *He was framed. It's all a French plot to undermine the British aristocracy. Cindy Reynolds is a Russian spy and only*

refuses to speak now because her accent would be a dead giveaway. The tabloids seemed torn between wanting The Prince castrated and wanting him knighted and offered a national apology.

I parked close to the hospital, exhausting my horn in an attempt to get them all out of the way. I kept my eyes on the entrance, so they wouldn't bother me, although I couldn't imagine I'd be photogenic enough to make the papers. One reporter did shout out to me:

'Nurse, nurse, what can you tell us about Cindy Reynolds' condition?'

'I'm a doctor!' I shouted back, barely restraining my irritation.

'I'm a nurse!' A yell from above. I glanced upward. Sure enough, there was The Nurse grinning and waving at the crowd, her split-ended, purple hair dangling out the window like a pathetic, punk Rapunzel. I couldn't count how many times I'd asked her to tie it up. 'You want the inside scoop from Cindy Reynolds? Here y'are!'

She flung the contents of the bedpan out of the open window. There were some shrieks and scarpers and, unfortunately, a few open-mouthed gasps. A few keen photographers managed to get snaps of the flying excrement. I had no doubt it would be front page news by the end of the day, probably accompanied by some horrendously punny headline: 'Up Shit's Creek,' perhaps, or 'Waste Not, Want Not'.

A small amount of urine splashed up onto my trouser legs.

'That wasn't very professional, was it?' I shouted up at The Nurse, trying to put on my firmest facial expression. She merely shrugged, still looking quite pleased with herself.

I'd been going into work earlier each day to spend a bit more time with Patch. It was the best part of my shift, but I'd started to feel guilty about my other patients, who I'm sure I was neglecting. I just couldn't bring myself to leave him. His enthusiasm for life was

contagious, and the love he felt for me was heart-warming. I found myself spending more and more time at WHSmith's flicking through the children's books to see if there was anything that he might like. He had his favourites. *The Gruffalo* was one, as was *Where The Wild Things Are*. He liked the characters that looked like him.

I'd brought him an old childhood favourite, *Not Now, Bernard*. With a household full of siblings it resonated with me, that light-hearted, childhood neglect. I was worried it would be too scary, but he loved it.

'What's that?' he asked, stroking the final page of the monster tucked up in bed.

'That's the monster.'

'Where did the little boy go?'

'The monster ate him. The little boy's in his tummy.'

'So, there's a little boy inside the monster?' Patch asked.

'Technically yes, but don't worry it's only being silly. Monsters don't really exist.'

Patch looked at me with his large, yellow eyes.

'I exist.'

At that moment, I wanted to hold him. I wanted to kiss his forehead and explain that he wasn't a monster; he was a human being who was a little different and that wasn't his fault at all. I wanted to say that of all the people I knew, he was undoubtedly the sweetest and most wonderful.

'Well, why don't we read a nicer one next time?' I said instead, like the coward I am.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Chief

The mortuary was a modest 8x10 large enough for fifteen bodies. Its wipe down floors and metal sides would be easy to sterilise for the surgeries. The lack of windows alongside the low ceiling reduced the likelihood of dust. Best of all it had some degree of privacy. I had confidence it would be a perfectly adequate setting for the transplants.

Perhaps I might have used my office, but that clunky, metal contraption took up too much space and anyway, I didn't want my experimental subjects to have a front row seat to my next asthmatic episode. The mortuary would do. With the repellent but helpful pink-haired nurse on side, I could keep my two subjects hidden. A new promotion might have to be on the cards for her. Official Corpse Transporter? She definitely looked the part.

Cindy and I paced the small, airy room, devoid of anything except for the examination tables and the freezer drawers. I took my soundproofing tips from *The Prince*. The rest was easy enough. Cindy was ‘cheap date’ so to speak. I offered to bring her down a bed but she refused. Apparently sleep was her most despised activity, surprising considering she found little joy in being awake. It saved my aching bones a trip at least. Bedsheets and pillows would do. No lights, at least initially, to ward off any environmental do-gooders. Cindy assured me this too would be fine.

‘If we’re going to do this right,’ I began, ‘we need to discuss it with your parents. They might be uncertain about their seventeen-year-old daughter disappearing for months on end.’

‘They won’t care,’ Cindy scoffed. ‘My mum’s dead.’

‘Your father though,’ I continued. She waved a hand dismissively.

‘New family. Works away a lot. He won’t be bothered. Frankly, it’ll probably be a relief for them all if I suddenly disappear.’

She sounded appropriately bitter, but I still felt we should be cautious. I didn’t want my plans scuppered because of misplaced adolescent self-pity.

‘All the same, it won’t do for you to simply disappear. You’ll have to tell them we’re trying a new experimental treatment where time and privacy is essential, though their emotional neglect is somewhat reassuring, I must say.’

Cindy smirked. She wheeled around the mortuary absent-mindedly, pausing to trace her fingers against the metal drawers, her hands small and soft, her nails encrusted with black and orange dirt.

‘What about everyone else?’ she asked.

‘Is there anyone else?’

She shrugged. ‘The staff here. Won’t they be asking questions?’

‘Perhaps. I won’t answer them.’

‘And that thing you found, The Monster, this whole plan hinges on him. Is he going to be okay with this?’

‘Oh, Cindy...’ I paused, wondering how much it would be safe to reveal. The sudden ridiculous thought entered my head that she may be a spy. I quickly dismissed it as indoctrination from the tabloids, which were particularly insidious. They treated Cindy like some mysterious femme-fatale figure instead of the terrified, malleable little girl she clearly was. I sighed. ‘That thing wasn’t found, but built. It’s there to keep tissues alive for transplantation, and yes, the personal growth has been interesting to observe, but that’s all. There’s no real question of autonomy. This is what it was built to prove. I imagine.’ If Cindy was suspicious, she didn’t show it. Her lack of curiosity was curious in and of itself.

‘Well, you might think that but The Doc will go crazy if you take her little teddy-bear away.’

‘The Doc, yes,’ I flinched. ‘I’m sure in time she can be persuaded, but again I need your help there...’

‘She needs to know I actually want this?’

‘Precisely.’

Cindy wheeled so that I was left to face the back of her chair. She examined the cold, grey drawers as though they were artistic masterpieces and sighed.

‘I’ll be sharing a room with dead bodies.’

‘Yes, but it is the most appropriate place, what with the soundproofing and limited accessibility. Only The Nurse and I will have passkeys...’

‘It’s fine,’ she interrupted. ‘I’ve been in rooms with dead bodies before. I’m used to it.’

‘Excellent,’ I said. ‘I’ll get the room ready and safe for surgery and we’ll get you and Creature A down here as soon as possible. Shall we?’ I gestured towards the lift doors, our only exit, conscious of all the things I needed to get started on now that I had her approval.

‘You go first, Chief. There’s no need for chivalry with me.’

I shuffled awkwardly into the corner of the lift while she glided after me like a swan.

‘Right,’ I began. ‘All arms and legs in?’

She smirked and pressed the button.

‘If you think The Doc is gonna be easy to convince, you’re wrong, by the way.’

‘You might be underestimating my persuasive abilities,’ I said. After all, persuading The Doc to extricate herself from her little plaything didn’t seem about more difficult than persuading The Prince to extricate himself from his precious corpses.

‘No, no,’ she responded sweetly. ‘I don’t underestimate anything. But I think *you* might be underestimating how much she can’t stand you.’

The lift pinged and the doors slid open. Without looking back, Cindy began wheeling towards her room. The Nurse intercepted her, playfully, grabbing the back of her handles.

‘Suitable abode, your highness?’ she which made Cindy laugh — an awful sound.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Doc

Doctors often sanctimoniously say they ‘do it for the patients’. I always want to ask, who doesn’t? Who goes through upwards of six years of training in one of the most difficult and mentally-taxing sectors for anything other than compassion? What else would it be for? The prestige? The wage? The terrible coffee? I’d rolled my eyes at such statements before, but now the mantra ‘for Cindy’ was running through my head like a drum-beat and I felt empowered by my resolution to do something good for this poor, mutilated girl.

I didn’t prepare much. I grabbed a food-tray off The Nurse’s trolley while she carted it around the corridors.

‘I’m going to take Cindy her dinner personally today.’

I deliberately made sure it wasn’t a question so she couldn’t dispute it, but she only smirked regardless.

‘Suit yourself, love. She’s no barrel of laughs.’

Unfortunately, The Nurse was wrong. I'd managed to catch Cindy Reynolds on the day she'd regained her sense of humour.

When I reached her bedside I was ready for discussion, not battle. I tried to smile at her without betraying any pity. I remembered well enough how much teenage girls can't stand the thought of sympathy while still desperately needing it.

'How are you feeling, Cindy?' I asked. She didn't respond. but I'd expected that. 'I've heard you've stopped your physiotherapy. I was hoping you might be able to tell me why.'

Her pulled-in lips showed she was repressing the urge to laugh at me. I suppose I deserved it. Open questions weren't going to get me anywhere with Cindy. I should've known that. I placed her tray down on her bedside table, shut the curtain and perched cautiously on the side of her bed, close enough that I could reach an arm out for comfort, but far enough away that I wouldn't smother her.

'I know you don't like to speak, although I remember that you can speak if you need to,' I paused, hoping to see a sliver of recognition in her features. She'd scared me before. That phrase, 'I can still feel it,' gave me troubled nights for weeks to follow, but Cindy didn't seem to remember the incident. If anything, her expression became *more* passive. 'Which leaves me to wonder how you consented to prematurely ending your treatment. If indeed you did consent...'

'I consented,' she said, before I'd so much as finished the sentence. 'I want to do what The Chief says.'

I felt my stomach plunge, imagined it slapping onto the linoleum floor in a messy puddle.

'Okay, but I want you to think very carefully about this, because prosthetics have advanced so much in these past few decades but you really must work *with* them.'

‘I don’t want a prosthetic,’ Cindy said. ‘I want a new foot.’

‘A new foot?’ I laughed before I could help myself. It was too ridiculous to contemplate. Cindy raised her eyebrows as though to challenge me but didn’t say another word. ‘Well, that’s not possible Cindy and if The Chief has told you that it was, then I’m sorry but he’s been lying to you.’

‘Has he?’ Cindy smirked. ‘I’ve seen that thing, you know? That thing you read to.’

‘What? Patch?’

‘The one made out of dead parts. He can move alright.’

‘Yes, well, he’s a medical anomaly, no one knows how he...’

‘Isn’t The Chief more qualified than you anyway?’

I paused. Her voice was mean, exactly like the seventeen-year-old girl she was meant to be, the pretty girl picking on the cringeworthy grown-up who’s trying, embarrassingly, to bond.

‘Cindy, I want to help you,’ I said.

‘So does The Chief, and he’s the expert.’

Had I the time I would’ve pleaded, but I didn’t. The thin curtain was yanked open.

‘Y’alright?’ The Nurse asked, looking directly at Cindy and ignoring me entirely.

‘Excuse me, we were having a conversation.’

‘I’d like to rest,’ Cindy said, her voice suddenly far higher and more childlike than it had been a moment before.

‘Cindy...’

‘The Chief wants you anyway,’ The Nurse told me. I felt reprimanded. It was as though she was Cindy’s bestie and I was the creepy man she was blocking from harassing her.

‘I would like to talk to Cindy.’ My voice put on that forced formality again, but I already knew it was futile.

‘I’d like to rest,’ Cindy said again.

‘She wants to rest,’ The Nurse parroted, smugly. I sighed.

‘Fine,’ I stood up, taking comfort in the fact that at least I could air my grievances to The Chief personally. ‘His office, I presume?’ Again, I managed to sound like a bloody Jane Austen character.

‘The morgue,’ The Nurse said in response. At my confused look she shrugged. ‘You know what he’s like. Here, have my key-card.’

I snapped it off her with a ‘thank you’ which would have been polite if I hadn’t sounded so furious. Since when did we need keycards to access the morgue? I stormed away, dwelling on The Nurse’s words. I didn’t know what The Chief was like, as it went, and I didn’t *want* to know what he was like. Something was telling me to run, to get away from this hospital since I wasn’t wanted here anyway. As I stepped into the lift, the bizarreness of the situation forced me into a reflexive anxiety. I wrung my hands as the grey doors closed. For the first time it occurred to me that lifts, in compactness if not orientation, are uncannily like coffins.

Chapter Thirty

The Victim

‘Y’alright mate?’ The Nurse asked me. I was glad she’d come, The Doc was starting to piss me off.

‘Yeah, I’m fine. Just tired.’

‘Do you actually want to rest? I thought you was just getting rid of Miss Nosy Parker, but I can go too if you want.’

‘No!’ I nearly shouted, then paused, embarrassed. I must have sounded so desperate. I usually managed to hide the fact that I hated being alone. I put a lot of emphasis on my superhuman self-sufficiency. I couldn’t wait for the days when I had a whole new skin, when I’d be strong enough to say something churlish in response to ‘I can go if you want’. Something like, *actually, yeah, if you could fuck off, that’d be great*, and mean it, but I wasn’t there yet. I was still scared of my dreams. ‘I just mean, you can stick about if you want to. I probably won’t go to sleep for ages anyway.’

‘Christ, you’re not still scared to drop off, are you?’

I shrugged. 'I'm not scared, I just don't like it.'

'Rubbish. You can't not like sleep,' The Nurse laughed. 'That's like not liking breathing or water.'

'That's not that weird,' I countered. 'My mate Olivia *hates* water, only drinks Ribena. She had to bring in a note from her mum so she could drink it in class. *Loads* of people don't like water.'

'Loads of dickheads don't like water. They'd realise how much they could stomach clean water if they were stuck in the Sahara desert for a week or two, or raving in Ibiza where they charge tenner a bottle to the punters who are chewing their own faces off.'

'Chewing their face off?' I asked. She shook her head.

'Never you mind. I shouldn't be chatting like this. It's bad optics for the medical industry to promote MDMA.'

I rolled my eyes.

'I *knew* what you meant, I was just clarifying.'

'Here, tell you what,' The Nurse continued as though she hadn't heard me. 'If you really wanna stay awake, that's the way to do it.'

'Reckon you could sneak me some?' I grinned cheekily, only half joking.

'Sure, I'll stick it up me hole and meet you in girl's toilets for a key or two,' she rolled her eyes. 'What kind of nurse do you take me for? No. Bedtime for you, Mrs. I've been keeping you up long enough with tales from my degenerate youth.'

Again, I felt my stomach sink, the same feeling I experienced when my friends wanted to get up and leave the party before I'd been ready to go, when everyone was ready to

take off their make-up and get in their jimjams, but I still wanted to chat about and flirt with boys and most importantly stay *out*. I didn't pout though. I was sick of being the spoilt, party girl. I tried to keep my face expressionless.

'Alright, night then.'

The Nurse turned around a little before going off, hesitating like she had something to say.

'Listen, I don't want to go all Doc on you, but you will be alright down there, won't you? I know you've seen it before and was alright with it, but this is a little weird and I'll get it if you change your mind. The Chief can be a bit pushy, like. Just wanna make sure you absolutely want this, you know?'

I smiled a little. I didn't think I'd ever had so many people concerned about my well-being before. Ironically, it came at the moment when I needed it the least. If my ex had been this concerned when taking my virginity, I might not have ended up crying in the shower for thirty-five minutes. It was strange to be getting so much compassion when I no longer needed it, when I'd decided that, actually, I didn't want anyone's compassion ever again. I wanted repulsion. I wanted fear.

'I'm certain,' I said.

'Great,' she said, nodding back. 'Just try not to change your mind mid-surgery or it'll be a ball-ache sorting out the paperwork.'

I looked at her firmly. 'I won't change my mind.'

'I'm just kidding,' she added. 'I never do paperwork anyway. Night, kiddo.'

She left. At seventeen, I was just old enough to have escaped the kids ward, and I was left in a room with three other beds, two occupied, one resident so old that their skin had

changed colour, and, of course, Patch, who was kid and adult both. They slept soundly. Often they snored, which helped me a little. I thought about tomorrow, going down the morgue, sitting there in the dark, just me and the monster. The thought would probably have been boring if it wasn't so fucking exhilarating. The only thing I'd have to entertain me would be the gradual changing of my body. I smiled, picturing the feeling of my hands going over thick, rough skin and yellow, rotten toes. It was a nice thought.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Chief

‘I’ve been informed you wanted to see me.’ The Doc stood there looking hostile, her hair escaping from its clip as she glared at me. The dinging of the doors had surprised me and I was afraid I might have looked guilty.

‘How did you get a key-card for the lift?’ I asked.

‘What?’ she asked, outraged. ‘The Nurse lent it to me, if you must know, but I am a member of staff and more than entitled to be here. Did you ask to see me or not?’

‘She’s lending out her key-cards now?’ I shook my head. ‘I wish she wouldn’t. And I didn’t ask to see you,’ I admitted, with a small smile.

‘Oh brilliant, so this has all been a waste of my time? Great!’ She began to turn, but stopped herself. ‘Actually, no. I’m not going. I have questions. We’re going to have this out right here and now. Why have you stopped Cindy’s physiotherapy? Why have I just had a conversation with a seventeen-year-old girl who believes that you’re going to replace her missing foot with a new one? Why is The Nurse throwing her weight around like you three

have a secret club? This is no doubt the most unprofessional environment I've ever worked in and I've worked... Well, it doesn't matter where I've worked. I want some answers.'

I passed a hand over my forehead, conscious that I looked irritated, which, unfortunately, I rather was. Not entirely due to The Doc, although she was exhausting in her apoplexy, but also with The Nurse who gave away my key-cards, and my patient who seemed the epitome of secrecy and silence one day, but couldn't appear to handle anything with discretion the next. I sighed.

'Cindy's confused. I've been examining that creature who was brought here for treatment...'

'That you *insisted* on bringing here.'

'As opposed to sitting in some horrible prison cell, yes, and I don't regret it in the least. You know as well as I do that that creature is made up of dead body parts. I mentioned, perhaps stupidly, to Cindy that at some point in the far, far future there *may* potentially be a possibility that she could have a new foot if research continued on the same trajectory. Obviously that was irresponsible of me. It appears she's taking that little nugget of information and ran with it into fantasy.'

'I don't believe you,' she shook her head, causing her wispy loose hair to shake with her. 'Cindy is a bright girl. She wouldn't mistake a fairy tale for reality unless someone lied to her. She *definitely* wouldn't misunderstand to such a ludicrous extent as this.'

'Such a ludicrous extent as what?' I asked, half smiling. 'Giving the incorrect information to another doctor? Why is that so extreme for you? She's a trauma patient. She's confused.'

'Why isn't she doing her physiotherapy?'

I shrugged.

‘She’s opted out.’

The Doc scoffed, although I could tell from the glittering of her eyes and the overtness of her gestures she smoothing over fear with anger. The overly-emotive are a danger to themselves.

‘Well then she’ll never walk again. Are you satisfied?’

‘Not in the least. I wanted her to continue with the treatment, but it’s incredibly painful and difficult. It involves a lot of physical strength and resilience. It must have been hard for her and she’s decided against it. I wish I could change her mind, I truly do, but unfortunately we must respect her wishes. While patients don’t always know what’s best for them, they often do have capacity.’

The Doc’s shoulders sank. I saw her briefly biting her lip and I knew that she must be breathing and getting a hold of herself. I respected that. Those who forced themselves through confrontation despite their outward displays of hysteria sicken me slightly. It reminds me too much of my mother, I suppose, who spent her many decades alive existing as a sopping wet blanket. The Doc sighed, and I could hear the sob she swallowed.

‘This is insane. This place is practically an asylum. You’ve got mysterious creatures up in the ward and no one knows how *you* managed to get the authority to place them here. There’s a traumatised girl up there, splattered all over the tabloids. We’re not even treating her anymore, but for some reason she won’t go home and she thinks she’s getting a new foot. This isn’t *normal*.’

She looked at me as though for confirmation. This was the perfect moment to twist the knife.

‘Doctor, a hospital isn’t the place for normal. It’s a place for the abnormal, the emergencies, the sick. It seems you’re struggling to cope with that. It happens to many doctors, but we can’t allow it to impact your work and your relationships with the patients, which I’m sorry to say, it does seem to be doing. I’m not the first person to notice your inappropriate closeness with Creature A upstairs. You neglect your other duties, and then you’re outraged when you find out the ins and outs of a patient’s treatments a little later than perhaps you normally would’ve. I suggest time off. Paid sick-leave...’

‘Oh fuck off,’ she shouted. I recoiled in shock, though I wasn’t offended. If anything it was the kind of immature reaction I’d wanted. I held my hands up in resignation, but she carried on regardless. ‘I don’t need your paid sick-leave, I quit. And I’ll be getting on to the union about this, *and* the police. I don’t trust for one second what you claim to be doing here.’

I nodded. ‘If that’s how you feel it will be sad to see you go, but I do think that in your current emotional state it might be for the best.’

‘*My* emotional state, fucking hell. I’m being lectured on emotional states by a robot.’ She stormed off towards the lift and swiped, stabbing at the up button aggressively. Her tears were flowing freely now. She was appalled, not only at me and the situation but also at herself, appalled because I’d hit a nerve and she knew that in some small part, I was right.

‘Doctor,’ I said as the lift doors opened and she stepped in. She turned to look at me. ‘I really must insist you hand back that key-card.’

‘For goodness’ sake. Here!’ She threw it on the floor, which I found inconsiderate considering the state of my joints. At least my monster and Cindy would be safe down here. Not that I’d let her onto hospital grounds again.

It was a shame I couldn't get her on board as she really was a spectacular doctor, far more qualified than The Nurse, but demonstrably she was far too stuck-in-the-mud for anything as innovative as this. A shame.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Doc

Raul's photography was taking off. I had savings. My mortgage for the flat was nearly paid off. And I hated Rompecabeza. The atmosphere depressed me, and my guilt at abandoning the NHS meant that leaving was probably a good idea anyway. I was never going to get on with The Chief. I'd much rather be helping people who needed it and who *wanted* my help, instead of convincing spoiled teens to have a bit of common sense. I could always visit Patch just as soon as the dust settled.

I sensibly reasoned all this in my head, taking a few deep breaths in my car before setting off. Why couldn't I stop crying? Why was I absolutely terrified of what would happen if I left? I took one last deep breath, blew it out like I was a disgruntled horse. It was time to go home and put this nightmare behind me.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Chief

5'4", female, 18 or 19 years old, overweight, riddled with acne and the fine hair and yellow teeth which suggested a flirt with bulimia.

'Hello, young lady. Is your father home?'

Home was a neat, orange box on a housing estate. Two cars on every tarmac driveway and a neighbour in every feasible direction, this was not a place where one could harbour secrets and, from the looks of it, no one did.

Cindy's sister, I presumed, turned around as her father slunk into the hallway. He fit the bill of expectation, although he did seem somewhat on the young side. 5' 11', brown eyebrows, hair highlighted artificially and lightly spiked, athletic in build, and around mid-to-late 30s, which was surprising when I knew his daughter was 17. It was clear he hadn't slept much recently. His eyes were bloodshot, his shoulders hitched-up tightly by his ears as he slumped against the wall. Finding him so vulnerable boded well for me. I held out my hand for him to shake.

‘Mr Reynolds. We haven’t been formally introduced. I’m Dr Stein, Chief of Medicine. I’m in charge of Cindy’s care at Rompecabeza hospital.’

The inside of the home was magnolia, every surface pristine, a hardwood floor that smelt of polish. I very much approved of the cleanliness. I held a lukewarm mug of tea as I sat on the black leather sofa. Cindy’s father had dismissed himself to use the lavatory a while ago. No doubt the stress would be taking its toll on his bowels.

I placed my mug on its coaster, needing both arms to stand up these days, thinking that I may as well take the opportunity to peruse their family pictures. It could be an aid in building a report.

Each photograph was hung methodically. There were a surprising amount of photographs portraying the girl I’d just met at the door, surprising as her face wasn’t a great one to immortalise. In each picture her mouth was twisted and sour while her eyes screwed up, as though she were wincing. The mystery was somewhat explained by the family portrait which revealed she was a twin, the two entirely indistinguishable. Cindy’s mother featured heavily too, significantly older than her father, perhaps in her forties or fifties, slightly piggish in the nose and cheeks, but with a certain glamour, I supposed. She had nails so long, I was certain they must contain traces of faecal matter. Her twin daughters had clearly taken after her in a way Cindy had escaped. I realised there were no pictures of Cindy, until I noticed her resting on the corner of the mantle, not hung up like the rest of them, but in a cracked, old frame leaning between the cedar-scented Yankee candles. She smiled broadly, more relaxed than I had ever seen her, hands folded over a flat stomach while she leant against a bridge. She looked slightly different in this picture, and I puzzled over her sharp nose, the jaw a little less defined.

‘She looks just like her, doesn’t she?’

Cindy's father was standing too close behind me smelling vaguely of soap and diarrhoea.

'Looks like who?' I asked.

'Cindy. She looks just like her mother there.'

'Oh.' I stopped, taking in the full picture while I tactfully took a step backwards. The impression I'd gotten so far of Cindy's familial life was one of a mishmash of doppelgangers, the plain, magnolia backdrop only adding to the uncanniness. 'Yes, they are alike. Although I must admit I'd assumed that was her mother in *those* pictures.'

'Angela? Oh no,' he laughed slightly. 'That's her stepmother. The twins are her daughters from a previous marriage. We got together,' he paused to calculate. 'Seven? Eight years ago now? Long after Cindy's mother had passed away, anyway.'

Ah. Good. No mother on the scene, a reconstructed family and, I guessed from the distinct lack of Cindy in the framed family album, a healthy dose of neglect. This would be far easier than I imagined.

'What is it you do, Mr Reynolds?' I asked, returning to the leather sofa.

'When I'm not off with stress? IT.'

I nodded.

'And your wife?'

'Real estate.'

Suddenly the age-gap and the beauty discrepancy made sense. I nodded.

'Well, within medicine there's an awful lot of bureaucracy we have to do, paperwork, legal contracts et cetera. Naturally, at Rompecabeza we want to help Cindy as best we can.'

‘Right.’

‘Which is why we’ve decided there will be no costs for the various treatments Cindy will undergo.’

‘Right,’ his eyebrows raised. ‘Thank you.’

I could see he was surprised, not because of my generosity, but because he’d never expected any costs at all. I’d insisted on her as a patient and he’d agreed to nothing, but it was better for me if he already felt indebted.

‘We like to do everything we can for cases like Cindy’s. Understandably, hers is a uniquely tragic case, with psychological as well as physical implications. With the current tabloid frenzy we’d also like to ensure that her privacy is protected as best we can.’

‘That’s great,’ he exhaled a little with relief. ‘Yeah, I’ve been worried about that. The press.’

‘Hmm. Now, during the sensitive stages of her treatment, we suggest that those closest not interfere. Learning to walk again, particularly with the innovative type of prosthetic we have in mind, is long and painful. We’ve found that any psychological reminders of the time before the injury can slow down, and in some cases even reverse, progress.’

‘I see.’

‘Now, at Cindy’s age, you know we need parental consent for the operations.’

‘Sure, that’s fine. I can sign the form or whatever.’

‘And that is a brilliant start, but the way I see it you have two options. I *could* come back here every few days or so with a new set of forms for you, explaining the ins-and-outs of complex medical procedures, and the risks and potential side-effects of all medication,

physical treatment, and psychological care. This will inevitably slow down the process of recovery and make things extremely frustrating for the both of us. We are both professional men after all.'

He nodded.

'Or, with the signing of *one* form, I become her primary guardian, temporarily of course, and can independently make the medical decisions that will best benefit your daughter without needing to take up your time and energy during what I can only imagine is a difficult time for you all.'

Mr Reynolds' laugh was bitter.

'God, you have no idea. It's been awful. None of us can sleep. The rows are constant, the girls *hate* going to the hospital. Every visiting hour is a battle. It would've been fine if Cindy would at least behave like herself but...' He shook his head. We stood for a while in silence as he swallowed a lump in his throat. 'She's not my little girl anymore.'

That seemed as good a time as any to bring out the paperwork. I slid them across the table with my silver, retractable pen. Within six minutes, the process was complete.

I left Cindy's perfect square house with a sense of accomplishment. I hoped the Reynolds would find they slept more soundly that night. I certainly would.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Nurse

Right then! Go time! Cindy were still asleep and we'd get her in the morning. There were less need for discretion with Cindy, apparently, (God, I got a right earful from The Chief about *discretion*. Wanted to say *discrete this, you old prick*). Patch on the other hand, well, it were a little harder moving him downstairs. He couldn't decide stuff for himself in the same way. He were a yowling wreck when he got here, so we couldn't exactly pretend that he knew what we was doing. There'd have been questions, I reckon, so, night-time it had to be.

Even in a hospital where no one ever properly sleeps, there were a nice quiet in the air. Four in the morning. When do you ever see four in the morning? It's not a time that should rightfully exist. Still, late as it were, I were jittery and excited. Don't know why, it's not like I were having owt done, but I guess it's like when your mate gets their hair dyed or a new tattoo. You're giddy by association.

I were thinking about our Craig as well. Would be nice if he knew what we were up to, you know, what I were helping with. New leg for him. That's enough to make anyone giddy. Can't tell him owt about it though. *Discretion*. I decided that our Rubes didn't count.

I woke Patch up dead slowly so he wouldn't freak out, shaking him gently on the shoulders.

'Here, Patch mate. We've gotta be moving.'

'What?' he asked, disoriented, blinking. 'Where? What?' He rubbed his ugly, blood-shot eye with his massive hand. Patch could be dead cute sometimes. Watching this big thing wake up confused were like watching an elephant stumble over. I shushed him.

'It's early, pet. We've gotta get you to a new room now. Come with me.'

'Why?'

'You and Cindy are going into a new room. A special room downstairs with a bit more space for you to move about. It'll be good for Cindy when she's learning how to walk.' He sat up and looked around me to get a glimpse of Cindy's bed where she were still sleeping, looking angelic, probably battling rapists in her dream. 'She'll come down in the morning, don't worry. Let's go.'

He moved out of the bed and stood up. Fucking hell. Everyone's the same height lying down. Stood up, some freaks are fucking *tall*. I held his hand and we shuffled out the room down the corridor to the lift.

'Will The Doc know I'm moving?' he asked. I winced.

'Here we are, then,' I said instead, making out like I needed to focus on getting out the key card. 'Down we go. It's nice and cool down here in the summer, you know?' I smiled

as we stepped into the lift together. Dunno why I were chatting shit about the weather to be honest. It were basically autumn now anyway.

When I got down I saw the room hadn't been properly prepared. Typical. The Chief had gone mad at me about keeping things *discreet* and making sure I did a good job, and he hadn't even bothered to get beds set up.

'Right well, it'll be a bit uncomfortable tonight, but we'll get it all sorted in the morning for when Cindy comes down,' I said.

'Where do I sleep?' he asked.

'Uh... the floor? Loads of people sleep on the floor, you'll be fine.'

That were the good thing about Patch. You could tell him what you wanted and he'd believe it. *Sure, mate, we all sleep on the floor. We all change rooms in the middle of the night and do mad illicit surgeries. Par for the course, pal.*

He sat down on the floor. I did feel a bit bad for him, bless.

'I'll get you a pillow and sheet at least,' I said.

'Thank you. Does The Doc come down here?'

No avoiding that one.

'Sure, mate. All the staff come down to the morgue. But you'll, eh, probably be seeing more of me than The Doc for a bit. See, I'm the new 'Mortuary Transport Assistant'.'

Nice little raise I got with that bullshit job title. Felt a little proud of my promotion, I did. Had to keep reminding myself it weren't a real one, more of a failsafe to make sure I keep schtum.

'But I want to keep seeing The Doc,' he said.

‘Charming! Aren’t I good enough then?’ He looked confused and sad. I tried the tactic I used for my sister’s brats. ‘Listen,’ I squatted down so I was facing him. ‘The thing is, The Doc works with... not babies exactly, but people who need lots and lots of help. Now you, you’re getting bigger and stronger by the day! You don’t need your antibiotics anymore. Look how nice and clean your stitches are. And you’re talking loads now, properly and all, saying right clever stuff sometimes. It’s time for you to use some of that goodness and help Cindy a little. You’ll be with the grown-ups now. Me, Cindy, The Chief... It might be scary but it’s a good thing. You’re a big boy.’ I had to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing at that part. He certainly were big, no doubt of that. I had to remember he were like a six-year-old in his head.

‘Big boy,’ he nodded. ‘I’m a big boy. And big boys sleep on the floor,’ he said, decisively.

‘That’s right!’ I continued, enthusiastically. ‘Big boys sleep on the floor.’

He nodded in understanding and curled back on his side.

‘I’ll try,’ he said.

‘There’s a good lad. Sleep well, and we’ll see you in the morning.’ I switched the light off as I went back up. It were really dark without the windows, I’d have to get him a lamp or summat. But then, pillow, sheets, lamp... Christ it were all adding up. Felt like I were setting up a hotel. It’d do for a night at least. Patch were made of sterner stuff.

I went back up to wait about for Cindy to come to, screaming like a banshee again. Christ, when they say no rest for the wicked, they int joking.

Part Two

POLICE REPORT

Case No: **0101181820121812** Date: 22/04/2019

Reporting Officer: **Sargeant Farouk Siddiqi**

Incident: Arrest of Dr Stein, Rompacabeza Hospital: GBH, illegal surgery, medical negligence.

20:15 disclosure received by a member of staff from the institution reporting incidents of illegal and damaging surgical intervention taking place in the hospital morgue at Rompacabezza Hospital, Norfolk. The patients in question were Cindy Reynolds and 'Creature A'. Both were recovering at Rompacabezza Hospital in a private ward due to high instances of media attention surrounding initial hospitalisation. At 20:30 the police arrived at hospital whereupon they demanded access to the morgue. The two complainants were found on parallel gurneys having recently undergone advanced retinal surgery. The environment was unsanitary and unsuitable for cosmetic operation, and both patients were in a state of extreme injury and ill-health.

Miss Reynolds was found confused, drugged, and injured, with various physical signs of invasive surgeries having been performed over the course of the year. The ward of the court legally referred to as 'Creature A' was more verbal than Miss Reynolds, but showed similar signs of post-surgical injury. A medical examination suggested that, evidenced by the scarification and stitching, there were various incisions, amputations, and reattachments performed on Miss Reynald's legs, torso, neck, face, and foot. Similar scarification was found across Creature A's body, suggesting similar treatment. The purpose of these surgeries has yet to be determined. Both patients showed symptoms relating to dangerously low levels of Vitamin D.

Miss Reynolds was immediately escorted from the premises in order to be treated at a different hospital. She was relieved to be rescued and showed signs of extreme psychological distress as a result of her year-long captivity. Creature A was willing, but reluctant, to leave the premises.

Dr Francis Steiner was apprehended on the scene. Although cooperating and appearing lucid, his account of the surgeries (p.17) was evidently nonsensical. A defence lawyer will be assigned to his case.

The nurse has been released on parole pending further investigation.

Six Months Earlier...

Chapter Thirty-Five

The Monster

I wonder if The Chief understands that I feel pain. He certainly doesn't respond when I tell him so. I no longer receive the morphine he extends to Cindy and I miss it. It's sad to think what I miss most is the pain-medication. And The Doc, of course. The Doc gave me morphine.

Things are darker down here than they were before. The Chief keeps the lights off so that we won't rouse suspicion. I remember the kind face of The Doc, and the stories she used to read me. I'm aware she must be gone. I'm not sure if by 'gone' I mean dead, or simply disappeared, but I am certain that if she knew I were down here being chipped away like a block of clay she would not allow such things to happen. Sometimes, I wonder what they did to make her stop looking for me. On especially dark days, I think that this is what I was built to do.

The Chief doesn't want me to speak about her anymore, although who I would speak to here is a mystery. Sometimes Cindy speaks. Often she doesn't. I can't tell if my old legs are making her happier than she was before, but it doesn't seem so.

I try talking to her about emotions. Those were so new to me a year ago that any expression of them was *exciting*, sensations I wanted to articulate in as clear a way as possible.

'Happy...' I would say to The Doc. 'Here and here. Happy like, not tired, like eyes open.'

'Ah. Adrenaline is what you're feeling. Excitement.'

'I'm excitement,' I would say.

'Excited,' she'd correct. My language acquisition I owe to her entirely. Without The Doc, I never would have read. Without books, I never would have spoken.

I cannot read down here because it is too dark and Cindy whimpers. Every time she wakes it's with a scream.

'It's too fucking dark in here,' she once said. That word 'fucking' is taboo. It should only be used during moments where emotions run high. Swearing is rude, but emotive. It's effective for the purposes of showing that, frankly, politeness is not the most significant thing in this particular situation. Cindy should not be concerned about being polite in my presence because I understand the reason she said 'fucking,' was because a particular emotion was running high. *Fear*. Cindy is afraid of dark, enclosed spaces. This is something she has told me when she speaks about The Prince. It is rare for her to do so, but it happens.

Today, she hasn't screamed because she hasn't yet slept. When I sleep I have nightmares. In them I cannot see, there are just blurs of brown and black while a story is

whispered in my head, nonsensical and surreal. I used to dream in pictures, but since the lights have gone I dream in words. I know it was only a short while ago I couldn't speak. If I was raised here, in the dark, without The Doc to teach me how to speak, what would I dream in then? Sensations alone? The thought makes me shudder.

I know what The Chief is planning. I've seen the drawings, heard him explain the process to Cindy. She wants The Chief to take all of me, my limbs, my organs, and then finally, all the delicate features. She wants no part of her to have any connection to The Prince. As far as The Chief is concerned, I am full of spare parts. One day, he will take my eyes and exchange them with hers just as he has been doing with my other body parts. I say exchange because it's what I hope will happen. Even though I live in darkness, it's still a comfort to see lines and shapes, but I have little faith in The Chief anymore. It wouldn't surprise me if he didn't see any need for me to have sight.

There's another word The Doc taught me: *pain*. This was the first word I learnt. 'Pain,' then 'hot,' then 'thirsty.' I needed these words for practical reasons. I can hardly remember those first months after the hospital discovered me. I've been told it was similar to a normal infancy, although I have developed at twenty times the rate of an average child, presumably the result of a previously functioning adult brain. Pain, right now, is what I feel. I feel it in the stitches round my ankles, my new legs aching from the weight of my heavy upper-body, my skin stretched tight across my new features. I worry drastically about the future. In the present, I feel pain.

Cindy still hasn't slept. I hear her stirring. She gravitates towards the corner of the morgue, where she feels safe. I wonder why she doesn't demand a bed. She has control over The Chief in ways I can only envy, but she is happy in her tattered hospital gown sleeping amongst the uncovered pillows and sheets. I wish that I could speak to her.

‘Are you tired?’ I ask. She does not respond. ‘I feel tired,’ I say.

‘Then sleep.’

Cindy holds onto this feeling: *bitterness*. Sometimes, I wonder if she knows who her enemy is. Her mind doesn’t seem to function in the way others do. I’m concerned for her. At the same time, I feel another thing: *resentful*. I am broken so that she can achieve happiness.

‘I can’t sleep now,’ I tell her. ‘There’s too much pain.’

‘You don’t get the morphine,’ she says. It’s as though it’s the first time she’s realised this.

‘No. I don’t.’

She is silent for a while. In my mind I think of ways I can revive the conversation, but she makes an attempt before I do.

‘I can’t sleep, either,’ she says. ‘I haven’t slept properly since it happened. In the hospital upstairs, you always slept.’

‘I don’t remember anything except The Doc reading me stories.’

‘She never read to me,’ Cindy scoffed.

‘Well, maybe that was the problem.’ More silence, although I sense that things are friendlier now. ‘Do you know any stories?’ I ask her.

‘No,’ she says. ‘Not good ones anyway.’

‘That’s a shame. I can tell you stories if it’ll help you sleep?’

She is quiet again, and I begin to feel this thing, *embarrassed*, before I realise she is crying when she responds:

‘Okay.’

I think of the best story I can tell her, the one which may make her the happiest.

‘There was once a duckling,’ I say. ‘And the duckling was very ugly. When people looked at it they felt this thing, *disgust*. They laughed and turned away, but as the years went by and the duckling grew, things changed.’

‘I know this one,’ Cindy said.

‘I thought you didn’t know any stories.’

‘Everyone knows this one, though.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Okay.’

‘You can finish it,’ Cindy says. She is talkative now. ‘I want to know what happens in your version.’

‘Well, one day the duckling grows beautiful,’ I say. ‘And it ends.’

‘It just ends?’

‘I believe so, yes.’

‘And is the duckling messed up by its beauty? Is the duckling raped at parties by boys who spike her vodka? Do the duckling’s sisters trip her up and break her collar-bone because she deserves it, because she shouldn’t be so skinny her bones break that easy anyway? Is the duckling kidnapped and mutilated, all because she’s beautiful? To the point that she never wants anyone to see her as beautiful again? Is that how it fucking ends?’

That word ‘fucking’ again lets me know that she is angry, and I wonder if this is a particular situation in which politeness is not important. I’m not entirely sure why she’s angry. I am not upset by her response. Instead, I am another thing: *confused*. I answer

carefully as I've begun to hear sobbing in the corner. I can vaguely see her outline curling up on itself.

'No,' I say. 'I believe the swan just stays beautiful.'

She sobs for a long time, and then stops. I think she is asleep but I am wrong.

'Thank you,' I hear her whisper.

I smile to say 'all is well,' before I realise that she won't be able to see me. It occurs to me that with Cindy's face, I will be beautiful. Her eyes are blue. I have read that blue eyes are pleasing. Pleasing appearances encourage romance, something I've yet to experience. I long to, though. I'd love to kiss, to be held, even platonically. I wonder if anyone would like to touch me now. I try to think about how this makes me feel, if I feel beautiful, if that beauty enables me to understand Cindy's anger. I try to focus on feeling pretty and I think there is a twinge of something. Mostly, I just feel pain.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Nurse

If Christmas looks like white, crispy snow, forest-green trees, pealing bells and all the rest of it, then Boxing Day looks like grey sleet, muddy tyre-tracks, and dark skies at 3pm. Working on Christmas Day isn't all that depressing, really. The patients are sad to be there, yeah, but they have their turkey dinners and there's always a bit of excitement in the waiting room. Who choked on a cracker toy this year? Who had a family row and punched their Nan in the face? Who mistook their present for a dildo and rammed it up their arse? Injuries are funnier when they're festive. Boxing Day is dead depressing, though. There's no escaping that. It's like the taxi home after a night out when you're still pissed but the fun's over.

I were driving up to see the fam. Mam always has a do at Christmas. Louise brings the kids with their loud, flashing toys (usually what I buy them to piss her and Steve off, forgetting that they'll inflict 'em on me too). Jack sometimes turns up, somethings doesn't.

Me mam's always there, obviously. And our Craig. Craig always manages to save the day, only one in our family with a decent sense of humour.

I got there and parked up. Through the window I could see everyone were already there lounging about on the settee, except Louise, who were probably fannyng about with the kids. Can't get them kids to stay still if you nail 'em to floor. I took a deep breath in me car before going in. You have to, with family.

My mam's front door opens into the living room.

'Here comes Santa!' I said, stepping in from the cold.

'Hiya, Steph!'

'Hi, love!'

'Auntie Stephy!'

'Hiya.'

The fam chorused at us while me mam rushed up to kiss me on the cheek. I struggled to get my boots off. The little ones was already rifling through the bin-bag of pressies I'd bought and Steve (Louise's fella) kept his eyes on the telly, which were all he were good for.

'Now, we've all had some nibbles but we've left you a plate. *Louise! Your sister's here!*' My mam called over her shoulder before turning back to us. 'Let me take your coat, love.'

'Hiya Steph! Wanna drink?' my sister called from the kitchen.

'Yeah, go on then,' I shouted back. My mam were still fussing around me, but I managed to shake her off and make a beeline for Craig.

'Now then, trouble,' he said as I threw my arms around him.

‘Missed you,’ I said muffled into his shoulder.

‘Are you having fizz then, Steph?’ Louise called through. She peeped round the kitchen door, wearing six inch heels and a new sparkly top. There were no way of telling she’d just had a baby, stick insect that she were. Who knows where she’d left the bairns when she were getting her hair done, but she’d definitely had it done because it shimmered in ash and honey tones, bouncing in loose curls over her shoulders. Bitch.

‘Yeah, whatever. I’ll get it,’ I said.

In the kitchen, the table had been crammed against the wall. Every inch were covered with beige and yellow leftovers.

‘Right, we’ve got turkey, potato salad, samosas, cauliflower thingies...’ Louise went on, as though I didn’t have eyes.

‘Yeah, looks great,’ I said, piling my plate and grabbing a plastic cup of prosecco. Louise poked me in the ribs from behind.

‘Ow! What?’

‘Let’s see it then,’ she stage-whispered, grinning from ear to ear.

‘See what?’

‘Your back!’

Bollocks. I deliberately didn’t tell her because I knew she’d react like this.

‘How did you find out I had my back done?’

‘Jack saw it on your Insta!’

Double bollocks.

‘Fuck’s sake. I thought he’d lost his phone...’

‘Go on, go on!’ she said, yanking at the bottom of my jumper.

‘Alright!’ I sighed and turned around to lift up my shirt so she could see, one eye on the door to make sure no one were gonna burst through.

‘Blimey,’ Louise said. ‘I weren’t expecting that!’

‘Well, what the bloody hell was you expecting?’

‘Dunno,’ she said, her eyes all wide. ‘But not that.’

Basically, a couple weeks back, I were looking at all these pictures of Victorian corsets. I’ve always loved that vintage, steam-punk shite. I like the teeny tiny waists you can fit in two hands, next to those huge skirts with crinolines and lace. Rubes likes that shit too, and she’s actually got the body for it, unlike me who’s all chub run and muffin top. Anyway, I thought it would be good to get one tattooed up my back, all the ribbons and that with a bow at the bottom, just on the lower part. Classy, like. Kind of like you’re dressed even when you’re undressed. I went to my regular guy, the one who’s done my thighs and arms and that, and he nodded when I showed him the pictures.

‘Easily done,’ he said. ‘I can book you in for six months from now.’

‘Fuckin’ hell, six months? Can’t you squeeze me in a bit sooner?’

He shook his head.

‘Can’t do it, mate. I’ve got a waiting list as long as my arm these days,’ he pulled back his sleeve to show a list of customers tattooed down his forearm, the top few crossed off.

‘Jesus,’ I said.

‘Tell you what though, you know you can get a corset done with piercings?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Couple of piercings on either side of your spine, going up and down, yeah? When they’re healed you replace them with rings and then can thread a ribbon through them, turn yourself into a permanent corset. Don’t get me wrong, a tattoo would look sick, but if you’d rather have it 3D... plus, I can get the new girl to do that now, if you want.’

He showed me a picture, black and white, of a girl with her back pinched into the piercing corset, the skin crumpling underneath the ribbon and stretched around the ribs, her arms held above their head holding up long, thick hair so you could see the work.

‘Eh, yeah,’ I said. ‘I’ll have that done now then, shall I?’

It’d been a pain in the arse keeping it clean and dry, but when it’d healed, it looked mint. I found myself staring at it as I stood in between two mirrors, holding my wardrobe doors at an awkward angle, getting Rubes to lace me up with black or red or purple. The corset became a part of me in the same way green eyes were a part of me, or acne scars, or social anxiety and a familial propensity for breast cancer. It were like the ribbons were my skin.

‘God,’ Louise said. ‘It’s huge.’

‘Well yeah,’ I said.

‘It looks *sore*,’ she winced. I rolled my eyes.

‘It’s not sore, it’s fine,’ I yanked down my jumper, flinching slightly as it caught on one of the hoops.

‘Oh, Stephanie!’ my mam sighed.

I span around, my heart beating fast like a teen caught smoking. Ridiculous. I were twenty-six years of age!

‘What have you done to yourself this time?’ she asked.

‘It’s just a piercing,’ I said.

‘It’s quite a few piercings,’ Louise helpfully added.

‘And all the way up your back!’ me mam shook her head.

