

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Writing Digital Culture into
Contemporary Realist Young Adult Literature:
a novel and exegesis

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of Anglia Ruskin University for the degree of PhD

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ABSTRACT

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

I argue that contemporary realist Young Adult Literature (YAL) thrives at an exciting nexus of possibilities, including literary experimentation, storytelling, identity formation, and culture shaping. As such, certain YAL represents a valuable discourse around urgent post-digital literary and cultural ideas that evidence new ways of thinking about, and responding creatively to, the subject of digital technologies within the lives of young people and within literature.

The research is practice-based and comprises a young adult novel and contextualising exegesis exploring the language and practices of digital culture and its impact on contemporary realist YAL. I acknowledge that significant work in this area already exists in other YA genres—science fiction in particular has done much to address the human relationship to technology but this lays beyond the scope of this project. This creative writing thesis represents a practice-based methodology that combines traditional writing techniques with new digitally informed practices of communication and representation found in social media technology. In this way this creative writing research builds upon the work of other YA authors similarly concerned with representing the experienced/lived world of digital culture for its readers, while innovating new ways of approaching multimodal fiction writing through the remediation of previous experience in filmmaking and screenwriting practice, situating this as a formative, adaptive and transferrable technique for developing original work.

KEYWORDS: creative writing, multimodal writing, digital culture, young adult literature, creative practice-based research

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I. **NOVEL:** *The Networked Wonderland of Us*

The Networked Wonderland of Us

Sarah Gibson Yates

Every story is connected

(be careful what you share)

Copyright:

Sarah Gibson Yates October 2020

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I think the main thing to remember is that any really powerful thing can be used for good or evil. Dynamite can be used to build tunnels or to make missiles. Engines can be put in ambulances or tanks. Nuclear power can be used for bombs or for electrical power. So, what is made of the Web is up to us. You, me, and everyone else.

From the FAQs page of Tim Berners-Lee website [the man who invented the Internet].

For my children, Morley and Orin.

My parents, Mary and Philip.

And my husband, Adam.

Our stories will always be connected.

Prologue |

So, this is when I tell you how I find her. The moment just before I understand how deeply and absolutely connected, we all are. The moment that sparks everything. The moment I realise some connections can't ever be broken, even if you want them to be.

Even if you try your hardest.

Even if you're dead.

Chapter one | it's a film thing

And, this is how I'm going to do it.

I'm going to write this in screenplay format. Sorry. I know it's unnecessary/annoying/pretentious/stupid—delete as appropriate—but it's how I remember. It's a film thing. Did I mention I'm into film? Well, I am. I'm a film student. Film is my happy place. I love watching films, thinking about films, and making films but don't ask me what I plan to do with that once I graduate. I'm warning you. Don't. If pushed, I'll mumble something about how I'd like to be a successful film director with unlimited budgets and awards—the whole shebang—but the stats are stacked against me. Only 34 % of UK film graduates find work in the film industry at all. And I'm female. Only 13% of film directors are women. Sucks, but there it is.

So, this love-of-film thing is the main reason why I need to write this part of the story in screenplay but there's also the fact that everyone remembers significant moments from their life in moving images so why not screenplay? Safe to say that this is the most significant moment of my life so far by some measure, so there's my rationale. Anyway, long story short, I can't do this in prose. BTW I'm going to adapt the convention. I'm going to put it down in first person, rather than third which is what it should be, so don't copy this and expect anyone to take you seriously as a screenwriter because they won't. Just saying.

Here goes.

FLASHBACK (12 hours earlier):

EXT. LIGHT PARK CAR PARK - FRIDAY MAY 11th 10.34 pm

In a deserted car park, a shiny airstream street food van [DAISY'S] waits patiently for customers. ME [18]—blue black medium length hair, *Stranger Things* tee, black jeans, signature yellow leather satchel, and turquoise Doc Martins—walks slowly across the tarmac towards the back of the van.

The radio booms out distorted dance music, and I wonder why it hasn't been tuned. It played fine earlier when I stopped here for a munch before home. Something. Is. Off.

I notice flashing headlights where RHID'S parked, 200 yards away, telling me to hurry up. He's such a pain sometimes.

I walk a little nearer, then stop. Something's not right.

I become aware of my heartbeat and listen hard. Nothing.

Ok. I'll just pick up my phone from the counter where I left it and leave. I walk around to the front counter and—

CRACK!

—I FREAKIN' JUMP OUT OF MY FREAKIN' SKIN.

Looking around, heart somewhere between throat and chest, I spot an electric insect killer inside the van, fizzing as a zapped fly falls onto a carpet of insect bodies gathering beneath. A macabre snowflake with a thin line of white smoke rising from singed remains.

I see my phone on the counter, by the tomato-shaped ketchup bottle and other condiments. It's the reason I'm here. Leave my head if it wasn't screwed on, Rhid says.

FLASHBACK WITHIN A FLASHBACK [40 minutes earlier that evening]

I'm chatting with the girl behind the counter. KASHA (18) is a striking British Jamaican girl with close-shaved bleached hair, a big smile, and sparkly eyes. We're chatting about all sorts of random stuff. I'm actually enjoying myself for the first time this evening, despite spending it drinking beer with friends. We've even exchanged names. Half way between do you follow X and, have you seen Y, the food is ready. I drop my phone on the counter, struggling to balance two chip bags, two

burger boxes, and two cans of coke in my puny inept arms. Kasha laughs at my pathetic attempts at personal logistics and kindly offers to help. Eventually, together, we balance the food, say good-bye and I walk back to the car where RHID [18] is flashing his lights impatiently. Leaving said phone on the counter.

END OF FLASHBACK WITHIN A FLASHBACK

CUT BACK TO:

ME standing in the doorway to the food van—the smell of burnt meat hanging in the air.

ME

Hello? Kasha?

I step up into the doorway, rocking the van slightly and the fridge door swings open.

My heart stops.

The entire service area is covered in BLOOD. There's BLOOD up the walls, BLOOD over boxes, BLOOD dripping down cupboards. BLOOD washes over everything like a messy

child's painting, bright in places—thick and dark in others.

KASHA is face down on the griddle, her body unnaturally twisted, immobile, and still. A tsunami of nausea rolls over me, suddenly weak like the proverbial jelly. I reach out for support. Take a deep breath. On the side of KASHA's beautiful face, nearest the hot plate, a white unicorn earring with a rainbow horn melts slowly, sending off a rancid mix of burning plastic and flesh (the meat I smelled earlier?). I wretch.

I need to get out of here. Just get my phone and go. Working hard to hold down the bile I reach out for it a good stretch away. I manage to pincer the device with my finger and thumb and drop it gingerly inside my jacket. Then I look up to the polished chrome splashboard at the back of the van, streaked with KASHA'S slowly drying blood.

I look like somebody else.

I CLOSE MY EYES.

FADE TO BLACK.

I listen to the neon hum, trying to block out the smell.

I take another deep breath.

FADE UP FROM BLACK.

Opening my eyes, I realise the reason I look like
somebody else in the flashback is because **IT IS.**

I squint to focus. The fluorescent light-strip flickers.

ME

Pete?

I turn quickly to look but there is no one. Just an empty
car park.

ME

[looking around, calling out]

Pete?!

No reply.