‘Yeah, alright.’ I grabbed my plate and cup and stormed into the living room. I crashed down on the settee next to Craig. ‘They’re doing my head in already,’ I said. He smiled and nudged my knee with his.

‘Wouldn’t be Christmas without bickering, ey?’

‘I mean, honestly Steph, you’ve ruined yourself with all you’ve done,’ Mam said, coming back through.

‘Look, just leave it, yeah?’

‘As though you hadn’t done enough with those *ears*,’ she said. She meant my gauges. Well, whatever, I still liked them. ‘And those *tattoos*.’

‘Oh, sorry Steph!’ my sister said, disingenuously. ‘I feel like this is my fault!’

‘This *is* your fault,’ I told her.

‘Oi! Don’t you blame our Lou!’ Mam said. ‘She didn’t decide to stick those pins in you! And you’ve ruined your legs. Look at our Craig, do you think if he had his legs he’d scribble all over them?’

‘Fuck’s sake,’ I groaned.

‘No need for that, Mam,’ Craig added.

‘Craig *has* tattoos,’ I said. And he did. Liverpool crest on his upper right arm. Tasmanian devil on his arse. The usual.

‘Well, it’s different, isn’t it? For a bloke,’ Mam said.

‘Oh, aye, yeah! And what’s different about it, ey? You think men should be allowed more than women, is that it?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she muttered, but looked embarrassed.

‘No go on, tell us then. Why is it alright for Craig and not me?’

‘Can I watch this, Steph? Please?’ Steve said, gesturing at the telly, which may well have been the first time he’d ever spoken to me directly in his life.

‘I’m just saying,’ Mam said, more sheepish now, ‘that there’s a little bit of a difference between a footy tattoo and all the nonsense *you’ve* done to yourself.’

‘You gonna help me out here?’ I turned to Craig. He were texting and he put his phone down, annoyed.

‘Are they on about that corset thing with the ribbons on your back?’ I nodded. He shrugged. ‘I dunno, Steph. It is a bit extreme, like.’

I don’t really know why *that* did it. Everyone else had said stuff that were way worse. It just reminded me all of a sudden of creepy Derick, Mam’s ex-boyfriend, who didn’t stick about long, but long enough to make a difference. He always had a fucking comment to make about my uniform being too short, or my tights having too many holes in, or some other unasked for bollocks. Craig always stood up for me, always told him to fuck off and stop looking, to get a life and worry about his own kids. Right up until he didn’t. *You could put some proper clothes on, Steph.* That’s what he’d said after mine and Derrick’s last argument. He said it nicely too. Like he were trying to break it to me gently, which made it worse.

‘You know what,’ I said to everyone in the room, my entire delightful family, the kids playing with their trucks on the floor, the baby, presumably in his crib upstairs. ‘You can all go fuck yourselves.’

‘Oh now,’ was the outcry. ‘I don’t believe there’s any need...’

‘She does this every year.’

‘Let’s just forget it so we can have a nice day,’

‘*Now* where are you going?’

I didn’t even bother to put my boots on properly before I slammed the front door.

So that was that then. The full extent of my family Christmas. I suddenly realised I was starving and I hadn’t even had a sip of prosecco. Ah well. At least that meant I could drive back home tonight, maybe check in with Rubes. I’d stop by a drive-through when I found one, get myself a proper Christmas meal.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The Prince

A knock disturbed me.

‘Your new cellmate is here.’

I rolled my eyes and forced myself to lean up from my cramped position, but when I saw him, I couldn't help but laugh. I was face-to-face with what appeared to be a child of no more than around nine, although I'd never been good with that kind of thing and he could have been anywhere between six and fourteen. His face was covered in cuts and scrapes, which only exemplified his childlike demeanour. If it wasn't for the cleanness of the lines, the stitched-together nature of the scars, I would have presumed they were from scrambling over tree-roots or falling from ponies.

Of course I laughed. I'm human, despite the claims. The guard glared at me. There was no need to be violent towards any of the balding ghosts in here, and yet that threat of violence was always present. I held up my hands in apology.

‘Forgive me. But surely, this is some kind of joke. You can’t seriously believe bringing a child into this establishment is a sensible idea. There couldn’t be a worse place on earth.’

‘I’m no kid.’

It spoke! Bizarre indeed. Horrifyingly enough, he seemed to have very few teeth. It amazes me the degradation prisoners allowed themselves to decay into, but it was far worse within the face of a child.

‘Peter just got transferred here,’ my guard explained. ‘He’s to be examined by the local hospital for research purposes. Unfortunately, he needs twenty-four hour surveillance, isn’t that right, Petey?’ he directed this at the child who looked as though he wanted to spit in his eye but settled on the floor instead. Briefly, I was reminded of Cindy and felt a pang of loss.

‘I’m no kid,’ this child repeated to the guard. That should have been cause for discipline. Instead the guard patted him on the head, which apparently proved even more infuriating, and locked the cell door behind him, encasing us both in my familiar shrine of grey. The child went rabid. He kicked at the door, hitting it with the flats of his palms, growling like an animal. All the while rage distorted his face into the most unpleasant grimace. Eventually, he tired himself and sank to his single bed. He put his elbows on his knees, his head in his palms. His fingers ran through dirty, blond hair. The absurdity of the situation roused me.

‘Forgive me the intrusion, but I must say I haven’t the foggiest idea what’s happening.’

The child looked at me with scorn.

‘I’ll tell you what’s happening, I’ve been in jail for decades now for a bunch of murders I didn’t even commit.’ He kicked the corner of the bed, presumably just so he could kick something.

‘No, I’m ever so sorry, but that’s nonsense. You can’t be older than...’ I paused. As I said, I know nothing of children’s ages.

‘I’m not a kid! How many times do I have to say it?’

He seemed erratic. I waited for him to calm. Contrary to my surroundings, it wasn’t within my heart to hurt children. I wasn’t adverse to the idea, but I understood it would be unpleasant.

‘Okay, how old are you?’ I asked. He shook his head.

‘Don’t know.’

‘Oh, come now.’

‘I don’t! I don’t remember being *really* little. I remember being a kid, playing in the woods and stuff. Parents called round, people caught me, put me in a home. Then I wasn’t good in the homes, so it was juvi’, and then bam, back in the woods. Then prison again. Tried as a minor. Fucking pigs.’

It was jarring. Not only were the Americanisms understandably cringe-inducing, the expletives sounded entirely wrong coming from this toothless, child’s mouth. I’d grown used to hearing such language from my victims, offensive though it was, but this was different.

‘So, you were abandoned by your parents?’ I asked him. I thought of my own mother and felt I might be able to empathise. He shrugged.

‘Or something.’

‘Well, I’m very sorry to hear that,’ I added with practised sincerity. ‘But I’m not sure this is the best place for you either. Even if you’re ‘no kid’ as you say, it may appear as though you are to others. And some of the people here...’

Peter laughed, something like a giggle. Again, I was overcome with the conviction that this was all an elaborate joke.

‘Yeah, I think putting me in with these sickos was part of the plan. Let ‘em try. I’ll bite their fucking dicks off.’

‘With what teeth?’

This, perhaps, was a part of my problem. I wasn’t used to having to control my tongue. With the wrong person, that might have been considered enough to initiate a beating, although I felt this was a fight I could win. Thankfully, however, the child laughed again, this time slightly hysterically. I smiled to indicate we shared a rapport. He grinned at me with that atrocious gap, that winking black entrance to his hot and sour mouth.

‘You’re funny. I like that.’

I smiled in comradery. Of course, I’d smother him as soon as the opportunity arose.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Doc

I don't know when I became complicit. It may have been in medical school. Then, we were always happy to joke about the bodies we saw on a daily basis; old and wrinkled mostly, often fat, always smelling. There's a certain smell that follows patients who've been sick for a long time. You get used to it after a while.

In front of the patients, it was incredibly easy to pretend you didn't mind, indeed barely even noticed, the things that were embarrassing for them. The greasy hair and skin, the rashes, the accidents. We knew it wasn't their fault. In our career, you see people at the lowest part of their existence, where all experience is pain and vulnerability. Men tend to handle it worse than women. I suppose it's a shock for them, being dependent on other people. They can be rude, but you handle it. It helps if you imagine yourself in their position. The fallen patriarch, the family man needing to have their bum wiped by a stranger (and a young, short, female one at that). Women are usually better, particularly if they're working-class. Presumably, they're more used to humiliation.

I assisted a birth during my training. It turned me against the thought of ever becoming a mother, something I could never tell Raul. It wasn't the pain, the stretching, the splitting, I'd expected that. I wasn't a total moron; I was conscious of the fact that childbirth hurt. What turned me off were the stirrups. During the actual birth they're helpful, aid the opening of the cervix, but afterwards, when everything had been delivered, I couldn't stand it. The patient was just waiting there with what my mother would call her 'shame' on full display. For reasons inexplicable to me, it just felt too demeaning. Maybe it was that the baby was out now and her job was done. She should have been swaddled and covered and held. Instead she was left as she was, sore and bloody and open.

The baby was born blue, the cord wrapped around his neck. He was immediately taken away to be revived, but thankfully nuchal cords are common and we knew he would likely be fine. The birth had been a long and difficult one, lasting maybe thirty-six hours, and the tearing had reached her anus. The mother seemed impervious to her own injuries, crying frantically after her son.

'My baby, my baby,' she shouted like something out of a film. I tried my hardest to comfort her. I said her boy was healthy, that he just needed a little rub and then he'd be right as rain. Her husband was pale as a sheet standing by the foot of the bed and I kept wanting him to come over and comfort her.

The primary doctor brought the baby back into the room, crying and purple and perfectly healthy. The mother carried on sobbing, this time in relief. The doctor handed the son over. Her legs were still in the stirrups and I caught the father staring, as though into space, but right into her nether regions. The primary grasped his shoulder affectionately.

'The tearing's bad but don't worry. We'll fix it up for you.'

The father had tears in his eyes as he looked at his son. They weren't loving tears. He was grieving.

I'd tried to speak to Raul about it, to explain why it might be good for us to wait, to suggest perhaps adoption as an option instead, but he thought I was being too dramatic. He said that crying over the birth of your first son is not a concrete sign of an awful, abusive, possessive husband who views his wife as a vessel and that, frankly, I was being unprofessional and unfair. It was the primary doctor who made the dehumanising remark anyway, not him. Then I stopped and thought, did the doctor even say that? Did he say 'We'll fix *it* for *you*?' Did he not say 'for *her*'? Or perhaps, 'We'll fix *her* for you?' And why did the stirrups bother me so much when I knew they were necessary equipment?

I couldn't logically justify it so I didn't attempt to, but after that moment I knew that I felt separate from the other professionals I worked with. I didn't voice this sense of separateness because I knew that it would come across as arrogance, and who knows? Perhaps it was. After all, I wasn't the only woman in the medical field, not by any stretch.

But I still wasn't having kids. That was for certain.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Victim

I want to stop myself from drifting off because when I do the nightmares come. It's hard, though. At the moment I'm so tired I can sleep slumped up against the wall, even standing. I won't realise I'm drifting off until I'm reminded with a jerk, my mind always a second too slow to catch up with my body. My hand will slip from under my chin and it'll seem like a ten foot drop. With a sudden thrill, I'll feel my head slap down on the concrete floor. My eyes will flick open, heart racing, and I'll suddenly be conscious that I'm back in this awful reality. This time, it was the 'ding' of the lift that woke me.

'Alright then boys and girls,' The Nurse shouted, rolling a dead body on a gurney towards the drawers. Part of living in a morgue was accepting, and at times embracing, regular cadavers as a part of your day. 'Or should I say girl and... yeah.' She threw a book at Patch who was forced to sit, his new legs too weak to support him yet. He looked so stupid with those shapely calves. The thigh-gap accentuated their weakness (and of that I used to be so proud!). Even worse, the left leg tailored off into a useless, cauterised stump. Our little foot problem still hadn't been resolved.

‘What are we having today then, ey?’ I asked The Nurse.

‘Fresh meat!’ With a flourish she ripped back the bedsheet. ‘Ta-da!’

I crawled onto my knees then staggered up to my feet. These legs were heavy and took some getting used to, but by feeling my way along the wall and clenching in my ab-muscles, I managed to stay upright.

‘Let’s see then,’ I said. ‘Ah! An old lady.’

‘Mrs Parker, eighty-six years young. She were a right ol’ tart, but I were fond of her. Reminded me a bit of my Nan.’

‘How’d she go?’

‘Heart attack’s what’s on the charts, but really it were just her time, you know. She’d been here ages. Had a fall, then she caught an infection while she were here, then we kept her in because of blood pressure until one morning she didn’t wake up. You know how it goes when yer body decides to pack itself in.’

‘She’s gross,’ I said. The Nurse tutted at me, but it was true. She was.

‘Apparently, she were a stunner back in the day. Kept flirting with The Chief if she saw him knocking about, asking me to put a good word in. Nah, I think she’s pretty,’ The Nurse looked contemplative for maybe half a second. ‘Still, no time like the present. Who wants what?’

I laughed.

‘I don’t want any old lady bits, ta. I want Patch. You hear that, Patch?’ I called over to him. He didn’t lift his head but I could tell from the flicker of his eyes that he’d heard me. ‘I want your body, baby.’ I sang at him.

He clenched his eyes shut.

‘Oh, leave him alone. How about you, Patchy boy? Do you fancy her foot? Better than nothing, ey?’

He managed to groan out an answer.

‘Alright then, suit yourself.’ The Nurse rolled her eyes. I smiled. If I’d learned one thing about The Nurse, it was that she hated self-pity. I’d been on the tail end of that eye-roll plenty of times.

‘Right, guess I’ve got my pick of the lot then!’ she continued with a clap of her hands.

‘Why, what are you removing?’ I asked, half sarcastically.

‘Nothing as of yet, but it never hurts to get yourself a little extra. She’s nice tits for an ol’ girl.’

The nurse cupped one in her hand. I wanted to slap it off, but stopped myself. The woman was dead and this wasn’t her body anymore. It hardly mattered.

‘Good weight to them. Thinking with The Chief, he can manage all sorts, yeah? I could get real breasts instead of silicone. I’ve been meaning to go a little *au natural* with my breasts, less plastic, more...’ she paused, trying to think of the word.

‘Corpse?’ I asked.

‘Well, I were trying to go for summat that rhymed, but sure. Give ‘em a more human shape.’

‘You can have mine if you want,’ I said, sliding carefully down the wall to take a seat. I couldn’t stand too long on these new legs without getting tired.

‘No thanks,’ she laughed. ‘No offence, love, but they’re a bit small and perky for my tastes. I want ‘em big and bouncing, you know? The kind of breasts that might intimidate a lesser man.’

No offence she’d said. I laughed. As if insulting my body would offend me now. Given the choice, I’d have sandpapered it all away, layer by layer, until I reached bone.

‘You’d rather an OAP’s then?’

The Nurse tilted her head to the side and considered.

‘Fair point,’ she eventually conceded, twirling a strand of purple hair between her fingers. ‘I’ll wait for summat younger. I have a tendency to rush these things.’

We watched her as she jimmied the trolley, moving the heavy body onto a bag and zipping it up. This was usually a job for two people, but since she was the only one with morgue access, she ended up doing it all herself. With difficulty, she managed to slide old Mrs Parker into one of the freezer drawers.

‘Thanks for the help you two,’ she added.

‘We’re recovering from surgery!’ I looked over at Patch for support, but he was still slumped over, his eyes clenched shut, pretending to sleep. Probably telling himself one of his stupid stories. He gripped his new book tightly in his left hand as though scared I’d try to take it from him. The Nurse had brought us lights and reading material, and he still acted like he was a prisoner in this place. Well, I suppose prisoners get lights and books too. Not that I read. I had all the entertainment I needed watching our bodies change day by day.

I hadn’t really noticed before, but The Nurse was looking different too. Her breasts were huge from the augmentation and her lips and cheeks had blown up like a bouncy castle. She stood weirdly, sort of tottery and strained. I knew that she was yanking at her corset

piercings with ribbon, tighter and tighter each day, as though it would actually make her thinner. Now she wanted another breast implant? To make her look more *natural*? I'd never seen anything less natural in my life. For a second, I felt a stab of jealousy at the fact we were both on this journey of reinvention, and yet she seemed to be transitioning much faster, without even intending to be grotesque. From the shoulders up, I still looked like a normal girl, albeit a little dirty. But then I glanced down at my legs, huge and bloated, still holding onto the stink of rotting flesh and I remembered all the reasons I had to be happy. It didn't have to be a race. I could take my time with this one. These were legs built for a marathon.

'Right, I'm gonna love you and leave you,' The Nurse called out cheerfully. 'I'll see you next time someone pops their clogs, I imagine.'

'Can't wait!' I called back, only half-joking. She disappeared behind the sliding doors and I heard the judder and pull of her ascension back into the normal world.

I moved myself into the most uncomfortable position possible to ensure I wouldn't fall asleep.

Chapter Forty

The Nurse

I should never have bloody got him *Catcher in the Rye*. Well, I didn't know, did I? It's not like I ever read, not since school. How should I know that Holden was a whiny little sod?

I'm working through this list online: '100 Books to Read Before you're 20.' I reckon Patch is probably in his teens emotionally. He's definitely passed the cute stage. I remember when I thought he were adorable, especially if I caught him with The Doc, lying on his belly with legs in the air, chin resting in his hands while she read him fairy stories. Bless. That were when I started calling him Patch officially because he seemed like a little pet and I couldn't keep calling him 'The Monster' or, even worse, 'Creature A'. We used to have a little Jack Russell called Patch when I were little, but he got killed by a postman's van. Terrible luck on roads, my family.

Patch isn't cute now and he won't stop moping. I know he doesn't have it easy, like, but bloody hell, I'm doing my best here! I got the lights back on for them, and some blankets.

I'll ask the library lady for something a bit cheerier next time, although it might depress him to know what he's missing out on. *The Great Gatsby* had that effect for a while, he kept asking if he could have a party for his birthday. I were like, mate, you weren't born, what do you wanna celebrate exactly?

I checked what's next on the list after *Catcher* and it's *Carrie*. That might do the trick. Ruby has this bit she sometimes does on Halloween where she pours a bucket of blood on herself, so I have a certain fondness for that story. Anyway, a decent horror always serves to give idiots a sense of perspective.

Chapter Forty-One

The Chief

5'11" now. Cindy was getting taller as the torso was coming together. She moved around her setting more comfortably. I was conscious that as I continued to replace more and more of Cindy, it'd be difficult for her to establish that mobility again. Her skin was growing paler from the lack of sunlight. She looked jaundiced. I prescribed Vitamin D shots, but they didn't seem to be helping. Cindy Reynolds, despite her age, was not the picture of good health. I worried about the cracking scabs around her mouth, the pimples rising defiantly around her chin.

Her eyes were manic. I'd seen those eyes in the many who rely on delusion to get through the day. You see it in the insomniac when they begin hallucinating, and Cindy was already laughing at things we couldn't see. It would have been disconcerting, but I couldn't help but think she deliberately *wanted* to disconcert everyone. Her oddities seemed far from genuine.

Cindy didn't want to sleep. She wanted me to take the nightmares away, but didn't want powerful sedatives or hypnosis or any of the other, conventional treatments that may

ease someone into a peaceful night's sleep. The only thing she'd settle for was a permanent wakefulness that went beyond what any human had survived before.

'I never wanna sleep again,' she told me in the mortuary, shaking her head emphatically. She was whispering as though she didn't want anyone else to hear, glancing in the corners of the room where only shadows lurked. My monster snorted from the other side of the room.

'You practically don't anyway, you phoney. I hardly ever see you sleep.'

'Yeah and that's the way it's gonna stay so shut up!' Cindy shouted back. Spit flew from her mouth in careless droplets. Hypersalivation. She must be feeling anxious. There was something animal about her, which was of course contrived. Anyone as controlling as Cindy wouldn't allow an affectation to take hold of her unawares, although the muscles around her mouth were twitching more these days.

My monster turned its face away. Cindy smiled at me. She wasn't brushing her teeth. They were yellowing; her breath was unpleasant. With her torso near completion, she cut quite the figure of intimidation and I watched my monster muttering to itself in what must've been fear. Disregarding its oversized head, there was a striking and horrible resemblance to a little girl. It sucked its thumb for comfort, began muttering to itself in a small, cheerful voice.

'Ignore Patch, she's telling stories,' Cindy explained to me, rolling her eyes. 'Like that's going to help anything.'

'Cindy, I'm confused about you want from me. I can offer you medication to keep you awake, although I don't think that would be healthy. Even if I did, you'd crash eventually.'

‘The aim is to always be ready,’ she said. ‘Alert, you know? Conscious. If I could keep going forever without resting that’d be the dream, but if not I’ll settle for being like a cat, you know? Asleep, but not really. Ready to jump at the sound of a pin drop.’

I shook my head.

‘Cindy, you ask me these things of me as though I’m an artist. Like this, like that, put that there, this here... it’s not as simple as that.’

‘Consider yourself a surrealist,’ she said. ‘Who cares if it works, just *try* it. You have a willing participant here, a canvas to work with. Don’t you wanna see what happens? They’ve done sleep studies before. This can be one of the extreme ones.’

‘I’m no psychologist,’ I said, although the thought did appeal to me. There was a lot of interest in sleep deprivation, although most experimentation simple showed that it was detrimental. Still, if it could be accomplished with a willing participant, a permanent wakefulness would allow us to ascend into the realm of the superhuman. How to get there though, I couldn’t be sure, and I was well past the age of being able to stay up all night researching. ‘I want to help you, Cindy. Trust me, I do, but it’s not a case of simply trying and seeing. I don’t even know what to try. You’d so likely die.’

‘I don’t care!’ she said, laughing. ‘I don’t care! Look, how often does this happen? You’ve got a willing body to use for medical science and it’s alive, doctor! It’s alive, look!’ Cindy waved her arms above her head, which I presume was intended to be humorous. ‘Just stick some pins in me and see what fucking works, yeah?’

I was offended by her tone. Cindy clearly didn’t realise how little control she had in this situation. Perhaps that was a good thing.

‘I’m sorry, Cindy. It just isn’t feasible.’

I couldn't continue with her physical examination. Cindy was uncooperative and stubborn in the face of bad news.

Chapter Forty-Two

The Monster

I'm going mad, I'm certain of it; but that certainty assures me that I must still have some sanity, because who wouldn't be insane in my position? I miss sunlight. I miss knowing the time through something other than the meals that come dinging down. I'd give anything for a window. I'm so bored that I'll scold myself for retelling the stories I know in a drab way. I thought that I knew a thousand and one, but I feel like I've already exhausted them all. The Nurse's books only take me a day or so to read now.

Luckily, I'm not as mad as Cindy. I hear her laughing to herself at absolutely nothing. She seems to be ill constantly, coughing and shivering, flushing hot and cold, starting sentences she never finishes. I see her pacing, an intimidatingly large shadow. I feel *disturbed*, but what she's doing is probably a normal reaction to these bleak surroundings. All I know is that it adds further to my discomfort.

She speaks to things that aren't there. I call them her fairies. I like the idea that it's magic instead of mania. One day I broke down. To use an expression I've read: 'it was a long time coming'.

‘You fucking idiot,’ Cindy said, laughing to herself. ‘You fucking, stupid bitch.’

‘Cindy,’ I asked. ‘Are you speaking to me or the fairies?’

She laughed in response, facing one of the walls.

‘You stupid, stupid, fucking, stupid...’

This new behaviour scares me and it’s happening more and more often. Fear quickly turns to panic, and then anger. I understand now why Cindy was so angry with me when she used to wake up from her nightmares. In her particularly hysterical moments, where I think she might hurt me if not herself, tears drip down my cheeks from fear.

‘I hate you,’ I told her. ‘I hate you for doing this to me. I could’ve been fine upstairs with The Doc if it wasn’t for you. I would’ve even given you my foot. Why did you have to take everything?’ Cindy laughed, and I felt angrier still, knowing I was being mocked. ‘I hate you,’ I repeated, feeling it twice as much this time.

‘Oh why, little girl?’ Cindy responded and at first I didn’t think she was speaking to me until she said ‘What’s the point in hating a freak like me?’

‘You took my life!’ I cried out.

‘Well, your life’s not that great, babe! I’ll be a reject. An outcast.’

‘Well, at least you’ll be something.’

She laughed again, her head shaking side to side in the dark, and I wondered if she missed her long hair (it had been shaved for all the operations) and the way she used to flick it away in moments of irritation.

‘I’m not your enemy, you know,’ she laughed. ‘No, no, not at all. I took your life, but now you’ve got mine. Do you know how many people want to be me? To look like me? You’re a lucky, lucky girl.’

At moments like this she seemed almost lucid. I curled up on my side to sleep. It was best to be unconscious when she was in these moods.

‘Please come get me, Doc,’ I whispered to myself.

‘Fuck your Doc! Where is she then? Tell you something about fake mummies, they fuck you up, then leave you.’

Everything was painful. For the first time since my conception, I managed to put my wish for death into words. I wanted to close my eyes and never wake up. I whispered to myself, to God, to The Doc, to any potential celestial being listening, to please, please, just let me die.

Chapter Forty-Three

The Prince

‘Will *you* entertain me with stories of murderous deviancy? Everyone else here is so frightfully dull.’

The lad was clipping his toenails over the edge of his single bed.

‘I keep telling you, I didn’t kill nobody,’ he replied.

‘Ah yes, I forgot. You know, a young guard told me that you hail from Scotland, or thereabouts.’

The boy shrugged.

‘Yeah, so?’

‘So why exactly do you talk like an old cowboy? Do you just like playing pretend?’

My condescending remark garnered the reaction for which I’d both expected and hoped. With gusto, he threw the clippers against the brick wall and turned to me with fire in his eyes.

‘Alright, hot-shot, you wanna know about my first kill?’ he asked.

‘I’d be delighted!’

‘It was some whore who double crossed me. Her and her boyfriend. Kept my hands clean, but they knew it was me. Does that answer your question?’

‘Ah,’ I sighed languorously. ‘A crime of passion. You know, we’ve more in common than you think.’

‘Yeah? Did you fuck all the ladies you killed?’

I waved my hand dismissively.

‘Oh, perhaps a handful of times. But no, I’m ashamed to say my first crime wasn’t even of the human variety.’

‘Are any of your crimes of the human variety?’

‘A wit, you are! I meant only that my first crime was *inflicted* on something inhuman. I’m not especially proud of it.’

I did miss that little walker of mine with her silly, combat boots, her grey trench coat. She had a number of buttons pinned to her backpack and would wander along with her Staffordshire bull terrier, a rotten little thing with one ear and three legs. I recognised her because she always went beyond the gate. There was a garden area open to the public, but you had to pay to enter the grounds. Still, I would catch her illegally stomping among the hydrangeas.

‘It was a dog,’ I said to Pete. ‘But it was the dog of a girl towards whom I had somewhat of a romantic attachment. I suppose we have that in common.’

‘Why’d you kill her pet?’

‘Well,’ I reflected, ‘I’d wanted to hurt her, I suppose.’

Rejection. That’s what it boils down to. They tell us everywhere to act like a gentleman. If one is well-mannered and charming, the girls will flock. It helps to be rich. Good looks are desired, but never essential, at least not for men of my social stratum. I thought it would be a given that when I reached a certain age I would have my pick of the bunch. What little girl doesn’t want to be a lady?

‘She didn’t like me as much as I’d thought she would. In fact, to a large extent she detested me,’ I said, chuckling.

‘How old were you?’.

‘Oh, it’s tough to remember. Fourteen or fifteen, I suspect. The age where things like this are bound to happen.’

I had waited while she was out walking. When she cut across her usual path, I was seated calmly on the fountain wall, ready to intercept her.

‘Excuse me, do you know this is private property?’

She glared at me with venom. I knew the back and forth of romance well enough to understand that ours would be of the will-they-won’t-they variety.

‘So?’ she answered back.

‘Well, as the proprietor of this estate I’d happily give you permission to use it provided I can partake in your company?’

‘No ta,’ she’d said. ‘I don’t need permission. There shouldn’t be such a thing as private property, anyway. It’s disgusting they’ve got that huge house for themselves. Parasites.’ She sniffed.

‘That’s an interesting opinion. And what are you doing on the grounds you find so despicable?’

‘Walking my dog, obviously.’

‘And then?’

‘I’m going home.’

‘Ah! So, you too have a home? And yet you judge mine so callously.’

I glimpsed something in her expression which may have been admiration.

‘So, you’re the lord that lives here?’

‘The one and only.’ There was a pause where I imagined she was wondering how to react. I could see that she was conscious of the power dynamic occurring between us. I could have her arrested for trespassing if I so chose. Or I could turn away and promise never to speak of it again. This may have been the first moment in my life in which I was conscious that I could hurt her, really hurt her, and there would be few, if any, consequences. There wouldn’t be very much she could do having snuck onto the grounds and, much like her crippled dog, she’d be lacking a leg to stand on if she tried to accuse me of anything. I smiled at her. ‘I won’t say anything to anyone provided that you allow me the pleasure of your company while we walk this mangy animal.’

‘His name’s Bruiser,’ she said, quietly. Most charming.

We walked, her combat boots stamping across the full extent of the land until we'd reached the gate leading onto the pedestrian road. During that time I regaled her with my charm.

'How did you expect you'd get through this gate without my assistance?' I asked her.

'The same way I got in. There's a hole you can duck under by the hedgerow.'

I laughed.

'And ruin your...' I wanted to say attire, but it didn't seem appropriate for the trench coat and ripped jeans, 'clothes? I should think not. Here.' With a flourish, I revealed the set of keys. After some time fiddling while she insisted she really didn't mind crawling through the dirt, I found the correct one and managed to shove the heavy gate wide open.

'Thanks,' she said, in a way that sounded rude, although it was technically polite. As a hopeless romantic, I refused to be deterred.

'Feel free to walk through our gardens whenever you like. The rules have been lifted for you especially.'

For weeks I didn't see her. I pined by the window pane, desperate to witness just a flash of her messy, bleached hair. I wanted to hear her dog bark, see it hobble across the grounds, to hear the whistle which signified that she was near. No such luck. Poems were written in her absence, songs felt more brutal in their melodies, the world seemed to collapse in on me as I wondered; could it perhaps have been a dream? Was she a fallen angel sent to tease me into subservience? I began to lose faith that she would ever return, but one day, she did.

I rushed down to see her, barely stopping to put on shoes. The ones to hand ended up being far too neat for a stomp across the grounds, but what did it matter? I rushed across the gravel to the fountain and managed to call out to her.

‘Hello!’ I shouted. ‘It’s me!’

She turned around and raised her hand.

‘Oh. Hi.’

For a while we walked together. I gathered a little about her from her monosyllabic responses and filled any uncomfortable silence. I promised that one day she would sit at the table to eat with us, a feast cooked especially for her. At the gate, I flourished the key again.

‘No, really, please,’ she said.

‘You’re far too modest for your own good. You won’t be able to crawl through mud if you’re to be a lady.’

She winced.

‘Listen...’

That was the moment it all clicked together for me. I was suddenly aware that what I’d seen as loveable teasing was legitimate disdain. Worse, that disdain had turned to pity. Had I hit her when I’d met her, or called security to drag her away, she would have at least hated me, perhaps even feared me, but inexperienced as I was to the intricacies of feminine psychology I had no way of knowing that my charm had lulled her into a false sense of superiority. She didn’t hate me or fear me, but then she certainly didn’t love me either. It was irritation. Second-hand embarrassment. The woman wanted to be left alone.

Ah. What was a young Prince to do? Every instinct of mine was telling me to raise hell, to let the rage that was bubbling beneath my skin erupt like molten lava and burn her to

the bone. Had this happened a few years prior, that would've been my response.

Unfortunately for this young trouble-maker, she had caught me just as the cusp of maturity.

I'd learnt that revenge was more exacting when served cold.

I continued to watch her and Bruiser from my window. The poor dog didn't go too far, but he would, like any other dog, disappear from view at times to mark his territory on our sculptures, or to chase the tennis ball she'd flung. With the trees and hedges to veil the view, it was easy enough to snatch him.

I wasn't there when she found Bruiser impaled on the spikes of the back gate. There was never even a report filed, or if there was it never reached me. Perhaps her penchant for anarchy may have helped in this regard.

'So, I suppose that's how it started,' I told Pete.

He shook his head in disbelief.

'You're a pretty fucked-up guy, you know that?'

I rolled my eyes.

'You're hardly one to talk.'

Chapter Forty-Four

The Victim

I suppose I can't blame Patch for daydreaming. It helps if you don't want to think about what's happening. We're stuck down here with nothing to do and will be indefinitely until... when? How exactly are we expecting to get out of here? Will we be released into the wild to roam free like stray cats until we come across an angry mob like Patch did the first time round? Bless him. He says he doesn't remember, but I see him shrink away when The Nurse plays with her lighter. Will The Chief do a big reveal and present us on a stage as if we're cars in an American mall? *'Ladies and Gentleman, behold the new model, these utter monstrosities.'* I picture pounding 80's music, both of us clad in one-piece swimming costumes, tight around the crotch.

'What are you laughing at?' Patch asked nervously. His voice is a lot higher and quieter these days, far less guttural than it used to be. I think, through fear, he's picking up softness.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I'm just thinking about when we leave here, how weird it's going to be.'

Just as Patch's voice was becoming higher, mine was rougher. I don't know why exactly. It was just a bit stupid to be reaching nearly 6'5 and full of scars, talking in an itty-bitsy little girl's voice.

'And that's funny, it is?' That should've sounded sarcastic, but it wasn't. Patch still wasn't sure how emotions were meant to work. I guess he'd not had a shining example from the little triad of freaks he'd interacted with thus far in his adult life.

'A bit! I just can't picture it,' I shrugged. 'It'll be so odd.'

'What's the first thing you're going to do?' Patch smiled, but before I could answer he was already going off on one. 'I'm going to see The Doc and give her a hug and tell her I'm safe. Then, since I can talk and I'm not so big anymore, I'll write a book on why you shouldn't be scared of monsters. Then the world will be different and I'll be able to live in it happily. Maybe with The Doc. If she's still alive.'

I rolled my eyes in the dark.

'The Doc, again. She's not coming back for you, Patch. You know that.'

He stayed quiet, I guessed in protest.

'Anyway, I think you're gonna be disappointed when you get out there, babes. Everyone already thinks they're nice and they say beauty doesn't matter, but they're not and it does, so get ready.'

'I am getting ready,' Patch said, quietly, as if he only half-wanted me to hear. 'I'm getting beautiful, aren't I? And learning to talk and present myself. I don't think I'll be perfect, but it's definitely an improvement from where I was at first.'

It hurt that Patch referred to himself as beautiful while wearing my old skin. I don't know why. Maybe it was the lack of sleep playing with my emotions. I'd started with this

stupid, pointless pining, developing lumps in my throat that I couldn't swallow. I didn't regret what I was doing, but uncertainty swept in in waves. Sometimes I'd realise where I was and think, Jesus Christ, what the fuck am I doing? I'd remember my family sitting at home, thinking I was going through some private treatment and needed space. I'd been so relieved when I first thought about not seeing them, but then sometimes I'd remember my mum and find myself hysterically sobbing.

She was pretty when she died. Everyone said I looked a lot like her and I'd always pretend I didn't see it, but it was obvious. I was a dead-ringer: the same blue eyes, same shaped lips, same blonde hair in gentle waves. Even our figure was identical. There was a picture on holiday somewhere, standing in front of a bridge, grinning at the camera. I could've been swapped out for her and no one would have noticed.

She'd been a model at one time, when she was in her early teens. The agency insisted that her breasts were too large and she'd need a reduction if she wanted to continue working for them, which was pretty rich considering *they'd* scouted *her*. Apparently she considered it. The money was good and there was the option of fame. She told her friends she'd be going down to a sensible B-Cup, but the word got around.

The boys at her school organised a vigil for my mum's tits. She'd scoffed at the stupid, hormonal boys, but something about my dad's presence had caught her eye and they ended up dating. She decided against the breast reduction op, and he was thrilled. My dad always told me that story as though it was funny and romantic. As a kid, I'd thought it *was* funny and romantic. Now I was reducing everything, slicing my chest right off, and I was worried that if she knew, she'd be ashamed. She'd accepted herself as too imperfect for modelling and been happy, I think. Was I happy?

She died a few days after giving birth to me. There were complications with blood-loss or haemorrhaging, I don't know, something gross and painful anyway. It's so weird to think that this could happen in our day and age and not in a Victorian work-house, but I guess birth is pretty timeless in its brutality. She didn't have much support. Pregnant teen and all. There's something dirty about her memory that I can't really name.

Anyone else can talk about their mum. She was an actress, a waitress, a dancer, whatever. Even Patch has The Doc in a twisted kind of way. My mum was a child, then a nearly-model, then a corpse. She didn't even have the time to be a mum, just a carrier. The only shoes I had to fill were to be pretty and amiable, and I couldn't even get that right in the end.

I remember when I was thirteen or so and part of the gymnastics team. Cheerleading wasn't really a thing, we'd only seen it on American TV shows, but we still managed to create the bitchy, sorority girl thing where we felt we were in some kind of cute, exclusive club. I was in my leotard practising in front of the telly, swirling my hips round like a coffee grinder, shimmying my chest before the handspring into a bridge. I always had to rearrange the furniture which drove my step-mum mad. I hadn't realised my dad was standing there until I caught a glimpse of him from my upside-down position.

'Oh, I'll move it back,' I'd said, guiltily.

'Don't worry love, I don't mind,' he smiled at me. 'God, you're really filling out now,' he shook his head. 'So much like your mother.'

At the time I'd been grateful for any comparison to the beautiful woman in the photo albums, taken off the walls in favour of the chubby faces of Cherry and Cilla as toddlers. I grinned at him and went back to practising the routine until after a while, I saw him slink away from the door. Presumably he'd gotten bored of watching. As soon as he stopped

looking, I stopped practising. I pushed the sofas back to where they were meant to be. I felt weird when I was in the shower later, even though I loved to be called pretty and I'd secretly been thrilled to watch my figure 'filling out'. I think I started dieting after that, though. I didn't want to fill out anymore.

'What are you going to do, anyway?' Patch asked, bringing me back to reality.

'What?'

'When we get out of here, I mean.'

'Oh, me?' I said. 'I'm going to kill The Prince now that I'm strong enough.' I laughed a little, hoping that he'd join in but he just appeared confused again.

'Is that a good idea? You'll get out of here and go straight to prison. Why would anyone want that?'

I shrugged.

'Who's to say I'm going to get caught?'

Chapter Forty-Five

The Chief

It's difficult to connect with your family when your earliest memories consist of them crying. Lying stiff in the iron lung, I couldn't turn to examine where the sobs came from, but I knew it was my mother. It would be easier to hate her if she was cruel or abusive. Had she forced me to don dresses and act as a living doll, or else whipped me with a leather belt across my rear-end, I might have been forgiven for missing her funeral. At times I've considered the possibility that I'm a psychopath, but then I think my concern surrounding this demonstrates my innocence. Besides, I'm not half as charismatic. My response to my mother's death wasn't a result of existential indifference or even of brutish joy, but a mild repulsion towards her that I've never been able to shake.

She was a good mother. At least, she did her best. In those days everyone was slapped, but with our mother it was soft and rare. She spoke quietly to us when she was angry, never shouting, though I knew the depths to which her voice could travel having been subjected to her piteous wails. She did well to stretch ingredients so that meals lasted, and always gave herself the smallest portions. I remember my mother being bird-like in her frailty. When she hugged us, I felt the knobbles on her spine which on a pet might suggest it

was time to go to sleep. The thought of her smiling eyes searching my face as she held my cheeks inspired not warmth, but nausea. I shudder when I think of her.

It's jarring for children to see their parents as weak, and there's an awful lot of weakness within death. I didn't want to be there, watching her coffin descend into the incinerator. My worst fear was that of an open casket. We would all have been expected to say a few words. I don't think it's callous to avoid doing things you know will be unbearable. More than most, I'm conscious that life is short and hideously unpredictable. Why should I waste time doing things purely on the basis of decorum? Well, I suppose very few people will buy into that argument. My siblings certainly didn't.

I am now twenty years older than my mother was when she passed away. Despite her going what many would call 'too soon', she was already an old lady when I saw her last. She still applied her lipstick and powder, making her ugly and clownish, especially as she stayed grinning ear-to-ear from the moment she answered the door. There was no particular occasion for my visit, but after two years and a handful of five minute phone-calls, the guilt had begun to weigh on me, so I'd sat awkwardly in her front room, sipping tea that was far too milky and sweet, the pale brown colour of envelopes. My mother refused to take her watery eyes off me, smiling as though this was an intense, emotional moment despite the overwhelming mundanity. I calculated when would be an acceptable time to leave. The television was on but muted, so the flickering pictures managed to be both dull and distracting.

'You're looking very well,' she said. I smiled with closed lips, knowing that I couldn't return the compliment. 'Very handsome,' she continued. 'I suppose the girls are all over you. Tall, handsome doctor.' She laughed.

I hated this kind of sycophantic condescension and found myself immediately on edge.

‘You’ll have to bring a girlfriend next time,’ my mother added, smiling. ‘Or a friend, you know. Colleague. Whoever you like.’

I left after thirty minutes (I’d spent longer on the journey) feeling relieved and guilty all at once, but conscious that if I didn’t leave soon I would likely lose my temper without understanding why. She hugged me too tightly as I left. Her eyes drilled into mine as she held me at arm’s length, surveying every atom of my face. I could tell that she wanted to cry. This made me want to hurt her.

‘I’m so very, very proud of you,’ she’d said.

That was the last time I could stand to see her.

Getting ready in the morning, I try not to spend too much time in front of the mirror. What I used to find comforting is now unnerving. My eyes water from sagging eyelids. My hair is completely white. I stoop. I wonder if I’d chosen to have a family, would I have inflicted on them that same torture my mother inflicted on me? While I’m grateful not to have done so, I’m aware that all my genes are now locked within me, and soon I’ll be sliding into that oven door before a very empty congregation. It cheers me to recollect Cindy. What I feel for my experiments is not quite paternal, but it’s something.

In our check-up, I surveyed her face. I examined her healing stitches, the skin grafts pulled tight, her slowly closing, exhausted eyes. While I didn’t say it, I wished to, and I muttered it internally: *I am so very, very proud of you.*

Chapter Forty-Six

The Nurse

‘Now, it’s not that I don’t trust The Chief...’ I started, lying on Rube’s unmade bed with scarlet sheets, the TV on mute while a record played.

‘No, God forbid if you don’t trust Ol’ Man Slice&Dice.’ Rubes had started to get dead freaked by The Chief and all the surgery, especially since I’d started getting treatment myself. It were a bit intense if you wasn’t in the profession, so I were toning it down, like, only telling her the bare minimum. She knows there’s surgery, but she doesn’t know we’re doing it in the morgue. She knows that Patch’s case is helping Cindy, but she doesn’t know they’re swapping bodies outright. Harmless white lies really, like how you always round down when your mam asks how much your tattoos cost.

I think it were getting stuff done myself what worried her. She picked me up from the hospital when I had my tits done, looked after me in recovery. For them three weeks off, she’d bring me back burgers, which I couldn’t really eat, and I saw her getting dead worried. She still weren’t over it.

‘He is a qualified professional, ya know?’ I said.

‘Babes, he’s about a billion years old and you’re letting him cut you open. You’ve done your tits now and your at-home filler, why not chill for a bit?’

‘This is nowt,’ I said. ‘You should see what he’s doing with Cindy.’

‘With her foot?’

‘Yeah,’ I said fast, ‘with her foot.’

Bit ironic, but the foot were the only thing we hadn’t touched yet. Without a model to work off of, it were the hardest. Still, she were looking incredible. The legs and arms were fixed so she were tall and long like Patch. Her torso were swapped over now, her stomach toned like a kick boxer, though she wanted more swell, more bulk on her bones. Weird, like, but how she wanted to look. A few more times under the knife, a little more practice, it would be practically unrecognisable that the limbs were reconstructed. Her face were still the same though. That were still ol’ Cindy.

‘You ever seen the first face transplant?’ I asked Rubes.

‘Nah.’

I got my phone out to google it. Rubes gagged. Even I had to admit it looked like dog’s dinner. Now they’re improving the procedure day-by-day. I showed her some more recent ones.

‘A few years back, I treated a woman whose face had been ripped off by a Doberman Pinscher. At first she couldn’t do anything. We didn’t even know if she’d make it. Now she eats, talks, smiles, gets on with her life,’ I said.

‘Wow.’

‘Don’t get me wrong, like, if you stare too long you can tell something’s up, and bless her, it hurts a hell of a lot, but she manages. And it’s not like she’s tough as old boots or owt. She cried like a baby at first, it were well annoying.’

Ruby laughed in a hearty explosion that let me know I’d said something funny by accident.

‘Would you ever wanna be a surgeon yourself? You know loads about it.’

‘Nah,’ I said too quickly, screwing my face up so she wouldn’t see how much I liked the idea. ‘Don’t be daft.’

Truth is, I wouldn’t mind being a surgeon one day, transforming stuff, seeing the end results. There’s something fun in it, like pottery or sculpting. But I couldn’t do it. Not for me. Maybe one day, if I get a brain transplant.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The Monster

Sometimes when I wake up, I imagine it is morning and my various cohorts have just awoken too. My head hangs heavy on my shoulders. If I move, it causes a shooting pain through my neck, so I must lie still, although lying poses its own risks. I'm fearful that I'll be unable to sit up again. I worry for this new spine of mine, curving against the wall I lean against. It's rare I hope for surgeries to come, but this level of discomfort demands change. My muscles scream for relief. The only respite I have is through thinking of others and the richness of their lives, no doubt exaggerated through the filter of my storyteller's soul.

I picture Cindy, strong but abhorrent, gliding her hands over new skin, smiling in satisfaction at the person she has robbed me of, a beautiful mouth upturned atop a pile of weathered, yellow flesh. I see The Chief in the place I believe best befits him; a pristine, plain magnolia bathroom, shaving between his wrinkled jowls, tapping a razor blade against the side of a porcelain sink.

And The Doc. Where do I picture her? Sometimes I see her in a cosy woodland cottage reading by a fireside on an armchair the colour of moss, her brown curls hanging loosely over her shoulders. Sometimes I see her overlooking a salty beach on a cold, grey day, sipping a warm mug of tea and staring wistfully at the waves as light drizzle joins the unforgiving ocean.

This morning (and how can I be certain it is morning?) I imagine her somewhere slightly more grandiose. I see her in a castle, stirring under silk sheets in a four-poster bed. Her eyelashes flicker as she softly blinks her eyes open, an incoming stream of light shining through grand, mediaeval windows. The birds chirp to greet her. Despite the fact I've conjured up this image entirely in my mind, I still manage to frustrate and pain myself with the bitter sensation of longing. Why can't I be there to stroke her hair, to lean over and gently kiss her sleeping lips?

As much as the present feels like nothing short of torture, I still fear for the future. The transition is nearly complete. This body – my body – is entirely Cindy's now. Only the head remains.

I recall a story The Doc once told me of a young boy and a juniper tree. An evil stepmother traps the boy's head in a trunk, killing him instantly. He turns into a bird to sing the tale of his injustice. His bones are recovered from beneath the tree, a millstone kills his mother, and he is reborn afresh. There are many messages that one could garner from this story, but the one that sticks most achingly in my mind is that decapitation kills.

Only our heads remain. If these are exchanged, surely it will kill us both. Will new life be restored? Will a millstone crush The Chief to death? And where's my singing bird to tell the tale? Cindy says that personality is held within the brain. If it is true though, why put us both through so much agony? Isn't it possible that all of this could've been avoided with a

simple brain transplant, which I am certain must be an option or else how could I be here? But no, The Chief didn't plan this far ahead. He is experimenting with us, establishing what fits where and how far he can go. Cindy obliges, and as much as I detest her for this, I also worry for her. Will our heads be replaced, with Cindy's brain re-sewn onto the very body she was attempting to escape? Will I find myself whole and comfortable again? It's impossible to know. All I can imagine is Cindy's horror when she realises that this body of hers is something she can never truly escape from. This *devastates* me. Despite everything she's done to me, I don't want her to be unhappy. There is a shameful part of me that sometimes finds it *funny*.