As I leave, I notice a pile of white bread stacked by the
grill where Kasha's hand lays limp beside it. Something
catches my eye—In the soft, spongy dough there is a
print. It's imperfect, small, and broken at the edges. It
is Kasha's handprint. At some point in the struggle, she
must have reached out and grabbed the bread.

The print is deep. Complete. As if her hand is still there—pressing down but invisible. I look closer and see a chip of glossy purple nail polish stuck in the crust.

END

This is how I found her.

A girl I met a few minutes earlier was now dead.

The irony is, last night had looked like things might start shaping up for the better—what with things-going-pretty-badly generally. I'd gone to a party with Rhid—Duma had invited a bunch of us to his house for a parents-away-for-weekend no-brainer. It seemed people had started forgetting they weren't speaking to me. I'd seen Cyd for the first time since *The Video Incident* (I'll tell you about that soon) and we hadn't killed each other. I'd even seen Pete—the victim of the bullying incident that prompted me to make the video—and he seemed ok. It was from a distance, and I felt awkward as hell, but somehow, I found the courage to smile at him and I'm sure he smiled back. For the first time in nearly a year, I felt that there was potential for some definite moving on. Maybe even forgiveness. But there you go. That's my life. One minute I'm happy. There's a song I love on the radio, the lights are all green on my cycle to uni, no one hated on me today.

The next it's free fall.

Chapter two | the day after I find her

- *u awake?*

- *yep*

- *alright?*

- *no*

- *b w u in 30*

The next morning, I'm lying in bed working out how to avoid the day entirely when a message from Rhid drops in. Rhid is one of only two friends who hasn't stopped talking to me. The other being Lola, who'll turn up later. As Rhid was with me last night—the RHID in the car flashing his lights impatiently, remember? So, I should probably explain what happened next.

EXT. LIGHT PARK CAR PARK – DAISY'S STREET FOOD VAN – LAST
NIGHT

RHID [19] arrives to find me frozen on the tarmac outside DAISY'S. As I clock him my throat catches but this time, I can't hold it down and a catering-pan-sized load of regurgitated carbs slaps onto the shiny black tarmac around my feet.

RHID

Nice.

He sees me first and the mess but then he looks up and inside Daisy's.

What...?!

He turns away, scrambling for his phone.

CUT TO:

10-15 MINUTES LATER (BUT FEELS LIKE HOURS): THE POLICE
ARRIVE. IT IS NOTHING LIKE CSI.

There are no flashing lights. A police car turns up. An ambulance. A few moments later two more police cars. Whoop.

Rhid's face is white. Eyes glazed like a dead fish. I look around, trying to work out how long I've been standing there. I can't move but I can feel every cell of my body jangling. One minute I feel light and floaty. The next heavy, from the top of my head to the soles of my splattered boots. The night air is cold and soft around my face. My worn yellow leather satchel presses close to my chest. Bulging a little, I fasten the buckle tight. I take a breath. RHID stumbles forward, throwing both arms

around me. Then, as if suddenly someone released the pause button, we slowly slide to the floor. Huge silent sobs shudder through our bodies. Seismic. Involuntary.

The truth is: Whenever Rhid cries, I cry. I just can't help it. It's an empathy thing, I guess. Thankfully he's only lost it twice in my company, so this embarrassing *connective impulse* hasn't had too many public outings. The first was when his Grandma, Nana-Bo, died, just before his 9th birthday. The second when he trapped his finger in the front door of our house and had to have the top sewn back on.

And now, this.

More people in uniforms arrive. A senior officer surveys the area, noting the positions of two CCTV cameras. A tired-looking man in a dark suit and bad tie - CHIEF DETECTIVE INSPECTOR IAIN LAYTON [54] has been here and done this before. I see him thinking crime detective thoughts at the cameras. Someone will have to trawl through that. LAYTON walks towards us before stopping to speak to a policewoman. PC TRISH KENDAL [35] - a no-nonsense, community police officer with an efficient

walk. They exchange words. I try to make out what they're saying but can't. Then she nods in our direction.

PC TRISH KENDAL

(speaking louder)

These are the only witnesses so far: Taylor Millar, first on the scene, and Rhidian Smith, second. Witnesses after the fact.

After the fact. Her words make me feel guilty. Like we arrived too late.

Which we did.

PC KENDAL wraps a foil blanket around us, and we're guided to one side to sit.

PC TRISH KENDAL

Shock's a tricky thing. You can feel alright one moment then boom! You've been staring at the curb for twenty minutes and not even realised. Here, drink this.

She offers us sweet tea from a thermos.

Remember to breathe.

As I sip, I think about a man in a documentary talking about seeing the New York Twin Towers collapse. As he spoke his gaze went off as if he was seeing it again in front of him. With his *inner eye*. He described it as if seeing in *slow motion*, so slow he could see the horror happening all over again like time had reversed and he'd gone back to before it happened. Like he'd seen it all before.

Strange the way the brain works.

As I walked up to the van for the second time that evening, I'd seen nothing wrong, but I knew. I knew something really bad had happened. And there was no going back. Was it guilt? Telling me if I hadn't gone back home when I did, if I'd stayed longer, with Kasha, stealing chips and chatting about our night then maybe everything would be alright?

She'd be alright?

Maybe.

Chapter three | message from a dead girl

My *curb*, right now—the day after last night—and my *second* phone notification of the morning is this unexpected friend request from the dead girl.

Dearly valued friend,

Sadly, my time with you on this beautiful, complicated planet has come to an end, but remember I am with you for as long as you remember me. Please visit my memorial page and post a memory or a picture of my name spelled out, or a favourite song, or poem. Keep our spirits alive together. Peace and love.

Kasha x

A friend in need

Unusual? Maybe. Maybe not. But here's where this story's sticky relationship to truth begins. 'Dearly valued friend' is wrong. For a start, Kasha Stone can't honestly call me her valued friend because I only met her last night. I mean, we liked each other, but it's a stretch to say someone you just met is a valued friend. Secondly, she's dead, so she can't be in need. It's just not possible for a dead person to need anything.

At least you'd think so.

In truth, none of us know how connected our stories truly are, but if stories fall into three acts—like most anyone who tells you anything about stories tells you they do—then currently I have no idea where I am. I'm way past the opening credits (birth-to-infant), over the inciting incident (the defining moment when I failed to stand up to Cyd), and through most of the first Act. I'm 18, for goodness-sake. If you claim to know where you are on your story arc at this age, then you're either lying or delusional or both. If pushed I'd say I'm somewhere around the end of act one, hitting that all-important first turning point.

The point of no return (cue cheesy dramatic music).

I'm calling it *found a dead girl (that I could have saved) (potentially)*.

This is where I am. From which point, in the tidy narrative arc of impossible logical causality, I can only go forward. Going back isn't an option. Not that going back is ever an option. There are no time machines—sorry my sci-fi-loving friends. Except if you count memory. And maybe films. Films are literally time machines. Seriously though, if real-time machines were at all possible, I'd have invented them last summer and rewound the whole month of June.

This isn't the first time I've stood-by and let something bad happen.

But I digress. More on that soon.

So, I'm reading this message for the 8th time wondering what to do, when an Insta notification pops up telling me I've been followed by someone called @Kashagogo. And the usual invitation to follow back. I'm pretty certain this is going to be Kasha Stone. In fact, if I was a betting woman, I'd put money on it. Now I'm in a dilemma. Should I accept this request? Follow the dead girl? Or ignore? What does this dead girl—or rather, whoever's in control of Kasha's social media accounts—actually want?

Chapter four | one way to find out

There's only one way to find the answer to that particular question.

I click on the link to Kasha's memorialised Facebook page. In the banner, there are invitations to follow her Insta @Kashagogo and a link to another website set up to honour and remember the dead. There's a search button where you can look the deceased up by name but also by type of death, for example, road traffic accident, natural causes, suicide, or murder. In, *The Universe of the Strange*, that is the internet, this is pretty up there. A few people have posted on Kasha's page already:

R.I.P angel, may you sing forever in heaven.

God bless xx.

The world is less without you in it.

You can donate to a music charity, receive a flickering candle gif to post alongside your personalised message, or buy any number of memorial gifts to remember Kasha by, but you have to log in and create an account which I can't be bothered with right now. Besides, I'm more interested in looking around her social media and finding a bit about this girl's *life*—not death.

I flick over to her Facebook. No one under thirty admits to using Facebook anymore—too many parents—but most keep up some kind of presence. Kasha's profile picture is an unfiltered webcam selfie taken from her laptop. She pouts playfully at the viewer, the edges of her face dimly lit by the blue glow of her computer screen, and she's partly thrown into

silhouette by yellow light bleeding in from the room beyond. Underexposed shadows are grainy and indistinct—sludge green darkness peppered with white noise. Kasha wears a bright green top with Adidas in rhinestones across her chest. The gems catch the light showing off her curvy chest, waist, and full hips. The large white star-shaped earrings and gold lamé headband are just the right side of eighties cool, ditto the purple round-rimmed fake Chanel sunglasses. Despite the low quality of the image Kasha glows. Her naturally caramel complexion appears white and smooth. Kasha presents herself well. Whenever I post anything, I'm never sure it's *The Me* I want to put out there. I'm never happy with the way my selfies turn out. But Kasha looks natural. Authentic. It seems like she not only knows more about understanding how to appeal to people than me but also better at knowing how to be herself.

Or rather she *was*.

I scroll through her profile information. Under her name she's added a description: love life, making music, family, and friends. She has 1450 friends. Respectable normal person figures. Her recent posts are a mix of night-out selfies, home alone composing at her keyboard, or trying out new songs, or cross advertising her YouTube channel. There's even a few of her at work at Daisy's with various happy chip munching customers/friends. I spot one where Kasha's pointing to the words *always ready*, written on the chalkboard propped outside at Daisy's. It was posted last night. Earlier in the evening.

The post before is a 'life moves pretty fast' Ferris Bueller's Day Off gif. The one where smug Ferris sits in the back of his friend's dad's red 1961 Ferrari 250 GT California Spyder. Best friend worried in the back. Perfect girlfriend at his side. It was posted yesterday at 17.46 p.m., has been liked 395 times and there are 234 comments below. I scroll through. Well-meaning

messages, full of love and sadness emojis and admiration for what they think she was, based on the same thin information I'm looking at. I keep scrolling until one post stops me in my tracks.

always with us - posted at 10.56 this morning.

The name beside the post is *Cyd Mendes*.

Now, I know Cyd.

I know Cyd very well.

Safe to say. We. Have. History.

Quite a lot of history, in fact, going back to when we were 7 ½ years old.

MONTAGE OF MY LIFE WITH CYD - THE GOOD (EARLY) YEARS:

2010: CYD MENDES (7 ½ years old) moves into the biggest, most expensive house on our street, four doors down from ours. She has a twin brother called JONTY who is, without exaggeration, the handsomest boy I have seen in real-life. They both are. Handsome, that is, not boys. Ha, ha. They live with their ex-model Brazilian mother SINITA MENDEZ, their very serious banker father GEORGE MENDEZ [British, Brazilian grandfather], and two white Chihuahuas called Crystal and Charlie who bark at anything and everything all the time.

AGED 8: SCHOOL PLAYGROUND

A GIRL has pulled my brand new Ponyo backpack and I'm trying to get it back. She is throwing it around, messing up everything inside, and I'm getting really, really angry.

For some reason, this is making everyone laugh.

Suddenly CYD [also 8] appears from nowhere and catches the bag. I launch at her. We fight, pulling hair and kicking hard. A teacher arrives, separates the two of us and we're marched off to the Head's office.

CUT TO:

Sitting in the corridor, waiting for a bollocking.

CYD

I was getting it back for you.

ME

[I scowl, sarcastically.]

You were?

CYD

Yes. I love that film.

ME

(cautious)

You've seen it?

(She's weirdly believable.)

CYD

Of course. Love it. [Beat]

I particularly like the bit when fish Ponyo turns into a girl for the first time.

ME

Me too! (way-too-enthusiastically)

CYD

Shall we just tell Drummer we were messing around? Hewlett overreacted? No harm done.

I think about the idea for a split second and agree. The alternative being a possible three-day suspension I don't feel like explaining to the parentals. We get off with a light warning.

Unexpected outcome: I now feel slightly obligated to Cyd, due to her coming up with the idea for getting us off, and for trying to get my bag back for me. Now me and Cyd

are strangely, but not altogether unpleasantly,
officially BEST FRIENDS.

AGED 11: INT. MY HOUSE

I am dressed up for a party in what I consider to be a pretty cool blue off-the-shoulder t-shirt dress with pink stripy leggings and yellow sparkly Trainers. I am waiting for CYD to come around, so we can go together.

I wait.

And wait.

The afternoon passes to evening and still no CYD. I go around to her house to find out she's already gone. Hours ago.

When I get to the party - not only is it nearly over CYD laughs at my outfit and then ignores me.

I'm furious.

AGED 13: INT. CYD'S HOUSE.

CYD tries out different make-up styles on me, playing at beautician. We laugh as she smears pink lipstick over my lips and smudges thick black eyeliner across my lids. It goes everywhere.

Age 16: INT. MY HOUSE - MY 16th BIRTHDAY PARTY.

Cyd has always looked older. She's curvier than any of us, with long dark, silky hair, and altogether way more glamorous. She dresses to show all this off. Low cut dress, heels, make-up that looks like she knows what she's doing. I come down in a vintage red gingham dress over black jeans and red Dr Marten boots. I see her whisper to Shani. They both look me up and down, pull a face, then rush up squealing and hugging, all smiles and birthday wishes. Cyd is whispering and two-faced all party.

Later, while dancing, she catches me off guard, admiring her brother.

CYD

Sweet 16 and never been kissed.

She smiles and pushes Jonty over towards me,

It's a crime.

Time for a birthday kiss.

Jonty squirms. I blush beetroot, feet to head, and run away. Pushing back hot tears of embarrassment, confusion, and hurt I run into the bathroom and lock the door where Rhid finds me shortly after.

END OF CYD GOOD [EARLY YEARS] FLASHBACK

As I scroll through my feed, I see Cyd's posted a picture of Kasha and her taken on a recent night out. She's recently added a hand-written message in blue over the top saying, *darling Kasha. taken too soon*. And a broken heart emoji. Followed by way too many normal hearts to reproduce here. She's linked a video of Kasha singing at the 2019 Talent East Awards. I click play and am directed over to Kasha's YouTube channel. Kasha stands on stage, owning it. She's dressed in a long black sequined tube, large boots, and feathered hat with white fringe, like something Lady Gaga might wear on a day off. The crowd applauds, the intro begins, and Kasha sings.