I am certain that our final exchange will be the most unclean.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The Prince

I'm surprised to admit that when recollecting Bruiser, the poor pup, I did feel a shiver of guilt. I didn't really care for the girl, of course. Her arrogance perfectly conflicted with her pockmarked flesh, her graceful, slim ankles shoved into combat boots in an attempt to dissipate her femininity. She hurt me. All of this justified the revenge I might have taken on *her*. But the dog didn't deserve a thing.

There was a method to my madness. I liked preservation. Immortalisation. I was a Porphyria's lover of sorts, protecting youth and beauty. Who doesn't chip away a few pebbles from the Great Wall of China while visiting, after all? My work could've been considered something similar if people were more open-minded. But the dog was neither cruel nor beautiful. Dogs never want to hurt anyone except in noble acts of protection. Loyal creatures. Man's best friend. Bruiser had squealed and struggled. I resented the scrabbling claws and was grateful that my heartbreaker didn't love a cat. But then I wondered, suppose I hadn't hurt the wretched thing. Suppose I'd let it all be. With all the time in the world to stare at

walls and ceilings, I'd begun to feel, perhaps, some small regret. Could I have been better? Was all this inevitable?

My first kill was Katerina. She could barely speak English and had been passed on to three different civil servants and fifteen politicians before she found her way to me. She hadn't begged. I suppose she thought there was no point in begging since no one would hear her. She'd allowed me to go quite far with my sadism before registering that something was amiss. I think that was the most disappointing part of it, her look of total resignation. She must have known for some time that this was how her life would end. Where was the thrill in that? Anyway, her feet were far too large. I believe The Chief used her long, thick legs.

Then there was May. It was fitting she'd been named for the sweetest month. The orient has always understood the beauty and significance of small and dainty feet, and hers were no exception. A delicate four and a half. Alas, they were *slightly* too wide. I would've loved to see someone bound, but it would have been nigh impossible unless I were inclined to find a geriatric (which I was *not*). The Chief kept her long and swan-like neck, perhaps her arms as well.

There were the others, although after a while they all blurred into one mascara-dripping mess. There was the one my mother had asked after, dressed in the clothes of a cheap prostitute, who led to all that screaming about justice for transgenders. There was the Mediterranean student who smoked rolled-up cigarettes and whose heart proved so invaluable. There was Cindy, of course, the special one. She'd fit.

I dreamt of her often, her pallid cheeks, her victorious smirk. Cindy brought out the best and worst in me. I wondered how my life might have been different if I hadn't abducted her. Would I have continued uncaught? Would I still be free to gaze upon my rose garden in

the early hours of the morning? Or was my capture imminent regardless? Alas, who could say? All I know is that this newfound melancholy comes far too little, far, far too late.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The Victim

I used to think being ugly was the worst thing a girl could be. Rationally, I knew that wasn't true. Girls can be cruel, manipulative, sadistic, intolerant, annoying... but deep-down I always thought I'd rather be each and every one of those things if it meant I wasn't ugly. There's nothing else so apparent at first meeting, so completely repellent and unsurpassable.

I remember the Year 11 prom clearly, and that must mean it meant something to me. Cilla and Cherry hadn't gone. They'd stayed home and declared it was all stupid. Really, they just didn't have enough friends for a table. Even though I was in the year below them, I was invited. The prom king (who else?) had asked me to be his date, and I ended up with a group of eight people. We fitted in two limos. I was in the pink car with the girls, who I barely knew but who were incredibly sweet to me, treating me like their cute, little sister in a way that Cilla and Cherry never had. Even when I couldn't pay the full £50 towards the limo, they were okay with it. *Don't be silly, hon. We had the space.* Cherry and Cilla had warned me that all these girls were bitches.

I was surprised by their kindness initially, but sat in the back of that limo, I could see why they could afford to be so generous. Each girl looked different, but they were all middle-class, middle-achieving, and stunningly beautiful. There was Becky, tall, thin, and mixed-race with straightened hair and high cheekbones. She wore a dark purple dress, sleek and silky. She was sitting next to Siobhan with black hair and wide green eyes in her knee-length, cream bouffant gown, her cleavage bulging over the top. Then there was Priti (Priti by name, pretty by nature) whose dress was made of sparkling indigo sequins, and who had henna trailing up her arms like floral ropes. Priti was widely considered to be the most sought-after girl in the year, and it was rumoured she'd had a relationship with the young, sexy PE teacher. I was in the middle feeling fresh-faced and uncharacteristically shy. They were some of the most popular girls in school. It was no wonder my step-sisters hated them. But they were kind. Kindness is a privilege that comes easier to the beautiful.

It was a mediocre night made better only by the fact that it was supposed to be special. The food was fine, the dancing was fun, the selfies were excessive, and the drinks were spiked. When I got in at around one in the morning, Cilla's bedroom door was wide-open and the lights were still turned on, but no one was in there. I wondered if perhaps I'd underestimated her, and maybe she'd snuck out at midnight to enjoy the festivities, but I heard the trusty sound of whining voices behind Cherry's door which let me know that they were both still up, still engaging in the sisterly bonding I was never a part of. I normally tried to avoid the she-beasts as much as possible, but in my slightly elated (and mildly drunk) state, I listened by the door. The familiar screams and sharp, piano chords told me they were watching some slasher. Cherry said:

'Oh, it's her, I love her! If they ever made a film about my life, I'd want her to play me,' and I put my fist in my mouth to stifle the laughter.

I couldn't even see who she was talking about, but I knew it was delusional. There weren't ugly people in films, at least not ugly women. If they did have an ugly character, it was a beautiful woman in an ugly costume. Producers knew it was better to rely on an audience's suspension of disbelief. Even in horror, the public find it easier to stomach mutilation if it happens to pretty people. It's easier to consume evil than it is to consume ugliness. I tiptoed to my room, glad they hadn't heard my snickering, and collapsed on my bed. The warm, fuzzy memory of a beneath-the-underwear-grope ran through my idiotic, fourteen-year-old mind. God, no wonder they hated me. At that point in my life, I really thought being unfuckable was the worst thing a girl could be.

I remember the first time I saw a woman in a burqa. I was maybe about seven. Our home town wasn't too diverse so it came shocked me to see this shadowy, black ghost waiting patiently for the bus. At the time, I was terrified. She looked scary. When my dad explained it was to do with her religion and that she chose to dress like that, I couldn't see how it was possible. Why would anyone choose to dress like that?

'They say some women find it empowering,' he said, with a bit of a disbelieving scoff. I couldn't see how covering up from head to toe was empowering. Back then I thought covering up was about stripping your identity away.

Now I understand. I wish that my face and body could melt away and they'd never be able to hold me under their gaze. I crave the power to say: 'You don't get to see me. You haven't earned that right. You wanna know me? Speak to me. Look me in the fucking eyes.'

Christ, isn't that the dream? Perhaps a burqa might have saved me a lot of time and Patch a lot of trouble. But, no. Even a burqa isn't contentious enough. I don't want to be blank and neutral. I don't want to demonstrate overt spirituality. I want people to shudder

when they look at me. I want them to be scared to see me and scared to look away. When people look at my face, I want them to know there isn't a God anymore.

Chapter Fifty

The Doc

Working in a hospital with the sick and geriatric leaves you with a distorted sense of your own desirability. I'd seen women with spiralling black hairs covering their backs, stomachs hanging down to their knees, discoloured and seeping sores by their mouths and eyes. You get to the point of understanding that your size 12-14, healthy body, with a slight tum, perhaps, is quite nice actually. By comparison, my body was demonstrably normal.

At the start of our relationship, Raul was rhapsodical about how I looked. He would take my hands in his and make me feel down my own waist.

'Can you feel that? Can you feel your curves? How sensitive and soft you are.'

'Sensitive?' I laughed. I'd never been good at taking compliments.

'Sensual, I mean. Sensual. God.'

Raul had this way of moaning with my ear in his mouth that made me feel weak.

I suppose it boosted my confidence. The day before Valentine's Day in our first year of dating, I popped into Ann Summers for a treat. I talked to the sales lady because I had a

suspicion that I might be wearing the wrong bra size and, lo and behold, I was tight on the back and loose on the cups and I'd need to completely update all my beige, old numbers. I splashed out, bought many matching sets of pants and bras, and a little purple negligee. Raul buckled when he saw me, a melodramatic drop to his knees. He immediately got to work kissing my thighs.

'My angel, my darling, my princess, what on earth did I do to deserve this?'

I giggled.

'Oh stop it, I'm sure you say that to all the girls.'

Raul stopped kissing me and paused in thought.

'I'd like to photograph you, Mary.'

'Oh no,' I laughed, my chest tightening in anxiety. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

'I'm serious,' he said. 'It'd be selfish to keep all this beauty to myself.'

'Well, I'm not sure. I've never done it before.'

'And what a waste,' he moaned as he attempted, and succeeded, in seducing me.

By the end of that exchange I could have promised him the world.

His gallery showing came months later on a rainy October. It was his first in many years, and he'd finally found a space for it. I knew that my picture would be there. He'd told me that I was going to be part of a project that had been years in the making, and I felt a twist in my stomach that was both nerves and excitement. I'd never modelled before, it wasn't my kind of thing, I was always brains over beauty, but when he'd asked to include my picture with such sincerity, insisting that it was some of his best work, I was far too flattered to deny him.

I'd been naïve in assuming I was the only girl he'd photographed. The piece had been accumulated over years and I was only the most recent addition. Under each Polaroid he'd left a concrete noun: 'Vengeance', 'Nubility', 'Comfort'. A word for each fuck. Their bodies were all significantly younger and tauter than mine, with those perfectly flat stomachs and muscular thighs. I couldn't believe I'd worried that my negligee was too revealing. Tiny dots of nipples pointed out on breasts so pert I felt certain they couldn't be real. Jealousy burnt the back of my throat. The noun below my Polaroid was 'Delusion'.

Why did I stay, smiling, clutching that cheap glass of Prosecco while Raul steered critics towards his work with his hand on the smalls of their backs? I was hurt, but worse than that, I was bored. Those events are always so boring, which gave me plenty of time to dwell on how truly, hideously angry I was, and how awful he was to include me in this. Still, I stayed. Even if I was delusional, I could at least play the part of supportive girlfriend. To be honest, I was also scared he'd fuck the critic.

When we got home we rowed. I suppose the wine can't have helped. He insisted the words were placed randomly, that altogether they were meant to represent the complexity of the feminine form. I was wrong in thinking all those girls were younger than me, and he hadn't even noticed the weight discrepancy.

'Can you really be so narrow-minded as to presume I separated my exes into neat little boxes like an advent calendar? How dare you? How little do you think of me? I'm not some raging lothario. I love you. I want to have a baby with you, you know that!'

I suppose the laid-back, bohemian personality I tried to affect with Raul didn't always come easy to me. I was the boring doctor, not the 'artiste'. Doctors see bodies as potential liabilities, not as *complexities of the feminine form*. It wasn't Raul's fault that I felt inadequate. He always complimented my body. It was just the way I felt.

Chapter Fifty-One

The Chief

4'11". Male. 31 kg in weight, supposedly around 50-60 years of age, although to all appearances, a prepubescent child. A few healed scars (some of them clearly from quite severe injuries) but no current ailment besides slight congestion with crusting evident around his nostrils. They called him Peter, but he told me to call him Pete.

No doubt he was a curious specimen, but I felt far too exhausted to delve in. His reflexes were fine, eyesight and hearing both good, blood pressure fine, no problems there. All in all, he appeared to be a healthy child who hadn't been put through life's meat-churner. No crack to the bones, no liver spots or yellow teeth, no acne scars or fat around the ribcage. And yet, he was unsatisfied. I was growing increasingly impatient with the number of perfectly healthy ingrates who demanded my services.

We stood together in the room usually used for surgery, as two guards waited outside observing everything through the window intended for trainee doctors. I didn't take the patient to the morgue, of course. Strangely enough, this was one of my only 'above board'

projects, and I was frustrated by the high levels of security, the incessant form signing, the strict timings to protect our current patients, and, particularly, the complete lack of privacy. Everything I was doing with Pete was eyeballed intensely, and my inability to cut corners frustrated me. I'd been so used to doing as I pleased as efficiently as possible.

'So, what appears to be the problem?' I asked him, although obviously I knew. I'd read about his case when it first appeared in the papers thirty years ago, and had enquired about potentially being of some service to the boy, teasing out whatever condition was stunting his physical development in order to help alleviate some of the (no doubt crushing) dysphoria. In the typical fashion of the medical industry – and with the added headache of our overly-bureaucratic justice system – I was only now hearing that he had been reallocated to my care. Now, of all times. It couldn't have been less convenient. My hands ached with arthritis from my intricate and uncertain work, and my eyeballs throbbed from lack of sleep. I knew if I kept doing this I'd run myself ragged. I may well have told Cindy that if she wished to stop sleeping, she need only practice surgery in the dead of night to appease finicky teenagers and their monstrous playthings.

'Well, doc, you know what's wrong. I'm a little squirt of a thing, can't you see that? Been this way since, I dunno, maybe '68? '69? Don't remember exactly.' He shrugged. I felt a pulse gather in my temples and rubbed them.

'I think if we're dealing with delayed pubertal development it would be sensible to start off with a course of testosterone and see where we go from there.'

'Oh man, that won't help a thing.' He cleared his throat, spat on the floor.

'Please don't do that. This is a hospital.'

'Look, those pills don't work. My body rejects them. I end up bent over double chucking my guts up in the morning. I turned into a waif of a thing last time I tried.'

‘Really?’ I asked, my interest piqued. ‘So, you’ve sought treatment in the past for your condition?’

‘Oh, yes sir, absolutely I have. Not with the prison doctors, though. They won’t approve shit for you medically unless you’ll drop dead without it. Nah, this was self-medication. All that stuff you see online, the shit that sneaks into your junk mail? I got it all snuck in for me. Enhancement pills, testosterone, protein shakes, whatever. If you need it, you can get it, and you wouldn’t believe how many men out there are looking for something to improve their peckers and build up their muscle. There isn’t anything you can’t find online these days. Hell, I’ve even been able to make a bit of money there myself with a camera, and a few hungry perverts,’ he chuckled slightly before stopping. ‘Maybe don’t tell the guards that, though.’

I waved a hand dismissively as I noted down his previous treatments.

‘Doctor/patient confidentiality etc.’ I said. ‘While it’s good to know you’ve made some attempts with online pills in the past, without correct medical records or effective legal treatment I can’t move forward until we’ve at least attempted the conventional methods.’

Pete rolled his eyes in a way I almost recognised, a look impatient and entitled, as though he understood far more than I did and was annoyed I was blocking his way. I was reminded of when women were constantly attempting to get unnecessary pain medication. Placebos used to be my firmest friends.

‘I knew this was gonna be a waste of time.’

‘However,’ I interrupted, ‘there have been some improvements in surgical intervention as of late, and if the script fails...’

‘It’s gonna fail, I’m telling you.’

‘Then I’ll tell *you* that I’ve *personally* been working in the field of cosmetic surgery. Soon there’ll be no limit. We can potentially update the whole body.’

Pete sat up straighter.

‘Oh yeah? What’s that gonna involve?’

‘We can build people up from the outside-in these days, replacing limbs, making you taller, essentially placing your entire personality into a new body.’

‘What, you mean like a brain transplant? Putting my brain in some dead guy?’

‘It’s more like crafting a new body. Brain transplants are still somewhat complex. Mostly we’ve focussed on limbs, some areas of the torso, genitalia, obviously.’

‘So what? I’ll have grown-up parts and the same little pin-head? I mean, I’ll try it but it doesn’t sound like much of a solution to me.’

‘While still novel, there has been some progress in rearranging and changing the shape and size of facial features. Mobility can be limited, but there’s no reason to say we can’t find a way to make your head match your body.’

‘Would I be ugly?’

‘Not necessarily.’

‘Alright, doc. I’ll play ball. I’ll take your pills if you can one day get me that new zombie body, head and all.’

‘Well, that’s not to say that it will be an inevitable success.’ My headache, momentarily lost in that brief moment of excitement, returned. Why did I insist on vocalising every thought I had? ‘But I’m sure I can send some information across to the prison health service if you would like.’

‘Hey, don’t worry about it. You’re the expert. I don’t trust those ol’ prison workers anyway. They spit in the food, you know? Who knows what they’d do if they had the chance to slice me open.’

I nodded and began writing out the necessary prescription.

‘Well, one step at a time. We’ll begin on testosterone. Give it a few months and we’ll see where we go from there. Hopefully, surgery won’t be needed.’

‘Sure it will,’ Pete said, jumping down from the examination table. He only came up to my elbow as he ripped the prescription out of my hand. He smiled at me before leaving. As soon as he was out of the room, I watched them cuff his ankles through the window. The guards towered over poor Pete, both arguably in the region of 6’3” or 4, and I wondered how he managed to stay so calm. They were rough with him. He didn’t seem to mind. Through the shatterproof glass Pete smiled at me. I caught my reflection next to his face. I looked so tired, so haggard and old that I couldn’t bring myself to smile back.

Chapter Fifty-Two

The Nurse

It doesn't always start with hating how you look. Sometimes, it's just a jewel of rebellion. Well, you get bored, don't you, when you always look the same? And we all want to be what our mams and dads hate. So, you get that Monroe piercing because everyone else is getting pierced under the lip and that's boring, and then start to like your lips, actually, when before you always hated your lips, them lips that your best mate (who everyone said were the pretty one) told you was too skinny, them that you fantasised about injecting since you was thirteen, them that had to brush against that smelly, pasty dick... Suddenly they become a new thing. Your thing. Because everyone else hates your lips but you've done something that makes them *yours*.

But fucking hell, then everyone's getting Monroe piercings, aren't they? If it's not them it's the bloody bull-ring, septum piercings (which you wanted well before everyone jumped on bandwagon) and then it's not that shocking that you like your lips anymore. So you think of other stuff you like, stuff that means a lot to you. If no one else likes it, even better. You get it inked onto your hip bone when you're sixteen and nicking your sister's ID

for the night. Suddenly, they're *your* hips. They're not the same hips your ex-boyfriend from Year Ten (total prick, tiny dick) said were too fat. They're not the same hips that your mam side-eyed because they muffin-topped over your jeans and you realised you were fatter than the other girls in your family and you must take after your dad (whoever the fuck he were). They're not the ones yanked up and down in slightly painful, and barely exciting, fuck sessions in bedrooms with football calendars and single beds. They're *your* hips. You chose that heart. You chose that dagger. You drew that design and you sat through the pain, and when you're tracing your thumb over it on a night, lying naked on your bed after getting out the shower, you feel proud of it because this was something you earned. It's not incidental. It's thought-out. It's you.

I suppose that's probably why dickheads in the gym spend so long looking at themselves in the mirrors. Tensing their muscles and that. Kissing biceps. Part of it must be narcissism, but a lot of it must be the self-recognition and pride that comes with earning how you look. Maybe if I'd had a different music taste, I might've been a gym-rat instead of whatever you call *this*. That would've been good. I could've been a size eight. Instead, however obliquely, I like all that dark and mopey shite and before you knew it I had a full sleeve, fake tits, and makeshift corset laced into my skin.

But nowt's genuine, really, is it? You think you've carved out an identity, and then you realise that's bullshit too. Everyone's a dickhead in one way or another. No one's unique, and you get sick of them white blokes with stretched ears, and girls in fishnets showing off self-harm scars decorating their thighs. Can't be arsed with that shite anymore.

I remember being 'propositioned' once when I were doing my nursing degree. He were an old dude with dyed orange hair straightened down to his chin under his black beanie, neck tattoo from an album he probably hated till he found out it were cool, his girlfriend

draped all over him, pupils as wide as her irises, sniffing between her four nose-rings, tattoos and scarification running up anorexic-thin arms.

‘Yeah, I like real girls, not like your plastic, blonde bimbos, you know?’ he told me. His girlfriend nodded along with it. I wondered how into this threesome shite she actually were. I didn’t think much of it when I first heard it, hazy through a layer of gin-goggles, but when I remembered what he said later on, I ordered online lip and cheek fillers. Maybe I’d quite like to be a plastic, blonde bimbo actually. At least I’d float in a ship-wreck.

The Chief’s pissed off that I’ve spent so long off work. Well, he can do one, can’t he? It’s not like he’s got a leg to stand on with what he considers to be a ‘professional’ workload. We both know that at his age he shouldn’t be moonlighting, but there he is every night in the morgue checking on his little protégées. I daren’t bring it up to Rubes, who’d give me the whole ‘I told you so’, but I do worry a bit. He’s looking ten years older now, and he weren’t exactly a spring-chicken to begin with. We’re all a little worse for wear, I suppose.

When you wake up from any kind of surgery the first thing you notice is the pain. I got myself a little blepharoplasty. Tiny little eye cuts on the lids, some fat sucked out, stitched up and sutured. Mad common in East Asia. Everyone wants to look white there, with moony round eyes. Anyway, The Chief had to put me under for that one, which I hate. Given the option, I’d rather stay awake.

I thought back to the chat me and Rubes had before where I’d said that if I could click my fingers and have my procedure done in a flash, I wouldn’t, because going through the pain is what makes it really yours. I didn’t feel like that after my eye operation. I didn’t have any evidence for thinking this, but I felt like The Chief must have been a bit less careful, must have gotten it a little bit wrong. If I weren’t still drugged up, I’d probably have been

screaming instead of moaning. I asked for more morphine. I think I must've got it because I passed out for a bit longer. When I woke up, I immediately needed more.

'I can't give you any more morphine. You'll overdose.'

It was The Chief's voice, but I couldn't see where the voice were coming from so I opened my eyes and I felt thick, heavy tears dripping down my cheeks. When they reached my open lips, I tasted them and felt sick. It weren't tears at all, it were blood. I rolled my head to the side and begged for more morphine, overdose or not, I didn't care. The Chief wouldn't give me any, though. Tight bastard.

Chapter Fifty-Three

The Prince

How strange the winds of change can be! Who would have ever thought that I would find myself paternal? I have to remind myself that the person with whom I reside is *not* a child, but one who has experienced more of life's difficulties than I. Sometimes I watch Pete sleeping, his hands in prayer beneath his soft cheek, and I feel an affection gush within me, grateful to be sharing a cell with a child full of wonder as opposed to a tired, old criminal. The next morning, of course, I'll see him smoking his rolled up cigarettes and spitting out the tobacco strands, giving me some story about the various orifices one can use to smuggle contraband, and the illusion is shattered.

Still, that juxtaposition delights me. There's none of the snivelling or whining that usually accompanies children. A boy of his stature would usually be hanging off a mother's neck, clamouring for affection (thankfully my family never went in for such sentimental nonsense).

I no longer wish to kill him. He holds uses for me. This man-child could be my means of escape.

Twice a week Pete leaves the cell for his medical appointments. That in and of itself isn't terribly interesting. Everyone knows he is a medical anomaly and initially I couldn't have cared less, but one particularly dull luncheon encouraged me to enquire.

'Amuse me again during our tragic imprisonment. Tell me, what happens when you leave this place?'

We sat in the cafeteria shovelling something the consistency and taste of sawdust into our mouths. You would think the bad food might make me angular and more beautiful, a veritable model of my former self, but unfortunately it just meant I was stocking up on sweets from vending machines; I'd grown quite an unattractive paunch. Pete didn't seem fazed by the quality of the food, even scraping his metal spoon against the tray to get the last remaining crumbs. He shrugged.

'I see this doctor dude, he does some examinations, checks my weight and height, blood pressure, all that stuff.' He paused for a while, chewing. 'He said they could build me a new body. Showed me pictures of some dude who'd been built up, said he could do it to me. Big, scary looking dude. Covered in scars and stitches. Massive face, pale and sick and horrible. I could end up like that, he said. Anyway, I'm trying not to get my hopes up.'

The amalgamation of those features was all too familiar to me. I recalled the drive in that transit van, the way the thing had wailed and screamed. I remembered opening the van doors hoping that it would leap out like a wolf and run wild into the forests, but it had sat there scared and confused, and I realised I would have to coax the vile thing out. I banged on the doors with the flat of my hand. It stepped out and began to imitate me, slapping the doors, grinning horribly as though in camaraderie and I ran back to the driver's seat, terrified. I didn't look back as I drove away. I never wanted to see the face again.

'The 'dude' as you say, what function did he serve?'

Pete shrugged again.

‘Function? I dunno. The Chief was just showing body transplants work. I dunno. It’s probably bullshit.’

I paused in my eating, wondering if I’d misheard.

‘This Chief, you say. Watery, blue eyes? Clipped way of speaking?’

‘Yeah, you know him?’

‘Intimately.’ I smiled, plans already forming. ‘You must mention to him that I’m here with you.’

‘Sure, but I mean I’ll reckon he already knows. You were all over the papers, right?’

‘Well, he’s a solitary sort,’ I justified. It had been niggling at me though, why he hadn’t visited. I liked to think he was sensibly scared of incrimination by association but deep down his heart bled for me. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed obvious that The Chief was making visits with Pete for the precise purpose of helping me. It was far too coincidental. I should have trusted that my friend wouldn’t leave me in the lurch. We had a bond, after all, a business arrangement and personal rapport wrapped up in one.

That night I wrote a note on toilet paper with a pen-like instrument used for tattoos.

Friend,

You can’t imagine my joy when I learnt you were in contact with my bunkmate. I’m glad to see your scientific curiosity continues strong. If I were to find some way of accompanying the boy to his appointment then I would be within your reach. Prepare for this inevitability. Your place of employment, I’ve heard, has a reputation for hiding terrible secrets. I’d be privileged to be among them. You are my last surviving hope.

Your partner in crime,

P

I handed this to the boy, wondering about where on earth he'd stuff it until he blew his nose on it and crumpled it in his pocket.

'You're allowed to keep a dirty tissue, dummy.'

Chapter Fifty-Four

The Victim

The Nurse's eyes are black now. She's had them tattooed, along with her lips and eyebrows, and I wonder if they used the same needle for everything. It's not quite as disgusting as her cheeks, which have filled up with hard little nodules, visible up close as separate from her actual flesh. She does all the fillers herself with stuff she gets online.

'I aren't paying fucking Becky with a B-TEC in hair and beauty, why should I? Half my bloody life I spend sticking needles in people, and you reckon I'd make an exception for meself? Fat chance.'

Obviously, I thought that was crazy dumb. I was *aiming* for grotesquery, and I still trusted a qualified surgeon.

When she came in with her eyes done, Patch screamed. At first I wondered where he'd learned to do that since I'd never heard him scream before, but then I remembered how many times he'd seen me do it. The Nurse was handing Patch one of her library finds and I

could only see the back of her head and Patch with his hands clasped over his mouth, shaking like he couldn't believe it. It was all so melodramatic, I laughed.

'Oh dear, what have you gone and done now?' I asked.

But when she turned around, I was taken aback too. We hold so much expression in our eyes, and now there was a horrid void where there should've been a soul. She grinned.

'What do you reckon? Am I weird enough for your freaky little morgue club yet?'

I smiled, felt a flicker of relief. Black eyes or not, she was the same old Nurse.

'Where'd you get that done?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'Same tattoo shop I always go to, where I got my corset piercings. I'm a very loyal customer.'

'Oh. Didn't trust yourself with this one then?' I smirked.

'Did I fuck, are you joking? You know this can make you go blind?'

'What?' Patch asked. He struggled up slowly, using the wall as a support. His legs were shaky still, but little by little he was getting used to them, especially considering that his torso was developing the way he wanted it to. More and more he looked like a scared little girl, like how I used to look, although I swear I never wilted as pathetically as he does, or made my eyes go quite so wide and terror-struck when faced with pain. It was quite nice to watch him since his shape had started coming together. Patch was the archetypal beauty. Whenever he was cautiously wiping his body down with the buckets of hot, soapy water that The Chief insisted on, dabbing himself dry with the scratchy, hospital towels, I felt as though I were watching the opening to a porno. Or maybe not quite porn, that's always far too artificial, but something sexy in that bleak, French way. It was nice. He didn't seem to know

that he should feel embarrassed about me watching him. Instead he was content to strip off, which always made me laugh. Then again, I suppose it wasn't anything I hadn't seen before.

I recognised my old self in him when Patch pulled that horrified and judgemental face at The Nurse, the same face that I, and many other girls I knew, would pull when faced with something untoward. (Ha! How I used to fake vomit when I passed girls with septum piercings and stretched ears on the street! Good Lord, if they could see me now...)

'Go blind?' Patch continued. 'Why would you do that to yourself?'

'Well, first of all I *didn't* go blind, thanks for noticing,' The Nurse said, 'and secondly, my self-expression isn't really your concern.'

Patch shook his head in disbelief.

'And people up there do this often?'

'No, not often,' I interjected. 'It's very weird. Like what I'm doing, it's not normal. Lots of people these days have tattoos and stuff, but doing your eyes and your lips isn't conventional.'

'But it's getting more common,' The Nurse interrupted, annoyed at my summation. 'More and more people are getting it done these days. It's not unheard of.'

'Even though you can go blind?' Patch baulked.

'The world's getting uglier, baby,' I responded. The Nurse rolled her eyes. Or at least, I think she did.

'Well I think it looks great and that's all that matters,' she said. 'Anyway, I've a job to do here. I'm meant to be running you through post-surgery physio. Stand up, you lazy bums. Don't have all day.'

Physio was painful. It managed to combine the shooting pain of broken bones with the dull ache of a bruise. It went on for what felt like hours with a cringing amount of attention paid to my body, although recently The Chief had started paying more attention to Patch's recovery too. I suppose he realised that at some point Patch would have to face the world if they were gonna get away with any of this. They had to prepare him to behave like a human.

Usually after physio we were both too knackered to do anything. Patch would wrap himself up in the sheets with his face to the wall while I would balance on one huge leg trying to stay awake, toppling over on my overly sore muscles. Even if I clattered against all the gurneys and equipment, Patch wouldn't wake. This time, even though he was clearly tired and quite happy to lie down, he stayed facing me. He had that strange concern on his face which usually meant I was in for a world of questions.

'Cindy,' he whispered.

'What?' I replied in my normal tone, switching from right to left foot.

'Do you remember when we were first brought down here? And you didn't have your body or anything? And I didn't even have sheets or lights or anything and we just had to sit for ages in total darkness and we couldn't see a thing?'

'Yeah, course I remember.'

Patch paused for a while.

'That was awful, wasn't it?' he eventually conceded.

I laughed.

'Yeah Patch,' I said. 'It wasn't great. Why?'

‘Well it just got me thinking. The Nurse said she could go blind? Just to make them look like that?’

‘Well I guess it was a risk, yeah.’

He shook his head and ignored me, turning to face the wall, our line of questioning apparently done.

‘Voluntary darkness,’ he whispered. ‘What a world.’

Chapter Fifty-Five

The Prince

There was only one murder I was never charged with. The authorities never connected me to it, and for that I must be grateful. It was my most shameful one to date. Then again he didn't exactly match my usual MO.

I suppose it was all very modern. They say gender is a spectrum these days. I'm sure that harbours some truth, but I couldn't help but feel horrified upon pulling down the underwear and realising his *thing* had still yet to be removed. Beneath his lacy pants there lay genitalia of, shall we say, masculine proportions. How laughable! I was spilling blood by the bucket-load and still concerned myself with a little light sodomy.

He was a youngish fellow, drugged up to his eyeballs, and I got the distinct impression that he wouldn't be missed. These boys that wander round in wigs and frocks are more often than not the bane of their families, and the communities they build for themselves tend to steer clear of authorities. It was actually one of the only times I picked someone up

without having a middle-man to help me. I'm so rarely an opportunist, although Cindy certainly sparked the need to act impulsively, but this boy was too easy to reach out and grab.

I often liked to stop off for a drink after exchanging body parts with The Chief. I could have gone home for a scotch at the manor, but there was something exciting about the sordidness of public houses. I was sipping a cocktail (a Long Island Iced Tea, if memory serves) in the bar's smoking area, directly on the high street, when he approached my line of vision. I was surprised that he was confident walking home alone, not through manor grounds or rural estates which, although certainly proving *not* to be safe in recent events, at least appeared safe to the uneducated eye, but right through the streets, tottering on heels that he could barely walk in, so much had he consumed throughout the night. I watched him drop a cigarette, scramble to pick it up. He replaced it in his mouth the wrong way around as he attempted to light it.

I'd like to say 'I don't know what came over me' although of course I do. I wanted to punish his sheer audacity (presuming he was safe in that get-up? Please!). On top of that, I had the complete conviction that I would get away with it. People like him weren't reported missing, I thought. But alas, it's a brave new world out there. A middle-man might have been able to inform me of that.

I had my fun with him and The Chief got the parts he'd wanted. It wasn't so much that he *objected* to the idea of creating a woman, but I think he had romantic notions of building his creature in his own image. Besides, it really is more sensible to bring to life the stronger and more competent of the sexes. The Chief was grateful for the variety in any case, mismatched though his monster then proved to be.

The news was a surprise. This particular murder caused a barrage of protests. People held signs outside of Parliament, that same aesthetic of cheap hair-dye, clumpy boots and

baggy jackets that reminded me of my first love. Suddenly, they had these drag-queens on the news performing formal interviews, campaigning against the ongoing dangers to *their* community in the wake of the ‘public kidnapping of transgender woman, presumed dead.’ It turns out the parents were *incredibly* supportive of their son’s ‘journey’ and appeared on the news in tears hoping that ‘no matter what else happens, her suffering wasn’t in vain.’ The CCTV footage caused a shiver down my spine (ironic considering his was the only death I wasn’t convicted of in the trial). Thankfully, it was nothing but grains and you couldn’t see a thing. People have televisions these days as wide as courtrooms with perfect resolution and yet still, street cameras may as well be children’s drawings. All the same, you could see me quite forcefully dragging him away by the elbow and nobody doing a thing to stop it.

It was jarring. In my mind’s eye I was ‘firm yet persistent’, but in the video I looked brutish, yanking the skinny boy along with a tough grip until we disappeared from view. I’d only parked around the corner from the bar. Later, that van was driven by a staff member to my favourite scrap yard, where I presume it still rots to this day. He’d protested loudly, ‘let go of me, let go!’ but I assumed the pedestrians thought we were a bickering pair of queers instead of anything out of the ordinary. Of course, I played along with this, ‘Darling, you’re making a scene,’ and very soon he was in the back of the van, crying silently with his excessive eye make-up running down his face. He perched in the back of the van. ‘Please,’ he said, ‘I just want to go home.’

‘Where we’re going is much more exciting,’ I’d responded.

In a way I do feel guilty that his was the only death left unsolved. The whole thing is still written off as a mystery, which I suppose is in some way beneficial as he’s become something of a symbol for that community. It’s definitely something I would recommend trying at least once, even just to declare that it’s as degenerate as was to be expected. I can’t say I hated it. In fact, in many ways it was incredibly similar to the experience of, say, Cindy

(my girl, I miss her dearly). Ah well. So it goes. Another perversion of mine to add to the ever-increasing list.

Chapter Fifty-Six

The Nurse

I've said before I don't get all that weird fetish stuff, and I don't, but at the same time if you wanna do summat to your own body, you should be able to. Lopping off a leg, splitting your dick in two, whatever it is, it's no one else's business but your own. I mean, fuck, the stuff they say is disturbed over here is the same stuff they do to kids in foreign countries for their bloody sweet sixteenth.

My mate Stace got her baby's ears pierced. Poor thing cried the house down. I were there at the time, we was only seventeen. Stace said she wanted the silver ones because, in her words, they was 'more classy'. Poor bairn. It weren't too long after her vaccinations and she must've wondered why everyone kept stabbing her all time. A lot of pricks in her short, little life.

And who knows if she'll want bloody earrings? For me, that's fucked. I'd rather fifteen psychos chop their bits off than one baby gets hurt to look pretty before they even know what pretty means.

The people who get in touch with me on Only Fans are different from the lads who used to flirt with me before. I mean, I got a lot of attention then too, what with the nurse's uniform and all, but now it's mental. I've gotta finish this shit with The Chief first, I owe it to Cindy and Patch more than anything, and it's not like he can just advertise for a new assistant, but after that I might quit this job and go into dominatrix shit. It fits the whole aesthetic I got going on anyway. Tits take up half my bodyweight now, lips and cheeks to match, black eyes, embedded corsetry, all them snakes tattooed up my legs like some Medusa monster shit. For whatever reason, weirdos fucking love it. A guy offered me five grand the other day to stick on a pair of fancy heels and stand on his dick. I mean five grand and the chance to inflict pain on a pervert? I weren't exactly gonna turn that down, were I?

He actually weren't as weird as I thought he'd be. He were real normal looking, a bit lanky: big Adam's apple, gappy teeth, you know, but normal, basically. I don't really see it as being a prozzie, because it's not like I fucked him. I don't know, though. It's weird to see anyone's eyes roll back like that when you're not getting off too. After a while, you start to feel guilty. Like, I were all for it at first, but you actually *hear* it crunch, and he's whimpering and begging me to stop so I do, but then he's annoyed.

'I don't actually want you to stop. If I did, I'd use the safe word.'

I guess to be into that you gotta go against all your instincts. I mean, I'm all for it when I'm getting five grand, grinding a dick like I'm scuffing out a fag end, but I don't reckon I could do it to someone I loved. By the end he were near hysterical. Paid me in cash, though. Said he'd call me back when he'd healed.

A part of me wanted to stick about and make sure he were alright. A bigger part didn't wanna stay in a room with a weirdo for too long with half my kit off and shoes not conducive to running, so I fucked off and got myself a coffee.

It were one of them cafes with an outdoor seating place, one that clutters up the pavement and pisses everyone off, and I lit a fag to calm down. I don't know why I weren't calm. It went exactly how he'd said and I didn't expect anything different. But there's no real going back from that, is there? Your first time stepping on a dick in heels is losing a very strange virginity. I couldn't shake the feeling like the money were dirty, like I'd robbed it or summat. Had to remind myself I'd earned it, fair, if not square.

That's what they don't want you to know, though. It can be that easy. Standing on a dicks in heels is the only chance we've really got of fucking over the wage gap, I reckon. I were smashing the glass ceiling in my own twisted way. Just a shame I had to muck up my Louboutin's to do it.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

The Doc

I knew a scene at reception wouldn't be pretty. I've always hated it when entitled, hysterical people think they can get around safety protocol by screaming at underpaid receptionists, and I cringed at the thought that I might be that person, if The Chief decided to make things difficult for me. If Shelly was at the front desk it wouldn't be so bad. We could have a natter, make jokes about how I'm getting on with the dole. She wouldn't make it hard for me if I asked to pop in and see an old patient. Otherwise, I supposed I could always walk straight past as though I had every right to be there, hoping no one knew I was no longer on the staff rota. I could say something chirpy like: 'Hiya! Just checking in!' I even considered bringing my old lanyard as a disguise.

'Don't be ridiculous, Mary,' I thought a split-second afterwards. *'You're not bloody James Bond.'*

I shouldn't have been nervous. I wasn't doing anything wrong. I tugged at my denim shirt sleeves, hoping that my loose, wavy hair looked laid-back and relaxed instead of Einsteinian and unkempt. I took a deep breath.

I'd managed to catch one of the few moments in the day when the reception was unmanned. It wasn't silent enough to be sinister, there was still the ringing of unanswered phones and the coughs from the waiting room, but I'd arrived at a somewhat relaxed time of day. I made a bored and insincere attempt to look around for anyone in charge, but I had no intention of lingering, and continued along the hallway, thinking I'd got away with it.

'Can I help you?' a voice behind me asked. I jumped. Turning to look at her my mouth dropped. She must have been a nurse in her uniform, but her lips were full to bursting and slathered in dark red lipstick. Her face, her cheeks especially, was stiff enough to suggest Botox. Worst of all were her black eyes. Perhaps contact lenses? I couldn't believe someone who looked like her could get a job at a hospital, especially one run by the stuffy, old Chief.

'Sorry,' I said. 'Sorry, I was, er, visiting a patient.'

'And what's the name, please?' she said in a customer service sing-song.

'Patch.'

'Last name?'

I paused. 'Excuse me?'

'What's the patient's last name, Miss?'

'Well, he doesn't have one,' I said, 'he's a...' I stopped. I didn't really know what he was.

'Is he a family member?' she asked, more coldly now.

'No,' I scoffed.

'Well, I'm afraid we can only permit visitation to those who are family members of the patient or patients.'

‘That’s ridiculous, Patch doesn’t have any family. Look, I used to work here.’

‘Well, the patient you’re discussing is hospital responsibility and only current staff members are allowed access to him, so.’

There was something in that sarcasm, that smirk, the northern vernacular, the way this conversation had been so needlessly polite in a way that couldn’t have been further from politeness. Recognition clicked. Underneath it all, I could still see where the round, brown eyes once were, the pudgy cheeks and purple hair.

‘Steph?’ I asked.

She didn’t even blink.

‘If you don’t mind, we’re very busy. If you’d like to come back during the correct visitation hours to see a *family* member, you’re more than welcome to.’

In hindsight, I suppose I could’ve made a scene. There wasn’t anyone to properly make a scene to, but I could’ve done it. I don’t know why I didn’t. The bizarre nature of the situation gave me pause. In general, I supposed it was right to prevent random people off the street from wandering in to harass Patch. And if this girl didn’t know who I was...

Was it really her? The Nurse? The only one who maintained her sense of humour, who hadn’t seemed to grow out of her teenage, misanthropic stage despite nearing her thirties? I thought of those black eyes, those tumescent lips. She looked like a demon, like something possessed.

By the time I’d driven back home I’d managed to convince myself that it was probably my nerves exaggerating things. So a nurse wears odd makeup and contact lenses, who was I to judge? I didn’t know fashion anymore. Of course, I couldn’t have been expected to just walk in. Who exactly did I think I was?

If I didn't worry too much about it, then I wouldn't have to go back and walk back down those corridors and face those who'd humiliated me, or more realistically, who I'd humiliated myself in front of. If I didn't go, it could all be okay again. Patch would be out soon enough, and I could write to him then, provided he'd kept on with his reading.

Isn't that always the easiest method in the end? Clenching your eyes shut and pretending it's all a bad dream?

Chapter Fifty-Eight

The Chief

Her legs were bloated and discoloured. This was to be expected. She had no temperature, very little swelling. Her veins weren't close to the surface. The scarification was going down little by little. My monster was sleeping and for that I was grateful. I didn't want to spend too long examining towards the end of the day, and now I had an excuse not to. I would rest in the office till the morning.

The forced conversation was the most insufferable part of this. I much preferred working with corpses.

'I want my eyelids tightened,' Cindy said during our examination. Her new appendages were healing well, but I was worried. She didn't look after herself as well as she should. Really, she shouldn't be moving around at all, but every time I saw her, she was trying to navigate her new limbs, running unwashed hands over the stitches, twisting herself this way and that. I kept telling her that cleanliness was paramount, but she ignored me. Cindy didn't like to smell of soap, instead cleaning herself with anti-bacterial gel, wiping her

whole body down before surgeries. It meant she never seemed comfortable, but was sterile when necessary.

‘Eyelid tightening isn’t a real procedure,’ I said.

‘Sure it is,’ she smiled at me coyly, as though we were playing a game. ‘You just did it to The Nurse, remember? She wanted the skin of her eyelids reduced before she got her eyeballs tattooed.’

‘Hm,’ I nodded. ‘Blepharoplasty. Popular in the orient. I don’t know why you’d want it considering your exchanged eyes will likely be Caucasian.’

‘How do you know Patch’s eyes are white? We don’t know where he came from.’ When she said things like that I sometimes wondered whether she was testing me. All that time she spent down here with it. I was growing more and more paranoid that they might both know more than they were letting on.

‘Hm,’ I said again. ‘Arm up.’ I was concerned about her swollen lymph nodes. ‘I hope you understand that these procedures are incredibly dangerous. We don’t want to get bogged down in doing more than is medically necessary.’

‘None of this is medically necessary,’ Cindy laughed. ‘Unless it’s medically necessary to stop me from topping myself or whatever.’

I hadn’t been thinking of Cindy, but myself. For her, this wasn’t necessary, but I the progress I was making scientifically was extraordinary. These transplants could be outstandingly helpful in preventing disability, dependency of prosthesis, perhaps even paralysis. Everyone with a medical licence could perform a face lift, but this work could be ground-breaking. It was also incredibly risky. I’d been noticing my hands shaking more and more as I was operating. I didn’t have long left to leave my legacy.

‘Anyway,’ Cindy continued, ‘The Nurse says it’s hard for her to sleep with her lids so tight. She says it’s the most painful recovery she’s ever had. Worse than the tits. Worse than the tongue.’

‘I suppose that’s why she demanded so much time off,’ I said, coldly. Actually, it didn’t really perturb me. The infections in her ear gauges looked sore enough that she perhaps should’ve taken even longer to recover. She’d stretched them to such a degree that only a thin strip of skin remained, wrapped around a large black disk. Her stylistic ideas seem excessive.

‘She looks great too. Kind of crazy and intense, like an owl.’ Cindy giggled slightly. I found her more disturbing when she was talkative and friendly than when she refused to speak at all. I think her loneliness had tricked her into thinking we were friends.

‘Why does she have me do these things to her?’ I asked. ‘She’d been quite a pretty girl before.’

‘Why are you doing all this to me?’ Cindy asked. ‘Because she wants it.’

I scoffed.

‘Oh, and her tattooed eyeballs are going to help war veterans too, I suppose?’

Cindy shrugged,

‘It might. Depends if they subscribe to her OnlyFans.’

I loosened the band around her arm, watched the air puff out of it. Her blood pressure was fine, if slightly high.

‘We’ll discuss cosmetic procedures at a later date,’ I said, preparing to leave.

‘I want them now though. On these eyes.’

‘That would be a waste of time, don’t you think? Or have you decided to keep them?’

‘Fine! Pills then,’ Cindy almost shouted. I heard my creature stir, a slight groan separating its lips. ‘Please,’ she said more quietly. She was using her volume as a way of manipulating me. I paused.

‘Pills for what?’

‘I need to stay awake,’ she said. ‘I hate sleeping. The nightmares... I can’t cope with them anymore, I need them to stop.’

I shook my head.

‘Cindy, if you don’t sleep you’ll die. It’s as simple as that.’

‘Imagine it though,’ she said, wiping her cheek with the palm of her hand. ‘If you created not only the first stitched-together human with every part of them transplanted, but a superhero who was immune to the needs of everyday people, who didn’t even need to sleep. Wouldn’t that be exceptional?’

She thought she was being clever and, truth be told, it did spark something in my imagination, but I shook my head.

‘I’m sorry, Cindy. I told you before and reality hasn’t changed. A human being needs sleep. You can tighten your eyelids as much as you like, but it can’t be done.’

Chapter Fifty-Nine

The Doc

I'd been on hold for nearly an hour, listening to the incessant dial tone. Three pence a minute. What a waste. I was pacing the kitchen when Raul wandered back through.

'If they don't put me through in five minutes, I'm going to hang up and call 999. This is ridiculous,' I said to him.

'Your dinner's cold now.' He put his plate in the dishwasher and poured himself another glass of wine.

'You're right, I'm sorry. I'll call 999, get this over faster.'

I hung up, just as I heard a voice answer, 'Hello.'

'No!' I waited in disbelief for a second. 'Goddamn it.'

'What are you doing now?' Raul asked me as I stabbed at the phone again.

'Calling 999. I just said.'

'You're seriously going to bother the emergency services with this?'

‘Well yes, Raul, it’s an emergency... Hello? Yes, hi, police.’

I cupped the mouthpiece.

‘I’m sorry about dinner, love, but I wouldn’t be able to eat if I was thinking about my patients trapped in there. The last time I went they wouldn’t even let me see them... Hello? Yes, I’d like to report a concern I have regarding Rompecabeza Hospital. I’m a former member of staff. I didn’t know who else to reach out to but I’m terribly worried about the safety of the patients.’

‘Can you explain the nature of the problem?’ the woman asked with the trained nasality and a downwards inflection which made me cringe. Raul was saying something too, but I managed to wave him away.

‘Yes, I can. It concerns a high-profile case. I suppose you’ve heard of Cindy Reynolds.’ I hoped this would pique her interest.

‘And what do you believe may be the problem?’ she said in the exact same tone. It was evident she was reading from a script.

‘My problem is that the Chief of Medicine Dr Steiner is suggesting unconventional and untested treatment which goes against the standards of our medical training and could potentially put a vulnerable patient at risk.’

I’d practised this line in my head and I was glad I had the opportunity to get it out so quickly and concisely.

‘Right. And did you say you were a former nurse there?’

‘Doctor.’

‘Hold on, just one moment.’

‘Un-fucking-believable,’ Raul said, slamming the kitchen door behind him. The glasses in the cabinet rattled, and I couldn’t hear the woman’s question.

‘Sorry, what did you say?’

‘And these non-standard treatments, are they happening against the will of the patient? Miss Reynolds?’

I took a deep breath.

‘Well, that depends on how you look at it...’

I used to love the idea of being a whistle-blower. I pictured myself with a megaphone leading a march on the hospital car park, or else strutting through the office of one of the country’s leading newspapers with overly gigantic sunglasses. *Boy, do I have a scoop for you.* Actually, it was far more tiresome than all that. I’d exhausted all the correct routes with the medical board, beginning the process of a formal complaint. The policy was called ‘Speak Up!’, and confidentiality *should* have been a given, but as I no longer worked at the hospital, I had to be named. As soon as I was, no one took me seriously. The implication was that I had left in a fit of rage and regretted it, so set about attempting to tear down its reputation. I could continue with the complaint, they said, but it must be stressed that it was to be taken very, very seriously and, if disproven, could affect my future career.

I left that where it was, too irritated to continue if I was going to be treated like an imbecile. Quickly, I regretted abandoning that course of action. No other path was any better. Next, it was the ICB (integrated care-board), mostly used by patients who felt their GPs had actively hurt them or else given them inadequate care. That was going well, until they realised I wasn’t the patient in question. After one brief investigation I received a cold, generic email telling me they had looked into the issues regarding Cindy Reynolds and the paperwork was all above board, her treatment approved by her primary guardian.

‘And what about Patch?’ was my response.

‘Who?’ was theirs.

The 999 call went very much the same way.

‘Well, that was fucking useless,’ I said, wandering back into the living room. Raul wasn’t there. ‘Raul?’

There was some slamming and muttering in the bedroom. A suitcase lay on our bed already half-full with his clothes. Silk shirts, white briefs, socks that were always matched perfectly.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m going to stay at a friend’s for a while,’ he said. ‘I can’t take it. You’re home all day, not working but taking up space so *I* can’t work, you’re shouting on the phone, you’re up all night on that computer. I don’t have the right environment for my art.’

‘I’m sorry we have to share your studio, but I need some office space.’

‘Why do you insist on having an office? You don’t work!’

‘I am working, Raul. I’m dealing with the Cindy situation.’ Hard work indeed, tapping away, finding the correct channels, finding the incorrect channels, tabloid articles, Reddit pages, Youtubers with their ideas on what went on in The Prince’s cellar, all of it relevant, none of it helpful.

‘There is,’ he muttered tensely, ‘no Cindy situation. You’re obsessed with this *nonsense*. It’s insane.’

‘Look, someone needs to look out for this girl. Her family is clearly useless.’

‘Cindy Reynolds is the most looked after girl on the fucking planet right now, okay? She’s in the hands of medical professionals, analysed by every tabloid under the sun, with a family who love her and know all about her treatment, who have *approved* it and she doesn’t want your help.’

He slammed his suitcase shut and zipped it closed.

‘That was only half-full,’ I said sarcastically. ‘Not a very committed dumping.’

‘Your *brain* is half-full!’

If I hadn’t been so utterly devastated I might have laughed. I attempted to scoff, but it sounded lacklustre. Instead, I felt myself tear up, and that was when Raul did the worst thing imaginable. He hugged me. My tears started pouring down my cheeks and I wanted to shove him away, to tell him to fuck off and go, but instead I melted into him. His woody aftershave drew me in. Of course, then I was a blubbering wreck.

‘Mary, darling, you need help. This time off work, it doesn’t have to be a bad thing. We could have got closer. We’ve always talked about having a baby, didn’t you say one day, maybe? When you weren’t so focussed on your career, didn’t we say that?’

I nodded and gulped, still unable to speak. I must have looked like a baby myself, tears, snotty nose, the lot.

‘But we can’t do it when your head is like this. I want you to promise you’ll see someone.’

I didn’t want a baby. I didn’t want a therapist either, but for some reason I found myself nodding. How easy it is to be complacent when you’re emotional. The voice from the primary doctor waved through my head again, the crying voice, the body split open, the

husband so worried, like Raul looked right then, gosh don't men all look so worried? To hold me closer, he placed his hand on the back of my head.

Don't worry, we'll fix it up for you.

Chapter Sixty

The Prince

‘I’m telling you, he didn’t say nothing about you.’

I was hurt but kept my expression neutral. I lay flat on my bunk, my head slightly propped up by the paper-thin pillow.

‘And I dare say you didn’t want to interrupt your treatment long enough to ask about our relationship?’ I’d wanted to sound snide but came across wheedling, which I hated.

‘Oh, I tried,’ Pete said, laughing. ‘I kept trying to tell him about you, how you were trying to get through to him, asking for his reply, but nothing. Whenever I started talking about you, he’d interrupt to ask me about my “stool consistency”.’

Well, that was The Chief to a T. Cold, medical, easily distracted by the beautiful and abject nature of the body (at least *that* we had in common). I don’t know why I felt our friendship might surpass his opportunistic nature. Still, when you only have one method of escape, it takes more than the sting of rejection to relinquish all hope.

‘He must be scared to admit to his part in the murders. He surely wouldn’t trust you with such delicate information.’ I swung my legs around and stood up from my bed, beginning to pace. ‘I just need to get to him myself, that’s all. Then we can talk without fear.’

‘Good, fine, you do what you need to do, pal. At least then I don’t have to be your pigeon boy anymore.’

I scoffed.

‘Well you were hardly a good messenger pigeon anyway. You can’t send a boy to do a man’s job, I suppose.’

I was angry, and perhaps misdirecting that anger, which was very unwise because nothing could have worsened my already sour mood than a bite on the ankles. Surprisingly, though, Pete seemed calm. In fact, he turned his face down as though embarrassed for me, which of course only served to enrage me more.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, annoyed.

‘Nothing.’

‘What are you hiding, you rotten, little toad?’

Pete sighed.

‘Listen, man, I don’t think The Chief has any problem with secrets.’

‘What are you talking about?’

Pete looked at me with pity.

‘I told him. I told him that it would break your heart if he didn’t help you, but he didn’t wanna know. I did try.’

He put his face in his hands. The truth came out then. It turned out most of what the boy said was true. He really *had* handed over the note and asked for a response only to receive complete indifference, but in his initial retelling, he hadn't quite given himself enough credit. When he'd left he'd asked directly and pointedly for a response. The Chief only said: 'Oh fine, tell him I said hello.'

Now, Pete wasn't accepting that kind of fickle, meaningless comment. He warned The Chief that if he didn't try and help me that I might smother poor Pete in his sleep, that I'd done it before to my bunkmates and everyone knew. He said The Chief was my only hope and the only friend I had left in the world.

'Good lord, and what did he say to that?' I asked, deflated by this sad confession.

'He said that you weren't his friend. That he needed you for research but that you were "vile".' Pete said that last word in air-quotes, which only added salt to the gaping wound. 'I told him it would break your heart, I told him, he said...' He trailed off.

'What did he say?'

'He said you haven't got a heart to break, Prince. I'm sorry to tell you, I really wish I didn't have to, but that's what he said.'

I scoffed.

'Well, that is very clearly a pot and kettle scenario. Does he see himself as the epitome of virtue and light now that he's got his little plaything in a hospital instead of my cellar? My cellar that he was perfectly happy to use, by the bye. Sheer hypocrisy.'

When the indignation had gone, however, I was left with the cold, unalterable fact that I was stuck here, that I was disposable, that no one wanted to help me. Well, if pleading couldn't help, the next step was threatening.

‘It’s not over yet, Petey,’ I said. ‘He might not help willingly, but good god, with a knife to his neck, he’ll help. I just need to find some way to stay conscious through the surgeries.’

‘You still want that face swap?’ Pete asked.

‘Of course! How else could I possibly maintain my anonymity in the real world? A little surgery is a small price to pay for freedom.’

‘But if he’s holding a scalpel, surely he could just kill you when he goes to start cutting.’ Pete shook his head. ‘I don’t think this plan is as fool-proof as you think it is. You know you sometimes forget about the obvious details when you get in your moods.’

I smirked. This boy clearly didn’t understand the power of a cold and calculating glare.

‘Don’t worry about the details, darling. I’ll be fine. The Chief is a wicked, old man with no heart but God help him, he couldn’t kill directly to save his life.’

Chapter Sixty-One

The Chief

Male, octogenarian, once an above-average 6'1" but now with a tendency to stoop. High IQ (always worth remembering at times of fear or insecurity). Non-smoker, teetotaler, no recreational drug use to date. Minor respiratory issues which require the use of an inhaler. Nothing out of the ordinary for a polio survivor.

I don't often check my personal credentials these days, but I find it brings me comfort on the odd occasion when I'm in doubt of where I am, physically or psychologically. This happens post night-terror. They're much rarer these days, but they can still occur, sixty years or so after the event, although to call it 'an event' seems to belittle it. Back then it was a large percentage of my, so far, very short life.

What I suffer from is now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, although it seems to me that to have lived to such an advanced age it would be impossible to exist without some sort of trauma. Trauma, after all, is what teaches us sensible reactions and responses. Last time I touched the stove, it hurt, ergo...

The hypnagogic hallucinations I suffer from tend to follow a similar pattern to those who suffer from sleep paralysis, excepting that I don't see any demon in the corner watching me. I do feel the crushing weight on my chest that others have documented. The only demon I see is my own face reflected back at me, varying in terms of age and vulnerability. Usually, I would see the image of myself as a sick, young boy of seven, but increasingly I'm seeing myself as I am in the present, stooped and grey, with eyes perpetually fading, wrinkles that define my face as opposed to interrupting it. I hear the same sound of the monster breathing, the restrictive tightness around my neck, but then I don't feel anything. I'm unable to move. My breathing isn't working, and yet I'm still living. My body is not my own, but a sarcophagus entombing me.

Perhaps that's why I've never feared pain. Pain is at least a sensation. You can control and relieve pain. You can inflict and ease it in patients with the use of scalpels and medication. It's nothingness I fear. You cannot rub life into something dead. There's nothing you can do to ensure you're still alive when you cannot move to prove it to yourself. As a child, I felt I was dead and the lung must be hell. Paralysis and sickness feel very much like hell.

Eventually, I pulled myself away from the hallucination. Years of practising lucid dreaming allows me to blink my eyes. The face in front of me, my face, fades into what it always must have been, a shadow on the ceiling sneaking through a slightly open curtain. I twitch my fingers, wiggle my toes. Slowly I step onto a carpeted floor and make my way to the bathroom, aware the worst is over. I rinse my face in the sink and look into the mirror, remembering the credentials.

Male. White. Octogenarian...

The image in the mirror brings me no comfort these days. I shuffle back to my bedroom, remembering when my strides were longer, when I never needed so much rest. I curl up onto my side, propping pillows behind me to ensure I don't roll onto my back. Sleep paralysis occurs more often when sleeping on one's back.

I know Cindy wakes up screaming, The Nurse complains about it constantly. If I could prevent sleep paralysis from happening to others, I would. If my Monster could avoid waking up in a cold sweat and having to check the mirror to ensure it's still alive, I would feel immensely comforted. If I'm creating something that can never die, it's natural that it will suffer immensely. Trauma, we know, is inevitable. Life involves an awful lot of suffering. But through alleviating sleep, I may be able to alleviate some fear.

I drift off again, slightly more comfortably, promising myself that I'm going to try.

Chapter Sixty-Two

The Doc

I'd always intended to do the whole gap year thing. As an enthusiastic and energised twenty-year-old, I gave it a go, but I didn't see the point in travelling for fun when I could double it up as a humanitarian project. I liked the idea of being *good*. Being *needed*. I experienced a narcissistic thrill when I was complimented for humanitarianism. Even my parents had expressed an atom of pride when they reflected on my time spent in Doctors Without Borders. So, I gave up my lounging on beach time in order to be ravaged by mosquitos and dripping with sweat in refugee camps.

But with good deeds you have, in reality, perhaps a year or so to discuss them in social circles without criticism, and after that you're considered snobbish and sanctimonious. I had to relinquish my bragging rights in order to be sufferable. Raul made me aware of that quite early on in our relationship. But now, after dramatically and needlessly walking out of employment, after ensuring that there would be no dependents to rely on me and no romantic relationship left to protect, I had all the time in the world to lounge around on beaches, to finally backpack around Southeast Asia, to enjoy the street-food in India. I could have done

anything, gone anywhere, packed a suitcase, placed my passport neatly in my coat pocket, and turned up to the airport with a plan to jump on the first plane out. It should have been liberating.

Instead, I was depressed. Worse, I wasn't even depressed for the right reasons; had I been struggling with my relationship disintegration I had no doubt people would be more understanding. Instead I was neurotically and forcefully contending with the unknown fates of Patch and Cindy, doing everything I could, which was next to nothing. It was getting hard to leave the house. Eating seemed barely necessary, an intrusion on my time. Coffee with sugar sufficed, and then coffee without sugar, and then tins of old tomatoes heated up on the hob and spread on stale bread. Washing up could wait. Laundry wasn't necessary, nor was changing bedsheets. I barely slept or changed my clothes anyway. My mind was too busy, running on anxious energy that told me I simply had to do *something*, but I hadn't the slightest idea where to begin.

As it turned out there were many forums on which to discuss Cindy and Patch's situation. Conspiracy theorists claimed all sorts of nonsense, some of them so laughably paranoid I felt adequately sane by comparison, at least at first. Then, upon further reading, the claims didn't seem quite so tenuous. Without telling Raul what I was doing, I spoke to people online about my experiences on the ward. I knew that it was illegal (and, worse, immoral) to pass on that information, but there was something so delicious in being believed after all my failed attempts. The police didn't care, the medical board didn't either, but these strangers not only believed, they encouraged. I pored over the paragraphs of baseless theories, filling in the gaps with what I knew to be true, calling out everyone who I felt was delusional, because I knew some of the truth after all. I was there. Who else could claim that?

It was in this state of study, the kind I hadn't indulged in since my med student years, wrapped up on my sofa with a blanket round my shoulders, scrolling through all these

theories when I realised I was being watched. I'd thought I was alone in the house. I didn't even hear the key in the door.

Raul had been staying somewhere else for the past four or five days. A friend's? A lover's? I didn't care. He walked in, his face newly clean-shaven and moulded by seriousness. I was conscious that it had been a long time since I'd showered.

'Hello,' I said, flinching as his eyes took me in.

'Mary,' he said. 'We need to talk.'

He went to open the windows, and I felt a shiver of shame. I wondered how he was wandering around in just a t-shirt. I had to be piled with blankets and dressing gowns to feel even slightly comfortable.

'This place is a mess,' he said. 'I mean, really disgusting.'

'Well, it's not like I have anyone to clean up for,' I said. I'd intended it as a dig at the fact that he'd left me, but instead it sounded like a pathetic confession.

'I needed the headspace. You didn't try to call me, though. I thought when you realised I was gone you'd at least try to call me, but you didn't. Weren't you curious about why I'd left?'

I shrugged. His things were still here. I'd assumed he'd come back eventually. I had been vaguely curious, but my newfound solitude didn't appear to be particularly important in the grand scheme of things. Patch was a government experiment meant to be used as a weapon of war. Cindy Reynolds had died with The Prince and been replaced by a mute model from Switzerland. What was one less normie boyfriend to the mix? Briefly, I wondered when I started thinking in words like 'normie'.

Raul put his head in his hands and he breathed, deeply.

‘This relationship isn’t working. We both know that. But there’s a reason I’m back here and willing to try. Mary, I can’t let you do it alone. Not with my baby. And at your age this could be our very last chance.’

‘What baby?’ I asked him.

‘I found the positive test in the bathroom bin.’

‘Oh, right.’ The pregnancy was probably inevitable. After the sobbing apology and the promise I would try, Raul had been a lot more affectionate. Sex helped him sleep better at night, and after I could sneak off to my laptop. ‘You’re right. I should be tidying up more. Or emptying the bins out at least.’

‘If there’s going to be a baby...’

‘There’s not going to be a baby.’

His face went through a flash of emotions. Relief, then disappointment, then anger. ‘You miscarried.’

‘Sure,’ I shrugged. Miscarried, aborted. What difference did it make?

‘*Did* you miscarry?’

‘Raul, you need to wake up. This world is an awful, awful place, full of bad stuff with even worse stuff underneath. What are we going to do if it’s a boy, hey? Take him off to school and try and teach him along the way how not to end up chopping off feet? And what if it’s a girl? God no. It’s too cruel in this world to have a girl. And anyway, what about the hospital? How was I supposed to focus on that in my condition?’

He looked at me like I was mad. I supposed to him I was. Something in the way his face shifted made me realised that he was done now. I should have felt something, some pain or disappointment, but it had been weeks of working on the case, emotions barely registering,

and I couldn't force them to rise to the surface. He took a deep breath in preparation for what I was sure would be a dumping, and I only felt frustrated that he was taking so long with it when I had so much left to do.

'There were so many women I could've settled down with,' he said to me, clipped, deliberate. 'I chose you. You were reliable. You were kind and dull and professional. You would have been perfect as a mother.' He shook his head. 'You fucked it.'

He left shortly after, though not before making a shattering cacophony, slamming doors, swearing loudly when things fell out of cupboards, grunting to himself throughout it all. I put on headphones and brown noise to drown it out. The place looked a lot emptier when he'd gone, so I knew finally he wasn't coming back.

Chapter Sixty-Three

The Prince

Before prison, my lawyers condescendingly suggested that I *keep my head down and my nose clean*. I often wondered what their implication was. That in doing so, I'd find it easier? That I might finish my sentence earlier? Regardless, the advice was utterly irrelevant to me. I knew I had no chance of leaving this place legitimately until my breath had long left my body. Yet still, they insisted on repeating that phrase, like obnoxious little parrots: *Keep your head down and your nose clean*. I suppose they were content to let me rot in peace, slipping through the rest of my life unexceptionally, making as little impact on the world as a shadow would make on the foundational integrity of a building. Unfortunately, I was too exceptional for that. I insisted that my chin remain high and my hands reject idleness.

Pete slept peacefully. He pillowed his cheek with his hand. The only softness to find in that hellhole was his own child's skin. Even our bedding scratched. To think, once I might have murdered him. Now I observed him with fondness and gratitude. Truly, he had proved himself invaluable.

Pete had pinched a vial of chloroform from the hospital on his most recent visit. This would be necessary for the guards I came across, although I'd have to be sparing. Better than that, he told me a secret. When some dirty, old fool from Cell Block Two died in his sleep (absolutely nothing to do with me, for a change) Pete found himself inclined to share a ride with him to the hospital.

'What's the stiff doing here?' he'd asked, to which one of the guards had replied:

'Prisoner #4514 needs a coronary report and we don't have enough vehicles. You two were going to the same place anyway.'

'You send our dead bodies to the hospital?'

'Sure. What else would we do with them?'

Pete relayed this to me later, and my hope refreshed anew. To reach The Chief, I only had to die.

Libraries are an underused resource. Obviously we had our own in the manor, thick books reaching from floor to thirty-foot ceiling, covered in dust and neglected, except by the eyes of tourists who might pay for private tours under the strict condition that they do not touch a *thing*. They were only allowed to gaze in awe and envy at our opulence, knowledge imprisoned tantalisingly beyond their reach. I was never one for reading, far less concerned with the tomes above ground than the tombs beneath. Mostly they were dull, old books, detailing our family history throughout the ages, and I far preferred to hear those kinds of stories from my drunken grandparents around a festive dinner table.

There's a lot I regret not fully appreciating while I was at home in the manor, but it's only since The Chief's betrayal that my mind has swerved to all the books I left behind. We had a large anthology of Shakespeare's texts with a beautiful cream, hardback cover, similar in size to a treasure chest. As a teenager I detested the thing. I was forced by my English tutor

(a stuffy, old fish who didn't seem to understand that I would be fine regardless of any lack of academic prowess) to analyse all the incomprehensible stories. I particularly loathed the syllabus' chosen text, *Romeo and Juliet*. I'd just been rejected by my stomping, Doc Martin princess, and scorned the thought of romance. Indeed, the only tale by that great bard of ours to bring me one moment's amusement was *Titus Andronicus*. But no, my scholar wanted to focus only on *Romeo and Juliet*. Love, tragedy, families destroyed my meaningless distinctions in identity. I'd rolled my eyes in boredom, but an inkling of the plot remained like a fingerprint on my memory.

I scoured through the prison library for any mention of the tincture Juliet had quaffed in order to bring about her corpse-like state. It did not exist: a mere work of fiction, which I suppose was to be expected, although it frustrated me that my spark of genius had led to a pointless dead-end. Still, I was not to be deterred. When literature failed me, I found solace in the works of science, but there were no medical books of any substance to be found in this ghastly habitation of mine. The very few they ordered in on my request turned out to be convoluted beyond reasonable comprehension, and I struggled to make sense of the jargon wriggling across the pages like so many tiny ants. I thought I must have picked up some knowledge during my tête-à-têtes with The Chief, but it turns out he was as useless a mentor as he was a friend.

Woebegone, I returned to my cell, accepting the inevitability of my permanent imprisonment amongst the dregs of our society. I felt that, considering the gravity of my situation, I'd remained fairly stoic, but my cellmate's patience was so easily tested that he would explode at the barest tickle of a whine.

'Idiot, why the hell don't you try the internet? Stuck in the past, man. No wonder you got caught.'

I resented the implication that I was stuck in the past, particularly as it was claimed by someone in a perpetual state of childhood, but I saw his point.

Oh, if the world didn't open up to me when I found my way to the internet! Phones with data plans existed in prison, although they were hidden in plastic bags inside toilet cisterns, or underneath loose tiles. One had to be willing to beg, to barter and spend, but that wasn't an issue for myself. I exchanged sweets, snacks, and cigarettes with a paedophile of minor celebrity, some flabby faced monster who found alcohol and prostitution just weren't touching the sides anymore. He was hated more than most and desperate for an ally. As he handed me the phone he made me sincerely promise that I would recall the favour and be there to defend him when necessary. Of course, I promised! Poor soul. He thought he'd made a life-long ally, when in reality I was escaping!

Hours of scrolling, light turned down, battery saver mode on (Pete taught me these tricks, the boy had his uses). I thought of my Juliet, dead but alive, a zombie dragging her tired, aching feet. I dreamt I myself was a zombie, craving brains, a monster rising from the grave, fingers clawing at the soil, and it all accumulated into one bright sensation: hope.

There was the answer, hidden in black and white on the pages of Wikipedia. Can you believe that silly boy Peter was right after all?

A Haitian man by the name of Clairvius Narcisse was declared dead almost two decades ago, and yet reappeared after having been 'zombified'. He had been buried, exhumed, and forced to work by the slave-master who'd saved him. The man claimed voodoo magic. A learned anthropologist claimed it the result of a paralysing pufferfish. The most important thing for me was that they'd pronounced him *dead*. And yet, he was alive.

I found a pleasant irony in Haiti being the answer to all my woes. After that insolent cleaner, it seemed only right that her culture could bring me back to the outside world. God bless the colonies, that's what I say. Savage, absolutely, but their wisdom knows no bounds.

My mother was still sending me boxes of tea, a mild comfort in these days of torturous captivity. I wondered if I might convince her to send some laced with a trace of – what I now knew was called – tetrodotoxin. Little by little, my plan was coming together. And to think, I came up with it all by myself!

Chapter Sixty-Four

The Chief

Iron lungs were originally used in the war to help soldiers impacted with noxious gas. It allowed them to breathe when their respiratory systems were collapsing. It was only later that it became useful helping children afflicted with polio. I'd stopped using my iron lung regularly, instead leaving the impotent relic to lie in the corner of my office. As far as I could, avoided the vile thing. It was warm, claustrophobic, and reminded me of how I would lie sickly and sweating while hearing other children play outside in the sunshine. Not that I hated the machine, exactly. At first it felt like a godsend. It's far more horrible to be choking and unable to breathe than trapped and unable to move. Still, I liked to imagine those days were behind me.

In an odd way, I liked to think of it watching me, witnessing how I walk unaided on strong legs, with lungs that barely required assistance. That awful, breathing tomb doesn't control me any longer. Nowadays, its biggest use is as a plinth for the rats.

My office door was stiff to open. I switched on the light to the windowless room. I preferred darker places when working; glare on a computer screen made me feel ill. The rats preferred it also. It was their feeding time.

I'd acquired the rats from a pet-shop when I decided to try and help Cindy, and they were proving invaluable. The staff I had purchased them from were surprisingly sentimental about their rodents, and I had to show them the sizeable cage I had ready, demonstrate a thorough understanding of their dietary and straw requirements. They were appeased I would make a loving pet owner and relinquished them to my care.

The lobotomies had caused a slight change in appetite, and both A and B were expecting more pellets throughout the day. Perhaps that was a result of the lack of sleep. Undoubtedly, when the results were in there'd be a rise in blood-sugar. Regardless, I fed them. The extra fuel didn't seem to impact their weight at all. A was still lean and thin, and B was, if anything, even lighter than before. I manhandled them to keep them awake, timed a LED light to flash every fifteen minutes in the cage, startling them out of slumber. Prior to the surgery, those tricks caused them some distress, but post-op they seemed more accepting. Whenever I entered my office I could hear them scrambling. I wouldn't be surprised if they weren't sleeping at all.

The process of helping Cindy initially felt impossible until I remembered, from some dust-filled corner of my brain, research done in the 1950s on sleep deprivation and frontal lobotomies. There had been success with rats. I found some of the papers in historical journals, and the progress was astonishing. 336 hours under observation, no sleep, and the rats functioned as usual.

Then, as it always does in society, the tides changed suddenly vis-a-vis lobotomies, and the work, despite its promise, was abandoned. Functioning on fewer hours of sleep seemed less important than good press.

A and B showed similar promise and I would have been happy to present my research to Cindy there and then, if it weren't for the smallest respiratory issues with A. The ventilation drive was impaired. With my overly large stethoscope on its increasingly bony back, I could feel the irregularities, the shallowness of breath which occasionally seemed to stop, before beginning again too quickly. The pulsing torso and darting eyes didn't match its sluggishness, its crawling gait.

It would need more work. Cindy must be able to breathe. Daoist monks sail through agony because they can control their breathing. That's how they can set themselves on fire without screaming. Men survive without food for days and weeks on end, but only minutes without breath. With all the work we were doing, I couldn't allow the most natural form of pain-relief to be stripped away from her. And if she died before I could present my findings, it would all have been for nothing.

It was possible, though. Of that, I felt confident. I fingered the pink scars beneath A's newly growing fur. Yes, it could be done. I closed the cage and left the room, locking the door behind me. It felt satisfying to leave the lung in the company of darkness and vermin, where it belonged.

Chapter Sixty-Five

The Nurse

I do worry about her, like. It takes a long time for her to regain consciousness after the operations these days. Probably because it's the only bloody sleep she gets. Her body must be pretty fucked off with her by this point considering what she puts it through, slapping herself round the face to keep awake, all them mind games and uncomfortable positions. I used to sneak her uppers, just 'cause I thought she wanted them for a bit of fun (it must be dead boring down there all day), but no, she just wants to stay wide a-fucking-wake. The surgeries are the only rest she really gets.

'I like the oblivion,' she once told me during a check-up. 'It's like no time has passed whatsoever. For a moment you're totally dead. You don't exist.'

'Christ, am I gonna have to put you on suicide watch here?' I asked.

She laughed.

‘I mean, realistically, you should have done that a long time ago, but no. You don’t have to worry. I like waking up again, transformed. Little by little, you know? It’s kind of exciting, like waking up and getting to see your new baby.’

‘Hate to break it to you, hon, but you don’t get surgical anaesthetic during childbirth.’

She shrugged.

‘Well, I dunno what to compare it to then. It’s like magic. An enchanted sleep that could have been ten minutes or could’ve been a thousand years. But you get a special present at the end.’

‘Like that new dick you’re after?’ I asked her.

She shrugged defensively.

‘Or something.’

I didn’t get her personally. Sometimes I thought I did, for like a second, but then she’d say shit like that, like she were telling one of Patch’s fairy tales, and I’d realise we weren’t owt alike.

If I had the choice, I’d do my surgeries awake. I remember getting my tongue split, trying to keep my eyes upwards so I didn’t notice the blood dribbling down into the metal bowl. I felt strong, like I’d done something important, transitioned into someone new and I’d *earned* it. I’d like to point out to The Chief all the bits I wanted done. *Less of that, more of this, let’s get them stitches neater mister.* If I could, I’d do it to myself, but I don’t have the knowhow. Cosmetic surgery isn’t quite the same as a piercing, is it?

Chapter Sixty-Six

The Victim

A hospital never sleeps, but dozes. The lights are dimmed so patients can rest, and everything goes at a slower pace, but there's still always staff hanging about, medics pottering round with little clipboards, drips that need changing, bedpans upending, the usual. There's still the patients who, at any moment, might scream or groan or buzz on their little buttons to demand extra drugs, and some of them are quite observant, don't you know? A lot of them would definitely recognise some untoward stranger stomping about on their ward.

With my old body, I would've gone by unnoticed. A wig, some glasses, a facemask, who would recognise or care about some generic-looking girl trailing the halls? But with this new hulking body it was difficult. Patch's parts are long, strong, and heavy. I stand taller now, and broader too. I'm notable for that alone. Then when they turn to stare and see the ugly dead skin, the rampant scars (even more rampant now) they'll remember, *hey, wasn't there that creature here a while ago? The one that was found wandering the slaughterhouse, stitched from body parts? Then one day, he just disappeared and we were told he'd moved on to a more appropriate facility, not to worry about the details? But isn't that him over there in*

the corner, skulking around trying not to be seen? Let's investigate this situation thoroughly and cause an awful scene.

I wasn't letting that happen until I'd at least finished my surgeries, so The Chief pulled a cheeky fire alarm trick so that he could show me how he'd fix my sleeping problem. My insides fizzed when I thought of it. No more sleep. No more nightmares. I couldn't wait to see what he'd discovered. Even down in the morgue where everything was soundproofed, I could hear when the shrieking smoke detector started. Patch covered his ears with his dainty little hands, and The Nurse pinged down to collect me.

'Quickly,' she said. 'Everyone's outside in the carpark, but we don't have ages.'

I stepped into the lift with her and I saw Patch's face. What a picture! He had the sulky lips of a toddler, the wheedling eyes and straining neck that let me know how jealous he was that I was getting out, even for just an hour. I winked at him as the door's closed. Me and The Nurse ascended upwards.

It was nighttime, but the lights still stung my eyes. I shielded them with my enormous hand and looked down blinking, watching the white ovals dance behind my eyelids. The Nurse lit a cigarette.

'You can't smoke up here, surely?'

'Well, no one's about, are they? Might as well!'

I couldn't look up yet, my eyes were still hurting, and so I focused on her white shoes just ahead of me on the cold, blue linoleum. She reached The Chief's door and knocked.

Shave and a Hair Cut, Two Bits.

‘I’ll leave you here, love. Gotta head to carpark with the rest of ‘em.’ She gestured with her fag end. ‘I’ll drop this off in toxic waste on the way out. Makes it more realistic if there’s an actual fire, like.’

Away she sauntered. The door creaked open, and The Chief gestured me in.

‘We’ll keep this brief.’ He closed the door behind me. ‘Now, I won’t be able to stop you from sleeping *tonight*, that’ll take an operation, but the wheels are in motion. Let me show you how it works.’

He gestured towards a cage, resting on some strange, cylindrical table. Bright heat lamps reflected off the table’s mirror and shone into a cage. There was a high-pitched eeeeeee playing gently over an audio device that rivalled the fire alarm in irritation.

‘Doesn’t that bother you?’ I asked him.

‘What?’

‘That high-pitched noise that’s playing.’

‘You can hear that?’ The Chief shook his head. ‘I thought it would only disturb the rats. My hearing can’t be what it was.’

He opened up the cage and pulled a skinny, white rat from underneath a pile of sawdust. Sure enough, it was wide awake, red eyes bright like traffic lights.

‘This is B. It hasn’t slept in 15 days,’ he said. His voice was low as he showed me the rat. I stroked it with my long, yellow finger. ‘I spent the first five days manhandling them, you know, picking them up, fondling them and such, so they wouldn’t sleep. That caused distress. They lost weight and fur, which has since returned. Since the operation, B’s stayed awake regardless of my handling, or lack thereof. Its appetite too, is excellent.’ With a shaky

fingernail, he pushed back the fur on the rat's forehead. 'You can see the small scar where the incision was made. Now, B woke fine and has continued as normal since the operation. We initially tried transorbital, through the eye socket, you know. That was less successful. A died four days later from what appeared to be heart failure. Sleeplessness was successful for those four days, but still.'

The siren still kept going in the background and, whether real or imagined, I was sure I could smell smoke.

'So what's the operation?' I asked.

'You may have heard of it, it's what we call a lobotomy, or a leucotomy. Very interesting science. It severs the connection between the frontal cortex and the rest of the brain so that behaviour can be altered. I've been able to focus that severance in the hypothalamus to impact sleep.' He chortled slightly, but I was no longer listening, instead recoiling from the alarm ringing in my head. 'It was hard to locate this area on a rat, as you can imagine. Very finicky. However, on a larger area this would be significantly easier and I see no reason we can't involve this in the next round of facial surgeries.'

'No,' I shook my head. 'You can forget it. You're not fucking with my head.'

'Oh,' he stopped, his expression immediately deflated, like I'd snatched away a present from him. Well, tough shit, no one's playing with my mind. Anything else, go crazy, but not that. 'Cindy, this was what you asked for,' he said. 'Drugs, hypnosis, all of your ineffectual suggestions, they would have had an impact on your brain function just as much as this operation. It's really no different to the surgery you've already been having.'

'Obviously it's different! What I'm doing with my body, that's manipulation, not erasure. This is my *mind* we're talking about. It's who I am.'

‘Who you are?’ he laughed. ‘The brain is just another *part* of who you are, just like all the other organs you feel free to experiment with without this pussyfooting. Whatever happened to “It’s alive!”? Cindy, you’d seemed so keen!’

‘Yeah, when it’s my body. Your body changes all the time, you’re still the same person...’

‘And the brain changes along with it as an ever-adapting *part* of the body.’

I shook my head. He was making sense, but it didn’t feel right to me. I guessed the brain was just another organ, but I’d seen films as a kid about lobotomies. I saw the dribbling, mute shells of humans who just potted along not feeling anything in their neat little hospital gear. Nothing could convince me to agree to that. Staying awake was about being more present, more active and alert, not less so. Zombiehood was not what I’d wanted.

‘If you were to agree, it could be done alongside the facial reconstruction surgery, and you wouldn’t notice a thing except for the sleeplessness. It would go seamlessly. You can’t get caught up with that ‘personal identity’ nonsense, that’s not science, it’s...’ he scoffed looking for the word, ‘psychology. It’s...’

‘Okay so, let’s hear it then Chief, go on. If my body isn’t me, and my mind isn’t me and is actually just a part of the body anyway, what is me? What is any of it? What are you?’

‘Christ alive,’ The Chief shook his head. ‘Does it matter?’

We looked at each other in silence. It was strange, but I felt guilty. He’d worked hard, and now I was turning him down. I’d turned down men before, and I usually managed to throw them some meaningless bone, but I couldn’t here. I needed my wits about me.

‘I’m sorry, Chief. It’s not going to happen.’

He shrugged dejectedly.

‘Well, if that’s how you feel, I won’t force you. You’re in charge, after all.’ The fire alarm stopped for a second, before it starting again aggressively. ‘You have to go back now,’ The Chief said. ‘They’ll start coming in soon when they realise there’s not a real fire.’

‘I think The Nurse set one, to be fair.’

‘Did she?’ The Chief raised his eyebrows. ‘So industrious, that girl.’

We sidled out together, shuffling through the empty corridors. The screaming alarm meant talking wasn’t feasible, and after the awkwardness of the rejection, I supposed that was for the best. The night, the smoke, it made the moment seem like a dream. The burning toxic waste bin was somewhere, but we didn’t walk past it. We reached the lift and The Chief pressed his keycard. We didn’t exchange goodbyes.

It can’t have been more than four or five seconds. My eyes had adjusted to the light by this point, so I saw my reflection, blurry and grey in the lift doors, my pretty girl’s face now grotesquely fearful. It was jolting. It was horrible. I loved it so much I could cry. I stepped in and went back down to my little morgue, back down to the sad girl/boy who would undoubtedly pummel me with questions, but the high from seeing myself, so big, so tough, so in control. It thrilled me. I was strong. I was awake. I was alive.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

The Chief

I remember those days through a filter of greys and browns, although that must be the influence of reconstructed memories, a symptom of too many films and television shows that paint the past in a dismal light. He was around fifty years old, whiskered to an extravagant extent, standing 5'7" while I, at the peak of my youth and fitness, was regarded as exceptionally tall. A serious man, he spoke of brain surgery, which at the time seemed like a fantasy. It was one of those stage-like lecture halls, and we meagre students sat in a circles above him while he waxed lyrical about the possibilities our profession held now that we could put patients to sleep, now that sterilisation was so effective, now we no longer had patients bite down on blocks of wood. He told us, his eyes bulging with excitement, about a future filled with tumour removals, limb reattachment, and brain transplants.

I still catch myself indulging in these bizarre speculations. I wonder if I could simply place Pete's brain in a grown, adult body. It would more humane. He'd certainly avoid the hell I've put my creature through. Would it be possible to achieve such a thing? If not, then do I have the fifteen or so surgeries left in me that would be required to help the boy? I wish

this could've happened when I was a young man, when the world was filled with desperately afflicted volunteers, back when medicine still had an element of the spectacular, the theatrical, and people opposed anaesthetic on the grounds that too much comfort was bad for the soul. I have no doubt The Nurse would agree with that sentiment, unsympathetic as she is to the necessities of modern comforts. I've seen her waiting till the very last moment to take her pain medication post-cosmetic procedure. She doesn't have much patience with my creature's supposed agony. Still, she seems to be enjoying herself:

'Faces are coming together nicely,' she said brightly one day, wiping down the tables while still in her paper, protective scrubs. She'd done a wonderful job of assisting me recently, taking on tasks and responsibilities which should have been far beyond her area of expertise. It was a shame that medicine could no longer be taught through mentoring. The girl said herself she wasn't bright when it came to examinations, but kinaesthetically she picked up protocol remarkably quickly, her black eyes darting this way and that, rodent-like in their swiftness and intensity. Despite her extreme and raggedy appearance, the whiff of infection and Savlon I pick up from beneath her scrubs, she was thoroughly clean and efficient when it came to the needs of the patients. I had no doubt she could've made an exceptional surgeon had the world allowed it.

'Yes, yes, they're coming together,' I muttered, tiredly. 'But coming together into what, I don't know.'

I was feeling morose. As the days wore on, I was less certain about the project, knowing things wouldn't be as neat and tidy as I liked. I was realising that the unveiling I'd imagined, with flashing cameras and wowed academics, was impossible. It was increasingly likely that the story of Cindy Reynolds' transformation would have to be brushed under the carpet if I wanted to keep my medical credibility.

‘Into them being happy, mate,’ The Nurse said, a firm look in her eyes that told me she had no interest in my whining. ‘Well, towards Cindy being happy anyway. I guess Patch just gets what he’s given, but if you ask me he’s got the better end of the stick.’

‘Do you really think so?’ I asked. I found it odd that when given the option between being a monster or a pretty girl The Nurse would think the pretty girl was getting the better end of the bargain; it seemed to me she did everything she could to make herself hideous. That wide black eyes, the rings of metal down her back, the tongue... I never claimed to understand the beauty industry, but she seemed like a perfectly normal-looking girl before, not quite as obviously attractive as Cindy was, but fine. Young at least. I tend to find youth makes even the plainest appear beautiful in ways they won’t appreciate until it’s far too late.

‘Oh, aye! Course I would! Wouldn’t you rather live your life being a normal girl than a medical experiment?’

I shrugged, indifferently.

‘Oh, maybe. Personally, I have a particular fondness for experiments. Oh, I just don’t know.’

‘What’s up with you?’ The Nurse asked. ‘You’ve been a proper misery all day. Are your legs giving you jip again?’

‘No,’ I muttered irritably. ‘It’s just this whole ordeal. I’m starting to think it might have been a mistake. A foot transplantation without the correct legal documentation is one thing, but *this*...’

‘Well, if she didn’t go to you she’d have gone to someone dodgy,’ The Nurse said. ‘You’ve done her a favour. Would you rather she got the surgery from you, or that she died next to some freak with a hacksaw and a cooler?’

I laughed.

‘You are morbid. Those things don’t happen in real life. At least they don’t now The Prince is incarcerated.’

‘Oh, lemme tell you, these things happen. My mate Chané wanted her nipples removed, right?’

‘Why on earth,’ I interjected, ‘would anyone want their nipples removed?’

‘Never you mind, you ol’ perve, she just did. Anyway, she went somewhere that did breast augmentations, said she wanted them gone, you know? Smooth all over, like a Barbie doll. Nothing doing. The surgeons were perfectly happy to cut them off, but on the condition that they’re allowed to put them *back* when they’re done. Chané said that didn’t matter. She’d fork out for a full reduction if they’d just take her nipples off, but no. Apparently it wasn’t a normative procedure. So she went to my mate... you know, the one who did this?’

She stuck her tongue out at me and wiggled the two ends up and down like a serpent.

I winced. ‘Yes, I’m familiar.’

‘Well, he did it for about fifty quid. Can you believe that? The breast reduction was heading on for five grand and she managed to get a quick snip and sew for one 100th of the price!’

‘And let me guess, they got horribly infected and she died of sepsis?’

‘No, not really,’ The Nurse shrugged. ‘She rubbed on a bit of antiseptic, managed to keep them out the sun, rinse ‘em off with salt water, and soon she were good as new. Unlucky for him though, she tagged him on her socials with pictures of it all nicely healed up. Some good Samaritan reported it all the police. He got done for GBH and were sent down for about ten months.’

‘Good lord.’

‘I know! Just when he were meanna touch up my legs and all!’

She shook her head, started packing up all her cleaning gear onto the trolley. I waited in suspense.

‘And so?’

‘And so what?’

‘And so why should I be grateful that Cindy isn’t going to some imposter? It sounds like it worked out fine for your friend.’

‘Oh yeah!’ The Nurse said. ‘I mean, sure, it were fine for her, but it weren’t for the idiot who performed the surgery. Just try not to be that idiot, I suppose.’

‘I’m not quite sure that moral message is particularly helpful, frankly.’

She shrugged.

‘Well, whatever. You’re in too deep now, Chief. You might as well stick along for the ride.’

Chapter Sixty-Eight

The Nurse

‘Why are we still here?’ Ruby moaned, leaning her forehead on my shoulder. She hated having to leave bed in the morning, and I only managed to drag her out by promising her a boozy lunch. ‘It’s been like, an hour.’

It had been ten minutes, but the daylight made her mardy. The bookshop were one of them chain ones where everything’s all sleek and shiny, and the staff look like they’ve got sticks up their arses (sticks they’re sort of enjoying). I’d steered clear of Young Adult. Patch’d grown out of that. I were trying out Modern Classics now.

‘Look, it’s for a patient, this technically counts as work.’

‘Oh please, if this was work you’d use the library. You’re buying presents for him to keep because you love The Monster.’

‘Let’s not say The Monster. Just one of my patients who likes to read, and I have to buy them books all the bloody time, because they read dead quick now, and if I don’t get enough they moan for ages and piss their wardmate off big time.’

‘Yeah, I know. Patch reads and if he doesn’t read, he winds up Cindy. Babe, have you forgotten we’ve met before?’

‘Shh! I’ve had The Doc in asking questions, we’ve gotta be even more secretive now. The truth gets round if you’re not careful.’

‘You’re *not* careful,’ Rubes said, pulling out her phone. ‘You tell me everything.’

I didn’t tell her everything, but I did tell her too much, and the worst part were Rubes couldn’t keep a secret for love nor money. Soon as my eyes was healed, that went right on the TikTok, videos of the two of us together, kissing cheeks, arms draped over necks, mouthing along to songs for the camera. #bodymod #bigtittygothgf. The affection were genuine but the posts were business. When your eyes are tattooed and your face is half plastic, you bring in a bit of a niche audience and Rubes wanted in on that. Good for bookings if you’ve got an online following. Still, I noticed I were waking up more and more often at her flat, and I never showed up uninvited. She could stand there all mardy and say I dragged her out of bed, but we both knew she didn’t have to come.

‘Just hurry up. I’m getting hungry.’

It were hard to know what to get Patch because I hadn’t read much myself, so it weren’t like I could just pop along to a bookshop and know what were good. I had to read the blurbs and that ‘cause if I got it a bit wrong, it were a right pain. I were still working through the books for adolescents, the classics that had been suggested by some internet list, until we had the ball-ache that were his *Catcher* phase. The last straw were when we got to *1984*. Fucking hell, what a ‘mare. Couldn’t get past the first few chapters without bickering.

‘So what’s the problem?’ he’d said, furrowing his big, old brow. ‘He has his own apartment, a television for exercise, only moderate pain...’

‘Cause it’s like, control,’ Cindy said. ‘The government tell you what to think, you can’t think for yourself.’ Little Miss Thing had got herself an A in GCSE English. I knew that because she mentioned it every time a book she’d actually read came up (not often).

‘You tell me what to think,’ Patch said. ‘Everyone is always telling me what to think. Otherwise I don’t know.’

‘Well, the people in *1984* like... they don’t have freedom.’

‘I don’t have freedom.’

‘No, not like that, it’s like... people tell you what you have to think and what you have to say, and you can’t challenge it or you’ll get tortured and brainwashed and killed. And you’re watched all the time. You never have any privacy.’

‘We’re watched all the time! We never have any privacy!’

Dear, oh dear, I thought. These fuckers have finally realised they’re in a dystopian nightmare.

Patch’d definitely surpassed Cindy in maturity by this point, but I don’t think she’d realised that yet. She just got aggy that he weren’t listening to her like he used to. There’d been too many philosophical conversations in that morgue as of late, it were starting to do my head in.

‘No dystopia,’ I explained to Rubes. ‘Nothing bleak. Too close to the bone, too much of a pain in my bloody neck. We want Utopia. Fantasy.’

‘Lord of the Rings?’

‘Not that kind of fantasy,’ I scoffed. I weren’t having our Patch end up one of them nerds with fake ears at a Comicon. No judgement like, but it seemed a shame to have them go from posh and cultured to ‘‘ere, Mr Baggins’ in the space of one poor decision.

‘I’m bored!’ Ruby whined. ‘Why can’t we get a pint? You promised me a pint. Ten minutes, that’s what you said, it’s been like four hours.’ It had been about thirty minutes to be fair. ‘Get him anything, get him the ones for 10p in the charity bin, it’s not like he’ll know the difference, it is?’

She were right, he wouldn’t. I would though.

‘Fairy tales were his favourite. What we really want is fairy tales for grown-ups,’ I said.

‘You know what I think?’ Rubes said. ‘I think you love those two freaks down there. I think you care about your patients more than you care about your girlfriend these days.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘You never used to,’ Rubes were smiling now, knowing she were getting my goat. ‘If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you had a crush on Patch instead of me.’

I scoffed. She didn’t know, obviously. Rubes still had the image from the newspaper in her head of that big, hulky, monstrous body. She didn’t know about the real Patch, the teenage girl from the neck down, bruised and wonky, the big sad face, the arms that still didn’t work and weighed too heavy, the lungs that didn’t fit. I didn’t know, now, whether to call Patch she or he or it or they or what. I don’t think Patch knew either.