*I didn't know if you knew
what I knew about you
but I thought you should know
that whatever they said about me was untrue.
These things, they don't need names
These things, but we learned them all the same.
I watch it through twice.*

Kasha had an amazing voice and a distinct ear for vocal phrasing. She transforms the lyrics giving every word something different each time. I'm impressed.

I'm more than impressed. I'm moved.

I scroll down a raft of enthusiastic comments posted under the video. She's replied to all of them personally. Rhid should see this. Where is he? I check the time. It's been well over thirty minutes since he texted. I jump on to her Facebook page and scroll back down her timeline. Way back. Before all the sympathy messages.

There seems to be not much going on for Kasha In the last few weeks before she died, and nothing before April last year. She shared a cute cat meme I've seen doing the rounds and a gif of an angry bald Trump with a slab of orange hair on a lead, barking. Disappointed not to discover something more useful (don't ask me what that might look like) I enter Cyd's name in the search window and do the same, scroll back to yesterday (not so far to go as her timeline isn't full of condolence messages) on her timeline and find this:

- *Cyd where r u? I need 2 speak. I've been calling 4 ages. Msge me, call me, anything!!! quick. I need to speak with u now. No word. Of a. Lie.*

It's from Kasha and was sent last night at 9.31 p.m.

Just about the time I placed my order at Daisy's.

Chapter five | an unexpected call

Rhid finally arrives wearing a black t-shirt with the words *cleverly disguised as a responsible adult* printed in small white text across his chest. This is funnier if you know Rhid. He enters my bedroom in the usual way—two long strides straight to my bed and flops himself down.

‘Are you alright?’ He asks, making himself comfortable.

‘I guess.’ I shrug.

‘Liar.’

‘Look.’ I try to scroll up the open browser window of my laptop, but my cursor won’t move. Impatient I refresh the page and Kasha’s help message vanishes before my eyes! ‘What the...?’

‘What?’

‘Shit. Shit. Shit.’ I glare at the screen.

‘What?!’ Rhid sits up.

‘Kasha posted something last night – on Cyd’s wall, now it’s gone.’

‘What did it say?’

‘Paraphrasing: Kasha wanted to talk to Cyd urgently. She sounded really upset.’

I had seen that hadn't I? I didn't imagine it? Or is this like the time when I couldn't remember if I'd put salt in my ex-boyfriend's drink or only wanted to? Or told Lola her hair looked truly ridiculous that green when I knew she wanted me to say it looked great.

Or when I knew I should tell Cyd she'd gone too far, but I didn't.

Then I remember.

Pete. I thought I saw Pete, in the splashback last night.

Was it him? Why would he be there?

If he *was there* why wouldn't he say hi?

TBH I often find it hard to tell the difference between what's real and what's imaginary. Nothing huge. Nothing to put my sanity into question I don't think, but enough to make me think twice. Like a dropped film frame or skip of a turntable stylus. Tiny ellipses. Breaks in the continuum. Gaps in the life I think I know.

I'd seen Pete earlier that evening, at the party. He'd seemed OK. Although we didn't have a chance to talk. He might have been avoiding me still. Which would have been fine. Well, not fine but understandable. Last year...well. I hadn't been a very good friend. I'd been a terrible one.

FLASHBACK:

HOW I WAS A TERRIBLE FRIEND TO PETE LAST SUMMER

PETE RIVERS - A nerdy, kind-looking boy with bright eyes, Save The Whales tee-shirt and box-fresh Dunlops trips over in the lunch queue. The contents of his tray - roast chicken, mash potato, and gravy - splats all over CYD. All over her new All Saints strictly non-uniform jacket, she's showing off to Shani. She is furious. The canteen goes quiet.

This has happened before, a different boy and Cyd publicly crucified him.

Everyone in the canteen holds their breath.

Silence.

And then (beat) surprisingly, CYD gains control.

She looks over to Pete and smiles. Everyone exhales.
Normal lunch service resumes. Everyone thinks CYD is cool.

Except me.

I know what that smile. She's plotting.

CYD'S REVENGE

INT. SCHOOL CORRIDOR - DAY

CYD and ME stand on either side of a grey school locker.
The locker is tall and long. Big enough to hold a person inside.

We stare at each other in utter defiance.

Neither says a word.

Neither gives any ground.

O/S AUDIO: SOBBING - DEEP AND LOW - AS IF SOMEONE IS
TRYING NOT TO BE HEARD.

INT. LOCKER

PETE [17] in a baseball cap and box fresh Dunlops peer out at the girls from inside. He shivers, sweating large drops on his face and hands, struggling to catch his breath. A long strip of snot expands down his face and drops, on his shoe, ruining their pristine crispness.

PETE

It was just an accident.

PETE pulls his sleeve across his face, huddling back against the far wall.

PETE

Please let me out I don't like small places.

Suddenly he grabs his leg. Cramp shoots through his calf. Sharp, excruciating. PETE rubs vigorously, as his nan showed him too, face twisted in pain. He tries to stamp it down, beat out the pain, but there's no room so he rubs and rubs, breathing through the pain. Arms and body pressed tight against the metal inside.

Suddenly the locker starts to fill with smoke. PETE panics, crying. Panic turns to hyperventilation.

CUT BACK TO:

CYD holds up a key and smiles.

ME

That's enough. Give it to me.

I make a grasp for it, but CYD is too quick.

CYD

Do you choose him over me?

ME

This is wrong Cyd, you know it is.

CYD

Here. Take it. We're done.

I stepped in too late. I shouldn't have let Cyd get that far.

Pete wouldn't speak to me after that. I tried to make up for letting things get so far over the summer before I started uni by launching an anti-bullying website *peoplelikeusactnow.me*. I tried to explain my actions in terms of something called the *bystander effect*, which is basically if one person stands by everyone does. It means bad people get away with things they shouldn't. It just takes one person to stand up and then

more will. I made a video about it called *The Bully in the Mirror* which went viral but instead of helping people see themselves in it everyone thought I was trying to make excuses.

ME V/O

It wasn't me who locked a shy clumsy boy in a locker for accidentally messing up her new jacket. It wasn't me who set a smoke bomb inside to scare him to death.

But I didn't stop her either.

Sometimes it's the person in the mirror, the person you least expect, who's the most to blame.

END CREDITS

Likes [24,027]

Shares [47,879]

Comments [2,650].

- I can't believe anyone would do this! It's sick. What sadist!
- they're both guilty duh. OF COURSE, they are!! BITCHES>

- I think this is a great video because it shows how difficult a situation like that is. It's hard to know what to do sometimes.
- bystander syndrome alert!! OMG. Who would just stand by and let this happen? They're both guilty as fxxx! Kill them now.
- I think you're really brave to make this video. To share this and help others learn from your experience.
- wow this takes guts. We all know who that 'brunette girl' is right. Taylor, you have double cojones!!
- So, the bully bitch starts an anti-bullying site? What a fraud! How can we believe anything you say??!
- and there you go...bad things happen when (good)?!! people don't act!
- why didn't you do anything to help that poor boy?? I don't understand. You could have jumped that bitch and got that key. Why did you let her even put that poor boy in there in the first place? If you can't do it yourself tell someone who can. Don't you have any teachers in your school???!!!

I'm completely freaked out by this response. Perhaps I am a bad person after all? I pull my website and YouTube channel offline, and vow never to go online again.