‘Mythology!’ I said instead, to change the subject. ‘Gods and that, that’s fairy tales for adults, innit?’ I picked up some Ovid, a couple of Homers. Anything called

Metamorphosis had to be a good shout for our Patch. ‘Right. Now I’m done with *my literal job*, we can go have fun.’

‘Oh behave, you didn’t have to do this. You just love them,’ Rubes said, linking arms with me and sticking her tongue out. Funny how quickly her mood changes when she knows food and alcohol is eminent. ‘Anyway, mythology is bullshit. It’s just religion for ghosts. You want fairy tales for grown-ups, you should be getting him horror.’

Chapter Sixty-Nine

The Prince

The tea had arrived. The plan was in place. Tomorrow was the day.

The thought of surgical disguise was a heartache initially. Naturally, I was anxious about disfiguring myself, and I had witnessed first-hand the ugliness of the creature The Chief had built (ugly despite its parts coming from such beauties! My poor victims would be turning in their graves if, of course, they had had graves.) Still, an ugly face was preferable to one that would be hounded and chased by authorities for the rest of my days. I would be free.

One thing was for certain, The Chief and I were at odds. One of us would have to suffer were he not to cooperate. Unlike him, however, the only place I had to go was up. There was no further for me to fall. I held the chloroform vial betwixt my thumb and index finger, tipping it up and down and watching the clear liquid tilt as though inside a snow globe. The only thing left to do was act.

Chapter Seventy

The Doc

I sat across from Daisy at the kitchen table and I worried about interior design. What I'd once thought of as cute and kitschy now came across as gaudy and offensive when compared to her glamour, her blown-out hair, her drawn-on eyebrows. She pulled a pen out of her handbag, topped with a bobble head and feathers. No bitten down, fourth-hand biro for Daisy. She ripped out a page from one of my notebooks, so deftly it didn't even tear down the middle.

'Okay, babe,' she began, an Essex twang she wasn't born with affecting her speech, 'it's time for you to get your act together. You need to learn how to be a selfish bitch.'

I didn't think anyone in my family would notice me going insane. Then my sister turned up on my doorstep. Daisy was only a few years older than me, and permanently competitive in that sisterly way. She'd never found me cute. I'd always thought I might be winning in the competition of our lives, what with my medical degree, professional career, charity work, sexy older boyfriend, and flat...but now? Ha! No job, no boyfriend, and

diminishing savings. She looked around my flat with all its filth and set down her suitcase. I was forced to magnanimously accept defeat.

Thankfully, Daisy was a gracious winner. She'd always suspected that I'd looked down on her hair salon and her sensible husband (which I never had, except for thinking it was all so very boring), but all the same she wasn't smug when she realised I was a mess. Now, a husband and a salon sounded like a fantasy.

'Are you going to whip me into shape again?'

'Whip you *into* shape?' Daisy scoffed. 'Bloody hell, girl, that's the last thing you need! You need whipping *out* of shape. If you were a different kind of sister I'd pull out the prosecco and ice-cream, but even though you've spent the last five years with that scrounging alcoholic...'

'Raul liked a drink, but he wasn't an alcoholic.'

'Oh please, he absolutely was. Even *Mam* thought he had a problem, and she's Irish. Still, even with that hot mess, you always were more of a green-tea-drinking healthy vibe, weren't you?'

'Look, I know you think I'm extra disciplined,' I said, attempting to be tactful. Daisy had been overweight for many years now despite all the Zumba membership. 'But I've not been like that at all recently. I've been rubbish. To be honest, I could do with some of that 'green tea vibe' back.'

'Uh-huh,' Daisy said, her face unmoving. 'And tell me, sister dearest, in this awful depressive spiral, what was it you were eating?'

'Oh you know, just, whatever was in,' I shrugged. 'Tins and things. Cereal.' Daisy slapped her palms on the table decisively.

‘Exactly! Normally, depressed and heartbroken people at least have the decency to gain a bit of weight. Even when you’re at rock-bottom you still manage to be bloody self-sacrificing about it. Babe,’ my sister continued, biting back what I knew was irritation, ‘it’s not a good thing. Being harsh on yourself doesn’t do anyone any good, and it definitely isn’t something to be proud of.’

I flinched. ‘I’m not proud of it. Where did you get that from?’

‘Your face. And the fact I’ve known you forever and you were always donating your Christmas presents as a kid, I mean who does that? Our parents didn’t even give to charity, where did you get it from? Anyway,’ Daisy continued, sighing, ‘in the absence of wine, how can we let you relax? What did you used to enjoy before Raul?’

‘Oh I don’t know. I was doing Doctors Without Borders then. I loved that.’

‘Boo! Charity work. What else?’

‘It wasn’t just because it was charity,’ I said.

‘Boo! Normal work. What else?’

‘I liked the travel aspect,’ I said bluntly.

‘Okay,’ Daisy said, scribbling notes down with a slight nod, ‘I can get behind that.

We could go all Julia Roberts about this. Take a year off...’

‘A year! A week,’ I said.

‘Six months.’

‘Daisy, I can’t afford that,’ I laughed.

‘Ask for a loan off Mam and Dad, they were saving for another wedding anyway,’

Daisy said.

‘No,’ I said firmly. ‘Never. I don’t rely on Mam and Dad for money,’

‘No, not like the rest of us parasites.’ Daisy rolled her eyes. ‘You need this break and they’d want to help you.’

‘I could actually probably do it with my savings if I did the backpacker hostel thing,’ I started.

‘No hostels,’ Daisy responded, fiercely.

‘I don’t mind them though, they’re quite exciting.’

‘Mary, you’re nearly forty. No hostels.’

‘You know very well I’m thirty-five, but fine. But I’m not borrowing off Mam and Dad.’

‘Okay, great,’ Daisy shrugged. ‘Spend your own money and call me if you need to transfer over some Deng or whatever. Just get yourself on a beach.’

Chapter Seventy-One

The Prince

Ah, I was in motion! My tincture had proved spectacular, and my performance as a corpse could not be faulted. They moved me roughly to a body bag to take me to the unsuspecting Chief. The sense of excitement and adrenaline more than made up for the undignified means of transportation. I'd always detested being crammed into small spaces, but prison will tease out the pettiest of peeves from the proudest of men.

It was cold. I worried that the shock from the ice might kill me before I had the opportunity to even make demands. If I could have seen anything at all it might have been my breath in the air, but I was in darkness, wrapped in a body bag having loosely stabbed air holes through the top with Pete's handy little 'shiv'. It's hard to focus on thoughts of vengeance when one is so preoccupied with physical impositions, but I managed well. If I hadn't been pretending to be a corpse, I may have laughed aloud in the thrill of anticipation. I was ready. I felt free.

The jerks and bumps of the road meant nothing to me. I thought that perhaps I would recognise the route, but more often than not when we slowed and I felt we must be approaching the end of the journey, it turned out to be a turn or roundabout, and we were back off at top speed again. Eventually, I heard the engine turn off. I heard the talk of guards. The back door to the van opened. I was being taken to the morgue where they had plans, no doubt, to slot me in a freezer like a packet of fresh salmon, but not before an autopsy. Not before I managed to The Chief. I felt the knife tucked up my sleeve for safe-keeping and shivered with joy. Even if I failed and didn't manage to carve my way to freedom, I would at least still go out fighting one last time. The chatter of the hospital surrounded me and I felt positively *sick* with excitement.

The knife too I'd gained with the help of my prepubescent friend. I'd hoped he might be able to grab me something from the hospital (how ironic it would be to threaten The Chief with his own scalpel!) but he merely managed to sneak something from one of his extracurricular classes. It wasn't as long and beautiful as I might have liked. I pictured something sharp, sleek, silver and dangerous. This was a flat and serrated knife with an ugly brown handle, the kind of weapon which suggested I needed to saw rather than stab. Ah well. Needs must. I could only hope it wouldn't be too sadly missed by the cobbling club.

I felt the roll of a trolley beneath me, heard the dinging of the lift. The rest of my body dropped before my stomach did as I slowly descended into the morgue. I heard the excited chatter of the nurse who had received me:

'Alright knob'eads, do I have a treat for you?' The lid of the icebox opened and light rushed down with the warmth. I felt my eyelids flicker and opened them wide, willing myself not to blink. I knew from experience that most corpses were left with eyes open unless their lids were lovingly closed, which of course would not have been. 'There's holes in this. Is the prison system in that much of a state?'

‘I don’t want to see him if he’s dead,’ a gruff voice answered in response. ‘I wanted to kill him myself.’

Now who was that, I wondered? Certainly, not The Chief. Perhaps another vigilante member of the public who gorged themselves on feelings of moral superiority. The zip was opened roughly and the worker leant forward to survey me. I gripped harder on the knife. I tried to glance around as stily as possible, craning to see The Chief, but alas, he was absent. I would have no choice but to make these hospital workers collateral damage on my way to him; an awful inconvenience I didn’t anticipate. The woman, if one could call it that, looked at me with strange black eyes. She stuck out her tongue in concentration, and good lord, was it forked? Had the tincture failed and killed me outright? Was this a demon and I in hell? I must have visibly shuddered for her eyebrows raised in surprise.

‘Yeah I don’t think he’s dead, pal,’ she said. In a rush of adrenaline, I went to slice at the woman, but a brutish hand had me by the neck against the metal drawers. I recognised that hand. I’d seen it before. And the arm. And that snarling brutal face, and I felt this person, whoever they were, should have already been dead because I was certain that I’d killed them. But no, I hadn’t killed them. I’d let them run off and escape into the darkness. This was The Monster, the one that I had abandoned in that terrible farm on that terrible day, the creature that awoke with the yellow, uncomprehending eyes, glaring at me mercilessly, but then, the eyes were different, and yet somehow familiar. This creature wasn’t the same one, but still I recognised it.

The smirk from the creature brought on the clearest recollection, reminding me of her voice coming towards me through the dark, *They’re coming for you*. The sound of sirens. The end of it all. That same smirk met me from different lips.

‘Cindy?’ I asked, through my restricted windpipe. She was monstrous and hideous and I couldn’t believe that this mess of a creature was what I’d sacrificed my freedom for.

‘Oh,’ the creature growled. ‘This couldn’t be more perfect.’

Chapter Seventy-Two

The Monster

I don't get many opportunities to use the idioms I find in books. After all, my world is very small. I can't say that the sky is raining cats and dogs when I never get to see the sky, or that I know anything like the back of my hand when the back of my hand has so recently been exchanged. However, it's with pride that I can say after Cindy grabbed The Prince by the neck and squeezed him until his eyes went red, when she dashed his skull against the concrete floor so that his cheek split open like a pomegranate, when she jumped up on down on his ribcage until bloody vomit dribbled down the side of his mouth and it was clear he was already dead, that she really did look like the cat who got the cream. I said as much to her:

'You look like the cat who got the cream.'

She laughed a little, shakily, jumping on the balls of her feet. The Prince's body was a mess. I had to pull my foot in towards me so the blood wouldn't touch the toes. The Nurse looked around in disbelief.

'Right. I'd better get a mop.'

She squeaked past me to the lift, her little, white tennis shoes now coated red around the rims. I worried about the footprints she'd leave through the corridors.

'He was alive,' I said, incredulously. 'I don't understand. How was he alive?'

Cindy laughed.

'I don't know, but it was great. I saw a little flicker and I went for it.'

'It was just so fast,' I said. 'If I hadn't heard him screaming...'

'Oh, how *great* was the screaming?!'

'If I hadn't heard that I would've thought he was dead!'

'Well, usually the ones that come down to the morgue are,' she laughed.

'So, what are you going to do now?' I grinned. Cindy's good mood could be infectious, especially since it was so rare. We hardly ever had moments of celebration, although I didn't like to dwell on what we were celebrating. I think The Doc would be saddened to know I felt joy at the death of another, even someone who had so totally ruined our lives.

'Well, I'll have to help The Nurse with the mopping and that,' she shrugged. 'And then I don't know. What can you do to celebrate in a place like this? Ask them to put some brandy in the coffee? Extra cup of jelly?'

'I meant in general. Now you've killed him, what are you going to do? Wasn't that your whole plan for when you got out?'

Cindy stopped and tilted her head slightly.

'I don't know,' she said. 'Huh.' She sank back down to the floor, her knees up against her chest. She didn't look sad, exactly. Perhaps a little confused.

‘I suppose that means we can probably stop the surgeries now.’ I said hopefully. ‘I mean, now that you’ve killed him, which is what you wanted, and you’re not beautiful anymore. There’s no reason to keep going.’ The more I spoke the more excited I grew at the prospect. No more pain. No more amputations, no more stitches, no more examinations with The Chief. I could finally leave. We could run away somewhere where no one would find us. I dreamt of cold, wooded areas with fresh air and trees reaching up into a never-ending sky. I dreamt of The Doc, of finally finding her, letting her take me into her arms.

‘No, we’ll keep going,’ Cindy interrupted, shrugging. ‘We have to at least finish this.’

‘But we have, haven’t we? Surely nothing is the same part anymore. There’s too much scar-tissue for this to be the same body.’ I knew I sounded desperate. I couldn’t help it. Too quickly I’d got my hopes up. The lift dinged. The Nurse came back through, half-heartedly trailing a bucket.

‘Right then, who’s helping me?’ she said.

‘I don’t feel like it.’ I stood and, leaning against the wall, hopped to the other side of the morgue, stepping over The Prince’s brain. I accidentally touched the blood, which I hated. I’d been trying so hard to avoid getting dirty, but now I left a footprint on the tiles just like The Nurse’s.

‘Ooooooooooh,’ Cindy sang sarcastically. ‘I know what’ll cheer her up, I’ll tell a story. “There was once a brave, beautiful, idiotic little girl called Cindy Reynolds...”’

‘Oh aye, and did she know how to get teeth out of linoleum? Because that’s all I’m concerned about right now.’

‘Don’t interrupt! I’m trying to tell it right.’

‘Oi, Patch, come on, mate. Help us out.’

‘Ignore her, she’s sulking,’ Cindy answered for me. ‘Now anyway, where was I?’

I slid down the wall, wondering when the story would end, wishing that I didn’t have to be a part of it at all. I clenched my eyes shut once again and waited for the world to fall away.

Chapter Seventy-Three

The Doc

I'd stayed away from the news on purpose, partly because it reminded me too much of evenings with Raul, but also because I'd been far too wrapped in conspiracy theories to allow myself to get swept up in any further tabloid frenzies. Cindy was receiving treatment and it was out of my control. The Prince was in jail and they weren't going to let him out for the rest of his days. That had to be enough for me. What I hadn't realised was that his days would be quite so numbered.

It's impossible to avoid the world's gossip even when you spend most of your days inside the house. I was trying to be good, drinking green tea, scrolling through Airbnb listings, keeping gratitude journals to stop myself from spiralling. It was an improvement on where I'd been before, but I still had to be careful. After all, I hadn't left the house for months and lived on a diet consisting of trail mix and black coffee, and now I was cooking wholesome, nutritious meals, although I missed the ease with which I kept off the pounds when I was eating next to nothing. Even when I'd been pregnant, I hadn't gotten any bigger. Daisy swore by weight-loss as a means of recovery.

‘If you refuse to indulge, then you might as well get that revenge body,’ she said. ‘Get on Insta, let him know what he’s missing.’

I thought back to that wall of photographs, the pert breasts and toned stomachs, and reeled. I doubted he was missing much.

My need for nutrition, and my family’s insistence that I lived a normal and functioning life, forced me to leave the house on occasion. Meandering through food stalls was something I’d always planned to do when I retired, alongside tending my own garden, travelling the world, picking up painting, looking after my skin and nails... but these days it was just another chore that involved too many interactions with kind people who made me want to cry for no real reason. It was hard, but it was working. Occasionally, I’d even manage to catch a whiff of happiness when I saw something like strawberries back in season. I was staring at the strawberries when it happened.

‘Alright, darling? Two baskets for three pounds. Low prices today. I’m celebrating.’

I’m smiled.

‘Why’s that then?’

‘Haven’t you seen the rag?’ He pointed to the cross-hatched headline on the board outside the newsagents.

‘THE PRINCE IS DEAD’

‘Oh,’ I said, not really knowing how to feel. I felt compelled by my usual etiquette to say something about the tragedy of death, but there was nothing positive to say about The Prince. Still, I couldn’t celebrate. Having him die didn’t seem like a clean enough resolution. Really, I wanted him to spend years and years locked up without the privilege that was

afforded him for the first three decades of his life, but I wasn't sure I wanted him to die. It seemed like a callous thing to wish for. 'What did he die of?'

'Says there,' the green-grocer replied back to me. 'Fainting fit. Passed out cold.'

I scoffed. 'No one dies of a fainting fit, we're not in a Brontë novel.'

'Exactly! If you ask me, it's all bollocks,' he said, shrugging.

'What?' I asked.

'Oh come on,' he laughed. 'Fainting fit? At his age and health? After what he did to all them young girls?' He shook his head, disgusted. 'You ask me he was knocked off in prison. By prisoners or guards, I don't know. I don't really give a fuck to be honest. It's the least he deserved.'

'Hmm.' This kind of talk was usually the exact kind of thing I disapproved of. I was a believer in rehabilitation, in government that went beyond primitive notions of revenge. I was primed to say something firm and disapproving, but I couldn't bring myself to. I thought about Cindy, so troubled. She'd never recover. I used to believe that hope was possible in all cases involving the psyche, but Cindy convinced me otherwise when she told me about his tongue on her phantom limb in that little, bitsy voice of hers sounding at once like a threat of violence and a plea for help. Suddenly, the idea of him killed by others didn't seem so terrible.

'I love strawberries,' I said. 'I'll take two baskets.'

'Lovely jubbly.'

On the way home I bought a cream cake from the bakery. I wasn't one for baking things myself, but I did manage to decorate the thing with the whipped cream I had in the fridge, the same can I used to squirt into my mouth for a moment's energy when I felt like

fainting a month ago. I placed the strawberries neatly around the edge like little blood drops. I twisted and ripped off the green ends and placed them pointy-end up. It wasn't the wholesome meal I'd planned for, but sweetness is necessary in times of celebration.

Chapter Seventy-Four

The Nurse

I were proper shaking when I stepped out. Could barely light my fag my hands were that bad. Them stupid acrylics weren't helping either and eventually I threw my lighter away, half hoping it'd explode. I couldn't get the image out of my head, Patch with his little hands clamped to his ears, holding back tears, Cindy laughing like a schizo, while I trailed a mop hopelessly around a lake of blood watching it spread and spread, not getting clean, just making a mess. I don't know why that did it. The Prince were a piece of shit who deserved to die, but looking over at Patch my first thought was to laugh at how silly he were being, before I realised that I'd just seen a murder and my most distinct, instinctual feeling were annoyance at the mess.

Patch looked like Cindy back when I'd first met her, except without all that pretty hair and with a lot more scars. Eyes all misting over, he turned and faced the wall and I just thought, *fuck's sake*. I can't keep letting them do this to him. He's just a little girl getting chopped up for no reason, and now he's stuck in a hole with a murderer. The *state* of Cindy too. She were uglier than Patch ever were. More stitches, less cuteness.

What the fuck had I gone and done this time?

I don't know why I were surprised that I'd fucked up again. It weren't exactly like I were known for being responsible. I were never the friend that parents liked. I got my belly button done when I were twelve with a fake ID. I'd smoked as long as I can remember, were nicking me mam's fags when I were nine or ten. If it weren't for Craig, that access course, and the fact I really, *really* wanted to move out, I doubt I'd ever have got much of a proper job. But it just never came naturally, smiling and friendliness, being *good*. Louise were always expert, she got all the good report cards. *Such a lovely girl* they said *so sweet, so polite*. I didn't know how to be polite. Well, I knew how, obviously, but people thought I were being sarcastic when I tried. Eventually the scowl became comfortable. Resting Bitch Face, they called it. If you scare people away just by staying still, you're not a rude disappointment, you're just a scary bitch.

I didn't wanna be a scary bitch. I wanted to be as little and vulnerable as I felt. I wished I'd never had the damn surgeries, the stupid tattoos. Days like this I wanted to be fresh and baby new, downy hair all over my body, flawless skin, soft and unblemished. I'd literally cut scars into myself to avoid that a few weeks ago, and I'd grinned at the sight of the blood dripping down making pretty, liquid patterns. Rubes had been there to help with the bleeding, posting the video on her Instagram. *Good to know it's not self-harm if the scars are pretty, babe*, she'd said. I'd ripped my tongue in half and shuddered with euphoria.

Cindy Reynold's were fucked in the head. She weren't gonna be happy with this new body. I'd be looking at doing time too, no doubt. If I weren't a criminal before, I definitely were now I'd cleaned up her Prince pulp.

I went straight to bed when I got in, next to Rubes, still in my blood-covered scrubs. She didn't notice. I thought I'd sleep on it, see how I felt. Maybe this were just a bad day,

like. Deep down though, I knew something had shifted. I wondered how The Chief would react to the murder, if he'd feel as squirmy and weird about it as I were, but I remembered who it were I were thinking of. The Prince were meant to be dead anyway. He'd just be glad Cindy saved him the paperwork.

I don't know how I did it, but I got through the next day. I work up at six and showered. I swallowed food that made me feel sick. Most importantly, I stood by for their last operation. Patch and Cindy, new murderers, partners-in-crime, lay there in front of me gassed out and ready to exchange eyeballs. There's something about eyes that's extra weird, int there? I could handle exchanging the limbs and organs no problem, but it's weird removing eyeballs. They looked so white to me. I suppose I were used to my own eyes by now. The entire operation I handed over tools, I stretched forehead and cheek flat, I shone lights in the dark corners of their skulls, but I felt a lump in my throat like I'd swallowed one of their eyeballs and got it jammed in there. My heart felt electric. I was too exhausted to think, and too hyped-up to faint.

After their operation, I were dead on my feet. I should've driven home, but I didn't because that knotty feeling in my stomach from the night before hadn't gone. The murder still weighed heavy. I still felt strained, tense, and weird. I went to the town centre and found a quiet bar with enough corners that I wouldn't draw attention. I knew that I weren't going to work the next day. The Chief said he'd sack me if I took any more time off after all that post-surgery sick pay, but I didn't give a shit.

I think that's when I knew I were gonna do it. That tiny decision not to go into work made the big decision much easier. I got ready. Deep breath. Bit of Dutch courage. I ordered a bottle of wine then thought, fuck it, Prosecco. I might as well make this a celebration. I drank on my own, looking down at my phone and trying to distract myself. Pretty, little

pictures on my Instagram feed, daisy tattoos on hippy ankles, stretched ears, t-shirts with vampire teeth saying 'this bitch bites'.

I went outside for a fag, three quarters of a bottle down. It weren't rainy, but it were damp so no one else were outside. I sat on one of the rotten, wooden tables. There was fairy lights strung round the trees as though to cheer the place up, but it just looked sad. No one else were outside. That were a good thing. I bit the bullet and dialled, surprised to find I had a lump in my throat as I heard the dial tone:

'Hello, 101, how can we help you?'

'Hi,' I said. 'Erm... There's something real bad going on at Rompecabeza Hospital. I'm a nurse there and I've seen some real dodgy things. Fuck. Sorry. I don't really know where I'm meant to start.'

'Don't worry, love, whenever you're ready,' the lady said. It occurred to me that this were the nicest someone I didn't know had talked to me for a while. It were probably because she couldn't see me. I took another sip from the Prosecco bottle; the glass they'd tried to hand me had gone by the wayside.

'Thing is,' I said. 'They're doing summat bad to Cindy Reynolds. Patch too, you remember the monster on the news around a year ago? Let me start from the beginning.'

Chapter Seventy Five

The Victim

I came round from the anaesthetic and I smelt decay. It must have been a long operation. I attempted to sit up. It ached to do this.

People were coming, I could hear them. I think their boots might have woken me. Perhaps I was hallucinating. I opened my new eyes slowly and waited for the blurs to form into shapes. For a second I was scared I was back in the cellar, but no. I peeled off the bandages and it slowly came back to me, the metal drawers, the dim lights. I felt the table underneath me and remembered where I was. Turning my head to the left, I saw Patch, still wrapped up, murmuring, awakening.

I couldn't fully lift my head up. This scared me, and I remembered what it felt like back then, waking up with a concussion, The Prince smirking down at me: 'Alas, my sleeping beauty awakens with a kiss.' He was holding my old foot then, rubbing it up and down the sole. That image was still imprinted on the back of my new eyelids. I could still feel his hand. It was sweaty.

I couldn't lift my arms either. The lift door dinged.

'Jesus Christ,' someone said. I turned my head and recognised them as normal people, policemen, not hospital workers.

'What is that?'

In the distance I heard retching.

'That can't be Cindy Reynolds.'

There were tears on my cheeks. I could still cry.

'Am I hideous?' I attempted to say. I wasn't sure if they could understand because even to me it sounded like garbled nonsense, a tongue too large for my mouth working round the teeth I hadn't brushed in months. Was it the anaesthetic or had The Chief given me Patch's tongue too? I laughed as they approached me, still crying from the relief of it all.

'I'm hideous,' I screamed again and they backed off slightly. At first I hadn't believed The Chief's ideas would work, but now they all looked horrified, holding their stiff little batons as if to make sure they were still there, but none of them would touch me. Thank God, they'd never touch me. No one would touch me now.

Chapter Seventy-Five

The Monster

‘I’ve got Cindy here,’ a strange voice said. My eyes were still bandaged. I heard them coming towards me while Cindy was still laughing in her loud, staccato way. Everything had a strange, dreamlike quality, and it didn’t help that I couldn’t open my eyes. They were still wrapped in gauze. I rocked back and forth trying to find comfort. Apparently, rocking is the body’s muscle memory from being cradled as a baby. I pretended I was on a boat in the ocean, travelling further and further away. I was Odysseus enjoying the slow course of the journey, the adventures and peril that went along with it. The rising hairs on the back of my neck made me aware that someone had crouched down in front of me.

‘Cindy? Is that you?’ the strange voice said, gently, in an accent I was unfamiliar with. Not since The Doc had I been spoken to so gently, and the tone made me want to burst into tears. It’s perhaps for this reason that I felt compelled to nod. I wasn’t ready for his kindness to melt away when he realised who I really was. ‘Don’t worry. I’m Officer Kirwin from the Norfolk Police Department. We’re here. You’re safe now.’

He placed his hand in mine and squeezed it before helping me upright.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked, my voice croaking, a lump in my throat. I was scared to let myself cry. I was sure the salt would hurt.

‘We’re taking you home,’ he said. ‘I need back-up,’ he whispered to someone who wasn’t me and I felt another arm link through mine.

‘What home?’ I said.

A third hand grasped my elbow firmly. This hand I recognised, it was rough and large. My saviours, whoever they were, reacted violently.

‘Get off her! Put your hands in the air,’ Officer Kirwin began to bark. ‘We will use force!’

I couldn’t even begin to defend her before they’d jumped in to protect me from what was essentially one of the only friends I’d ever had, the only person in the universe who understood a fragment of what I was.

‘Wait, no! Cindy!’ I called out.

‘Yes,’ she replied, firmly, her voice low and serious, ‘You are Cindy. Cindy Reynolds. You’re finally safe from the clutches of the madman. And so am I. You’re Cindy Reynolds. I’m The Monster. You’re safe, and you’re going to go home.’

‘We said, get your hand off her!’ Kirwin said, and then I heard the blow. She didn’t react, but that wasn’t surprising. Why on earth would she react to a baton when she’d lived by the scalpel for a year now? Her hand remained on me.

Although I couldn’t see her, I could picture her face exactly, could feel it focusing hard on me and willing me to understand. It was a face I knew so well, a face I’d seen across this room for most of my existence, a face that seemed just as much a part of me as my own. I

felt I was being torn away violently from a conjoined twin. While I was expected to rejoice, I was suddenly so terribly lonely.

‘But what about you?’ I whispered.

‘Baby, I’ll be fine,’ she laughed. ‘I’m made of sterner stuff.’

I felt a gentle squeeze before she, finally, let go.

‘Come on,’ the officer said, clearly distrusting of me now that he’d seen I was friendly with Cindy. That was how I learned an important lesson about the world. If you associate yourself with freaks and victims, a lot of the kindness people might initially offer you goes away.

When my stomach jolted, I realised we must have stepped into the lift. How many times had I craved that lift? I heard the bustle of people around me. Phones were ringing, wheels were pushed on linoleum, and I was aware that I knew these sounds, but it had been so long. There was the unfamiliar stomp of boots and sirens coming closer as they half walked, half carried me. I could hear gasps and tuts from what I guessed were patients and hospital workers, but I could sense their reactions were different to what they had been before. I was pitied now instead of feared and I felt relief settle on my shoulders so powerfully that tears gushed from my eyes and dampened my bandages. I was right. It did hurt.

‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ the officer continued to mutter as he guided me, and soon I heard the swoosh of sliding doors and I stepped outside and felt a coolness from the wind that I hadn’t experienced in so long. I gasped and nearly collapsed.

‘Woah, there,’ the officers said, holding me up. ‘Come on, you’re tired. We’ll get you home. Your father’s waiting for you.’

I was sobbing completely by then, despite it stinging my wounds, gasping in breaths whenever I could. The significance of what Cindy had gifted me became apparent. I had her life now. A second chance.

‘Thank you,’ I cried, supposedly to the officers but I knew I was sending my thanks all the way down to the morgue, to Cindy. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you.’

Chapter Seventy-Six

The Chief

I was too tired for proper measurements. He was maybe 5'6", definitely not a tall man, and he might have been even smaller than that. These days I tend to exaggerate the height of others since I'm using myself as a yardstick, and I daren't measure how much shorter I am now. His skin was dark. He might've been of middle-eastern descent, not that I could tell from his surname since I'd barely paid attention during the formal introductions. I'd been too dazed by the spiralling disaster that was the twilight of my life. I couldn't guess his age. He may well have been a teenager. His face was utterly lineless and his brown eyes were wide and soft in an undefined and chubby face. It seemed cruel to have someone like him question me. I might have preferred a terrifying drill-sergeant type. That would have at least flattered my ego. This kind-faced, confused young man added salt to the wound.

'Do you know why you're here, Dr Stein?' he asked.

'I'm not sure why I'm here without a solicitor present,' I said, with my only intention being to demonstrate soundness of mind.

‘That’s fine, if that’s what you’d like we can rearrange this for another time. We’ll have to keep you in custody, of course, but we’ll allow you to contact your preferred legal aid.’

‘I’m being held in custody?’ I asked, sighing. ‘I don’t believe that’s legal, I don’t even know what I’m being charged with.’

‘Doctor, you were read your rights when you were arrested. We have you for endangerment, GBH, FGM, violation of medical ethics...’

The list went on. During the arrest, everything was so chaotic, with the staffs’ confused chattering, the hysterical laughter of Cindy, my monster rocking back and forth, its hands clamped over its ears, the bandages around its eyes, wailing. I’d taken it all in with a recognition that what I was witnessing was my horrifying and total failure. This was a mess I’d created and would now never have the opportunity to put right. I’d wanted to introduce the world to an omelette and had been interrupted in the middle of breaking the eggs.

‘If you want to continue tomorrow with your legal counsel, we can.’

I looked back at the Sergeant’s kind eyes, the confused, wheedling expression.

‘Oh, what difference will it make? Do you think there’s any chance that I will leave prison alive, lawyer or not?’

The boy shrugged, almost apologetically.

‘It’s really not for me to say but... At your age it would be very unlikely. You’re looking at ten years minimum. Probably more.’

I would never have admitted such a ludicrous notion aloud, but I now realised that in all of this work, I’d intended to make myself immortal. It was a thought I’d never truly allowed myself to have consciously, but which must have been brewing in the background.

My plan was to train others, starting with The Nurse of course, to perform the surgeries, replicating them exactly so that my body would get increasingly younger and I could leave behind some of the aches and pains that had afflicted me so badly. Amongst all of my nervous obsessing, I realised that I was going to die, probably quite soon, and there was nothing I could do about it. No one would mourn me. With the research interrupted, I wouldn't even leave a proper legacy. What an absolute waste of time it all turned out to be.

‘Well, fine then. I suppose there’s no point denying something so blatantly true.’

‘Your cooperation will benefit you,’ the police officer said as he went to a new page in his notebook.

‘In what way?’ I muttered, rolling my eyes.

He ignored the question.

‘Right, well, let’s start from the beginning then, shall we?’

Part Three



DR EVIL SENTENCED TO LIFE

Leniency plea approved for

‘demon nurse’

The medical trial of the century has reached its conclusion with the sentencing of Rompecabeza Hospital’s Chief of Medicine Dr Francis Steiner, known to the public as ‘Dr Evil’. His testimony revealed a supposed organ-trade with ‘The Prince’ (serial killer deceased in custody), and details of a strange body swap experimentation. Dr Steiner was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment in a secure mental health facility. While plea for insanity was granted, the consequences are minimal considering the doctor’s advanced age.

The whistleblowing nurse, famed for her online ‘Only Fans’ presence and extreme body modification – many of her procedures were completed by Francis Steiner during her employment – received a six-month custodial sentence due to her cooperation with the police throughout the investigative process. *Continued on page 3.*

‘Please give me space and privacy’

Cindy Reynolds, survivor of ‘The Prince’ and victim of Dr Evil’s body swap controversy will begin attending her local university to study Classics this autumn term. She has asked for space and privacy so that she may focus on her physical and mental recovery. Her semester is due to start September 2019, while she will be living in student accommodation. Further details can be... *Continued on page 8.*

Murder House Sold

After six-hundred years with its aristocratic family, the mansion in which the Prince’s 14 known victims were mutilated and killed has now been sold. The buyer has stated they intend ‘to respectfully honour the Prince’s victims though education’.

No statement could be obtained from the Prince’s family who are believed to be living abroad in their Bali summer home. They have been silent since the arrest and subsequent death of their relative in custody. *Continued page 15.*

ICE, ICE BABY. The next scientific breakthrough, could below zero ice baths be the first step in finding the cure for cancer?

After a lifetime confined to a hospital ward, Creature A has been granted a holiday! Funding has been awarded to the New Hope Scientist research company to test the limits of human resilience in the North Pole. The team are due to set sail in the next two months.

“The possibilities for discovery here are endless. We are so excited to take advantage of this opportunity, and were delighted to find out Creature A was willing to assist!”

Creature A was unavailable for comment, though authorities assure us it is keen to get started.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

The Monster

It's tough to tell if I am well or not. My new body aches with every step and I cannot know for sure if this is a permanent fixture or if, with time and patience, I will overcome it. Quietly, I am confident.

'Cindy, you're doing so well,' one of the physiotherapists said, a glint of pity in her eyes as I lumbered painfully upstairs. Of course, they couldn't know that my living experience thus far on earth had been spent in varying degrees of agony. In my head, I felt a *smugness* as I thought to myself, no one should ever underestimate a monster.

Undoubtedly, much has changed. I am not as beautiful as Cindy ever was, although every part of her now seems to be mine and vice versa. The news came out after The Chief's arrest. We heard about the partnership, the exchange of body parts. When Cindy found out she was made up of The Prince's other victims, she vomited. I worried she might regress and get depressed, but after a little while vomiting and crying she ended up laughing. She laughed for a long time, and I couldn't get her to stop. I took this as a positive sign.

At my conception, I was a mere amalgamation of pre-existing parts, most feminine due to The Prince's predilections, but the external appendages male thanks to The Chief's

antiquity. Cindy exists presenting the skin and bones from so many that The Prince has hurt. I find this ironic considering his touch is what she wanted to avoid, but she wears it as a badge of honour these days. Perhaps now he's dead it means something different. It feels cruel to say so, but she is ugly. As am I, I suppose, although less than I used to be. Still, the tight, white skin grafts between all the repeated stitching mean I'm no supermodel.

Together, I sit with Cindy and we are ugly. I visit her whenever I can. I feel it's my duty, as though I need to show her what I'm doing with her body, although she appears entirely indifferent. Cindy doesn't leave the house now. She sits in a council flat and smokes too many cigarettes outside the window, perching on the sill. Strangely enough I feel irritation at the thought that she's destroying my lungs before I realise that they're no longer mine and perhaps never were. Who knows how many smokers' parts this Cindy could be made from?

'How's Dad?' she asks.

I smile in a way I would like to be comforting.

'Fine! Keeping fit. He's thinking of an early retirement.'

Cindy snorts, an ugly, snotty sound. I cringe, at first in repulsion and then again in shame. I now know how I must have appeared to the world.

'He can't afford to retire.' Cindy flicks her fag out of the window. 'Not with those trolls to support.'

I flinch.

'Actually, Cilla and Cherry have been better than you give them credit for.'

But she'll hear none of it. I can never be sure if the abuse she experienced at their hands is real or not. She warned me all about it, how they would torture and hurt her, how her

step-mother resented her. They would all want me out of the family home, she promised. I went in fully prepared to be meek and obedient, to give them no reason to spring to immediate cruelty, but it never came. It seemed that the moment I was bashful, they relented, and now they smile at me with a mixture of guilt and pity. Cindy doesn't want to hear this. She winces when I speak of it. Sometimes, it seems as though she would prefer me to be in pain just to be sure that others have suffered as she has, just to be proven right. This is an ugly side to Cindy. All her sides are ugly now.

'Wait and see,' she mutters gravely. 'They'll be plotting something.'

But whether they are or not means little to me now. I've flown the nest (a good expression I'm pleased to be able to use) and I'm completing my further studies. I went through clearing and received my predicted grades, a kindness from the school who were happy to see me alive and keen to return to normality. Now, at eighteen, like any other teenager, I'm a student.

I study Classics: Ovid, Milton, Homer. The words delight me in the way that stories always have, tales from past kingdoms with heroes and villains, devils and angels, adventures and metamorphosis, with protagonists and antagonists alike growing into things spectacular. I hear stories of scorned women becoming rivers to flow along with the tears that roll down their cheeks and I pity Cindy even further. These women turned into something beautiful. She had to turn into a monster. But then a monster with legs and arms that can move and speak and fight. Better to be a Gorgon than a stone.

What I wanted never really came into account, but on reflection, I suppose that normality would've been the aim, and to the best of my ability I'm achieving it. People see my scarred and beaten face, my prosthetic limb (reaching up to the knee now) and they know my story. So often I am told that I am 'brave'. I appreciate the sentiment, but what does it

mean to be brave in the face of things you can't control? You may as well say the sea is brave when it's blown by the wind; that those starving are brave as they persist in existing while they wither and shrink, their body preparing to die.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

The Victim

Once upon a time, there was a dickhead who decided that a butterfly defined them as a person. They looked at their shoulder blades and believed that there should have been wings there, but instead of dissecting insects and finding some sadist with free time and a sewing machine, they went two-dimensional and got the thing tattooed. I doubt they ever considered whether or not this was clichéd. Worst of all, it wasn't even well-done. It was a scratchy, flat drawing that looked like it was maybe done in Ibiza, maybe in a mate's garage.

Now, whenever people look at me, they'll wrongly assume that I'm some dickhead who's decided that a butterfly represents who *I* am as a person. On questioning (not that anyone dares get close enough to question me) I'll need to think up a decent excuse. Maybe I've always admired a butterfly's freedom of movement; that seems like a profound thing to admire. Maybe I like the nature of their physical development; they come out beautiful and graceful after weeks of dissolving in goo, waiting it out in a cocoon before dying a matter of days after they become conventionally beautiful. Maybe, I'll tell them, it's because butterflies

are fucking pretty, and I like, and they should worry about their own bloody shoulders. Either way, I'm not lasering it. I like my body as it is.

I spend a lot of time admiring it now, observing its new dips and curves and elephantine proportions. It reminds me of being twelve again, back when I was delighted by my newly developing hips and waist, my breasts that came in heavy and large (and yet I only ever had modest tufts of blonde, soft pubic hair). We'd been told in sex-ed that these changes would make us feel sad and strange, but that was never my experience. I had seen people who looked a little bit like me in films and dancing in music videos, flat-stomached, soft-breasted, long, blonde hair, fair skin, big eyes. I thought of Britney and Shakira, collapsing against walls while they sang their stupid songs, gasping out words over the poppy beats. I loved the way that velvet and fishnet looked on their glistening skin. They didn't seem human, but carved out of steel or marble, so smooth, so flat, so perfectly formed. And then, against all odds, I found it happening to me.

Every change brought on a shock, a kind of narcissistic thrill when I realised this was going *exactly* how it was supposed to. My other friends were horrified by their newly growing toe-hair, the black spindles that managed to craft a trail all the way up to their belly-buttons, their breasts that just weren't coming in no matter how much they willed them, the blood that stained their pants a disgusting brown instead of the hot, shocking red they'd imagined. Of course, I had to find ways in which I was lacking too so as not to seem arrogant, and I publicly condemned the non-existent fat on my hips, the sagginess of my large and pert breasts, my flat bum. Soon, my protestations turned into real-life insecurities and I genuinely did find myself skipping meals whenever I found myself a pound over what I saw as acceptable, saving up for surgery to make myself less messy *down there*. I thought that I deserved to be the best of all the options, completely perfect and flawless, like I too was carved out of metal and perfectly, perfectly smooth; a vintage car, a brush of paint, a

varnished table-top. Now the things I find repellent, tacky, and ugly are my favourite features.

This butterfly confounds me. It's on a feminine torso, but the breasts have been removed, and now I'm twisted and deformed, like I'm looking in a circus mirror. Mismatching legs, mismatching arms. I wonder why The Prince didn't keep them all together, paired like socks in a drawer.

And my face. My bulging eyes that caused me so much agony, the broken rugby player's nose, the lips that were always cracked and busted.

I touch myself. Sometimes it gets sexual. When I used to masturbate I imagined people watching me. In my new body, I couldn't give a fuck if I look good, crouched down and animal, pumping away at an organ I've only just met. I know that if my genitals hadn't been removed and reattached, I would spurt everywhere and love it. As it is, I just stop playing when I'm bored.

Chapter Seventy-Nine

The Nurse

I never understood people who say that if you shag about you aren't loyal. Rubes is a reet slapper, but no one can say she int loyal to me. She visited me at just the right time, on one of them weeks where I were feeling dead shaky, barely eating from the lump in my throat. I weren't gonna cry. You didn't cry in prison unless you had a bloody death wish.

When they said I had a visitor, I assumed it were my mam, who came every other week. Me mam dressed up for prison, always wearing blazers with trousers or a pencil skirt. Her 'interview outfits', as she used to call 'em. She'd stick on a little lippy and clutch at her handbag the entire time. I thought it were because she'd wanted to look nice for me.

'To what do I owe all this effort, aye? Whappin' out the Marks & Sparks, I must be special,' I said to her the last time.

The look on her face told me she were still fuming, not least because she'd had to take the nightmare drive down to visit me (four hours, no motorways, a ball-ache I was well-aware of).

‘Don’t be daft, Steph, it doesn’t suit you.’ Me mam sniffed. ‘I just don’t want anyone in here thinking you’re from *that* kind of family, even if you *do* act the part.’

Funny how everyone posh I met on the nursing degree wanted to pretend they were rough as arseholes, but me mam wore a suit to prison so no one thought we was *that* kind of family. And we *was* that kind of family! Craig had been done for D&D twice, *and* our Uncle Jack did time for laundering. Her suit had been bought in January sales anyway, so she weren’t all that.

I didn’t know if I’d be able to cope with another stiff conversation. Still though, as much as she did my head in, in a place like this, you need your mam. I followed the stream of inmates out into the visitation room, and there were Rubes. No suit for her, pure tartan skirt and holey black jumper from the charity shop. She winked at me.

Forget me mam! This was loads better! I rushed her off her feet in a hug, ‘till the bloody guards stepped in.

‘No contact!’ We broke apart.

‘I take it you’re happy to see me then?’

Then I were crying, my head in my hands so grateful to see her despite my vulnerability, my dumpy tracksuit, my greasy hair (you rushed your showers in prison).

‘Um... You okay, hon?’ she asked me, and through the snot and tears I found myself laughing because my girl were here. When I finally stopped crying she asked how I were doing.

‘Yeah, you know, fine.’

‘Are you joking? You just tsunami-ed all over me.’

I laughed.

‘Look, it’s emotional, but I’m fine. I get on alright.’

‘You know, back home you’re a bit of a legend. Famous even.’

‘Am I?’

‘Yeah. You get a lot of publicity because of how you look, you know? Everyone thinks you’re a freak.’

‘Lovely.’ I rolled my eyes.

‘It kind of is. There’s fan clubs online where people want you to step on their throat and shit. You’ve got that freak Dom energy, baby.’

That would explain the letters I’d be getting. Nudes, locks of hair, confessions of undying love... Apparently it were quite common for serial killers, but I were just there for medical incompetence. It weren’t exactly sexy.

‘When you get out of here, your OnlyFans is gonna pop off,’ Ruby said, sincerely.

‘Good. I’ll need the income.’

Half an hour never seemed so bloody short. When they let her go, I could sense she were relieved, which hurt, but I got it. Prison’s a horrible place. Rubes had a life outside where things were still in colour. It were sweet of her to pause that for me.

‘I love you, you know that,’ I told her. She kissed me, and even though we was technically allowed one to say goodbye, they shouted at us anyway.

‘That’s enough!’

‘Alright!’ Rubes shouted back. I guess we wasn’t demure enough for their liking. She looked me in the eyes and held me by the shoulders. ‘It’s a few more months,’ she said. ‘You keep your head down and your nose clean, yeah? Don’t let them break you.’

I smiled.

‘Don’t worry, babe. If they break me a little, I’ll just call it aesthetic.’

Chapter Eighty

The Chief

Male, 6'1", well-built, blueing tattoos, male-pattern baldness, mid-forties, disconcertingly strong. I hoped he thought me pathetic, that my stooped and geriatric frame inspired pity instead of disdain. Thankfully, he seemed somewhat sympathetic to my cause.

'Oh, so it's you, is it? Dr Evil?' he asked.

That's what they called me in the press. It was a nomenclature to which I could scarcely live up.

'The one and only,' I said. I doubted my dry manner of speaking would work well in prison. If misconstrued, it could come-across as blind arrogance. Though I suppose blind arrogance wasn't the worst position to adopt. After all, The Prince survived prison. It was Cindy's vendetta that got him in the end.

My bunkmate nodded.

‘Well, I’m top bunk, but providing you respect that, and you keep the place *clean* we’ll get on just fine.’ He had a slight rhotacism that I could attribute to the loss of a few important teeth. I prayed for it to be a result of poor dental hygiene and not violence.

‘I wouldn’t worry. My bones are too stiff for ladder-climbing these days.’

I shuffled past to perch on the stiff mattress below, having to duck to avoid the cheap metal skeleton of our bunk bed. Naturally, there was no chair, or indeed any other furniture present unless I felt like relaxing on the privy (which seemed precarious). I took advantage of my only option and lay down on my mattress, ready to sleep. After the legal battle, which was less of a battle and more of a baseless attack, it was almost a relief to understand what I could expect. This was home now. There was little I could do about it.

‘I hope you won’t think it rude of me to sleep,’ I said. ‘I really am awfully tired.’

‘Nah, don’t worry, mate. We’ve time enough to get to know each other.’

It occurred to me I didn’t know his name, but I didn’t want to ask. I closed my eyes as he settled on the top bunk. The mattress squeaked as he settled into place. The noises of him getting comfortable were distracting, inconsistent enough that I couldn’t even allow them to become a wall of white noise. My eyelids flickered in irritation.

The slats beneath his mattress were metal. Whether that was to give the place a colder, more oppressive feel I wasn’t sure, but metal has the awful quality of being reflective. My bunkmate truly was clean and tidy. Clearly, he kept the bed frame polished.