‘Why’ve you got this?’ Rhid notices my phone on the bed.

‘It’s... my... phone...’ I reply slowly, wary of stating the obvious.

‘Why haven’t you given it to the police? It was there last night, at the time Kasha was killed. It might... I don’t know ... have clues on it or something.’ I think about that and pick it up, accidentally pressing my thumb on the home button—the screen wakes and I see something unexpected in my call history. Two *unidentified calls*. One *same* number.

OK so let me repeat that. Number. Not name. Which means it isn’t in my contacts. One of these calls is green, meaning it’s been dialled out from my phone and punched in by hand. The other is red which means that whoever someone called then called back!

Who used my phone? And who the hell did they call?!

Several scenarios present themselves, none of them good. I take a note of the number on some paper by my desk and stare at the screen. ‘So...there are a number of things I could do right now: 1, listen to you and take the phone to the police; 2, find the business card PC Kendal gave me, tell her about the number and she could tell me to take it in; 3, call the number myself and find out.’ I can see what Rhid wants me to do but... I just can’t help myself. ‘Obviously, I’m going for number 3!’ I deliver in a Ta-Dah-kind-of-way. Hoping to make this potentially stupid/dangerous decision sound like lots of fun.

Rhid rolls his eyes. I take a breath, holding the phone in both hands, like some Neanderthal who's never held a phone, and dial the number on speakerphone.

It rings.

Bring. ‘What if no one answers?’ I whisper.

Rhid shrugs.

Bring. ‘Should I leave a message?’

Rhid shrugs again, unhelpfully.

Bring... scuffle...

- *Hello?*

'OMG. Someone's answered.' I whisper.

- *Hello? Who's this?*

The voice repeats. It's female, but deep, with a strong London and...something-else-accent.

I seem to have lost my voice. I literally cannot speak.

- *Who IS this?*

She's getting angry. OK. I need to woman up.

- *Err. Hi. Yes. I'm calling because someone dialled this number on my phone last night. When I wasn't there and I...*

I was going for confident and self-assured, but my voice is distant and faint.

- *Who IS this?!!*

'Does this woman know no other words?' [Another helpful Rhid contribution.]

- *This is my phone...and I...*

- *What do you know about Kasha's murder?*

The woman asks in a way that makes me think that perhaps I do know something.

Even though I blatantly don't.

- *Me? Nothing!*

A short silence.

- *No matter. I know.*

She says this last line slowly. Then there's another silence, and the line goes dead. I stare at Rhid who seems to have lost the power of speech and lay the phone carefully on the bed, like a bomb about to explode, and wait for my hands to stop shaking.

Regaining speech, Rhid orders. 'Police station. Now. Let's go.'

There are only a few people I'd let convince me to do something I didn't first think of first myself. Mum, dad, Lola (sometimes), and Rhid. 'Okay, but I have to shower.'

'We need to get this to them NOW.'

'No way I'm leaving here without a shower.' I've already got my towel and heading out of the room.

In the shower I let the hot water run over me, wishing it would wash away the past fifteen hours.

'Have you seen all these condolence messages?' Rhid's followed me into the bathroom. I can see the shape of his back leaning by the door, respectfully faced away.

'I know.' I call out from behind the curtain, over the sound of the water. Thank god the shower curtain is solid.

'Listen to this one: 'Even though I never met you I miss you already so much. u r in my thoughts always xxxxx love u xxxxx' and this, 'One more angel in heaven. God bless you, child.' People are crazy.'

'Yeah, I read some. Weirdly, they're addressed to Kasha.'

'Why?'

'As if she's out there still. In some digital afterlife or something. Scrolling through messages, waiting for updates...I don't know. It's just weird.'

He reads another: 'I never met you, but you seem to be to me so beautiful. May your heart shine on forever; sing for us in heaven with the angels. RIP xxx. Just viewed your talent show vid. What a loss. You had it, Kasha. You really did. Tragic.'

'Tragic.' I say, because it is.

Beat. 'Drink?' Rhid can change gear pretty quick.

'There are some cans in the fridge.' I call out through the curtain.

'On it.' He leaves.

I catch my face in the polished chrome surface of the shower unit and flashback to last night reflected in the blood-splattered splash-back. I turn up the heat. Steam billows all around, so dense I can't see my face anymore. I turn it up again, letting the now near scalding water run over my body, watching as my skin turns red.

Back in my room, wrapped in a towel, I join Rhid on the bed and close my eyes.

'Last night catching up with you?'

A bit.'

'Drink this.' Rhid passes me a can of coke, and, sitting up, I chug it down and burp.

'Easy.' We briefly laugh and lay back. I look up at a stain on the ceiling section where the paint is peeling, right above my pillow. It's been many different things over the years at

different times of my life. Easter bunny. Christmas Elf. Elephant. A cloud. Today it looks like a cloud. A proper Mr. Daydream cloud.

Maybe if I'd stayed with you like you asked, Kasha. Maybe you'd still be alive.

Rhid pushes me off the bed.

'Oi!'

'Get dressed. We need to go.'

I disappear behind my cupboard door for some privacy and emerge, a few moments later, wearing black jeans, trainers, and a tee with the words *moody bitch seeks relationship* across the chest. Rhid shakes his head. 'Maybe not for the police station.'

I change to a plain dark grey shirt with yellow trim and we leave, grabbing the phone. Half-way down the stairs, I realise Rhid isn't following.

'What are you doing?' I call up.

'Waiting for you to remember the hideous yellow satchel.'

'Why?'

'Because you take it everywhere.'

'Well, not today.'

Rhid looks at me like I've decided to leave home without my head.

...

We open the front door to find Mum's walking up the path.

'Where are you two going? I've got lunch.' She says, holding up two grocery bags as evidence.

'We're taking my phone to the police station.'

Mum is confused. I take a breath. Admitting you've been majorly stupid is hard any time but when being-stupid interferes with a murder investigation, that's much harder. I can tell you.

'Someone used my phone last night.' Confused mum-face from mum. 'I left it on the counter at Daisy's after getting our food. We found her when we went back to get when... Anyway...someone called a number from my phone, then that number called back.' Mum's wondering if that's all. 'And... well...I...kind of called it—them—just now.'

'You did what?!' Mum puts down the bags.

'I wanted to find out who it was.' Rhid looks at Mum. 'I know. Stupid...'

'Why didn't you give it to the police last night?'

'I don't know.' I stare at the floor in silence. We all stare at the floor in silence.

'I've already lectured her on the importance of locking her keypad,' Rhid adds.

'You don't?' Mum looks like I've just told her I've stopped cleaning my teeth.

'I do. I did. It was set for like 10 minutes... anyway. Jesus! Shoot me, why don't you? There's a lot of things I should have done! I should have given the police my phone last night. I should have stayed longer at Daisy's and not rushed off. I should have stayed. Like Kasha asked me too. But I didn't.

'She asked you to stay?'

I nod.

'Why?'

‘I wish I knew. I feel terrible.’ And here’s the reason why. ‘It’s just like last year. I didn’t act then, either. Did I? I stood by and let something horrible happen. Only now someone is dead.’

‘You mean all that business Pete and Cyd?’ Mum only really knows half of that story. A state of affairs I intend to keep that way, at all cost.

‘Yes!’ I sound strained and involuntarily emit a slightly hysterical laugh. It catches me out.

They’re both worried. ‘So, I’m going, Mum. I’m going to the police station now because you know, and I know, I need to give this to the police. Before anything else bad happens.’

‘This isn’t your fault Taylor.’ Mum puts down the grocery bags and puts her arm around me. ‘It’s not always easy to know what to do in a difficult situation. It’s easy to think what you might have done, with hindsight.’

Rhid steps in. ‘Cyd was in crazy town that summer. No-one knew what she was capable of. Not even you.’ He’s trying to be tactful, not give anything away. He knows every last detail.

‘But I could have found out. I should have. Just like I should have stayed with Kasha.’

The three of us stand silently for a moment pondering similarities between two quite distinct events which I’ve managed to merge.

I can see Mum calculating offspring risk.

‘Don’t worry I’m not going to do anything stupid. More stupid. I’m just going to drop it off and come right back. Right?’

‘They’ll probably want us to make a statement.’ Rhid adds.

‘Right. Sure.’ I move towards the side alley where our bikes are parked. ‘Anyway. We need to go.

‘Let me drive you.’ Mum shakes her car keys. ‘I’ll just drop these inside ...’

‘I’d rather bike with Rhid.’

‘And I’d rather drive you.’ Mum’s easy come, easy go most of the time but she can do a hard line in my way or the highway when the situation calls for it. But then so can I. She considers her options. She’s probably thinking it’s good that her daughter wants to go out with her friend still. That she isn’t so traumatised by last night’s events that she doesn’t want to never leave the house again. Good. Yes. But right now, she hates it.

She draws a deep breath, sucks in any reservations, and says, ‘Ok.’

‘Thanks.’ I give her a big squeeze with both arms locked.

‘You two! You scare me to death.’

‘I’ll look after her,’ Rhid reassures.

‘Like last night?’

Rhid stops in his tracks like he’s been slapped. Mum’s gone and voiced a feeling he’s been working hard to suppress.

‘It’s not your fault, Rhid.’ I say because if there’s one thing I do know about all this it is that.

‘I shouldn’t have let you go on your own.’ Rhid points out.

The three of us look at each other, each one of us suddenly realising the magnitude of last night.

‘Sorry Rhid, that wasn’t fair. None of this is your fault.’ Mum pulls me in for another hug. Rhid stands awkwardly for a moment until mum pulls him in too.

Now we both feel awkward.

MONTAGE OF MY LIFE WITH RHID SO FAR:

EXT. OUR STREET

RHID [aged 7], SECOND GENERATION WELSH-BANGLADESHI peers out of a beat-up orange Toyota holding one end of a NATIONAL WELSH RUGBY SCARF. The other flaps out the back window like a flag. The car is covered with welsh national stickers. They slow-drive past our house, looking for an address. Which they eventually find—the last in a terrace of new build houses, at the end of the street. Dad steps outside to see what I'm looking at. He objected to these new houses at planning on the grounds there wasn't enough room on our street for the extra residents' cars, and the architectural design was, he said, unsympathetic with the rest of the Victorian properties on the street. His objections were ignored.

RHID spots me playing on the street on my bike. He sticks his tongue out, and I copy. We laugh. His parents are busy looking around the house, unpacking, Rhid cycles out with two packs of sweets. He comes over, hands me one, and cycles off. I cycle after him.

INT. UNIVERSITY PHYSICS LAB - CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS.

Aged 11. Rhid and I mess with the microscopes in the lab where Rhid's dad works as a technician. Rhid's dad gets cross and makes us wait outside in a long boring corridor. This doesn't last long. We go outside and cycle down the steps of the college. Rhid says he's going to be an award-winning downhill cyclist when he's older. We're told off by a porter. Rhid's dad is told off by the porter. Rhid's dad tells us off again.

EXT. STREET - HALLOWEEN

Aged 13: Rhid is dressed up as the Pope and I'm a zombie witch. We are sitting in my room with my dad's old portable cassette player on my lap and a small Casio keyboard beside me. We're recording repetitive 3 note loops and things like: we know what you've done, we will never fooorget, you will paaaay, and making screeching, retching, strangulation sounds while trying not to laugh.

CUT TO:

After dark: Rhid and I hide behind a large skip with the portable cassette player playing the muffled recordings

to groups of younger kids out trick or treating. We jump out when we see anyone new, scaring them senseless.

INT. HOME - MY 16th BIRTHDAY

I'm having a party at home, everyone is dancing in the living room, cake, balloons scattered on the table. The works. I'm crying in the bathroom. Downstairs Rhid realises I'm missing and comes to find me. I don't want to tell him what's wrong and push the laundry basket over. One of mum's bras falls out. We both look at it and pull a face. He tries it on, over his t-shirt that says *I'm fine #what u lookin' at?* He admires himself in the mirror, acting sexy until he strikes a pose. I laugh to crying.

END OF FLASHBACK MONTAGE OF MY BEST BITS WITH RHID SO FAR

So, you see, Rhid and I go way back. It's an odd alliance but it works.

Chapter six | operation Alice

Finally, mum lets us leave and we cycle to the end of Victoria Avenue, over to the bus stops by Christ's Piece and from there it's only a few minutes to Parkside station. For a few moments, cycling along the streets I've cycled so many times, I feel free. My turquoise Raleigh with drop handles wrapped in cream leather tape with cherry red tyres is a completely customised Restoration Project of Love from Dad who found me this rare vintage frame two Christmases ago. Rhid rides a black and green fixie with polished chrome rims and bright yellow tyres and a yellow leather seat. It's way cooler than mine and I love it, but I love mine more. I couldn't love mine more.

'So, how'd Kasha know Cyd and everyone I wonder?'

'At a party I suppose. You saw who Kasha was; singer-songwriter with her own YouTube, going places, and you know Cyd likes to friend people who might be useful one day.'

I knew. It's one of the reasons we fell out.

'Listen to this.' Rhid was looking at his phone, 'Yesterday Kasha had 1107 friends. She now has 2,976. Thank you for helping remember a very special person. Come and join Kasha's growing online family and keep her memory alive. Peace and love.' He pulls a face.

'Do you think it's Cyd?'

'What's Cyd?'

'Who's taken over her Facebook?'

‘Probably.’ Rhid can’t stop himself jumping up and down the odd curb narrowly avoiding cars and other vehicular road users.

‘I found a whole load of stuff going back to last August when they met—photos of nights out, music shares, random gif likes. Usual.’

‘Cyd and you weren’t speaking then, right?’

‘Not one single sarcastic emoji.’

Rhid jumps off the curb and pulls out a bike’s length ahead of me. ‘Shame we can’t show the police that last post of Kasha’s you saw, to Cyd.’

I push through the gears to keep up with Rhid. He’s so much fitter than me. ‘I know, but that’s the trouble with social media. It only tells you part of the story. The parts people want you to see.’

The police station is a bland concrete building next to the fire station. Like the council’s put all the ugly services buildings together in one area, so they don’t ruin the picturesque tourist version of Cambridge everyone comes to see. We screech to a stop by the bike racks outside the main entrance.

‘I can’t do this. I feel sick.’

‘It’s alright, Tay c’mon. They’re not going to tell you off or anything.’

‘Look at my hands.’ They’re shaking and I struggle with my lock. Rhid takes over, pushing his arm through mine. ‘C’mon. It’ll be fine. We’ll explain.’