I saw my face, in slices, above me. Old. Wrinkled and exhausted with hanging jowls and eyes that seemed more bloodshot than I could ever remember seeing them before. I shut my eyes again, tried to crawl onto my side, but the bed was too narrow for me to hike my knees up effectively and I was forced back onto my back. I would get stiff in this position I knew, and with stiffness came immobility, which brought on the paralysis and already I could

feel the crushing sensation on my ribcage. I tried to clench my eyes shut. If I opened them I was sure to see the face. Hours passed and I tried to count my breaths, to forget about my sorry reflection, and when my bunkmate started to snooze (of course, I was paired up with a snorer) breathing thickly and methodically, I couldn't help but hear the iron lung, the sheets too tight around me.

I hoped that when I died, mercifully soon I hoped, they'd allow me to be cremated.

Chapter Eighty One

The Monster

‘I am living for this look.’ Cilla’s voice is quiet, her breath hot near my cheek.

‘Yes, queen,’ Cherry adds, picking another song on Youtube.

After years of stumbling through and perfecting the English language, I’ve learned that there are thousands of languages to stumble through and perfect, and Cindy’s sisters’ Rupaul-flavoured dialect was just one small part of it. Of course, I knew from the books I’d read that there were different languages, but it always seemed nonsensical, like dragons or fairies, mystical, foreign and strange. Now, I wander around campus and hear a cacophony of different sounds, and every time my head snaps round so I can stare like a child at a magic show. I love languages. Like me, they’re built from bits of predecessors, making up something more modern, more continental.

Is that how I see myself now? Continental? I must admit that when I sip my coffee in the university café, snacking on my cakes and scones (everything seems unnaturally delicious after a lifetime of hospital food) I do feel somewhat proud of how I must come across to

strangers. When people see my scars, they flinch, but then recover with a soft smile. These are the kind of deformities that inspire pity instead of fear, and these I can live with. Injury can be assigned a cause whereas before I was just a sinister freak. When the pity becomes tiresome, I have other alternatives to make myself seem pretty, or at the very least normal.

The paints I use across my face hide many of the surgical scars. It took me a while to get used to the themes and styles of beauty that were socially accepted. I learned that chocolate brown foundations were not appropriate for my pale face, and glittering pinks and golds didn't fit girls of my age. Cindy's sisters help me. They showed me how violent, red lips suit almost everyone, and a splash of blusher was all someone of my complexion needed. The bleak, clownish masks I initially put on my face weren't fit for public consumption, but with some slight blending I pass for normal. No one needs to know my story from a glance, though they can tell something's amiss from a stare.

'If you contour, you won't be able to tell your nose is broken,' Cilla says, again in that lovely low voice. It is so intimate that my head tingles. This, I know, is sisterhood.

'How did you break yours?' I ask, stroking my finger down her long and crooked nose.

'Seriously?' she jerks away, anger in her eyes. 'One of your arsehole prom mates hit me with a hockey stick in games in Year 10. Don't you remember?'

'Oh.' Poor Cilla. 'Yeah, of course. Sorry.'

She shakes her head, her voice goes back down low.

'Whatever. It was a long time ago.'

Cherry has put on a foreign song because she knows I like it. This is another thing we've bonded over. French is my favourite of the unknown languages. It sounds so soft, like

a whisper, while the tongue sits thickly in the head. I wonder about my tongue's originator, one of the only parts of me I haven't exchanged with Cindy. My tongue tip points down. I know this because I checked it with Cilla and Cherry in the fun game they taught me called: 'Can you roll your tongue?' and I found that I couldn't, but I also saw that their tongue tips pointed up. I looked online and realised that this meant my tongue perhaps came from someone who spoke a language with Eastern European routes. It may have been taken from a Russian or Bulgarian woman. In my formative years, I twisted it up and round to learn the sounds of English, but even though my tongue no longer knew those foreign words, its instinct still told it to lay flat in preparation to speak... what? What language would it have been? And what would it have said?

'Cherry, can you play Pussy Riot?' I ask, suddenly craving something Eastern European. My musical knowledge too has developed quicker than I could have fairly expected.

'Which one?'

'Organs,' I say.

There are so many secrets held in this body of mine, and I want to learn them all. The list of The Princes' victims is exhaustive and very few have been named directly. Too many were sex workers, and I've learned people think very little of them. Still, I agonise over the pictures in the newspapers. Is that nose like the one that used to belong to me and now belongs to Cindy? How about those ears? That chin? There's so much I torture myself with in the pursuit of self-reflection.

There's little time to learn everything I want to know. I feel joy in life beyond the pain I suffer, where positive sensations like taste and beauty, art and stories fill my soul to bursting, and I almost want to cry at the futility of it all. When I read about ancient

civilisations, it occurs to me that these stories were born perhaps a thousand lifetimes ago. As humans, our stories are painfully, tragically short.

But then do I need to die at all? Could I replace myself time and time again with newer parts? Live forever through the various body parts of others far less fortunate? Who knows? I'll leave those kinds of fantasies to The Chief.

'Right, Cherry, you're up. Cindy's finished,' Cilla says. I feel sad as she pulls her face away from mine. I wander to the wardrobe mirror to see myself in the glass. Cilla has used highlighter on my cheeks. They glitter as I move. I feel ethereal.

'I don't think I've ever looked more beautiful,' I say.

When she gets up to hug me, there are tears in Cilla's eyes.

Chapter Eighty Two

The Victim

At eighteen years of age, it felt about the right time for a gap year. The problem was I needed a new passport. My recent makeover made me unrecognisable to the border security. And god, the bureaucracy! Did I tick the male or female box? Where exactly was I from? Was I human or pet, and then who does the paperwork? No passport, no backpacking in Australia with other perky and excitable teenagers, the gap year dreams were left as pure fantasy. I accepted my awfully grey, British fate. That was until the researchers got in touch.

‘A new phase of experimentation in thermoregulation, homeostasis, and vasoconstriction,’ their frantic letters stated, ‘a chance to save countless lives in the upcoming climate disaster’, ‘invaluable for innumerable generations’. HA, I laughed, I’d heard that one before. Unlike The Chief, however, these researchers offered generous financial compensation. I thought, fuck it, it breaks up the monotony of anticlimactic masturbation and cups of tea with Patch, so I said yes. It’s not like I could get a regular job looking like I do.

I call them ‘the researchers’ because they were too homogenous to bother distinguishing. They all had the same beards, grown in advance to handle the harsh, Baltic conditions. They all wore the same protective gear. Only one of them ever spoke to me (in my head I called him Rasputin) and I could tell he found it arduous. Still, they needed me more than I needed them. There was just one of me. I was gold dust. Every scientist wanted to play. Their funding was extensive. They could take me to the ends of the earth.

We travelled by ship mostly. For the initial flight to Greenland I was nervous. I was chock-full of splints, and I wouldn’t let anyone touch me. I told my pal Rasputin that if anyone tried to graze a hand up my leg, I would snap it from its arm like a twig from a branch.

‘I will go first and speak to security,’ he said, with a tone that suggested I was being precious.

He gestured at me through the barriers and they waved me right through with no bother. It was the smoothest airport process I’d ever experienced. To top it all off, when we waited in the airport bar, someone slammed a pint in front of me. They didn’t know who I was, of course. Just saw a big man looking injured and dressed up in survival gear.

‘Thank you for your service, Sir.’

I raised the glass to them.

‘Don’t mention it.’

In the whole world there is only one body like mine. These scientists are so stupidly careless with it. I’m used to the boredom – I got plenty of that in the morgue –but the cold is new. I’ve never been so frozen that it hurts before. In a strange way I enjoy it; nothing wakes you up faster than a quick sharp slap with a Baltic wind. I was warned it could get up to minus 70. That’ll whip anyone’s eyes open.

Because, yes, despite it all, despite the murder of The Prince, despite the new body and the feeling of safety, I still can't sleep. For a while after I killed him I was sleeping like a baby, but it didn't last. Soon there were the jolts awake again, the screaming, the panic that there were others who were like him because I'd seen the television shows. There were others just as keen to rape and mutilate and kill.

I had to understand them, but my research attempts weren't scratching the surface. Into Google I typed:

Why do people kill?

Why do people kidnap?

Why do people like feet?

And at best I got some WEB MD bullshit about psychopathy and at worst I got a virus after streaming a six-hour documentary on Ed Kemper. This was going nowhere so I welcomed the paid holiday with Rasputin and his friends.

Ten grand total. More money than I've ever seen in my life. All I have to do is stand about in the tundra, get dipped into ice baths, and then sit while my chilblains are examined by these boring men with bushy beards. God knows what they say about me. There's an amalgamation of languages flying about. Once I asked them:

'What's the point in all this?'

'The pursuit of knowledge!' Rasputin said.

'The pursuit of knowledge has taken me to some very extreme places.'

As I stood outside their base, the electrodes on my skin, nothing to do but stand and think, an ice-cold clarity hit. I remembered all the documentaries, the web pages, the theories, and I realised what these men had in common, the ones that killed, and fucked skulls, and

sucked toes, the ones who'd ruined my life so that I could build it up again. No wonder I didn't get it at first. The concept was an enigma to me. But since I didn't get to have a mother, I'd learned to get a grip. Those other monsters weren't so lucky.

A few hours after this unspoken epiphany, the scientist called me in for unrelated reasons. They had a nice long talk in Russian while I warmed up with a coffee. The conversation got heated, with much gesturing and sighing. Rasputin eventually rubbed his temple and turned to me.

'We will be heading back soon,' he began. 'The experiments are done.'

'Has it been six months already?' I asked.

'No. There are concerns about your condition. We'll go back via Russia and get you the medical attention you need for your frostbite.'

'What frostbite?' I said. He gestured vaguely to my mouth area, and I suddenly realised that, while the coffee mug was warm on my fingers, I couldn't feel it as it rested on my chin. I touched it. There was a crunch. The black lump of flesh that was once a chin was now held between my fingers.

Chapter Eighty Three

The Monster

Female brain. Male brain. What does any of it actually mean? It seems like most people think that kind of thing is nonsense, but the difference comes up constantly and I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about it. I should have kept notes on my experience with the changing of genitalia, but that barely seemed to matter at the time, not compared to how much everything hurt.

Tiresias changed from a man to a woman and also lost their eyes. In the higher powers' obsession with sex, Tiresias was blinded for giving the wrong answer. I suppose this obsession must be universal. It definitely fascinates me, if only because I don't quite understand why everyone else finds it so fascinating. The Doc never told me about these things. I don't think it appeared in The Chief's radar either. I sometimes try to think about him making love, perhaps to The Nurse with her sticky, black lips and various piercings. It's easy to imagine The Nurse being sexual because I've seen some of her pictures online. The Chief is much harder to imagine. I picture him bored, lying flat and geriatric on a bed with a single white sheet, watching a clock on the wall while The Nurse writhes on top of him. The

thought makes me uncomfortable, so I don't dwell on it, even though it's of my own invention. I think I preferred it when I was innocent.

As it currently stands, I'm an eighteen-year-old girl. Or at least, I am physically. Mentally, who's to say? One year old, technically? How old was the brain donor when they died? And is it a male brain? Female? It brings me comfort to think that my brain belonged to a woman, and I argue it's likely since The Prince's victims were women, but then, The Chief made sure I was male in all the areas where he supposed it counted, and I can't imagine he would allow the brain to slip him by.

Tiresias said that sex was more enjoyable as a woman. I wonder if there's truth in that. I never found sexual excitement as a man. I was a child: injured, mute, and hidden in the dark. Later, there was always Cindy screaming, curled up in the corner, offering no privacy whatsoever. I pondered love, but my body wasn't something to be touched sexually. Even when the books I read got heated, it felt like something that simply couldn't be for me.

Tiresias suggested that women cum harder and for longer. Hera didn't like that comparison. It's frustrating to know that I've been one of the only creatures able to answer this age-old, mythical question, and I never took the opportunity to answer it.

But then, I suppose I'm not the only creature.

I know a girl. A woman really. A mature student in her early twenties who exudes more confidence than the rest of us lowly freshers put together. She wears her hair long and plaited. She wears pretty summer dresses year round, often in floating white material. I've heard her explain to others that she always liked the aesthetics of Greek mythology. I think that's why she chose the name 'Athena' for herself. Her voice is gravelly, as though she's been smoking cigarettes since birth. It's rare to see her outside lecture halls without a fag in

her hand and a circle of confidants, who she entertains with her natural exuberance. She too would theoretically know the answer to Hera's question.

I tried to copy Cilla's technique, but it didn't work the same way. I'd taken it too far. I walked into a seminar with glittery pink eyes and sparkling cheeks. I heard some snickers. I didn't understand why and in my ignorance presumed it was because, despite it all, my scars were still visible.

'Are they doing face painting in the square?' someone asked me, and I shook my head at the exact same time that a handful of others started laughing. Shamefully, I felt my face grow hot, which I knew made the scar tissue stand out.

'Hey,' Athena called over. 'I love what you've done to your face.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, it's campy. Iconic.' She nodded approvingly, although she wasn't wearing make up at all.

The lecturer came in who, although I am aware it is impossible, did seem old enough to have heard Cicero directly, and silence settled over the room. I didn't focus on a word that he was saying, even though those lectures often made my days worthwhile. I felt hot and uncomfortable, hiding my face in my hair.

Chapter Eighty Four

The Victim

Oh, it must have been embarrassing for her, just awful. She finally had to sell up. Course, the mansion had to go, the amount of hate mail was unbearable, not to mention the shit through the letterbox, the red paint splashed up the windows. It had been in the family for generations, and it all ended with her shit-for-brains, pervert son. Now to see the state of it, you'd never believe its prior grandeur. They had turned the cellar from my nightmares into a tourist attraction.

Bali was a beautiful destination, and I was thrilled to finally get the chance to do my cliché, teenage backpacking amongst blue sky and white sand. The resorts were absolutely luxurious but nothing was quite on a par with The Prince's beautiful summer home.

I tortured his mother a lot *physically*, obviously, but I relished the specific agony created by psychological torture. I read to her from the Trip Advisor site of her old home. They'd turned it into 'The Norfolk Dungeons'. Actors in white face-paint with old-timey clothes, fake hacksaws and the awful, awful dungeon decorated with false cobwebs. I wondered if they could still smell my blood.

‘Please stop,’ she’d begged me. ‘Oh, please! Haven’t I been through enough?’

By this point I’d removed her feet and I assumed that was what she was referring to, until she gestured with her hands to the beautiful, adobe building we sat in, a bedroom flooded with natural light as she lay on a carved-wood four poster.

‘Exiled from my home country! Our name in tatters. Tortured by a monster, a leper!’

‘Do you know you don’t have feet right now? You’re never going to walk again. You probably won’t *live*.’

‘A mercy, a mercy,’ she cried, grasping at her neck as though holding pearls.

I had planned some more violence. I wanted to jump on a head again, to get that taste of vengeance crushing the life out of her skull with big, meaty hands. Physical prowess was something, but psychologic torture were great too and, unlike my beefy hands, that mean girl ability to pinpoint an insecurity and twist the knife in, well, that was mine from birth, baby.

‘Yelp says four stars! Good acting, a great day out for the kids, reasonably priced. Excellent facilities. Location a bit of a pain, too far to drive from the city centre. Bummer. Maybe your ancestors should have considered that, hey?’

‘The facilities! Oh, they’re using our toilets, it can’t be, it can’t be!’

‘This one’s only two stars. *Total waste of money. My child was terrified and slightly pushed an actor, after which we were asked to leave. Awful way to treat customers.* Two stars seems harsh to me, they say on their website that the actors can’t be touched. I mean, they’re human beings, right? You and I both know the awful consequences of disrespecting bodily autonomy. Look at the stains on your bed sheets. They’re ruined.’

‘Stop, I beg, I can’t take it. Not the reviews, not your rotten face, none of it, please, just let me die in peace.’

‘General consensus though is that the parking is great, five stars all round.’

Chapter Eighty Five

The Monster

Athena has this way of teaching me new words without even knowing she's doing it. The development of my socially-anxious state was gradual, but since being forced into new social circles at university, it is now in full force. It's because of this that I no longer ask what words mean, but instead bury them away to look up later, alone. This began when I asked a classmate what he meant by the word 'misanthropic' and he stared at me as though gauging if I was joking before finally defining it for me in a sentence that began with, 'Wow'. I felt uncomfortable at the time without knowing what I was experiencing. I recognised his tone later, after some self-reflection, to be one of *condescension*. So, I keep my uncertainties silent until they can be resolved with the help of online dictionaries and scribbles in my secret diaries.

It's in this way that Athena helps me learn.

During a drizzly October fair one day, we were walking slowly, arm in arm, through an array of flashing lights and rickety rides. I will never understand why people choose the artificial experience of danger to alleviate boredom. I couldn't stand the steam of screams rushing past me from train cars, even though their joy was evident. It reminded me too much

of Cindy. Athena tore off cloud-like bites of tri-coloured candy floss, popping them first into her mouth and then mine while I cherished the sensation of her fingers on my lips.

‘I always love candy floss for the first few bites and then after about ten minutes I start to feel sick,’ Athena said. With a flourish she dropped the sticky, plastic bag into the rubbish bin. My heart sank as I realised that was the end of our sharing sugar. I didn’t know when we’d next do something so intimate. ‘And it’s terrible for you. I probably won’t have any teeth left by the time I’m forty.’

‘Why did you buy it then?’ I asked, bumping my hip into hers, an attempt at flirtation that I’d copied from her.

‘Oh I don’t know. I suppose it makes me feel nostalgic, you know?’

I nodded, but I had no idea what she meant. I hadn’t intended to dwell, but I must’ve looked pensive because she paused in her walking and tilted my chin with her finger so that I was forced to look in her eyes.

‘You alright? You went quiet for a minute there.’

Immediately I broke into a grin. She winced, so I let it falter. I shook my head, started again.

‘I’m sorry, I’m fine. I’m just having a good time with you and I’m a bit nervous,’ I said. Honesty had proven to work best whenever I accidentally found myself behaving oddly in a social situation. As it turns out, *most* people feel scared of social interaction *most* of the time, which raises the question of why we feel the need to do it so often. Athena smiled and took my hand in hers.

‘You and me both, kid. Here I am with the famous Cindy Reynolds. On a date. What did a gender-fuck like me do to deserve this?’ she laughed.

‘Well you were beautiful, kind and exceptional. I think that means you probably deserve anything.’

I didn’t intend this as flattery. It seemed perfectly true to me. However, it must have been as effective as slaughtering dragons or picking up lost treasures from the bottom of a river because she kissed me, beneath a Ferris wheel, surrounded by awful dance music and the sickly smells of vomit and cheap cider.

As soon as I was home, still breathless and giddy from the buzz of it all, I googled the definition of nostalgic.

*The adjective **nostalgic** is often used to describe someone who is homesick and wants to be back at home with family. It always involves a wistful memory of times that now seem better or simpler. A **nostalgic** feeling can involve home and family, but it can also involve a longing for long-gone moments.*

I knew I could never experience ‘nostalgia’. I had no family or home. My time at university, supported by Cindy’s father, was the first time I’d ever experienced anything that could be counted as simplicity, and even this was fraught with the constant worry of being found out. The only thing I had that was like a loving family was The Doc, and she was gone. I suppose I had Cindy when she came back from travelling. Was that a good thing? Self-pity crept in as I thought about my childhood, a lifetime spent in pain and dejection.

Then I thought of the kiss with Athena. I wondered if maybe in the future I might also feel nostalgic when I taste candy floss or hear dance music, when I see the flashing lights of a fairground and smell the sour apples from spilt cider. As someone who was rarely able to use

idioms before, I discovered with joy that I knew exactly what I was feeling. I could describe this wriggling sense of love and nervousness. Athena had given me butterflies in my stomach.

Chapter Eighty Six

The Nurse

I kept my head down, like Rubes said, and two months later, I were free as a bird. Free, but I couldn't go back to nursing. Free, but no money. Free but back in me mam's spare room while she cried at the state I'd got myself into.

Sex work got me through, financially. You can do it from your bedroom. Money drops into your account without you having to think about it. Turns out there's a big audience for people who look like me. Take that, Mam! Told you them piercings were a good idea.

Still, I lie on my single bed sometimes, looking up at my old Kerrang! posters and I feel like crying. Nowt ever goes to plan, does it? I tried to explain that I did it all for our Craig: I got into nursing to help Craig, and got myself struck off trying to help him too. But he never asked for my help. He were fine.

I stroke up the side of my legs, and I'm grateful. I have to remember this body is who I am. It's not just that I have tattoos on my legs. I *am* the tattoos on my legs. I am this body, and even if I'm no longer The Nurse, I'm still me. I know that when I stroke myself, the double sensation of touching and being touched reminds me, I am still here. Even if I cry a bit, I'm glad I'm still here.

Chapter Eighty Seven

The Victim

I wake up with the sounds of the Kolkata slums surrounding me and I feel fine. The smell of fried samosas filters in through the gaps of my makeshift teepee. So far I've acquired a metal plate and cup which serves me for all my chai and breakfast needs. I eat outside using my remaining fingers as cutlery. People are kind here. They won't stand to see someone go hungry, even when that someone is hideous and deformed.

I did spend a fair amount of time in Bali, chilling out on the beaches while The Prince's mother rotted in her blood-soaked bedsheets, but when my nose came off, it seemed like a sign. I couldn't live in the Prince's shadow forever. It was time for me to move on.

But where could I go where they'd let me rot in peace? I thought about what the posh bitch had said when I killed her. She thought I was a leper. Well, lepers still existed, right, living in their little colonies, infecting each other, starving together and wasting away? Vague memories of sanctimonious saints flashed through my mind and I aimed for India.

If I was Jack Kerouac, I'd describe the bullet trains through China where I was left to slump against the walls of shaking carriages, and the way people backed away as if what I had was catching. I'd describe the changing shape of faces and the flash of mobiles where people tried to take my picture when they thought I wasn't looking. I'd describe the crowded

trains of Bangladesh where I clung onto the door frames with my few remaining fingertips, thrilled at knowing any second I could slip. I'd talk about the superstition of those who muttered incomprehensibly when they saw my face, gifting me with free food so that I might leave them alone. But I'm not Jack Kerouac. I've never had that kind of ego.

I didn't find the leper colony of my dreams. That travesty, I learned, has since been resolved with antibiotics, but it hardly mattered. People still pitied me tremendously. They thought me terribly deformed. They let me set up my tent and ignored the stench of my body when I flung off the clothes I'd been wearing for weeks of travel. I'd grown to love the pungent scent of my own flesh, the rich sweat that hung around me. To think I used perfumed soap on my vagina just to make sure I was completely undetectable, scrubbing away at my vulva to wash away the discharge, until it backfired and I found myself stinking of fish. Despite my growing appreciation for primality, I was glad when one of my neighbours allowed me to borrow some water to wash with.

So, this is where I'll end my days. Maybe I'll start to learn the language. Maybe I'll get bored and travel on. I might even end up back in England, though I doubt it. But piece by piece, all of me will fall away, and I will be free. Already I feel lighter. The chatter of Hindi surrounds me and I'm grateful. Knowing I have nothing to do for a while, I settle back into a doze. Sleep doesn't bother me now.

Chapter Eighty Eight

The Monster

‘Cindy, can I ask you something?’

We were in her dorm bed beneath a white duvet sharing a single pillow, but I felt like I was in a grand four-poster draped with furs, indulging in the same luxury I used to fantasise about in the morgue. The window was ajar so that air could circulate and get rid of the smell of cannabis, and I could hear birds twittering and the casual laughter from young people walking past in their soft canvas shoes. Everything felt gentle in the world.

‘You can ask me anything,’ I said, my eyes still closed.

‘Why did you get your tits done?’

I paused. Moments like this brought a jolt to my stomach. I was reminded, brutally, of how much I was hiding from Athena and why I had to do so. It wasn’t that I couldn’t trust her with the truth. If there was anyone I could tell, it would be her. The problem was I might be rendered insane. I’d heard of asylums for people who told stories as ludicrous as mine. The thought of further incarceration made me sick to my stomach. I shrugged.

‘I don’t know. I suppose I wanted them done. How did you know they were fake?’

Athena laughed.

‘Well, I’ve seen my fair share of women’s bodies and I suppose that I’ve developed an... ability? No, that sounds too crass, awareness... of the natural breast? Oh God, is that pretentious? It sounded fucking awful when I heard it.’

I relaxed. Sometimes I needed a reminder that, despite her appearances, Athena was as awkward and new to all this as I was.

‘I don’t know, I just wanted them. I wanted a normal body.’

‘What was wrong with them before?’

Sometimes I would love to tell her. I would love to say that I was made up of the parts of a serial killer’s victims, crafted by a bitter, old man who wanted me to be male; that I was picked apart and replaced piece by piece to appease the demands of a traumatised young girl who wanted nothing more than to be monstrous; that in something, not quite compassion but perhaps convenience, this same creator had allowed me to appear somewhat normal, and that to avoid the confusion of such an unthinkable explanation it was decided in unspoken agreement to swap lives with this girl so that I could pretend to be something nearing conventional. To do that would hurt both me and Cindy. Instead, I shrugged.

‘Nothing, but I wanted a new body after everything and this seemed the best way of doing it.’

‘Oh God,’ Athena said, a hand to her head. ‘Oh God, I’m sorry. You’re so well adjusted that sometimes I forget what The Prince put you through. Of course, you’d want to change your body, I shouldn’t have even asked.’

I interrupted her self-flagellation with a kiss.

‘Don’t worry about it.’ I smiled. ‘I don’t mind answering questions. God, I’ve had so many surgeries now to help me feel more comfortable in my body. Sometimes I don’t even feel like the same girl.’

‘I can appreciate that,’ Athena said, laughing. ‘I mean really, I can.’

‘In fact,’ I bit my lip in thought, then continued. ‘In fact, at the hospital no one even called me Cindy. It didn’t seem to fit. They called me Patch because I had so many surgeries. All this stitching, you know?’

‘Patch! Oh my God, that’s adorable. Like a little blanket!’

I kissed her shoulder, moved so that I was lying on top of her.

‘I can still be a blanket. Keep you warm at night.’

Athena smiled broadly, her eyes rolling back in disbelief, her hand found my neck and we kissed.

‘How on earth did I get so lucky?’ she said. The breeze tickled my ear and brought chills up my back, just as she lifted a knee up to separate my legs. I finally knew what the big deal was, and I felt exactly the same way. Lucky.

Chapter Eighty Nine

The Doc

What are people meant to do when they're finding themselves? I'd imagined if I hopped on a plane with a suitcase and enough euros to buy a body-full of seashell jewellery, then I would eventually figure it out. Perhaps I'd find myself at the foot of the Parthenon, and I would stare up at the exceptional buildings and become aware of my own insignificance and how inexplicable my own existence was. As it turned out, the Parthenon was very hot and crowded, so after a quick tour I went back to the beach.

Athens was filled with rubbish and graffiti. Anarchy signs were painted over lettering I couldn't understand. Everyone was kind to me, far friendlier than I anticipated, as though they could tell I was recently heartbroken and in need of extra caution. They gave me free drinks with my meal for being so pretty, (Ha! With my poorly highlighted hair and fresh new wrinkles, I highly doubted it.) A few days into the holiday I realised that there was no law against sitting on park benches and reading books as the world went by. No one here knew me, and so there was no expectation to behave in any particular way. I could be self-absorbed and strange and no one would care.

Little by little I started to enjoy some semblance of peace. The end of my relationship required self-reflective quietude. I existed wholly for myself.

The problem was, I'd never done that before. I'd always looked after others. I knew, though never dared admit it, that if I was feeling unhappy or depressed, usually because I was terrified that things with Raul were falling apart, or because I'd had a bad day with The Chief or a tragic patient, then the person I'd call would never be my friend who gives the best advice, or my friend who seems to have it all together, but instead my friend the alcoholic, my friend who had been sectioned, my friend who at forty-five still presumed that they might lose their virginity one day. And this wasn't sadistic. It wasn't a case of competing or wanting to mock them so I could feel better about myself. It was simply that I knew if I asked how they were then they would cry, and I could comfort them, and before the conversation was up I would feel better about myself because didn't that prove I was such a good person? My friends needed me. They depended on me. I had to be there to cheer them up. Many failed relationships later, I realised that this unshakable need to project wasn't the healthiest way of handling insecurity. As I reclined on the yellow beach with an ice-cream and tiny plastic spoon, I felt like being selfish was perhaps the most selfless thing of all.

I'd just come to terms with the prospect of being happy alone when a familiar body sat down beside me. She was brown from the sun, although a lot of her skin was still mismatching, white and pink as scars crossed up and down her legs and arms. Her eyes were still a beautiful blue, though. Now, they even looked a little kinder.

'Cindy?' I asked.

She smiled at me with a shyness I hadn't anticipated.

'Hello,' she said. 'I didn't know if I'd find you here.'

'I didn't know you were looking,' I laughed. 'How are you?'

‘Well. I’m really well, thank you.’ Cindy looked at me with eyes full of devotion and I wondered whether this change in temperament was genuine. It was strange to see her looking sentimental, but then she was vulnerable. I’d known that all along.

Of course, I’d read about it in the papers. All over social media, newspapers, television segments, there was the face of The Chief. *Dr Evil*, as they called him. I wanted to grab strangers just to tell them, ‘*I never liked him, you know. I always knew he was off*’. But knowing isn’t the same as achieving. I’d gone about it all wrong.

They kept Cindy and Patch out of the interviews, thank goodness for that, although their pictures and the shaky camera footage of Cindy coming out of the hospital, eyes bandaged, and collapsing to her knees and crying, was everywhere. Her father wrote a book on the ordeal, although what *his* role in the story happened to be, I couldn’t tell. Had it been her mother who survived, I’m sure the obvious questions of neglect and parental incompetence would have risen, but Cindy’s father was very young and good-looking, and so the world was happy to believe he’d been tricked by a notorious manipulator. There were tearful interviews where he talked about the pain of losing his wife before nearly losing his daughter, how he loved and accepted her regardless of how she looked.

‘She’s still my little girl,’ he said, ‘and always will be.’ It was generally agreed that he was a bit of a dish. Very strong. Very brave.

Suddenly, the calls that had faded away came back in full swing. Old friends were ringing out of morbid curiosity. My family were completely flummoxed and, a rarity, apologetic. Of course, they’d all thought it was mad at the time.

And none of it mattered in the end. The fuss I caused, the ringing round, the drives to the hospital where I sat in the car and had panic attacks before hopelessly, pathetically, turning away. I could say I told you so, but to who? And to what end? What had my insight

actually done to help? I don't know if I could have tried harder, if I should've demanded answers sooner. I was so conflicted by uncertainty.

I tried to get an address for Patch but, understandably, they had no interest in helping me. He'd been harassed by so many people that authorities felt the need to keep him isolated for safety. Fair enough. But I wouldn't make the same mistake twice. I barged into offices and stayed on hold for hours and I put on my best middle-class voice and I finally, finally, got the address. When I made it over to see him, the door had been boarded up. 'Gone Travellin'' was spray-painted on the boards. When I tried the handle, the door swung open. Of course, you leave a sign saying you're going away for an extended period and people will break in, and perhaps they had already stolen things. I couldn't find anything except a tray of cigarette butts and a pile of letters on the floor. There was a brochure for a trip to Athens there, ripped open from an envelope. Later, I received one just the same. The flyer had been posted in an envelope with my name and address, and I wondered if they did this for every house on the street, or if they'd gotten my information online. I liked the idea that it was a sign, that if no one was bothering to listen to me, I might as well shut up and listen to the universe.

'How are you really, my love?' I asked her. 'And what are you doing in Greece? Are you on holiday?'

'Something like that,' she broke into a grin. 'It's more of a class trip. I do Classics now at university, and my girlfriend and I thought it would be cool to get away, see some stuff. Check out the library.'

'Girlfriend?' I was surprised and, in a way, impressed. It seemed a little controversial for angry, Barbie-doll Cindy. Credit to her. 'Well, that's wonderful. I'm glad to hear you're at university too. Well done, you. Best years of your life, or so they say.'

Cindy laughed.

‘Well, they have been so far.’

‘Good. I’m glad. That’s really nice to hear.’

We sat quietly for a little while, absorbing the sound of the ocean waves, the buzz of children shrieking and laughing as they splashed about. It was a happy, complete kind of quiet.

‘So why are you here?’ Cindy asked me.

‘Oh. It’s all a bit embarrassing really. I’m having a very Heartbreak Hotel moment, and a flyer with a cheap flight deal came through the letterbox. It seemed like serendipity. You know how it is when you’re depressed and constantly searching for signs.’

Cindy grinned from ear to ear. Her smile was a little too white, as though she were wearing dentures, and I wondered if she’d had to have her teeth fixed too.

‘Well I, for one, am glad you’re here. I wanted to say thank you,’ she said.

‘Thank you? Why? Of course, you’re welcome, but I mean, I’m not entirely sure what you’re thanking me for.’ As far as I was concerned, I had failed in every regard when it came to Cindy’s treatment. I presumed we both knew this.

‘I wouldn’t be who I am now without you.’

There was a part of me that was waiting for the punchline, for The Chief to pop out of the sea with a camera crew to laugh at my ridiculous ego. I could feel my eyes narrowing as I tried to establish what exactly it was I’d done to help her. I suppose I’d tried to convince her to continue physiotherapy and step away from the intrusive surgeries. She now had a below the knee prosthetic, I could see it under her sarong. When the wind blew the fabric away I glimpsed a small tattoo of the Gruffalo on her thigh.

‘Hang on,’ I began.

‘Patch!’ a voice shouted from the promenade. Both Cindy and I turned to look. There was a woman in a bikini top and loose unbuttoned shirt holding two rapidly melting ice-lollies. ‘Help me,’ she shouted down in a smoker’s husky voice, licking the sticky sugar drips from her hands.

‘Coming!’ Cindy shouted, getting up and brushing the sand from her bum.

‘Patch?’ I asked.

‘A nickname,’ the woman in front of me responded. ‘Because of all my skin-grafts. You know.’

I wanted to laugh. This whole thing was like a dream where I knew I was speaking to Patch, my Patch, but for some reason it was Cindy. The waves of heat and the shocking blue sky added to this sense of otherworldliness. Surely, this couldn’t be real.

‘Is it you?’ I asked.

‘You know, I sometimes pictured you on the beach,’ she said. ‘But in my head it was far, far more miserable.’

‘Patch!’ the woman shouted again, this time more frantically, turning her wrist to prevent further leakage.

‘Coming!’ Cindy shouted again.

She rolled her eyes at me.

‘Girlfriend. I’ve gotta go.’ She padded her way across the hot sand, limber on her prosthetic now, her balance good, and she seemed, for perhaps the first time since I’d ever met her, to be comfortable in her own skin. She bounced up the stone steps, and took the lolly before kissing her girlfriend gently on the lips.

I turned back towards the ocean waves, in shock. Already it seemed like something I'd imagined. I turned around again to see if Cindy really was there, and saw the backs of her and her girlfriend walking away, sarongs and shorts and sandals, her girlfriend's bandanna tied tightly as Cindy crashed into her side, bumping hips together to playfully knock her off balance.

This would no doubt keep me awake at night, drive me back into insanity just as I was coming to terms with my stable(ish) mental health. That hardly seems to matter. All I knew was that I spoke to somebody, and they seemed very happy. That was all.

Epilogue

Toby sat next to me in the passenger seat. We were parked in the prison carpark, waiting. His hair was still thick, unlike mine, the lucky bugger, although he'd gone a little grey by the ears. He wasn't scrawny like he used to be. Toby stood at just under six foot, and while he wasn't exactly a body-builder, he'd definitely kept himself trim. His house wasn't too bad either; nice little trampoline out back for the kids, deck chairs for him and the wife. They had no idea what we were doing today.

Toby told me a little bit about them on the drive. He had two kids, Finley and Kellin, seven and eight. His wife was called Trish and worked in a pharmacy. They'd met at university, but hadn't married till a decade later when they'd reconnected. Social media, you know how it is. He asked after me, but I couldn't say much. I'd always been far too squirrely to get into anything like a family. I had my fun as a young man, but didn't want to make any commitments. Being single is a safe place to be. Anyway, I was past it these days, bald on top and overweight. Not that I minded. When you knew Pete, you knew ageing was a blessing.

'Here he is now,' Tony said. He offered me a cigarette, but I shook my head. 'Suit yourself.'

Of course Pete looked just the same, hadn't aged a day. A little more beaten up, I guess, and sure, why not? He'd spent half his life starting fights. He walked up to the vehicle.

'You the guys who are picking me up?' he asked us. The window was wound down because it was roasting. Sweat dripped down the backs of my legs, pasting my thighs to the leather seat.

Toby smiled, a big-wide grin with lots of teeth.

'Don't you recognise us? Course we are, Pete.'

'Where's Tommo?'

He'd rung Tommo originally, who said he'd pick him up, but got cold feet. He called me in a panic, *Bud, can you do it? Old times sake? It's just I have kids now, and I can't take the risk and well, you never married.* Always was a wuss, that kid.

'Tommo rang us to help. Said something came up.'

If Pete was suspicious, he didn't show it.

'Whatever. Take me away from this dump.'

He slid into the back of my car, small enough to rattle about without a seatbelt, which I knew he wouldn't wear. Before that might have scared me, I know how much he hated to be thought of as small, but now I found it funny. I suppose I'd grown up.

'We're gonna take you for a little picnic, Pete,' Toby said, turning round in his seat to grin at him. 'There's a great spot around here, loads of green. We've left you a little treat in back too, if you wanna get started. Might have rolled under the seat.'

'Yeah?' he got on his hands and knees to look, pulling the rucksack out of the way. 'Jesus, that's heavy. What have you got in there, rocks?'

I smiled, but he couldn't see me. Eventually, he got his grubby hands on the bottle of whisky. He had no problem cracking it open. Course we'd loosened it up for him when we opened the bottle to piss in it. He didn't notice a thing, but then he wouldn't, would he? Frankly, he should've been grateful we watered it down.

'We have some sandwiches and stuff too, but if you don't mind, we'll wait for those. Nice to all sit down and grab a bite together, don't you think?' Toby continued. I didn't like the way he was smiling so much. I was sure he'd give it all away. Ah well. I stuck on the child-locks and started the engine.

It really was a beautiful day. Scorching hot. I turned up the radio. 'Good Vibrations' by the Beach Boys was playing on Classic Rock FM.

'Man, it's been so long since I've had a proper drink. This is good stuff,' Pete said. 'You guys are alright, you know?'

'Oh, well, you can count on old friends, Pete. We don't forget a thing,' Toby looked at me and smiled. He threw his ashy cigarette out of the window and it flew backwards down the empty road. I put my foot on the accelerator and we glided down the tarmac towards the lush, green forest ahead. The future would be messy, but for the present I embraced the excitement bubbling in my stomach, the engine rumbling beneath me, and I felt just fine.

“If it didn’t hurt, I probably wouldn’t do it”: A Freudian Exploration of Creative Practice in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Cathleen Davies’ *Stitches*

Introduction

When completing a Creative-Critical PhD centred on novel writing, questions are raised surrounding what is gained by framing a novel within an academic, cross-disciplinary context. This critical study aims to address this, beginning with an outline of the novel.

My novel *Stitches* follows two protagonists, Patch and Cindy, who are engaged in an extreme body-swap facilitated by cosmetic surgery. Patch is a Frankensteinian monster created using discarded body parts and neglected by their creator. Cindy is a seventeen-year-old college student captured by serial killer The Prince, whose victims’ body parts form Patch’s physical form due to a deal with The Chief, a character who serves as the novel’s Frankensteinian scientist. The Prince amputates Cindy’s foot before being promptly arrested, and Cindy arrives at the hospital where Patch is also being treated. When The Chief offers Cindy a straightforward foot-transplant, she instead opts to transplant *every* part of her body with the intentions being to erase The Prince’s touch, and to become repulsive and monstrously strong. Unaware of Patch’s origins, they become Cindy’s unwilling exchange partner, and the two gradually ‘switch’ identities.

The novel focuses on the central theme of the body *as* identity, phenomenologically exploring ideas of consent, shame, gender, disability, and body modification. Beyond Patch and Cindy, the various side-characters have unique relationships to their bodies and senses of self. The multi-voiced first-person narration contributes to the theme of fragmentary and incomplete realities and experiences. Altogether, this builds an intertextual absurdist novel which contains characteristic elements from *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1831), ‘Cinderella’

(Grimm and Grimm, 1826), and *Peter Pan* (Barrie, 1911); alongside narrative and aesthetic choices extracted from Gothic literature and horror cinema.

Methodology

The methodology used in this thesis is Creative-Critical Practice, specifically Practice as Research (PaR) in the area of novel writing. This account of that approach considers not only the finished novel but how it emerged through research and, conversely, how research was shaped and advanced through creative practice. For this project, the PaR methodology centred on an approach grounded in intertextual horror writing through the framework of psychoanalysis, particularly the Freudian Uncanny, which segues into descriptions of the doppelgänger and the return of the repressed, and can be applied to Freud's ideas on iteration. This critical component of the thesis examines how Freudian concepts can connect with PaR by looking at two key texts. The first is my novel *Stitches*, and second is its key inspiration, *Frankenstein*.

Creative Writing was not only the methodology I was most experienced with, but also the best method for such a subjective topic. The use of multiple-character first-person narration in *Stitches*, each character with differing levels of autonomy, reflects the unanswerability of questions surrounding body modification when interacting with patriarchal beauty standards. This echoes Shelley's stylistic use of multiple first-person narrations in *Frankenstein* which also creates ambiguity; as Lee Sterrenburg puts it: 'The messianic struggles of the hero are presented subjectively, in an autobiographical confession we cannot fully trust, and surrounded by equally subjective editors, interlocutors, and interpreters whose presence further complicates our hope of finding a simple ideological meaning.'

(Sterrenburg, 1979, p 145). Though all characters attempt, in some way, to exert control over

their bodies and environments, all of them – whether conventionally beautiful, alternatively beautiful, or deliberately monstrous – are then regarded as marvels, both by the secondary characters of the novel and, in a metatextual sense, by the readers themselves.

My critical thinking was influenced through both research and Creative Practice due to the continual re-emergence of Freudian themes in both – while writing as part of the horror tradition, Freudian concepts continually arose to the surface in my novel, something I recognised precisely *because* of my research into the horror tradition where Freud was continuously brought up in critical analyses – demonstrating how iteration and Research as Practice (RaP)¹ contributed to the thesis. The iterative nature of the two components of ‘creative’ and ‘critical’ being worked on simultaneously allowed them to interact and influence the direction of the research and the practice: ‘This feedback loop between speculation and experimentation is fundamental to research in many disciplines, and is also appropriate for research in the creative arts’, (Brown and Sorensen, 2009, p 153), a process also referred to by Bolt as a ‘double articulation’ (Bolt and Barrett, 2007, p 29). A Creative-Critical PhD was a methodologically robust option for this work due to the mutual subsumption of Practice and Research representing an ironic foreshadowing – and a revelation in hindsight – of the fates of my protagonists whose bodies mutually subsume each other.

¹ It is important to note here that I am using ‘Research as Practice’ in a similar way Hazel Smith and Roger T Dean refer to Research-Led Practice: ‘Research-led practice is a terminology which we use to complement practice-led research, and which suggests more clearly than practice-led research that scholarly research can lead to creative work.’ (Smith and Dean, 2009, p 7). In its simplest description, Practice as Research (PaR) refers to the process of creatively practicing an artform (in my case novel writing) in order understand the process of said artform. Research as Practice (RaP) however, refers to researching critical material in order to influence the direction of creative work. In my case the researching of Freudian ideas, horror cinema, and Shelley’s *Frankenstein* influenced the direction of the creative text. I will later use Bolt’s work to demonstrate how PaR and RaP are interlinked to the point of being inseparable in the creation of a Creative-Critical project.

The methodological approach was guided by one overarching question containing a series of supplementary research questions which correlate to their respective chapters as follows.

Core Question:

To what extent can Creative Writing Practice in Shelley's *Frankenstein* and my novel *Stitches* be analysed through Freudian concepts such as iteration, projection, the Uncanny, and the doppelgänger?

The use of specifically Freudian concepts proved not only useful as conceptual framework for the critical analysis, but was especially relevant when applied to the act of Creative Writing as an artistic practice due to Freud's reflections on the art of writing and how the practice can relate to psychoanalytic theories. This will be developed and demonstrated further in later chapters.

Supplementary Questions:

- How does iteration play a role in the Creative-Critical process of novel and academic writing?
- Is autobiographic self-recreation an unavoidable facet of Creative Practice and how does this link to the 'doppelgänger' and Freudian projection?
- How can Freudian concepts of 'the Uncanny' and 'the death drive', be explored in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and my novel *Stitches* to demonstrate underlying human anxieties surrounding self-perception?

Across each of these questions, I draw on Freudian ideas to explore Creative Writing Practice, utilising his work on subconscious fears and drives which are central to the horror genre and its artistic creation. In later sections, I will also use Freud to provide a theoretical framework for an analysis of *Stitches* and its characters' actions, and in an iterative way to analyse Shelley's, and my own, creative process. To do this, I will begin with a discussion of PaR, reflecting on my own methodology.

Most of the current research into the field of PaR focuses on work with a performative element, where textual information and the exegesis surrounding it amount to extraneous necessities for the sake of the academy, rather than the defining feature; for instance Robin Nelson's (2013) work on PaR focusses mainly on the work of PhD studies relating to dance, music, and performance art. For this reason, PaR research tends to emphasise these disciplines slightly more than novel writing. There are exceptions to this: to give a few examples, Gaylene Perry's essay (2007) on novel writing and autobiography informed the core argument in Chapter Two, and Lyle R. Skains (2018) and Anne Brewster (2009) provide compelling PaR reflections on Creative Writing, with Skains focusing on creative inspiration and Brewster examining identity and privilege in artistic practice. However, novel writing still remains an understudied artform to be considered through the lens of PaR.

I paired PaR in novel writing with Freudian ideas of psychoanalysis for various reasons. Freud's interest in the art of Creative Writing, which he explores in multiple essays on interpersonal relationships and the imagination – 'A Special Type of Object Choice made by Men' (Freud, 1910), 'The Uncanny', and 'The Creative Writer and Daydreaming' (Freud, 1908) – suggests that he recognised similarities between the art of writing and the act of psychoanalysis. The Uncanny is easily applied to Gothic fiction where discomfort and subconscious symbolism abound. Bronfen's Freudian reading on gender and horror aided my research when applying the idea of the doppelgänger to Shelley's fiction and my own,

considering character motivations through the unconscious ‘death drive’ which Bronfen argues offers women a means of autonomy and escapism in worlds tainted by masculine sexualisation and objectification (Bronfen, 1992, p 191).

It would be remiss not to mention that Freudian ideas of psychoanalysis are contemporarily contested (Crews, 1996). Second-wave feminists such as de Beauvoir (1956), Benjamin (1988), and Irigaray (1985) have long since challenged Freud’s views on sexuality and gender. These works offer valid criticism, and consequently, Freud’s theories are rarely applied to contemporary concepts like PaR. However, I would suggest Freud’s views are helpful to apply creatively and critically due to their cultural resonance and recognisability. Components of Creative Writing interconnect with Freudian ideas, which are interspersed through *Stitches*, both purposefully implanted, as with the prevalence of foot mutilation which was a conscious artistic choice, and incidentally, as with the gendered examples of masochism which I only recognised applied to my characters after a post-writing research excursion – and symbolic projection can be seen in many Gothic novels, not least of all *Frankenstein*. The crux of *Frankenstein* is, after all, a parental figure casting their creation outwards due to a philosophical and corporeal fear, a not dissimilar origin story to that of *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles, 425 BCE), the namesake of Freud’s contentious theory on male infant psychosexual development.

The next section examines more fully the key critical literature to inform my research, and how they guided the project solidly towards Freud and his application to PaR.

Literature Review

In this section, I will summarise the works I studied to develop my Creative-Critical ideas on gender and maternity in horror, and how they influenced the phenomenological ideas I had

regarding embodiment within the novel. Similarly, I will explain Freudian ideas in horror as presented through various feminist analyses which would go on to influence my own. This will work as a chronological research journey which will allow the reader to see how I developed the themes, philosophical reasoning, and genre awareness that culminated in the creation of *Stitches*. Below will demonstrate how Critical Research influenced my Creative Practice before and alongside the writing process, while Creative Practice influenced the Critical Research direction, in a cyclical model of interaction.