Inside the police station, we walk up to the desk where the sergeant, a plain-looking man who is hard to age, regards us with a pretty impressive mix of disapproval and boredom.

‘Can I help?’

‘We need to see DCI Layton. We’ve something very important to tell him about last night.’

‘And you are?’

‘Taylor Millar.’

‘Rhidian Smith.’

‘We’re the ones who found Kasha Stone last night.’ Rhid leans on the counter. The desk sergeant pushes back and nods. He turns to the phone on the counter by a stack of CCTV cameras and makes a call. A few moments later another officer ushers us into an interview room. A few more minutes later PC Trish Kendal enters looking stiff and uncomfortable in her uniform. I don’t see how standard police uniform is practical for chasing criminals, surely tracksuits would be a better option? Hard to take anyone that seriously in a tracksuit though I suppose.

‘Hi. I’m Trish.’ We look at her blankly. ‘I told you last night but sometimes it’s difficult to remember stuff like that when you’ve had a shock.’ She’s more business-like but still friendly. ‘Why don’t you have a seat.’

We sit on orange plastic chairs set on either side of a small table adjusting to the reality of the situation; a grey interview room in a grey police station with grey CCTV cameras and what looks like a two-way mirror along one side. Whoa.

‘No one’s on the other side of that if you’re worrying.’ Kendal reassures, reading my mind. ‘Wouldn’t have chosen this room myself but it’s the only one free right now.’

I pull out my phone and put it on the table. ‘This is the reason we found Kasha.’

‘Okay.’ Kendal takes that in.

‘I bought food from Daisy’s earlier—Kasha served me—and left it behind, accidentally.’

‘Go on.’

‘We were halfway home when I realised so we went back and well, that’s when I found her.’

Kendal looks at the phone, then at Rhid and then me. ‘How long were you away?’

‘Twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes, tops,’ I explain. ‘I left it on the counter, so it was there when Kasha...’

Just then the door opens, and DCI Layton appears, grey, contained and slightly aloof, like last night.

‘Taylor, Rhidian, this is DCI Layton. The lead investigator.’ Everyone shakes hands. Layton takes a seat. Kendal fills Layton in.

‘I see.’ Layton’s expression is pure poker play. ‘So, tell me about this call you made to the unknown number you found on your phone.’

I shift uncomfortably, glancing at Rhid. ‘A woman answered. I asked her who she was. She asked me who I was. I told her this was my phone and then she asked about Kasha. She thought I was involved in her death. I said no way—then she seemed to change her mind.’ Layton and Kendal listen carefully. ‘She said he knew who killed her.’

‘Who?’ Kendal asks the question that everyone’s thinking.

‘She didn’t say. Just hung up.’

Silence.

‘What about her voice. Anything distinctive about it? An accent?’ Layton asks checking his phone.

‘London I’d say, but with a tinge of something...maybe. West Indies? Jamaican?’

‘Anything else you want to tell us?’ The question is directed at both of us.

‘No. I don’t think so.’ I say wracking my brains for anything I can remember of last night.

‘Rhidian?’

Rhid shakes his head.

Layton walks over to the one window in the room and opens the blind a little. Early summer sun hits his face, blinding him slightly. He turns back to us. ‘You’d been at a friend’s house earlier... a house party out in Barston?’ I glance at Rhid he must have told them because I don’t remember telling them anything. ‘What time did you leave?’

‘About ten-thirty.’

‘And you drove straight to Daisy’s?’

‘Yeah. Munchies stop before bed.’ Rhid grins, then stops, realising Layton’s probably some years away from the need for an after-party munch stop if indeed he ever did.

‘And the only other person you saw at Daisy’s at the time was this truck driver?’

I mentioned the truck driver last night — he was there when I pick up the food but gone by the time we returned. I nod, ‘Apart from a few people at the club bouncers, smokers, taxi drivers, you know.’ I try to work out what he’s thinking. ‘You think he had something to do with it?’ I ask, I hadn’t thought about him at all until now if I’m honest.

‘Maybe. Worth a chat. If he’s innocent, he’ll be easy to find. If he’s guilty harder.’

Layton pauses for thought. ‘Tina said you spoke to Kasha while you were waiting for your food?’

‘A bit.’

‘What did you talk about?’

‘College. She wanted to study music. I told her a bit about my experience.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Boys. How shit boys are.’ Everyone acknowledges the truth of this statement without question.

‘Any particular reason for that conversation?’

‘Do we need one?’ I pull a face. ‘It looked like maybe she was having some boy grief...’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘She kept trying to text and call someone. Without much luck by looks of it. She seemed anxious. As if she wished she were somewhere else — or with someone else maybe. I don’t know.’

Layton considers this while Kendal writes something in her notebook.

‘Have you got any idea who might have done this to Kasha?’ I ask.

‘Not yet. We’re trawling through the CCTV. Unfortunately, the van’s pitch sits between two cameras. Exposed a bit of a blind spot.’

I think back to the person I saw reflected in the splash-back. Would the CCTV pick them up? Perhaps this is just another one of those times where I’m mistaken.

‘Is there anything else you want to tell us?’ Kendal interrupts, turning my thoughts to Kasha’s deleted post.

‘There is something.’

‘Go on.’

‘Kasha posted something on a mutual friend’s Facebook page last night. I saw it there this morning but now it’s gone.’

‘Deleted?’

‘I guess. She sounded... desperate like she wanted to talk ...and well this person: she’s a friend of mine. Or used to be. Cyd. Cynthia Mendes.’

‘Local?’

I nod.

‘Didn’t think kids your age use Facebook anymore.’

‘Sometimes. Some do. Anyway, you still use the telephone, right?’

Layton nods.

‘Just because some new technology comes along doesn’t mean we stop using the old one, does it?’

Layton concurs. ‘So, I’m getting it’s not all harmony between you and this Cyd girl?’

‘We fell out last year. You know, final days of 6th form there’s a lot of stuff going on. Friendships get...reviewed. Long story short. We haven’t spoken since.’

Layton considers me. ‘So, it might be fair to conclude you have a bit of an axe to grind with this girl?’

‘With Cyd? Not really. Not now. Anyway, this isn’t about us. This is about Kasha...’

Layton addresses Kendal. ‘Might be worth seeing if cyber can pull this message up.’ He stands and moves to the door. ‘I’m not sure some unanswered calls and one unanswered message is much grounds for calling this Cyd in, or my missus would’ve pulled me in years ago.’ He smiles at his little joke. Tina rolls her eyes. ‘We’ll see if we can trace the number in your phone and take things from there. PC Kendal will see you out.’

He leaves.

‘What about my phone? When will I get it back?’

‘Could be a while.’ Layton stops and turns back to us, ‘Probably best to get something else temporary meanwhile.’ Then, addressing Kendal. ‘Full Op Alice briefing in one hour.’

‘Operation Alice?’ I ask.

Layton takes a deep breath, ‘That’s what we’re calling this investigation.’

Chapter seven | in which I carry on as normal

'I think I'm going to class...' Rhid says unlocking his bike outside the police station. 'I've got *intro to music tech* at 3. What about you?'

'I'm not sure.' I unlock mine and we walk the 200 yards from the police station to uni and lock them again to a railing.

'No one's going to mind if you take the day off. Given the circumstances.'

'Given the circumstances, I suppose not.'

Beep, Beep.

'It's Dug.' Rhid says looking at his phone. 'He wants me to meet him in the music room.'