The fact that Freud proved so influential for the Creative and Critical Practice of this project was not, at first, a deliberate intention. My interest in horror and the Gothic began from a consumerist perspective, but in researching the tropes it was important for myself, as a feminist writer, to consider the genre through a feminist lens. In feminist-oriented research on horror and the Gothic there is a tendency to centre on Freudianism, often as a means of critiquing ideas of womanhood that are exaggerated through the genre. A key inspiration for the creative project and critical thesis was Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) which highlighted the tropes regarding beauty, maternity, and monstrous othering stemming from social rejection (all key themes which run through *Frankenstein* and were therefore consciously paid homage to in *Stitches*) through her analysis of various feminine stereotypes used in horror. To take one example, her arguments on the castrating mother in horror, based on the 'Oedipus Complex', reflected Western society's negative attitude towards women by portraying them as fundamentally dangerous, castrative due to their inescapable penis envy: 'The monstrous mother is central to a number of horror texts. Her perversity is almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behaviour towards her offspring, particularly the male child.' (Creed, 1993, p 174).

From here, I looked further into conceptualisations of motherhood through the field of gynae horror, considering the work of Erin Harrington (2017) where the image of the woman

in horror cinema, and particularly of the embodied cis woman, was regarded with repulsion in a more abject and visceral way. Joseph Campbell's (1959-68) anthropological work also revealed recurring cultural anxieties about female bodies and functions, particularly the "castrating woman" embodied in the *vagina dentata* motif found across global mythologies. Freudian thought in folklore was relevant to a novel like *Stitches* which relies on fairy tale, with 'Cinderella' itself a text with various global interpretations. The idea of the feminine body as a repulsive monster is explored in the novel's conversation on the oxymoronic sexualisation and disgust of the feminine body. Alongside this, Robin Wood's essay the *Return of the Repressed* (1978) demonstrated a Freudian framing of the horror film and its politics of heteronormative sexual expectations, an understanding of which allowed me to develop his ideas of family in horror. For each of my characters, corrupted maternal relationships (from the mundane to the extraordinary) are considered, as I apply Creed's ideas of the monstrous mother, and Wood's ideas of corrupted domesticity, to my own work in a modernised context. The idea of fictional narratives in horror representing a 'return of the repressed' was vital and will reappear in Chapter Two regarding the inevitability of autobiography in fiction writing as repressed anxieties about the self are projected on to their characters and thus return in a veiled and uncanny manner.

Later feminist work on horror, which was perhaps less condemnatory of the genre, added more nuance to the argument surrounding horror and the feminine presented by Creed, with two notable examples being: *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (Clover, 1992) and *Recreational Terror* (Pinedo, 1997). Rather than demonstrating the internal anxieties presented by men *about* women in horror, these texts looked specifically from feminine perspectives at women and horror, and thus contributed to my recognition of the creative potential of approaching horror through an academic feminist lens despite what may, on the surface, appear to be a genre saturated with misogynistic exploitation. As Pinedo herself says

regarding her conflict as a feminist horror fan, previously ashamed of what she defines as her 'guilty pleasure' (p 2): 'In the current climate of radical, political conservatism, I intend this analysis of the contemporary horror film to contribute to the debate over violence in films, women and violence, and popular culture' (p 7). I had a similar intention in *Stitches* when presenting the desecration of the feminine body as complex and multi-faceted, capable of representing both autonomous choice, and patriarchal pressure.

A key concept within horror scholarship is 'abjection'. Kristeva's ideas of 'abjection' in relation to human disgust tied into her idea of 'the deject' as a liberatory form of being, a concept applicable to my characters. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection* (1982) was vital for this research, and coaligned with Freud and his ideas regarding castration anxiety, the return of the repressed, and the Uncanny, which I will examine in Chapter Three when exploring Cindy's relation to the death drive. All of this helped contribute to the general aesthetic of the novel – the mishmash of psychological thriller, social commentary, and body horror – and the direction the critical thesis would take.

One of the most influential factors on my creative work was the current discourse on gender expression. From Judith Butler's idea that 'gender is performative' (Butler, 1990, p xv) and Simone de Beauvoir's idea that gender is a learned set of attributes and actions (de Beauvoir, 1956, p 1), I was able to explore ideas of gender expression in the novel using PaR, while aligning my critical argument on gender politics. *Stitches* uses multiple characters with differing gender identities, presenting gender as a nebulous concept unwittingly thrust upon us with the understood distinctions that separate masculinity from femininity being social constructs that are in many ways harmful and unnecessary, although carrying the potential to be personally and aesthetically satisfying. From this particular frame of reference, experiencing reality through an unavoidably gendered perspective meant philosophically considering reality from an unavoidably *embodied* perspective, allowing for a more

intersectional perspective, with how said body is interacted with impacting environment and experience.

I connected my novel to the philosophical theory of phenomenology due to the idea, posited by Husserl (1900) of fragmentation and one's ability to build a whole only when viewing parts, paramount to the use of subjectivity within the novel. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) was essential for the purpose of establishing the body as identity, and how we move around space and exist within it being a defining feature of personal experience on an unconscious level. I then considered this from a modern, intersectional perspective by looking at Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) which was useful for regarding the orientations of my characters, many of whom choose to subvert the 'lines' expected of them; the ways in which they orient space, and particularly the ways in which they are perceived by others, impact their experience of embodied existence. This can be seen when considering Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' (1975) and the ways in which my characters futilely attempt to escape from it, relevant due to the influence of horror cinema on my novel. I looked at the filmic analysis of Vivian Sobchack, taking into account her personal experience with leg amputation and her comments on how that affected her environment and experiences in the academic world: 'I am both startled and amused at the extraordinary moves made of and by "the prosthetic" of late—particularly since my prosthetic leg can barely stand on its own and certainly will never go out dancing without me.' (Sobchack, 2000, p 205). Despite not directly referencing all of the work in the critical analysis, understanding the research journey here is valuable for gaining a deeper comprehension of the creative work's intention, and how this may have altered over time.

Finally, I will address the influence of Freud in my work, whose idea of 'the Uncanny' can contribute towards understanding many of the unsettling experiences within the horror genre, and the unsettling experiences involved in the creation of something novel

and yet disturbingly familiar. In Chapter Three, I examine Freud's attitudes towards maternity, his work on fetishism and 'lack' as represented through castration, and his theories on masochism and 'the death drive' to explain my characters' reactions to gendered trauma. Through an exploration of his work on 'screened memories', 'projection', and 'iteration', I will argue that his work not only frames the thematics and character choices in my novel, but works as a way to demonstrate through PaR the psychoanalytical influence of these ideas on novel writing, as I posit that novel writing is autobiographical to such an extent that fictional characters become uncanny doppelgängers of their writerly counterparts.

My personal experiences also inform my research. I use queer and feminist theory as a way to position Creative Writing in a sociological context where I explore their uses and limitations, and utilise these theories not so much to understand socio-cultural phenomena, but instead as a means to critically explore and contest questions that arise from my own lived experience. Therefore, my choice to include elements of queer and feminist theory within *Stitches* was unavoidably linked to my character and politics. My thesis is cross-disciplinary, and each borrowed discipline was distorted by my intention to use it as a fiction-making device. The act of Creative Writing allowed me to discover pockets, particularly regarding PaR, where a psychoanalytic lens was lacking when discussing the art of fiction writing, while simultaneously this same philosophical research inspired certain elements of the prose.

Original contribution

By its very definition, a novel, if not plagiarised, will be novel in that it will offer some kind of original contribution purely on the basis that it has not been written before. This idea of novelty, however, is complicated when considering an intertextual novel that brings in

multiple elements from pre-existing works in the canon and, regardless, it is well recognised that fiction can be uninspired and derivative whether utilising intertextuality or not.²

Nevertheless, *Stitches* is unique in its nuanced critical exploration of body modification. Through a non-deterministic approach where moral questions on embodiment are left open to interpretation, I explore the nature of gender, disability, modification, and trauma on the site of the body through different characters, allowing room for multiplicitous personal experiences which are then complicated by moral ambiguity and the potential for numerous readerly interpretations. In *Stitches*, I offer a contemporary view of gender and the body as a site of contested identity, exploring the possibility of changing one's body voluntarily in order to reach a point of contentment and, as a juxtaposition, the possibility of having one's body changed without consent to something more socially palatable. These oppositions explore a complex reality in which the impact of trauma and its influence on, and perhaps nulling of, autonomous choice regarding self-mutilation and modification is debateable and potentially unknowable, with no clear answer as to what separates mutilation from modification in a definitive manner.

In regard to the arguments I present and why they offer original insight to the academic field, I apply Freud's theories in a contemporary and original way, offering a new interpretation of his concept of the doppelgänger within the context of PaR and Creative Writing. By arguing that characters act as uncanny doppelgängers and psychological conduits for the writers, I am doing something original in using elements of PaR to comment on the nature of Creative Writing as a method of unconscious self-exploration. The two pieces of Creative and Critical Writing work together to explore Shelley's intertextual and, in some ways self-reflective, novel *Frankenstein* through a psychoanalytical Freudian lens with

² See Nelson: 'Since each creative iteration is distinctive [...] it is in a weak sense "original" and, since originality is a requirement for research, artists assumed their practices amounted to research.' (Nelson, 2013, p 24).

particular focus on the Uncanny. I do this through literary- and psycho-analysis, self-reflection through my discussion on PaR, and the act of mimicry in my own intertextual, and in some ways self-reflective, novel *Stitches*.

Ultimately, my aim with the novel and critical analysis was not only to create something that demonstrated an original contribution to knowledge, but to also demonstrate how any original contribution to knowledge need be built on prior knowledge and creativity in a collaborative and iterative process. I re-purposed pre-existing material, using the familiar in a distorted manner in order to create an uncanny new artwork. Freud states: ‘All one can say is that what is novel may well prove frightening and uncanny; some things that are novel are indeed frightening, but by no means all. Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny’ (Freud, 2003, p 125). Evidently, the meaning of ‘novel’ here refers to that which is ‘new’, but it is useful for my purposes to interpret it as a comment on creative texts also. In my creation of new characters, new plots, and new contextual dynamics, I am making a creative text that is novel and unfamiliar. The genre and subject matter is, I would hope, frightening, if not solely for its gorier elements, then for the unsettling realisation that we are all embodied beings, and thus mortal and fragile. These corporeal realities are reinforced in *Stitches* through the descriptions of injury and recovery. In the ‘something added’ to the unfamiliar, the inclusion of canonical texts which are recognisable, yet skewed, adds to the aesthetic of uncanniness. What is created becomes a literary déjà vu with the recurrence of Gothic motifs and plot devices acting as an uncanniness – the genre can be seen here haunting itself.

In short, *Stitches* does not only put forward an *original* contribution to knowledge and field, but an *uncanny* contribution to knowledge and field in which originality blurs into the already known but perhaps forgotten.

Chapter Outline

This critical thesis will explore psychoanalytic aspects of Creative Writing Practice. Chapter One focuses on iteration entirely, considering both creative and critical editing and rewriting, detailing *Stitches*' conception and development. It begins with the process of iteration, a significant psychoanalytical concept in which individuals repetitively put themselves through traumatic events. This is pertinent to the character of Cindy whose insistence on repeatedly engaging in cosmetic surgery is suggestive of iterative self-harm, as she re-experiences the mutilation forced upon her by The Prince. It is also relevant to Creative Writing as a methodology, since the process of rewriting is instrumental to the completion of a polished novel.

Chapter Two reflects on the autobiographical and intertextual nature of Creative Writing, delving into the context surrounding Shelley's *Frankenstein* and how this can be read to have impacted her creative choices, before considering *Frankenstein*'s relation to *Stitches* and reflecting on the autobiographical and intertextual nature of my own creative choices and those of my characters in their respective creative pursuits. This autobiographical component is representative of Freud's description of the Uncanny as a return of the repressed. The characters and events come to symbolise aspects of the author's life returning through the emotionally-detached layer of fiction. It can also be argued to be a means of creating new 'screen memories' (Freud, 1899) as a way of distancing oneself from real psychological difficulty through the creation of characters and events. In doing so, writers create 'doppelgängers' of themselves in their characters: uncanny, familiar companions who represent that which would rather be forgotten.

Finally, Chapter Three considers how Freud's ideas of the Uncanny and the death drive can be read in both of these texts, and how they interrelate to the characters and context.

I will consider Cindy's self-destruction as a means of creating autonomy, relating her to Julia Kristeva's concept of 'the deject' expressed in her essay *Powers of Horror* and Elisabeth Bronfen's concept of feminine autonomy through suicide as a 'narcissistic self-protection into an expression of a self-annihilating death drive' (Bronfen, 1992, p 153). I will then consider ideas of campness and embracing social rejection through Patch's narrative as a more wholesome alternative for embodied creatures seeking gendered liberation in patriarchal environments.

Chapter One: Iteration as a part of Creative-Critical Practice

‘Handling that repetition, staging it, cultivating it until it releases, beyond its eternal return, its sublime destiny of being a struggle with death—is it not that which characterizes writing?’
(Kristeva, 1982, p 23)

In this chapter I will demonstrate why iteration is a fundamental process of Creative and Critical Writing, answering the first research question: ‘How does iteration play a role in the Creative-Critical process of novel and academic writing?’ First, I will begin by looking at the psychoanalytical idea of iteration as this particular form of neurosis applies both to my characters in the creation of their bodies, and to myself through the creation of the novel and critical material. Having established this, I break down my Creative Practice in a chronological manner, highlighting several moments of key edits and iterations which proved invaluable to the final product, demonstrating that Creative Writing is a never-ending process of improvement through iteration. Following on from this, I will suggest how re-evaluation of critical thought is its own form of critical iteration, and that in a Creative-Critical context, this changing of opinion through Research *and* Practice works as a means of developing creative and critical work, meaning the accumulation of both creative material and critical research leads to an infinite loop of development and editorial adaptation, often ending due to authorial fatigue or imposed deadline rather than to any unattainable idea of completion. Ultimately, I argue that iteration is a foundational aspect of a specifically PaR journey in which the continuous accumulation of knowledge invariably influences the creative direction of the writing, and the writing influences the direction of the research to a moment of imperfect abandonment, reflecting the abandonment of Shelley’s creature, her ‘hideous progeny’ (Shelley, 1831, p 10), and my own characters, novel and critical engagement.

Freudian Iteration in *Stitches* and *Frankenstein*

Freud discussed the importance of repetitive compulsion with most clarity in his essay 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through,' (Freud, 1914) in which he described a subconscious repetition of trauma-seeking behaviour due to an inability to work through previous traumas consciously. Here, Freud posits that compulsive repetition occurs as a consequence of psychoanalytic treatment prior to its completion: 'Further dangers arise from the fact that in the course of the treatment new and deeper-lying instinctual impulses, which had not hitherto made themselves felt, may come to be "repeated"' (p 153). An element of this is explored with my characters, as Cindy reenacts the bodily harm The Prince inflicted on her by seeking out multiple painful surgeries. Without the effectual means of recovering from her trauma, she unconsciously repeats it. Thankfully, Freud offers a means of implementing iteration in a more positive way, through the act of, 'transference [:] We render the compulsion-harmless, and indeed useful, by giving it the right to assert itself in a definite field' (p 154). Contemporarily, we might define this act of transference as a more transformative way of working through trauma, which we can see in The Nurse who similar to Cindy has experienced sexual abuse and seeks to regain control of her body, but who does so through modifications which do not seek to injure, but adorn. While both are remembering and repeating – or iterating – their trauma of male violence through the process of body modification, it could be argued that, at least initially, The Nurse uses transference as a means to 'work through' what she has undergone; Cindy, however, realises at the end of her surgical modification process that the trauma still renders her unable to sleep. She realises her self-injury is ineffective in comparison to outwardly projecting her hurt outwards, in this instance towards The Prince and his mother, and even after this act of cathartic transference her trajectory towards a self-destructive death drive continues to the novel's end. Throughout *Stitches*, the boundaries between useful modification and self-destructive mutilation are

blurred, and the distinction between self-harm and self-expression, injury or adornment, becomes fundamentally indefinable. This ambiguity reflects the subjectivity involved in body modification discourse, particularly in its connection to mental health and trauma.

In a more concrete way, the inescapable violence in *Frankenstein* can be seen as an example of Victor and the creatures' repetitive compulsions. The homicidal tendencies that inhabit the creature, unlike with Cindy who is entirely unconflicted, serve both to sicken him and reaffirm his own negative self-concept in a cyclical condemnation which spirals into tragedy: 'the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil' (Shelley, 1831, p 223). Victor displays this too in his twice attempt to build a creature only to then abandon it; his repetitive desire to escape from his responsibilities reinforces and exacerbates the trauma he then experiences, as he must know it will since the creature directly threatens him so: 'I'll be with you on your wedding night' (p 172). The negative consequences of these repetitions seem less ambiguous here, as the death of both characters at the end of the novel suggests no further possibility to 'work through' their trauma, somewhat distinguishing *Frankenstein* from *Stitches* with its clear moral message of responsibility for one's creations. That Victor on his deathbed attempts to encourage further scientific progress at the expense of physical and psychological stability in his 'be men, or be more than men' (p 217) monologue does not necessarily confuse this narrative, but reaffirms his desperation to project his repetitive self-destruction onto others. That the men are unroused and still opt to return to safety while Victor is 'sunk in a languor [...] almost deprived of life' (p 218) suggests that lessons on self-protection have been learnt at least by some.

This brief contextualisation of the characters and their processes of iteration in their creative, psychological, and scientific designs can be expanded outwards as we consider the process of iteration for the writer, considering myself and the creation of *Stitches* through the

process of PaR, editing, redrafting, and the interconnection of research and critical discoveries.

Creative Iteration

Creative Writing is an iterative process. This sentiment is expressed by Smith and Dean when explaining their ‘Iterative Cyclic Web of Practice-Led Research and Research-led Practice’: ‘Very important in the model, with regard to the sub-cycles, is the concept of iteration, which is fundamental to both creative and research processes’ (Smith and Dean, 2009, p 19). In the process of completing *Stitches*, I have worked through multiple redrafts; characters have been introduced, plot points have expanded, and the chronology has been rearranged. While this has often been a muddled and complex process with lots of back-and-forth editing and rewriting, a chronological consideration of my personal workings can hopefully help piece together how the novel was conceived and constructed to in turn reflect on Creative Writing as a research method.

An earlier iteration of *Stitches* was submitted for a Creative Writing Masters module on Intertextuality as a 3,000-word short story. After the module’s first seminar on *Frankenstein*, I drafted a flash-fiction piece where I imagined a modernisation of Shelley’s monster if discovered in 2018, considering what differences there might be if the creature was created and abandoned in an environment of marginally improved medical empathy. This is where the character of The Doc and The Monster, and to a smaller extent The Chief and The Nurse, began to materialise. After much polishing and redrafting, this prompt response became Chapter Twelve. Through this practice, certain aesthetic literary devices were solidified, and the tone was established. The choice to dehumanise the characters by giving them monikers rather than names began as a drafting technique to ensure I would not

ruminate too long on character names, rumination often serving as a productive-seeming means of procrastination. When I saw the effect on paper, however, I thought it worked within the narrative realm of stereotyping and marginalisation. It became a technique to argue for a deeper understanding of nuance and self-concept; by reducing each character to one aspect of their identity, I was hoping to reflect the reductive nature of societal perceptions which can lead to caricature. The reader may recognise this irony as Cindy gains more agency as the plot develops, and yet is still defined as 'The Victim' due to others' perception of her trauma; or alternatively how Patch, despite others' shifting perceptions and their evident victimisation, is still perceived as a 'Monster' at the novel's close, reflecting the inescapability of societal demonisation. The futility of branching beyond a prescribed identity decided by external perceivers is suggested by the monikers, and then made concrete in the plot content and the characters' internal reflections.

The secondary thread of the novel follows Cindy and her monstrous transformation, and again began as a prompt from studying fairy tale adaptation, engaging in a close-reading of Angela Carter's 'The Company of Wolves' (1979). I was inspired by Carter's stylisms and her way of presenting male violence alongside a defiant feminine sexual agency. I enjoyed the poeticism within her writing style, especially effective when juxtaposed with timeless crudity and violence. It was through this prompt that I free-wrote Chapter Eleven, entitled at the time 'Prince Charming' (Davies, 2020). The Prince's rococo and extravagant voice, paired with primal, violent behaviour, was myself taking inspiration from Carter's work and unconsciously attempting to emulate it. 'Prince Charming' began the theme of foot fetishism and its link to castration, which helped establish the Freudian themes. The image of the foot was then scattered through various points in the novel. As well as working as the central starting point for Cindy's character development, we see Miss Lily's dead foot in the prologue standing in for Pete's impotency, and in the reclamation and rejoicing of a castrated

identity in the tattoo on Patch's ankle, a self-imposed wound with an artistic intention to reflect their newfound bodily autonomy.

Both chapters eleven and twelve began as flash-fiction segments and were intended to be quick, disconnected responses to weekly tasks. When I recognised that there were connecting themes of mutilation and body horror, modernisation and intertextuality, and the plot potential for transplantation of disparate body parts, I began to imagine that the two flash-fiction pieces could be interwoven to become a complete piece. In the weaving together of these two stories, a stitching of narratives that came to reflect the stitching of physical bodies, it became apparent that there was too much plot involved in too many fragmented sections for it to work as a short piece. I therefore framed the few fragments I had written as particularly chosen chapters that would be extended into a full and detailed novel. It was through the three years of PhD study that this experimental genre-excursion materialised into a first draft.

In the draft first presented to my PhD creative supervisor, I opened the novel with Chapter 40 in Part Two – the scene in which Cindy is found by the police after her final eye surgery – working *in medias res*. This flash-forward was intended to mimic the dramatic irony found in horror film aesthetics in which a narrative opens with a violent and shocking scene before returning to a conventional normality that is now distorted by anticipatory dread. This foreshadowing builds a sense of anxiety in the reader/viewer, as described by Seymour Chatman in his extensive project on story-telling: 'anxiety is not a reflex of uncertainty about the conclusion [...] It is rather that we know what is going to happen, but we cannot communicate that information to the characters' (Chatman, 1980, p 52). However, it became clear when introducing the character of Pete, who was originally intended to be brought into the story at the opening of Part Two, that this was clumsy and confusing for the reader in a novel which already demands a lot of focus with many characters, dialects, and plot strands.

The short story 'Pete' (Davies, 2021) was brought forward as a prologue, allowing for an equal amount of foreshadowing, while also setting the tonal genre for the novel and establishing that the story takes place in a supernaturalistic horror universe. *Stitches*, therefore, occurs in chronological order, except for the three one-page forewords at the beginning of each section. These allowed the reader to anticipate where each part would end via the same technique described by Chatman above. It also allowed for me to play with other forms: a letter, a police report, and a sensational tabloid front page. These forewords allowed for an objective third-person perspective to briefly offer a sense of reality in a novel where reality is so often questionable, as the many different narrators are all in some way unreliable as a result of psychological strain.

A suggestion was made by academic and novelist Giles Foden, who believed I may be writing in the wrong person. He suggested that by placing the story in third person, I might be able to make the novel more marketable as there would be a more tangible reality for the reader to cling on to. While this suggestion was sound, and some third person attempts were made in the process of experimentation, I chose not to follow this idea to completion. I was engaging with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept that reality can only be experienced through a personal body (the *Corps Propre*), and that therefore reality is altered depending on how the body moves through the world and creates contact with it:

In the same way I treat my own perceptual history as a result of my relationships with the objective world; my present, which is my point of view on time, becomes one moment of time among all the others, my duration a reflection or abstract aspect of universal time, as my body is a mode of objective space (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p 81-82).

This felt to me to be a key tenet of the novel's exploration of identity. To remove the first-person narrative would be conceptually contradictory, but the short third-person reports allowed for the reader to feel there was some partially objective reality perceivable through insignificant characters who did not usually exist within the hospital's realm. This felt like a

compromise which allowed me to stay true to the novel's intentions, while also making accessibility a priority.

Other adaptations were made throughout the three years of the PhD. Initially, many of the sections from *The Nurse* had a monologic quality, with no clear indication of who she was speaking to or *why* she was having personal reflections on the nature of body modification and trauma, particularly for a character who often seemed to hide her sensitivity behind a brash persona. For this reason, I introduced her partner Ruby. Ruby became a symbolically significant character who added further nuance to *The Nurse*, their queer relationship reflecting *The Nurse*'s queering of conventional beauty standards. While still participating in body modification, *The Nurse* does so for reasons that transcend the conventional wish to embody heteronormative desirability. Unlike Cindy, whose transformation is in opposition to the wish for male attention, *The Nurse*'s attitude to male attention is one of indifference. Her body is hers to control; if the extremity of her modifications has financial benefits, she is comfortable exploiting them.

As Ruby is a sex worker, the argument for corporeal ownership and the body as a tool for capitalism becomes another significant sociological element, raising questions on the body as a means of accumulating wealth through exertion and, in this case, desirability. As sex work is primarily dominated by women, and indeed the only work where women are on average paid significantly more than men (Edlund and Korn, 2002), Ruby brought forward another opportunity to consider the contentious argument in which examples of bodily autonomous expression can be regarded as a form of patriarchal complicity. Ruby's character offered a convincing way to introduce *The Nurse* to the world of sex work, where her modifications become to some degree a professional benefit, as her appearance proves more lucrative through its nicheness.

Following on from this, I creatively explored the use of pain and masochism for sexual enjoyment in Chapter Fifty-Six, with The Nurse working as a sadistic dominatrix. As pain is often an unavoidable part of bodily modification, and as it is often considered by the body-modification to be an essential part of the appeal (Featherstone, 2000, p 209), bringing the concept of masochism more obliquely into the narrative served an additional purpose. The insertion of Ruby's character allowed for a richer exploration of the exoticized 'Other' represented by The Nurse, whose motives and feelings were then explored through observable actions, rather than through internal-monologue/exposition which could be regarded as creatively apathetic, going against the cardinal 'show don't tell' rule of Creative Writing: 'Show don't tell' is one of the most common catchphrases [...] to tell is to over-explain, to burden your writing with unnecessary exposition.' (Bell and Magrs, 2001, p 47).

These were the major changes the novel underwent from its initial conception to the final submission, although there were countless smaller ones which were essential for the creation of a neat prose style. With multiple character voices, I had to refine each one to create vocal distinctions. The Nurse's dialect in particular, although perhaps the most similar to my own manner of speaking, was incredibly difficult to keep consistent as I am in the practice of removing Northernisms in writing to mimic 'Standard English', despite the concept of Standard English now being widely regarded as classist, racist, and regionalist (Shariatmadari, 2020). As stated by Terry Eagleton: 'Language, that most innocent and spontaneous of common currencies, is in reality a terrain scarred, fissured and divided by the cataclysms of political history, strewn with the relics of imperialist, nationalist, regionalist and class combat' (Eagleton, 1976, p 54). It was difficult to be consistent with The Nurse's dialect, and multiple iterations were necessary to solidify her character voice.

One of the first critiques I received was that The Doc and The Chief were too similar in tone. As parallel characters who were both experts in the medical field, their voices

blurred. The Chief required a further medicinal coldness and observational quality, which is why I created his habit of establishing a character's physical characteristics before each interaction. This was a short-hand way of allowing the reader to recognise we were in The Chief's perspective. These writerly modifications of The Chief were completed while I was working parallel with The Doc's character, reinforcing their differences by stressing her lack of self-esteem, which leaves her in a conflicted state regarding her own perspective on reality. This I attempted to achieve through the interactions we see between The Doc and her dismissive family, and the observations on the medical profession's poor treatment of women which led to a gradual gaslighting and self-mistrust. The impact of micro-aggressions and stereotyping of women in the medical field has been researched and challenged: 'Women leaders are under-represented in academic medicine, to the detriment of individual women, departments, medical schools, patients, and society.' (Hastie *et al.*, 2023, p 1024). These prejudicial ideas have a lasting impact on the treatment of women in the medical field, and I felt it was important to include them because medicine forms the setting of my novel. There is perhaps still further to go in distinguishing the characters' voices, and this area is one in which the novel could still benefit from further revision.

Critical iteration: Research development and its impact on critical concepts

Having established the importance of creative revisions for the completion of a polished novel, I will now turn to the use of iteration in a critical context, considering how my continuing accumulation of research on the horror film altered the creative direction of the novel, alongside personal critical reflections on the genre. I will do this by focussing on one specific instance of reiterative reflection to illustrate how the continuation of Research can alter the direction of further Research and Creative Practice, explaining how an alteration in

critical thought regarding genre during the Creative Practice process after the introduction of altered Cindy's intended character arc from one of empowerment, to futility.

Many horror films share the modernised Gothic style I wanted to encapsulate in *Stitches* with thematic similarities of gender dynamics, exploitation and sexualisation, pain politics, and embodiment. Freud's work is regularly used as a means of critically analysing horror films (Creed, 1993; *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, 2006; Wood, 1978). One need only examine a single example of what Freud classed as uncanny in reference to the upcoming case study on *The Blair Witch Project* (1999):

One may, for instance, have lost one's way in the woods, perhaps after being overtaken by a fog, and despite all one's efforts to find a marked or familiar path, one comes back again and again to the same spot, which one recognises by a particular physical feature (Freud, 2003, p 144).

Were it not for the universality of the fear, one could presume directors Sánchez and Myrick took inspiration from this exact paragraph.

The Freudian approach I was lending to the novel coincided with the horror film theory I was consuming. For this reason, I wrote Chapter Eleven with a 'found footage' narrative aesthetic in mind: 'the specific brand of amateur aesthetics in found footage horror is crucial to its construction of verisimilitude' (Heller-Nicholas, 2014, p 3). This was a purposeful choice, as I had once theorised that found footage was a means of telling horror narratives with a more cautious feminist consideration. Film is a helpful medium in regard to societal perception, as the actors and characters have no choice but to be visibly perceived. In novel writing this can be avoided with techniques like internal monologuing and withholding information which separate characters from their embodied experiences. As I consider it impossible to separate yourself from your embodied experiences, film and filmic analysis worked as a valuable tool for exploring gender within a patriarchal environment. Mulvey's concept of 'the male gaze' was a useful starting point. I will analyse one scene in *Blair Witch*,

an homage to which was made in *Stitches*' Chapter Eleven, as a means of demonstrating how iteration in academic writing was important for the development of critical thinking, essential for the process of developing not only my critical thesis, but also the creative component.

Cindy's speech in Chapter Eleven is considered through the lens of the misogynistic and voyeuristic consumer, The Prince, and was inspired by the monologue Heather delivers in *Blair Witch*. In my MA essay I argued that the use of shaking, hand-held cameras worked as a means of detracting from the male gaze, since the camera is not centred on a woman's body but beneath her tear-sodden, snot-drenched face. To quote again from Heller-Nicholas whose analysis proved invaluable in the critical advancement of my argument: 'The camera is more than a device of control for Heather: It is a weapon to deflect the kind of aggressive objectification of women' (Heller-Nicholas, 2014, p 109). Heather is the only young woman in the film acting as a main character – aside from the witch herself, of course, whose identity and therefore gender is ambiguous regardless – yet she is neither a love interest nor femme fatale, and her costume of hiking gear is near identical to her masculine co-characters. These costuming and camera details worked to subdue the usually invasive sense that the camera represented the eyes of a masculine audience. The very parameters of the found-footage genre suggest instead that the camera is a deliberate narrative device intended to signify the viewpoints of the characters, with the cinematic audience being incidental and unintentional bystanders if effectively engrossed in the fictive environment.

Heather's monologue is impactful due to its formal restraint. Beyond the quiet, murmuring dialogue and the shaking breath, the only background sound consists of crickets and forest rustlings. The lack of extra-diegetic sound allows the audience, as well as Heather, to feel heightened to the smaller sounds which may suggest something supernatural. This ambiguity is what terrifies. On the screen throughout this scene, we see only half of Heather's face illuminated by her camera light, gradually moving further into the bottom corner of the

screen as though retreating, while the symbolic darkness behind her becomes more central. When Heather says ‘What is that?’ her eyes moving to the right and past the camera, the audience are unsure if she is referring to something she can hear, or something she can see, and are both straining to hear, and eager for the camera to turn. Sánchez and Myrick do not show us what is in front of Heather, creating a more palpable tension as the unknown further exacerbates the terror – the ‘withholding information’ discussed earlier in reference to fiction writing. Instead, the camera stays on Heather as she has a visible panic attack, made apparent by the rapid, shaking breath and uncontrollable tears, a tilting of her head to show the unfiltered snot-stream followed by the final line of monologue: ‘Oh God, I’m gonna die out here.’ This line’s cultural resonance is such that I later chose to echo it in Cindy’s first spoken sentence, – ‘My name is Cindy Reynolds, and I’m going to die down here’ (Davies, 2026, p 50).

By deploying sustained close-ups of the face during an emotive monologue, the directors create a sense of terror without a gratuitous focus on the violence inflicted on feminine bodies. The violence is still present, but left mostly unseen, leading to an encroaching sense of dread that can psychologically be more effective than blatant gore. As Stephen King puts it: ‘What’s behind the door or lurking at the top of the stairs is never as frightening as the door or the staircase itself.’ (King, 1983, p 110). It was this creation of terror, the abject, and the realistic nature of the feminine face when de-sexualised as a means of creating horror – ‘her weeping eyes and famously dripping nose feature centrally’ (Heller-Nicholas, 2014, p 109) – that contributed to establishing the tone for *Stitches*. Examples of *Blair Witch*’s tonal influence on *Stitches* include the withholding of information when I describe the development of Patch and Cindy’s bodies during surgical exchange, only offering fleeting details which suggest rather than fully paint, and Cindy’s sexual assault and amputation occurring off-page so as to avoid becoming titillating material for chauvinists.

As with the iteration involved in Creative Practice, within academic Research my ideas shifted upon discovering further research on film and feminism. While found footage aesthetics worked well as a creative device in this chapter of *Stitches*, I would now suggest that to claim found footage evades the male gaze is overly generous. 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure... with [her] appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact' (Mulvey, 1975, p 11). We can understand the *act* of gazing as the intrusive act of scopophilia in which a woman's lack of awareness of their eroticism, or the fact they were being viewed, worked as part of the appeal, as Mulvey goes on to explain: 'At the extreme, it can be fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other' (p 9). As Heather is filming herself with the hopeful intention that the footage will be found, she has agency in *choosing* to be looked at, but feminine protagonists demonstrating agency is fairly anomalous for the genre. Having reassessed the work of Mulvey, this theoretical idea was adapted as part of the ongoing development of the critical project, as it reinforced the inescapability of the male gaze in any medium (including the medium of reality) where feminine bodies have the potential to be viewed. This became vital when Cindy attempts to escape from said gaze, leading to her ultimate destruction.

I used this example of Heather's monologue in *Blair Witch* as an attempt to show how we can avoid the male gaze in horror, and instead found it was futile to attempt this. Caroline Lane demonstrates in her analysis how this specific scene could be read not as one of feminist empowerment and evasion of the male gaze, but as a misogynistic humiliation for attempting to seek creative autonomy: 'Did we really need to see our indie woman filmmaker reduced to a sniveling, groveling victim? (Lane, 2004, p 177). Heather's monologic apology

demonstrates an awareness from the director's perspective of a misogynistic audience's inherent irritation towards feminine characters. Critically, I would now contest my prior feminist celebration of found footage. Creatively, that contestation added a richness to Cindy's character arc, which reflected the inescapability of perception and judgement for women during their lifetimes, with the ultimate act of non-compliance being that of dying to avoid scrutiny. This political and gendered arc will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three, where Freudian ideas of the 'death drive' explored in his essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) and later in 'The Economic Problems of Masochism' (1924), will be related back to Cindy through close reading. It was this amalgamated inspiration from Creative Practice, and Critical Research that the characters of Cindy and The Prince materialised. Cindy's status as 'The Victim' was formed from this initial encounter with The Prince where her beautiful, distressed young face was seen through a camera lens informing an audience that she was going to die.

My second reappraisal on *Blair Witch* regards a development on my Creative-Critical position on gore. I had once believed found footage was the most feminist of filmic horror genres due to its lack of screened violence, which represented a more sophisticated style of horror telling avoiding what Isabel Pinedo describes as 'the wet death' (1997). A developed understanding of found footage allow me to recognise that the presumption of less blood and screened violence in the genre as a whole is not entirely accurate. Aldana Reyes discusses the artistic merits of causing visceral reactions in viewers in his work on *Horror Film and Affect* (2018), while Carol J. Clover finds empowerment for women in their survival of gory circumstances, and Pinedo recognises the titillating catharsis experienced by the feminine voyeur in response to social upheaval. These scholars therefore attest that the abundance of gore does not necessarily indicate a lack of aesthetic sophistication. There is still bodily

distress involved in gore, which is not without its merits. To quote again from King, with the intention of critiquing:

I recognise terror as the finest emotion...and so I will try to terrorise the reader. But if I find that I cannot terrify, I will try to horrify, and if I find I can't horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. (1983, p 10)

Gore is presented here as a potential stepping stone towards the finer emotions of horror and terror. However, my critical thoughts have since expanded to considering that all three of King's emotional phases of horror (terror, horror, the gross-out) work in complementary tandem with each other, rather than in any particular hierarchy. While much of *Stitches* focuses on characters' internal thoughts and feelings, there is still the use of visceral imagery through descriptions of the blood, pus, and scarring. Similarly, the focus I place on pain, particularly from Patch's perspective, although to a smaller extent from The Nurse's too, is intended to have an effective *and* affective response on the reader. Examples of 'gross-out' in *Stitches* include: "I looked at Spikey's face and threw up because it wasn't really a face anymore. His head wasn't head shaped. Nothing was the right colour. I thought about deflated balloons." (Davies, 2026, p 17-18) And:

I thought of the metal clamps keeping my mouth open, the shock of the needle as the piercing went in, the thin strip of wire breaking through the tongue, the metal bowl placed in front of me to allow the blood to dribble out, and I smiled. (p 92)

And:

... after Cindy grabbed The Prince by the neck and squeezed him until his eyes went red, when she dashed his skull against the concrete floor so that his cheek split open like a pomegranate, when she jumped up on down on his ribcage until bloody vomit dribbled out the side of his mouth and it was clear he was already dead... (p 285)

These three examples evidence the process whereby the critically-informed Creative Practice I undertook demonstrated that psychological horror and terror could be intensified by the

inclusion of abjection and gore to ensure that the reader can experience the total impact of horror writing. *Stitches* works to encapsulate both elements of the Gothic/horror genre, delving into philosophical arguments regarding the self and other, and playing with language and the art of Creative Writing in order to demonstrate the expertise in my craft necessary for a doctoral degree. The blend of ‘high-brow’ philosophical and psychological horror components (contemplations on identity, feminism, queer theory, and beauty standards alongside a discussion on the distinction between modification and self-harm) and ‘low-brow’ camp and schlocky horror-inspired techniques (buckets of blood, the usage of gore, characters named comically after their intertextual counterparts) allowed writing *Stitches* to remain such a gratifying process. In *Stitches*’ current iteration, the blending of these ‘finer’ emotions and the abject ‘splat’ genre lends it a new aesthetic which works with a recognisable horror tradition, sincerely celebrating the use of abjection, violence, and intertextual campness as equally significant elements of the horror genre to that of the more culturally respected uses of terror, tension building, and societal critique. It was through the process of Critical Research into the genre that informed this blended Creative Practice, again feeding into the idea of the ‘iterative cycle web’ of PaR/RaP.

I have discussed the significance of creative iteration, alongside critical iteration, and finally how that re-examination of critical ideas has influenced creative choices. To conclude this section, I reiterate what was stated in the opening paragraph that iteration is, and will indefinitely continue to be, a vital part of the Creative and Critical Writing process, interlinked with the Freudian idea of ‘repeating’ and ‘working through’. The inseparability of critical and creative means that the iteration of the creative piece informed the direction of the critical piece, which has also been redrafted multiple times. In its current form, this is where *Stitches* stands as a thesis. There will always be areas to improve and voices to perfect and distinguish, always be places in which I can neaten up language choices and sentence-

structures, and rearrange plot-points for ease in understanding. Creative Writing is an art of redrafting and – as *Frankenstein* can testify – there is never one definitive version of an artwork. By that same token, one must accept in the practice of any artistic creation that the platonic ideal is an unfeasible goal. As Gene Fowler was quoted in Smith, paraphrasing from Paul Valery's comment on poetry, adapting potentially from the Leonardo da Vinci on visual art: 'A book is never finished, [...] It is abandoned'. (Smith, 1973, p 90-91).

This example of Research informing Creative Practice leads onto my second chapter where I will consider my literary influences, the use of intertextuality working on metafictional levels, and the inevitability of autobiographical influence on the art of Creative Writing.

Chapter Two: Practice as Research and Research as Practice: autobiography, intertextuality, and the Doppelgänger

‘The double has become an object of terror, just as the gods become demons after the collapse of their cult.’ (Freud, 2003, p 143)

This chapter critically considers other methodologies in novel writing which, much like iteration, are invaluable and in this instance unavoidable in the act of Creative Writing. I will consider the use of autobiography through the lens of PaR, looking at the work of Gaylene Parry, another academic novelist who detailed the psychologically revealing and healing impact of Creative Writing and Critical Research in her thesis experience. This will then lead onto a conversation regarding how our autobiographical Critical Research journey leads to an unavoidably intertextual influence on the written product, something particularly pertinent to this thesis the majority of which is an intertextual novel based on another intertextual novel, though, as I will argue, all novels are in some ways intertextual. The impact of the author’s psychology through autobiography/intertextuality influences the psychology of the characters who become, I will argue, the writer’s uncanny doppelgängers, reflecting unconscious fears and anxieties which might have remained hidden were it not for the Practice of Creative Writing.

The Freudian doppelgänger is outlined in his essay ‘The Uncanny’ as the ‘harbinger of death’ (p 142). The use of an uncanny double appears repeatedly through *Frankenstein* as both Victor and the creature mirror and represent each other – ‘Almost every critic of Frankenstein has noted that Victor and his Monster are doubles. The doubleness even enters some of the popular versions and is un-self-consciously accepted by everyone who casually calls the Monster “Frankenstein”’ (Albert J. *et al.*, 1979, p 14) – and both can be considered

doubles of Shelley herself when applying an autobiographical lens to the novel as Ellen Moers has, and I will.

Adam and Satan, themselves doubles of each other, with their tempestuous relationships to God in the *Bible* and *Paradise Lost* (Milton, 1667) are returned in an uncanny and distorted means through the characters of Victor and his creature, who are again resurrected in *Stitches* with further distorted uncanniness. One can regard these character rebirths through another Freudian concept, 'projection', a propulsion of one's own feelings and experiences onto others, mentioned initially in his essays to William Fleiss (Freud, 1892). I argue that a Subject (in my instance, the author) projects themselves onto an Object (their character), thus making them autobiographical and uncanny conduits of the writers themselves. Applied through the lens of PaR, Perry's essay supports this idea of writing as an autobiographical process. It is again evidenced in Shelley's representation of the monster's education, reflective of her own Romantic literary studies, creating a moment where intertextuality and autobiography interlink through the symbol of the uncanny doppelgänger.

With *Stitches* too my characters represent my divergent and contradictory attitudes to body modification, consent, and mental health, which is another reason the use of multiple third-person narratives was essential. Through my own feminist and queer experiences, I created characters who reflect through extremity the subconscious anxieties surrounding embodied existence, literalising through fiction the queer feminine desire to escape a body subjugated in a patriarchal environment. This can be seen in the thoughts and actions of The Nurse and Cindy. My conflicting concern for those potentially demonstrating self-destructive behaviours under the guise of self-expression can be seen in The Doc, and my cold, academic interest in the topic of embodiment and how far theoretically one may alter the body is encapsulated in The Chief, who also expresses the universal fear of mortality which again taps into unconscious phobias.

All of this is to demonstrate how these methodologies will apply to myself, my intertextual inspirations and their works and characters, and my own characters and their own creative pursuits in body modification. I will begin now with an introduction to PaR in which I consider two specific points in two essays on the topic and how they relate to *Stitches*.

PaR Introduction

To begin, I will outline how theories on artistic intention presented by Paul Carter and Barbara Bolt in their essays on PaR can apply to my own work, before considering the intertextual influences on *Stitches* and *Frankenstein*, where I will argue that the reapplication of particular characters acts as a form of uncanniness, producing a Gothic aesthetic. Carter speaks about the creative process and its interaction with academia and philosophy: ‘creative research [...] explores the irreducible heterogeneity of cultural identity, the always unfinished process of making and remaking ourselves through our symbolic forms,’ (Carter, 2004, p 13). Carter here speaks metaphorically, describing how individuals acting as part of a collaboration should ‘commit themselves to the process of self reinvention’ and share a ‘mytho-poetic goal’ of embracing ‘the collective desire of self-becoming’. When Carter refers to self-becoming and self-reinvention here, he means intellectual plasticity and development, an internal shift in personal and artistic thought, feeling, and belief, rather than a corporeal *bodily* self-reinvention of the type performed by many of my characters. To consider his intentional metaphorical meaning, the act of Creative Writing worked as a symbolic making of some aspects of myself; in writing I became a writer of horror fiction. To consider Carter *literally*, Cindy and The Nurse go through a conscious and physical self-becoming in the making and remaking of their physical bodies through surgery, where the action of physical mutilation is necessary to the creation of a new corporeal reality. As

Kristeva puts it: 'the advent of one's own identity demands a law that mutilates' (Kristeva, 1982, p 54). The Nurse and Cindy share a similar intention in their bodily transformations, that of shocking or repelling a society which has proven itself unjust in its treatment of young women. They create artwork through collaboration, using their bodies as the canvas on which to architecturally build upon, or demolish and remodel as the case may be.

What these characters are doing is, in essence, body art. The idea of 'Body Art' stretches back to the 1960s and can mean both the use of the body in particular performances (Arya, 2014), or the act of bodily modification through tattooing, piercing, or scarification (Lodder, 2010, p 6). These acts of modification often aim to reject societal ideals of identity, gender, and beauty, although are considered ethically ambiguous when taken to extremes where the argument for personal autonomy becomes uncomfortable. Armando R. Favazza says in the preface to his work on self-harm and body-modification: 'Self-mutilation is nothing to trifle with. For individuals who cannot control the behaviour, it provides short-term relief but at a great cost' (Favazza, 1987, p xix). The subjectivity of art in general means that reflections on body art in particular become complex. It is this dichotomy of personal choice battling with psychological or societal pressures that helped to inspire Cindy and The Nurse's voluntary transformations. That Patch is an unwilling participant hints at the collateral damage that could affect those most vulnerable in society when bodies can be freely manipulated.

Paul Carter continues: 'The impulse to make or invent something stems, rather, from a growing sensation of silence, of loss, lack, incoherence or absence.' (Bolt and Barrett, 2007, p 21). The loss, lack, or absence represented here is that of a gap in the canon where a person may not see themselves in the current art available, or may find there is a part of a cultural puzzle missing. Literally, however, it is Cindy's physical lack of a foot which inspires her desire for complete bodily re-invention. Cindy and The Nurse's transformations demonstrate

that artists are not simply compelled to fill a gap, but to then expand upon the filling. In psychoanalytic thinking, the 'lack' will always be deferred, so a successive chain of 'lack' is always being created, the 'object petit a' or 'unattainable object of desire' as Lacan terms it (Lacan, 1957, p 7). In its most literal sense of a physical bodily lack, Carter's quote still resonates.

The novel in part arose from a frustration at the lack of nuanced exploration on the feminist implications of body modification. Too often in Second-Wave feminism, the idea of altering the body's appearance was regarded as the ultimate pandering to patriarchal superiority and the unreasonable expectations placed on women and girls; this can be seen typified in Sheila Jeffreys' *Beauty and Misogyny* (2005) and Andrea Dworkin's *Woman Hating* (1974) to name just two examples. The alternative, however – a complete defence of the freedom of choice – appeared naïve, as it would require one to consider bodily manipulation in a vacuum separate from hierarchical society, a fundamentally impossible concept. As Tsaousi argues in her critique on the 2000s makeover show, post-feminism offered a surface-level acceptance of 'natural' femininity which also allowed for body modification and artificial enhancement, but fell short, as 'it reaffirm[ed] gender boundaries and construct[ed] gendered identities and practices, by complying with the standards of slenderness, youthfulness and the idea that appearance is interlinked with social worth,' (Tsaousi, 2017, p 11) essentially offering lip-service to ideas of autonomy, while reinforcing patriarchal ideas of beauty and capitalist ideas of commodification. There has been nuanced academic work regarding the topic of cosmetic surgery and beauty standards, particularly, Paula Black's *The Beauty Industry* (2004), whose deep exploration on beauty spaces reflected the rich variety of women and their circumstances relating to body modification. Creatively, however, this lack encouraged me to write *Stitches*, in which I intended to explore agency, choice, beauty, and gender in a misogynistic society where

different characters have ambiguous experiences in their embodied realities. The unjust sociological hierarchy is still present and unavoidable, but their personal autonomy is not debated or scorned. In the disparate experiences of Patch, Cindy, and The Nurse in their attempts to assuage the bigoted community they exist within, we witness multiple means of working towards a freedom of expression. Similarly, The Doc, who does not engage in extreme modification, still feels objectified in a world of gendered beauty standards as Chapter 50 demonstrates when she finds herself unwittingly held up against previous ex-lovers in an art exhibition. Once again, the inevitability of the male gaze impacts all who are embodied.

In Bolt's essay 'The Magic is in Handling' she states: 'In contemporary practice, this pre-occupation [with newness or originality] has tended to take the form of conscious attempts on the part of the artist, to create an event that shocks or puts the viewer in crisis' (Bolt and Barrett, 2007, p 31). Cindy's reasons for physical re-invention are multitudinous, but there is no doubt that provocation is a part of her intent. As her internal monologue reads in Part Two:

I want people to shudder when they look at me. I want them to be scared to see me and scared to look away. When people look at my face, I want them to know there isn't a God anymore. (Davies, 2026, p 195-196)

In attempting to create her own artwork through her body, she is relying on fear tactics. With Cindy, however, there is a question of authorship in terms of the work done on the body and who can claim it. Cindy embodies it, but she was not the creator of the art and, indeed, could be regarded as the subject of it. The Chief, although unsentimental towards Patch, still regularly refers to them with the pronoun 'my' as in '*my monster*' (pp. 25, 48, 95, 119, 163, 228, 244, 304). In examining Cindy's development and recovery, The Chief considers her as a personal accomplishment: '*I am so very, very proud of you.*' (p 183). The bodily image and

concept, however, is of Cindy's own making. While The Chief is the manufacturer, Cindy is the visual designer, thus reinforcing the concept of art as a necessarily collaborative process. Cindy needs The Chief's expertise in order to accomplish her designs, but she is very much the creative architect of her transformation.

The Nurse, however, has a marginally different relationship with her body art. While much of it, by virtue of necessity, had to be a collaborative effort, whatever could be self-inflicted was intentionally done as such. The effect here is less professional, as testified by the descriptions of her infected ear gauges and lumpy lip fillers which cause an abject/uncanny effect (pp. 213, 230). Her face is both recognisable, but strange and foreign, with elements of inorganic material, and organic material decaying, making The Nurse, in some way, another Frankensteinian creature. The pain, far from being an uncomfortable side-effect necessary for an aesthetic outcome, becomes a part of what makes the procedures so personally fulfilling for The Nurse. Doing this (to) herself is a conscious de-professionalisation of these procedures. As she confesses to her partner: "You're right, if it didn't hurt, I probably wouldn't do it," (p 94). This is something Cindy aspires to, and initially attempts to emulate. The lack of control she experienced when mutilated by The Prince leads to a mentality that demands some control. It is Cindy's comment which leads to The Nurse's reflection on her attraction to pain:

'...it's a shame you can't just click your fingers and have it done, ey?'
 'No,' Cindy said. 'It isn't. I'd want it to hurt.' (p 92).

With all her bravado however, she does accept anaesthetic – something which is not offered to Patch at first when their humanity is still supposedly up for debate. This suggests that for Cindy, shock is a primary condition of her creative, aesthetic, and verbal choices.

As Bolt claims though, shock is still broadly utilised in the push towards novelty, and while applying this to my characters, it is important to challenge my own writerly motivations. When using the framework of PaR, I have to consider whether I am attempting something similar in regard to arbitrary shock factors with the superfluous use of gore and body horror, something I would usually aim to avoid as, while shock in itself is not a morally objectionable device, shock for the sake of shock can often be at best creatively lazy and at worse exploitative. It is true that I consumed material from various disciplines which focused on contentious subject matter with the intention being to cause a visceral and physical response in the reader/viewer – the intertextual use of *Frankenstein* itself attests to this. When focussing on violence and gore, my intention was identical. I wanted to create a visceral, physical response in the reader so that fans of horror felt appeased and satisfied, and fans of literary fiction experienced the horror novelty. In the art of practising creative writing, shock can be useful for maintaining engagement. If a reader's concentration begins slipping, an act of sex, violence, or profanity will appeal to their morbid curiosity and draw them back into the present, a kind of narrative 'hook' which can appear at any point within the story (Lyon, 2008, p 48). In these ways then, I fall victim to Bolt's cynical presumption that in the pursuit of originality artists succumb to shock tactics which may contribute in some ways to a voyeuristic male gaze in which the destruction (or, arguably, recreation) of feminine bodies works as a form of entertainment.

However, as with the blending of high- and low-brow culture discussed in Chapter One, *Stitches* uses shock in a deliberate and informed way regarding gender theory. When regarding sociological expectations, a fundamental stepping out of assigned roles (be they gender or otherwise) can be enough to create shock and offence despite personal intention. People respond with apoplexy and bafflement when people willingly sacrifice particular privileges for the purpose of self-expression, as can be seen by the scholarly research that

investigates exactly *why* people might sacrifice privilege, (Cooper *et al.*, 2020) and the detailed accounts of bigoted responses to those who do sacrifice these privileges (Ploch, 2025) – whether those be the privileges of existing as cisgender, as a man, as a straight person, or as someone who encapsulates conventional beauty standards with the associated racial and class implications that coincide with this (Weiler, Mühlenbeck and Jacobsen, 2025). Phillipa Snow describes this succinctly: ‘Culturally, there is something shocking in the image of a woman choosing to destroy what is supposedly – which is to say misogynistically – her most valuable asset: her own flesh’ (Snow, 2022, p 64). This bafflement and apoplexy is something I wanted to challenge. I do not formally come down on one side or the other with the modification/mutilation debate, though I err towards allowing adults to exercise informed consent in the vast majority of cases. *Stitches* explores individual rights to bodily autonomy and self-expression, even when, as with the case of Cindy, I would consider the ending tragic.

It is through the Practice of creative acts, whether that be my writing or, meta-textually, the modification of my characters’ bodies to their own visionary ideals, that we recognise how personal recreation and shock tactics can be beneficially utilised and challenged. Considered from a wider perspective, the ideas developed through these individually Creative Practices can then be applied to a wider understanding of sociological or Critical Research. By playing with the concept of shock and self-recreation in my writing, I am contributing to an understanding of the horror genre in a mirrored way through myself and my characters, as we correspondingly play with provocation as a means of protest and engagement in our processes of self-becoming. With my characters’ work on their bodies, they too are contributing to research in the areas of self-expression and gender identity. This conclusion is reached when considering the tactics put forward by Carter and Bolt regarding

Practice as Research in general, and applying them to my own creative and critical understanding.

Intertextuality

In the creation of *herself* as horror writer, Shelley too relied on a critical understanding of the literary work that came before her, and in this sub-section I will detail the influence of intertextuality and its relation to PaR and psychoanalysis. In the previous chapter, I quote from Terry Eagleton as he describes how insistence on standard English can butcher language development: ‘Language, that most innocent and spontaneous of common currencies, is in reality a terrain scarred, fissured and divided by the cataclysms of political history, strewn with the relics of imperialist, nationalist, regionalist and class combat’ (Eagleton, 1976, p 54). I return to this quote as it offers a compelling metaphor, where the abstract concept of ‘language’ becomes a physical body damaged by the impact of oppressive structures, much in the same way that the modifications of *The Nurse* and *Cindy* could be regarded as symbolic protests to those same oppressive structures. Both Frankenstein’s creature and *Frankenstein* the text coincide with Eagleton’s metaphor of scarred and mismatched terrain with disparate influences. The same can be said of *Stitches* and *Patch* in that they are both collaborative and restructured *things* made from an amalgamation of parts. In drafts of the *Frankenstein* text, both Mary Shelley’s and Percy Shelley’s additions, suggestions, and iterations are visible. As with the changes in skin tone, shape, and texture seen in Frankenstein’s creature, the variations in handwriting offer hints as to which edits came from which writer to become what we recognise as *Frankenstein* today. ‘As Mary Shelley herself recognized in her Introduction of 1831, what we too often call literary “creation” is really a process of assembling and combining pre-existing elements.’ (Baldick, 1987, p 35). The assembling and

combining here could refer to artistic iteration, collaborative ‘self-becoming’, and intertextuality.

Patch is a creature of collaboration in that they are tangibly made up of many of The Prince’s victims, while metaphorically composed of my own intertextual inspirations. The character, and arguably my other characters too – not just those of Cindy, Pete and The Chief whose literary counterparts are evident, but all my characters– are complex amalgamations of my research and collaborative efforts with supervisors and workshop teams. *Stitches* is a singular project when it comes to PaR, as it works on layers of intertextuality. The foundations on which the project was based were on the stories of *Frankenstein* and ‘Cinderella’ and both of *these* projects were themselves intertextual texts inspired by that which came before them, the works of science and philosophy, or the previous oral and written versions of the same tale, respectively. It is this intertextuality which means the works become uncanny, as readers experience a distorted familiarity intended to create an unnerving impact, essential for horror and fairy tale, genres which both use cautionary fear for moralistic purposes.

In Smith and Dean’s Introduction to *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*, they speak to how a creative spark can develop from research into scientific areas to allow for practical and innovative advancement:

Research-led practice [...] originates in the contemporary modus operandi of science, engineering, technology and medical research, in which research work is directed not only towards the elucidation of falsifiable ideas but also towards the production of practical out-comes, whether they be pharmaceuticals or physical machines. (Smith and Dean, 2009, p 7).

Another potential result of research-led practice may be the creative inspiration for *artistic* advancement. One can reflect on Shelley’s fascination with galvanism and its influence on her novel: ‘When Mary Shelley gave her intended “ghost story” a scientific context, she

linked the Gothic concept of the double with technology.’ (Tropp, 1976, p 52). Shelley recalls these creative ponderings as inspired by scientific research in her 1831 introduction: ‘Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things.’ (Shelley, 1831, p 8). Fran Pheasant-Kelly details how contemporary research by Andrew Ure into galvanism ignited Shelley’s creativity (Pheasant-Kelly, 2018, p 316), and Tropp reaffirms how the historical context surrounding Shelley informed her Creative Practice, as she incorporated the public’s excitement regarding scientific discovery through hypothetical fictionalisation: ‘The search for the power that could give life seemed to have ended with galvanism.’ (Tropp, 1976, p 23). That this fictionalised hypothetical swerved into horror likely echoes Shelley’s personal anxieties, as she found the prospect of reanimation ‘supremely frightful’ (Shelley, 1831, p 9). The focus on these scientific advancements serves to reaffirm the significance of iteration; Shelley’s developing understanding of scientific academic theories led to creative adaptations: ‘Galvanism, unmentioned in 1818, also creeps into the text along with occasional phrases which stress the unhallowed nature of Victor’s transgression.’ (Baldick, 1987, p 61). Whether Shelley researched more on galvanism following the publication of the first edition, or whether her previous understanding began to seem more significant on later reflection we cannot know, but the intertextual significance of scientific research on the *Frankenstein* text is unquestionable.

That her creature is a ‘double’ of Shelley can be seen through her use of intertextuality, as he learns to speak through pre-existing literature from Shelley’s plane of reality, adding an educational autobiographical timbre to the novel. Shelley prioritised texts she believed most likely to create an articulate, intelligent, and self-aware creature with a penchant for philosophical thinking: Volney’s *Ruins of Empire* (1792), Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), Plutarch’s *Lives* (1579), and Goethe’s *Sorrow of Werther* (1779). Shelley, as a self-improving enlightened Romanticist, allowed her autodidactic research into literary

analysis, history, and theology to infiltrate her fiction writing, neatly laying out the themes and inspirations of the plot. The casting out of the imperfect child in *Paradise Lost* mirrors the fate of the creature who is similarly rejected, as he states: ‘like him [Satan], when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.’ (Shelley, 1831, p 132). Baldick describes the significance of this intertextual influence when viewed from the creature’s perspective: ‘By far the most important literary source for *Frankenstein*, though, is Milton’s *Paradise Lost* [...] culminating in the monster’s own reading of the epic poem, which he takes to be a true history.’ (Baldick, 1987, p 40). The conflict experienced by the monster here is apparent, as he associated himself first with Adam, then with Satan, the antithesis to that which is culturally good. The blurring between reality and fiction here is interesting, as the creature takes the literature to be historically verbatim, raising questions regarding the reading of reality or biography in fiction as helpful for enriching readerly experience.

Paradise Lost’s significance is apparent from the outset through the subtitle: ‘The modern Prometheus’ alongside Milton’s quotation at the opening to the novel: ‘Did I request thee, maker, from my clay to mould me man?’ (Shelley, 1831, p 1). This quote suggests Shelley was playing with a myriad of conflicting perspectives, influenced by Milton whose own intertextual poem nuances the biblical characters’ experiences. These Christian images can be framed autobiographically against the backdrop of Percy Shelley’s newfound atheistic inclinations, ‘In fact, argued Shelley, if God did not create human beings, was there not a good chance that human beings created God and Christianity was a sham?’ (Gordon, 2015, p 180). It is possible that Shelley may have been creatively working through her own anxieties regarding disobedience to God, as implied again by Gordon who claims that ‘she, like her mother, found occasional solace in the liturgy of the Church of England’ (p 509).

We have established how the key inspiration for *Stitches (Frankenstein)* and the key inspiration for *Frankenstein (Paradise Lost)* are all intertextual texts that rely on literary and scientific research for successful creative practice, contributing to the concept of Creative and Critical PaR components as iterative and inter-cyclical. As a secondary layer to this PaR intertextual framework, *Stitches*, like *Frankenstein*, is a novel I wrote which stemmed from the academic process of literary analysis in the Intertextuality module. Through reading fiction, and in researching Freudian ideas of identity – the doppelgänger, the Uncanny, the Oedipus complex, fetishism, screen memories and projection – the novel materialised.

As with all creative artwork which forms a part of the known artistic landscape, each personal inspiration would branch out into further inspirations-by-proxy, leading to a rich and thorough research experience which influenced the creation of my characters, and solidified the sociological internal battle they symbolised.

Autobiography: The character as author/doppelgänger

Gaylene Perry's reflections on her doctoral thesis, another Creative-Critical PhD with a novelist element which she titled *Water's Edge* (Perry, 2001), demonstrate the unavoidable autobiographical influence involved in the process of creativity: 'what I learned most from the act of writing this novel, was about the instability of boundaries between the fictive and the autobiographical, the singular experience and the collective, the personal and the political' (Perry, 2007, p 37). I will use this PaR reflection to argue that a similar autobiographical inevitability influenced *Frankenstein* and then *Stitches* by using the work of Shelley scholars who have detailed the biographical comparisons between herself and her characters.

Ellen Moers similarly posits that there was an instability between the fictive and autobiographical in regard to *Frankenstein* when she argued that Shelley's personal maternal tragedies influenced the narrative, demonstrating psychoanalytical and autobiographical implications are involved in the act of creation (Moers, 1979). Just as Victor and his creature can be interpreted as doppelgängers, mirroring each other's cyclical patterns of macabre and controversial actions followed by a guilt-ridden self-loathing, Shelley also acts as a doppelgänger for each character. As the daughter of Wollstonecraft who died in childbirth, Shelley was likewise caught in this controversy/guilt cycle: 'Surely no outside influence need be sought to explain Mary Shelley's fantasy of a newborn as at once monstrous agent of destruction and piteous victim of parental abandonment.' (Moers, 1979, p 85). This presumption is echoed by Knoepflmacher: '*Frankenstein* resurrects and rearranges an adolescent's conflicting emotions about her relation [...] to the dead mother she idealized and mourned' (Knoepflmacher, 1979, p 91). Shelley's curiosity toward her mother is well-documented. In Charlotte Gordon's thorough duo-biography, she opens with an epitaph quoting Shelley: 'The memory of my mother has always been the pride and delight of my life.' (Gordon, 2015, p ix). Shelley was rumoured to have both learnt to trace her name and lost her virginity on her mother's grave (St. Clair, 1989, p 358), and the shared idolisation of Wollstonecraft by Mary and Percy Shelley has already been cited extensively as a cornerstone of their romance (Garrett, 2013, p 299).

Shelley experienced infant mortality prior to writing *Frankenstein* through the death of her own daughter Clara, and so the image of a creator making something in a manic state of euphoria, only to realise they were unable to effectively care for them can be regarded as another of Shelley's psychological projections: 'For Frankenstein is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist's imagination, I am convinced, by the fact she was herself a mother.' (Moers, 1979, p 79). In her 1831 introduction, Shelley famously referred to

Frankenstein as: ‘My hideous progeny’, the word ‘progeny’ suggesting the novel acts as replacement child, while the word ‘hideous’ adds an apologetic condemnation, mirroring Victor’s relationship to his creature.

This point regarding the epitaph as the intersection of the personal and the thematic is also emphasised by Moers: ‘The material in *Frankenstein* about the abnormal, or monstrous, manifestations of the child-parent tie justifies, as much as does its famous monster, Mary Shelley’s reference to the novel as “my hideous progeny”.’ (Moers, 1979, p 87). In an act of Freudian displacement, (Freud, 1927, p18) the care and attention Shelley might have shown Clara was instead channelled into her creative work and the figurative birth of a monster.

This strand of thought is echoed by de Beauvoir when she posits that, to a mother, the daughter is a terrifying doppelgänger, a reminder of her (the mother’s) mortality: ‘The mother’s attitude towards her grown-up daughter is most ambivalent: in her son she looks for a god; in her daughter she finds a double. A double is a dubious personage, who assassinates his original’ (de Beauvoir, 1956, p 599). De Beauvoir intended this quote to suggest a symbolic death in terms of social importance and sexual desirability, but it is autobiographically relevant for our purposes. As Shelley gave birth to her own ‘progeny’ in *Frankenstein*, she masculinises her doppelgänger and instead creates a son. Shelley engaged in masculine pursuits due to her privilege and her rejection of societal expectations, so the masculinisation may be justified in this way. Alternatively, we can consider de Beauvoir’s theory that Shelley made her doppelgängers masculine so she could see them as gods – after all, they create and extinguish life. Perhaps it is Victor’s maleness that caused creating life to be so disastrous; Bronfen argues that the act of asexual reproduction was the crux of the destruction: ‘To exclude the feminine as natural difference results in a relationship where the creator is exclusively constituted by his creation such that it implodes and destroys itself.’ (Bronfen, 1992, p 132)

That autobiography infiltrated *Frankenstein*, despite it being a work of science-fiction involving impossible ideas, is testament to autobiography's inevitability. Read through a Freudian lens, *Frankenstein* can be regarded as a distorted 'screen memory', a displacement of trauma into something less personally recognisable: 'instead of the memory image that was justified by the original experience, we are presented with another, which is to some extent associatively *displaced* from it.' (Freud, 2003, p 7). In displacing her maternity trauma into fiction, Shelley was able to review it from a psychological distance. As Kristeva describes it: 'The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life again in signs.' (Kristeva, 1982, p 38). This mention of phobia suggests that autobiographic tendencies may emerge most often in genres pertaining to fear. Re-emergence through horror, we will see in the next chapter, is an established Freudian staple.

To conclude this chapter, I offer a brief summary of how elements of PaR interacted with psychoanalysis in the writing of *Frankenstein* and *Stitches*. The use of identity and creation as a form of research was explored in its layered complexity: in Shelley's creation *Frankenstein* and its autobiographical elements, in my *Stitches* and my need to fill a particular gap in body modification discourse, and finally in Cindy's physical 'lack' and her need to create a new identity through her body art. Again, this blending of psychoanalysis with PaR contributes to an original reading of the novels which reaffirms the two lenses' necessary interconnection in the field of Creative Writing in horror. A further discussion on the Uncanny follows as we deepen our understanding of the doppelgänger, explore the death drive, and consider their influence on my characters in *Stitches*.

Chapter Three: the Uncanny, doppelgängers, and the death drive, and their influence on *Stitches*

‘Fiction affords possibilities for a sense of the uncanny that would not be available in real life’.

(Freud, 2003, p 154).

‘Family Relationships’: foot injury and Oedipal dynamics

In this chapter, we will turn to Freudian concepts of the Uncanny. Freud defines the Uncanny as ‘something that has been repressed and now returns’ (Freud, 2003, p 147), a phrase Wood then took forward in his analysis of twentieth-century horror films (Wood, 1978) which he argued demonstrated domestic phobias returning to the literal. I believe this is likewise true of literary horror. Through the act of fictive creation, Shelley has managed to create uncanny doppelgängers of herself as both mother (creator) and child (creation) through her characters of Victor and his creature, thus allowing her, through the protection of symbolism, to psychoanalytically work through maternal anxieties.

Maternal anxieties are often tied to the symbolic injured foot, which stands in for castrative anxiety in Freudian thought, and the prevalence of foot injury in *Stitches* was a deliberate insertion to reflect Oedipal symbolism. In *Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles, 425 BC) the protagonists’ clubfoot symbolises his inability to progress psychologically beyond maternal dependence; he is continuously dragged back to that which we require as infants – a maternal home. In the 1885 introduction translated by E.D.A. Morshead, the parental neglect of Oedipus is made evident: ‘Therefore when a son was born unto them, they fastened the feet of the child together and cast him forth on Mount Cithæron, that he might die’ (Sophocles, 1885, p viii). The tying of the feet and the subsequent injury that plagued Oedipus throughout

the play is significant; indeed, it defines him: the Greek word ‘Oedipus’ can be translated to mean ‘swollen foot’ (Steiner, 2018). The foot mutilation in The Grimms’ ‘Cinderella’ – another key intertextual inspiration – works inversely to Oedipus as a way to escape the maternal home and romantically ascend into a more lavish marriage, suggesting a gendered difference in the symbolism of foot injury and its relation to romantic expectations, maternity, and psychosexual development. Dysfunctional maternity is a central theme in both the Gothic and fairy tale, and in both there is a reliance on its relationship to feet.

In *Stitches*, I explored my own interpretations of Frankenstein’s creature and Cinderella. I found these characters compelling because of the role parenthood and its subsequent neglect plays in their stories, and because both protagonists have been adapted so many times as to have become distanced from the original text. They have become cultural symbols with malleable personalities due to multiple interpretations. In the Prologue to *Stitches*, I expand upon the prevalence of maternal dependence and its subsequent disappointment through the character of Pete. Here, I suggest that this inability to progress beyond psychological infancy (symbolised through his literal inability to grow older) would be disastrous for both the person in question and their extended world through this hyperbolic and literalistic setting. Pete’s murder of Miss Lily speaks to his need for a mother/partner who offers sweetness, nourishment, and affection, while simultaneously working to demonstrate how a child’s relationship with maternity is complicated by their emerging and frustrated sexual development, a theory made more horrific through an understanding of Pete as, in some ways, mentally adult. Pete’s character was intended to offer insight in the misogynistic rage of men who feel disappointed by an unmet feminine dynamic in their lives, and to speak to an injustice within heterosexual relationships where the feminine party is intended to be partner and mother, both.

Absent or corrupted maternity emerged as a significant part of the novel and went on to impact every character in turn. I emphasised The Chief's discomfort with maternal affection, which he perceives as a reminder of his own vulnerability in childhood; The Nurse's dysfunctional relationship with a mother who failed to protect her from sexual violence; and The Doc, whose own maternal feelings are complicated by her love of Patch and her nurturing nature intermingled with an insecurity stemming from the medical abuse she witnesses towards mothers within the system. Naturally, both Patch and Cindy serve as the motherless creatures, representative of Shelley and her doppelgänger characters.

This focus on parent/child relationships and their enmeshing toxicity is founded on Freud's understanding of family relationships with their latent incestuousness. His work on the Oedipus complex is strictly defined in his essay 'A Special Type of Choice of Object made by Men' (Freud, 1910) and discussed more generally in terms of varying incestuous desires in his essay on 'Family Romances' (Freud, 1909). There are, however, other Freudian theories that became significant for me when researching the writing process and PaR. These same theories worked to help explain the characters' motivations.

In the next subsection, I will discuss these other Freudian theories, and their impact on *Stitches*, looking specifically at the Uncanny, and finally, the death drive.

The Uncanny and Abjection

Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny' discusses the evocation of the psychological phenomenon in which something familiar (*Heimlich*) becomes unfamiliar (*Unheimlich*) promoting a sensation of 'fear and dread' (Freud, 2003, p 123). Freud describes how fear of the uncanny stems from repression 'the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns' (p 124).

It is through the lens of the Uncanny that I began to regard the character as authorial doppelgänger. This can be seen especially in the horror and gothic genres which often interact with the thematics of subconscious fears, guilts, and anxieties: ‘the uncanny is that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well know and had long been familiar’ (p 124), demonstrating how frightening a repressed memory becomes when forced to the forefront of our imaginative awareness. A writer attempting to protect themselves from recognising internal fears and repressed experiences instead projects them forward onto a new, though uncomfortably familiar, character. Another definition of the *Unheimlich* is translated as: ‘what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come out into the open’ (p 132).

There is a connection here to Kristeva’s theory of abjection, which is utilised in *Stitches* through its use of gore, crossed corporeal boundaries, and the Uncanny. Freud states: ‘To many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits, and ghosts’ (p. 148). This parallels Kristeva who defines abjection as that which crosses the border of our understood corporeal reality, thus creating a visceral disgust: ‘the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). The same sense of fear and disgust present in the Uncanny appears in the experience of abjection, although with more focus on the physicality of bodily repulsion and sickness, rather than the psychological unease more suggestive of an uncanny experience. Kristeva considers abjection as a psychological level of repulsion beyond the Uncanny: ‘Essentially different from "uncanniness," more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory’, (p 5). For Kristeva, the repressed is either nonexistent, and thus the source of the abjection is novel, or else the repression is so buried that it cannot and does not return. When regarded from a broader perspective, I would contend that in Kristeva’s examples of what constitutes

‘pure’ abjection – bodies, death, disease, human waste – most are familiar and indeed mundane. It follows that abjection and uncanniness are undoubtedly interlinked, and experiences of the Uncanny will likely also include experiences of abjection and vice versa.

In regard to *Stitches* and the concept of Patch as a character, I considered him as an accumulation of the ideas of abjection and uncanniness. Kristeva states:

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (p 4).

We can see how the Frankensteinian creature is the ultimate Abject Uncanny, both as a corpse who has been reanimated, and that which is familiar, a collection of human and animal parts resurrected (literally rather than psychologically) and made unfamiliar. This is somewhat diminished by the use of scientific advancement in both *Frankenstein* and *Stitches* as a key theme, which dilutes the primal experience of abjection. However, the advancement of scientific research through an understanding of the body, accomplished through the physical practice of dissection and manipulation of corpses, works paradoxically to desensitise a culture, and then to provoke fresh horror at that desensitisation. So much of *Frankenstein* focusses on the internalisation of the creature’s thoughts and feelings, his psychological and social development in an unaccepting world. This goes beyond concepts of pure scientific expansion and explores the personal: ‘the most disturbing thing about him, indeed, is that he has fully human feelings.’ (Baldick, 1987, p 8). I would like to think *Stitches* accomplishes something similar, showing the internal and external experiences of the characters, going beyond scientific curiosity and into the personal experiences of identity, loss, and the philosophy of pain.

Shelley's Frankensteinian monster, and my Patch and Cindy, become the epitome of these psychologically horrific, reanimated corpses: 'the utmost of abjection' Kristeva describes. This becomes even more apparent as we consider the sense of otherness and the status as 'outsider' which helps define the two characters, who become entwined through their shared bodily experiences and existence within the same limbs, arguably becoming two halves of the same person. With Patch and Cindy, I created two mirroring characters who were both individually themselves and each other. In this way they came to represent the 'Subject' and 'Object'. While evidently Patch becomes the victim to others' whims, the autonomy that Cindy represents allows her to become a version of the uncanny abject Kristeva calls 'the deject' (Kristeva, 1982, p 8): 'The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing.' (p 8).

In the process of cosmetic surgery, amputation, and the reconstruction of different body parts, Cindy is quite literally separating herself, straying from what is expected of someone in her embodied position. Many respond with perplexity at Cindy's requests, even as they acquiesce to them. Cindy rejects so many social expectations that her end-result echoes something similar to a masochistic self-harm. Her cosmetic choices can be regarded as self-destruction spurred by patriarchal trauma, and indeed there is evidence to suggest that sexual assault and rape survivors have a higher rate of self-harm *and* body modification in an attempt, healthily or otherwise, to regain control of a body that was previously under the control of an attacker (Brockdorf *et al.*, 2023). However, Cindy is doing more than simply 'harming' her body. If she were truly led by simple masochistic purposes, it would be easier to commit other forms of self-harm and bodily destruction which didn't necessarily involve the degradation of another person. Cindy requires Patch as part of her artistic material. With

Patch's disintegration, Cindy's body is built up into something of her own design, which works as a form of salvation:

A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved. (Kristeva, 1982, p 8).

The 'risk' Cindy is taking here is with her health, body, and sanity. As the surgeries continue, she is increasingly at risk of death. Psychologically, she also has moments of doubt regarding her extreme symbolic resistance. Yet, it is in her new body, that of the androgyn monster, that she finally finds freedom and peace.

If this is where we are left considering Cindy as the Subject, one can also regard her as Object in relation to Patch through Kristeva's framework of abjection. *Stitches* works to make the philosophical and metaphorical literal in many respects, and here is no exception.

Kristeva states:

I experience ab-jection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be "me." Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. (p 10).

This quote suggests that Patch is experiencing abjection through the act of Cindy possessing them by taking their 'old' body, and causing them to be by gifting them their 'new' body. It is the possession of Patch's body by the Other (Cindy) which allows them to be.

Initially, Cindy reflects the feminine victim, distressed and powerless, physically in darkness and near silence, psychologically awaiting uncertain horror while others gaze upon her during her weakest moment. This vulnerability is what Cindy attempts to invert as the novel progresses with her transformation into the 'monster' whose body has been deliberately altered to evade or repel the male gaze. Through the practice of Creative Writing, I realised

that this inversion is as similarly futile as attempting to ensure an avoidance of the male gaze through the use of hand-held cameras. Cindy's creative concept of bodily modification, much like my concept of found-footage aesthetics, was proven to be naïve in its attempt to evade patriarchal voyeurism. In becoming freakish, Cindy invites a different type of gaze, though not necessarily one that is any less primitive or any more desirable. This becomes a significant part of the story's philosophy, as Cindy realises that in escaping a body which The Prince has touched, and thus escaping from her victim status, she has unknowingly been reconstructed from his other previous victims. It is for this reason that she is content to rot away piece by piece in the finale, subjecting herself to a painful and premature death. Although framed, from Cindy's perspective, as a sort of liberation – and if the aim is to no longer be perceived under the male gaze, a slow and unassuming death may be the closest possible way to achieve this – it is in reality a suicide by neglect.

The Death Drive

Freud extrapolates on the connection to self-destruction and femininity in his 1924 essay 'The Economic Problem of Masochism', in which he argues masochism and the death drive amount to one and the same: 'it may be said that the death instinct which is operative in the organism – primal sadism – is identical with masochism.' (Freud, 1924, p 164). Freud details the use of masochism as a sexual fetish, linked to femininity in that it is symbolic of castration, childbirth, or sex. Of the three strands of masochism he identifies, he defines this particularly gendered form of masochism as 'feminine masochism':

if one has the opportunity of studying the cases in which the masochistic phantasies have been especially richly elaborated, one quickly discovers they place the subject in a characteristically female situation (p 162).

Feminine masochism can be applied to my characters as they engage with increasingly severe methods of self-destruction.

That masochism has sexual elements is well-established. However, Cindy's intentions are not strictly sexual but rooted in the sensations of power within the self as she demonstrates to what extent she can push her original, and violated, body to its limits, aiming to exert psychological control over the physical. This line of thinking, however, relies on a Cartesian dialectic which, as a phenomenological thinker, I consider reductive. As argued by Merleau-Ponty, the mind and body should not be regarded as two separate entities intercommunicating, but instead one fluid whole, with the mind being a part of, and dependent on, the body: 'But I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p 173). In seeking this psychological control, Cindy instead demonstrates her tilt towards masochism, and the prevalence of the death drive. Her final indifference toward death can therefore be interpreted as a desire. As Jessica Benjamin put in her work on psychoanalysis and relationships: 'the violation of the body is a transgression of the boundary between life and death.' (Benjamin, 1988, p 62). This boundary has been crossed repeatedly for Cindy since the beginning of her narrative, demonstrating her desire to become the dead, fragmented corpse.

Elisabeth Bronfen examines the cultural fetishization of the feminine corpse in her book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* exploring how the feminine death drive is invariably linked to societal repression in its representation of women. She asks: 'Is the feminine so inextricably bound to cultural fantasies, so that only in death can Woman be real, autonomous, alterior?' (p 64). If Cindy's ending reflects her thinking, she would no doubt answer Bronfen's question in the affirmative.

Once Cindy's bodily goal is achieved, her self-destructive tendencies extend outwards into sadism, observable by her torture and murder The Prince's mother – a nod to the

prevalence of maternal blame in Freudian thought which has infiltrated the horror genre. Benjamin explains this behavioural shift from inward to outward projection of violence when summarising Freud's ideas of sadomasochism: 'aggression internalised as masochism reappears as sadism.' (Benjamin, 1988, p 68). When the masochism has reached this sadistic stage, however, and the revenge has been effectively carried out, Cindy, with a Zen-like acceptance, allows herself to die. This surface-level seemingly passive acceptance is debateable. The pain Cindy underwent when being operated on was a deliberately weakening experience, the aforementioned suicide by neglect, conflicting with an outward appearance of monstrous strength. When the body-modification reaches its limit, however, Cindy has no interest in reparation and healing, but accepts her limitations without attempting salvation. Here again, the line between masochism as a sign of-like bravery, and masochism as a sign of psychological insecurity and self-loathing has blurred to the point of being inextricable.

It is paradoxical and problematic, but in many ways paramount, to regard Cindy's suicidal death-drive an act of autobiographical self-expression. I return again to Bronfen who argues in depth on the power of the feminine writerly suicide: 'Feminine suicide serves a trope, self-defeating as this seems, for a feminine writing strategy within the constraints of a patriarchal culture.' (Bronfen, 1992, p. 152). In many ways Cindy's eventual suicide ties in well with The Nurse's use of body modification, both serving as acts of artistic self-expression, protests against conventional beauty standards. What Cindy is rejecting is any outward expression of gender, an impossible aim when embodied in a patriarchal culture. In much the same way that a lack of aestheticization is, in its own way, an aesthetic choice, so too can agender individuals still be seen as presenting their gender *through* their agender presentation. To escape gender as a concept, one must escape being perceived, and to do so one must get rid of the body, a task that can only be achieved through total disintegration:

Because culture so inextricably connects femininity with the body, and with objectification, because culture makes the feminine body such a privileged trope or stake

in the aesthetic and social normative debates, a woman can gain a subject position only by denying her body. (p 143).

This is something Cindy attempted with her monsterisation. As established in Chapter One, attempting to make oneself un-sexual through extremity does not negate a male gaze, but merely distorts the gaze from one of admiration to contempt, or else a voyeurism towards, or fascination with, the freakish. Perhaps it is only in a complete lack of consciousness that a subject can be separate and free from their objectification.

Bronfen discusses the process of ‘undoing’ (p 143) the body, something Cindy attempts twice voluntarily. The first example of her voluntary undoing is in her initial body swap with Patch. This proves to be a creative process which, like novel writing, is not finished but abandoned. The authorities interrupt the surgery after The Nurse’s confession, at which point the two figures of Patch and Cindy are now ‘passable’ as mutilated versions of one another. Instead of achieving the perfection Cindy aimed for, something that would have proven itself impossible with ever-shifting goalposts and necessary points for improvement, they instead came across an imposed ‘deadline’ of sorts and were forced to stop, demonstrating how, again like novel writing, body modification is its own form of artistic creation and autobiographical self-expression. The second ‘undoing’ is when she allows herself to rot away from untreated frostbite in Kolkata. This final undoing allows her to accomplish what she first attempted with the body-swap. ‘By undoing her body, she undoes the gender construction which places her in an inferior position, even as cancelling the “illusion” of gender lets death emerge.’ (p 143).

That death is the only way for feminine bodies to achieve a freedom, however, felt uncomfortable for me from a moral and political position. As a creative writer, I did not want to reinforce the ideology that for a woman to best demonstrate her power, she must turn her anger inwards self-destructively. It is partly for this reason that I used Patch as an inverted

doppelgänger of Cindy, allowing them to be a symbol of strength in recovery in the third section of the book. Despite having had the least autonomy through the majority of the text due to their childlike nature and its related ‘othering’ and degradation, Patch’s choice to embrace a feminine expression in its celebratory fullness works as a counter proposal to Bronfen ideas of suicidal autobiography. Patch’s sapphic relationship with Athena, a trans woman who has also chosen to embrace her feminine identity despite an outward loss of privilege, signals a different and profoundly more wholesome rejection of gender construction. The examples of misogyny, and in particular transmisogyny, that Patch experiences in this final section indicate that they are still perceived. Unfortunately, these perceptions are unavoidably attached to society’s objectification and judgement of women and gender non-conforming individuals. All of this affirms Cindy’s death-driven philosophy.

I included a chapter in which Patch experiments with makeup as a way of hiding their surgical scars, attempting to blend more seamlessly into society. Their lack of understanding in how to apply makeup is mocked by fellow students, again demonstrating that when existing under a male gaze conventional beauty standards are considered necessary, yet judged when attempted incorrectly, a oxymoronic prospect considering that makeup artistry is a practice which – we have established – requires collaboration, practice and iteration.

I walked into a seminar with glittery pink eyes and sparkling cheeks. I heard some snickers. I didn’t understand why and in my ignorance presumed it was because, despite it all, my scars were still visible.

‘Are they doing face painting in the square?’ someone asked me, and I shook my head at the exact same time that a handful of others started laughing. Shamefully, I felt my face grow hot, which I knew made the scar tissue stand out.

‘Hey,’ Athena called over. ‘I love what you’ve done to your face.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, it’s campy. Iconic.’ (Davies, p 332).

In this section, an alternative to Cindy's philosophy is offered. In their romantic relationship, Patch and Athena are creating a tiny community which is separate, though unavoidably linked, to the larger aspects of society. Though fundamentally impossible, they can *attempt* to ignore the perceptions of others. Failing that, they can deliberately rebel against them, thus existing in a happier, insulated, personal universe, which stylistically follows the doctrines of 'camp'. In Sontag's seminal essay, her opening remark is that 'Camp is a mode of aestheticism [...] the way of Camp is not in beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, or stylisation' (Sontag, 1964, p. 2). While Patch and Athena cannot escape perception, or the pressure of unrealistic beauty standards, they can support each other through those critiques, thus queering 'mistakes' to become an intentional camp aesthetic.

While the death drive explains how Cindy's self-destruction can be regarded as empowering in that it is a personal choice demonstrating autonomy when following unconscious desires, the act of 'queering' shows empowering autonomy without the need for self-destruction. Despite the academisation of suicidal tendencies, Cindy remains 'The Victim' both ironically and not so, as her attempted liberation from patriarchal norms, and particularly its sexualised gaze, fails. From a metafictional standpoint, Cindy is a character of my making. I had intended that she be gazed upon by the readers of the novel, in fact, I brought her into being with the intention of seeing her scrutinised and considered. While her gradual death is the end of her narrative, we have various other Gothic narratives to evidence that death does not protect women from a sexualised male gaze. Even in death, a woman is still a fetishised creature upon which to gaze, 'The feminine body appears as a perfect, immaculate aesthetic form because it is a dead body, solidified into an object of art' (Bronfen, 1992, p 5), a sentiment previously established by Poe when he notoriously stated 'the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.' (Poe, 1846, p 29). The death of Elizabeth in the *Frankenstein* text is portrayed with

her collapsed on the bed in a swoon: ‘She was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair.’ (Shelley, 1831, p 199). This swoon has become a Gothic trope due to the ambiguity within the gesture. It could be one of death or, more suggestively, one of exhausted ecstasy – something films could only imply after the strictures of the Hayes Code – with a metaphorical implication taking form in the feminine corpse. The argument for the link between sex and death has been established in breadth, and my attitudes follow closely Pinedo’s argument in *Recreational Terror*, believing the link to be nuanced and complex, potentially representing a cathartic transgression of the taboo. The success of *Frankenstein* as a cultural concept celebrates the sexualisation of the corpse. If the flaws in Cindy’s sacrificial attempt are so evident, then why does she appear so content to rot away?

A further examination of the death drive can be found in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (Freud, 1922). Here, Freud considered the experiences of war veterans and, perhaps more apt for Cindy’s case, his grandchild dealing with bereavement by reiterating the death of their mother through play. Cindy too is reiterating the trauma inflicted on her by The Prince through her surgeries, particularly amputation and violation. However, due to the complexity of her trauma, this is merely one layer of justification for the extremity of her body modification. Existing as a young, attractive girl in a patriarchal society has led to an abstract disgust in her beauty, compounded by her reflections (another painful Thanatos repetition, like Freud’s grandchild playing with maternal abandonment) on others’ treatment of her. In particular, she recollects the uncomfortable moment of sexualisation from her father when practicing gymnastics as a child – ‘God, you’re really filling out now,’ he shook his head. ‘So much like your mother.’ (Davies, 2026, p 179) – alongside other memories of underage sexual experimentation with all its statutory implications, and a suggested date-rape revealed to Patch in a moment of intense emotional collapse. Psychologically, Cindy is either

punishing herself with traumatic memories, or else returning to her repressed memories in order to work through them. The confined space enables her psychological reinvention as it offers her the opportunity for solitude and thoughtfulness. Regarding 'The Economic Problems of Masochism', her need to self-punish, a need that is not abated even after the murder of The Prince, can be seen as a means of reaching towards the death drive. When she rots away at the end of the novel, having ironically decided on an adolescent-esque gap-year, something juxtaposed by The Doc's and Patch's genuinely healing travel experiences, it appears Cindy has achieved her goal to reach back to an 'inorganic' state. (Kristeva, 1982, p 109).

To conclude this third chapter, I have used Freudian ideas of the Uncanny, the Oedipus Complex, and the death drive to offer a psychoanalytic reading of my characters' motivations. A consideration of Freud's attitudes to maternity explains the motivations and conflicts present in all of my characters, and the symbolic castration through foot mutilation which appears at key points in the novel to celebrate a destructive and empowering femininity. Through a close reading of Kristeva and Bronfen, I have demonstrated Cindy's propulsion towards the death drive throughout the novel's narrative, as well as considering how Patch avoids this self-destruction, while still engaging with patriarchal and heteronormative rebellion, through the doctrines of camp. In so doing, I have recognised the feminist and queer implications of the novel, and re-established its foundation in Freudian thought.

Conclusion

In a Creative-Critical PhD, the methodology is split between that of academic Research and Creative Practice. In this thesis I argue that the two processes of Practice and Research are deeply interlinked. As stated by Smith and Dean, and reiterated by Robin Nelson, one should not 'see practice-led research and research-led practice as separate processes, but as interwoven as an iterative cyclic web.' (Smith and Dean, 2009, p 22). When critically engaging with *Frankenstein* in a modern context, I found it occasionally necessary to echo the methodology used by Shelley. In the case of 'the body as identity' and the ideas of abjectness and the Uncanny, all of these ideas rely on subjective emotionality, interpersonal internal sensations which cannot be quantitatively measured or recorded with accuracy. While it may have been possible to do a straightforward reading of *Frankenstein* in regard to Freudian concepts, it was imperative for me to explore subjectivity through a fictional account, as multiple characters demonstrate the subjectivity necessary to reflect the idea of the body as identity, as a means of experiencing the world.

Previously, I have discussed the importance of using the first-person narration so as to stress the unreliability of a narrator, particularly a narrator experiencing trauma which would impact mental health and perception. Within a patriarchal society in which beauty standards are ever-changing and unattainable, and with gendered violence remaining an ever-present threat, it is arguable that trauma is a *certainty* for particular communities; and regardless, to suggest a lack of trauma creates an objective perspective is irreconcilable. To therefore attempt to present an objective, academic account of the experiences of body dysphoria (both with and without relation to gender), body modification as a form of self-expression and/or punitive self-injury, the impact of cosmetic surgery on public and private perceptions, the psychological impact of embracing a 'freak' identity, and how choice and personal autonomy can impact all of this, would be a long, arduous study with each point above constituting its

own PhD thesis, and with each thesis still only representing a small proportion of the real-life community. I cannot claim to be representing all members of any community, and in many respects, it would be inaccurate and offensive to claim that I speak for *one* member of some of the aforementioned communities. I have never engaged with the extreme forms of bodily modification The Nurse has, or transitioned binarily to another gender as Patch and Cindy have. While I am intellectually invested in the subject, cosmetic surgery is not something I can claim to have any experiential connection to. I can, however, use fiction influenced by academic research to explore all of these aspects through multiple characters and their voices, not only considering but actively *creating* their experiences.

By that same token, fiction is perhaps more accessible than literary criticism or academic research. There are more novel readers than academic journal subscribers, and with this in mind, I felt it was important to make some of these complex and unanswerable questions more accessible. Members of the trans community who might be unlikely to engage with complex gender theory may instead feel an affinity with Frankenstein's creature, who was built to be a particular way and born without their consent, only to be scorned by their creator, and to face the moral panic of an outside community.³ I would aspire to create characters that one could relate to in this same way, in fictional narratives that mirror their own experiences. For these reasons, and for the simpler truth of being a creative writer who

³ One particular example attests to this, the stage play by Hester Stefan Chillingworth (2024) played on the parallels between the James Whale filmic version of *Frankenstein* and the trans experience. A one-person play, Chillingworth wore a large Frankenstein's monster (1931) costume complete with a huge Frankenstein head and recited every line of the film while performing in front of the projector screening. At various parts, the film was paused and Chillingworth removed more and more of their costume, symbolically shedding the label of monster that is unfairly placed on transgender people. Kate Wyver described the experience thus: 'By wedding the movie's monster to a trans body, Chillingworth reframes the heavily judgmental narrative around bodies that have undergone surgery. The meaning of some of the script's lines around fear and cruelty shift, challenging where in the story monstrosity really lies.' (Wyver, 2024).

has spent many years in academia practicing the craft, I believe that a novel was the best methodology to utilise for this particular project.

Stitches is a creative work filled with Freudian thought. That very act of iteration, a repetition compulsion to work through psychological worries, was reflected in the making of the novel, as discussed in Chapter One. The same has been argued of Shelley and *Frankenstein*, as its intertextual elements and autobiographical similarities are posited in Chapter Two, with further conversations on the creative impact of the doppelgänger, and the work of screen memories and psychological projection. Finally, in Chapter Three, I turned these same Freudian psychoanalytical concepts from myself and Shelley to my characters, as I regard their acceptance and rejection of the death drive in their own, unique, artistic creations: their bodies. Ultimately inescapable, the Creative and Critical Practice here have interwoven with each other to reflect the complexity of embodied identities from a psychoanalytical standpoint. This act of interweaving Practice with Research and Research with Practice in the creation of this PhD thesis was perhaps the largest reflection of *stitching* in the whole narrative.

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