'Cool.'

'Catch up later? Will you be alright?'

'Course. I'm fine. I will be fine.'

'How though?'

'How what?'

'How will I catch with you later? No phone. Remember?'

'We live on the same street Rhid.'

'Sure yeah. Ok, see you later then.'

Streams of students come, go, hang, chat, laugh and smoke outside the early-nineties office building—the main administrative and teaching portal for my uni. It's Friday which means fish and chips in the canteen and lots of talk about where people are going tonight. It's also the last teaching week of the year so everyone's stressed with assignments due in two weeks. It's hard to know what to do after you find someone to murder, but something is telling me I should try to carry on as normal. Go to my film adaptation class, do the presentation I prepared with Lola yesterday morning and *then* go home and freak out about the rest of my fucked-up life.

So, ok. Here goes.

The moment I step into the foyer I know I've made the wrong decision. For a moment, it's like nothing has changed. Like last night didn't happen and I've not just been sitting in a police interview room with my 'important evidence' phone with which I've just spoken to a woman who knows who murdered the girl I found last night.

But then...*the university town of Cambridge is in shock today as it struggles to come to terms with the news that they are the latest victims in Britain's escalating knife-crime epidemic...*The wall-mounted information screens are tuned to the news. They're never tuned into the news. Why today? [scream emoji] *Local talent competition winner seventeen-year-old Kasha Ray was found murdered yesterday at the street food van where she worked. She was found by two Cambridge residents...* Fortunately, they don't say my name because hearing Kasha's spoken in the dispassionate formal voice of the newscaster is weird enough. I've never heard the name *Kasha* before. I'll be hearing it everywhere now.

Young Reporter Edie Heller leads the story. I recognise her from other local news, potholes mostly, or new city traffic systems so this murder's a bit of a promotion. She's

broadcasting from Daisy's, right from the spot where I hugged Rhid last night. The report cuts to a close-up shot of blood-stained tarmac then cuts to DCI Layton, a caption gives his full title: DCI Steven Layton Cambridgeshire Constabulary. *This is a horrific and brutal attack – the worse I've seen in many years of policing...* He's sincere and sad and calls for calm in this difficult time. The camera cuts back to Edie who provides a few more details explaining how Kasha was found and ends with a call for information. Somebody looks at me, or at least I think they do and suddenly I'm thinking everyone's looking at me.

It's strange being part of the news.

I duck into the back stairway. Perhaps this presentation is a bad idea. Everyone is going to know what happened last night. Everyone will either be: A—looking at me and thinking about the fact I was involved in a national murder case last night. Or B—politely trying to ignore the fact I was involved in a national murder case last night. I could e-mail Dr P and explain. I'm sure she'll understand...let me do the presentation another time.

'Taylor! Presentation buddy of mine! So, glad you're here. I just messaged you! I was worried you were going to leave me flying solo...' Lo—otherwise known as Lola—has me in her huggy-grip. For a moment I can't breathe. I try to return the hug, but her backpack is too huge. 'Mate! Fucking can't believe it. How ARE you?'

'Ok. I think. Sorry didn't get your message, police have my phone...'

'Listen I totally want to hear all about what the fuck happened to you last night, but we have 5 minutes until Dr P wants us up at 'em with facts about Wiseman and observational documentaries at our fingertips, or at least on the PowerPoint—you've got the PowerPoint?'

I hold it up.

‘Phew. Thank fuck. I know I should have got you to send me it earlier... I so do not have any presentation facts at my fingertips. I can riff off slides with a compadre but solo...you know I’m no good solo...’

I do. If there is anyone who hates being alone it is Lola. Normally this kind of personality type is too much for this only child, happy spending days in her own company, reading, writing, filming, photographing, carousing the internet, etc. But I completely fell for Lola from the first day I clapped eyes on her blue-haired nut-jobness. She’s the exact opposite to me in so many ways. She likes Fila leisurewear, high top trainers and big jewellery and grime, and I don’t. I love Doc Martens, bomber jackets, nineties indie bands and weird German electro and she breaks out in hives if she so much as hears a synthesized chord. She’s hazelnut praline latte every time, where I will only ever buy un-sugared soya flat whites, but somehow, against all these odds, we completely get each other.

We head to a study space above the cafeteria, trying hard to ignore the smell of canteen fish, chips and peas, and run through the presentation. It’s on a sixties’ documentary set in a prison by an American called Frederick Wiseman. He’s the father of what’s called the *observational* style. That fly-on-the-wall style of filmmaking with shaky shots that looks like no-ones watching, but, of course, we are. We have to prepare a talk about him, his work, pull some extracts, discuss and there we go. It’s pretty interesting and worth 20% of our final assessment for this module.

We’ve just edited the final slide and noted the cue points and who’s going to say what, when dad’s face pops up in a Skype window on my screen.

- *Dad, hello!*
- *Hi sweetie.* (He swings his laptop around and sits on what looks like a hotel bed.) *Mum’s just told me what happened. Good God. Are you alright?*

- *I think I'm fine.*
- *Are you sure?*
- *[beat] I think. I laugh nervously.*
- *What happened exactly?*
- *(I take a deep breath. I want to talk to him but...) Look, Dad, I can't, not now. I've got a presentation to do in... (I look at the canteen clock) ...5 minutes.*
- *A presentation? Today? Where are you?*
- *In the canteen at uni. With Lola.*
- *(Lola sticks her head in shot and waves.) Hi, Mr Millar!*
- *Hi Lola. Good to see you. Glad Tay's got some company. You look after her ok?*
- *I will.*
- *Dad, I've got to go. I'll call you after class, Ok?*
- *Straight after?*
- *Straight after.*

After hanging up, we save the PowerPoint and rush upstairs to class.

Chapter eight | Justice for Kasha (.tv)

The presentation goes fine. A little better than fine, even. We grab a celebratory drink from a machine and take it outside.

‘We rocked that.’ Lo insists on a high 10.

‘Yeah, it went OK’

‘Better than OK. You are my presentation buddy forever. Deal?’

‘Deal.’

‘So, come on Tay, from the beginning. Where were you and Rhid last night? Before... you know...Duna’s party?’

‘Not here.’ I say because I’m not sure I won’t break down telling this story and I don’t want everyone gawping. I walk us round to where my bike is parked on a side street to find Rhid waiting for us.

‘Have you seen this?’ Rhid pulls up Kasha’s Facebook page. ‘It’s some seriously crazy traffic. Most of these people don’t even know her. They’ve just become her friend in the past ...what? Twelve hours? And the way people are writing these messages...’

‘What do you mean?’ Lola asks, trying to get up to speed.

‘They’re written for Kasha but they’re really for everyone else, aren’t they? To show everyone how much they care.’ Rhid mansplains.

‘Of course, they are. Duh. That’s how social media works.’ Lola’s and Rhid don’t always get on that well. I think Rhid irritates Lo a lot of the time and vice versa but I can’t work out whether it’s because they’re too similar or too different.

Lola gives this idea some thought. ‘Imagine if there’s some post-life virtual inbox where the dead collect messages from the living?’ Ditto, what I thought earlier.

‘Spooky.’

Lola and Rhid scroll in silence on their devices. I have total FOMO. I can’t stand not having a phone.

‘I thought you wanted to hear about last night, Lo?’

‘Oh yeah, yeah. I do.’

A student walks past.

‘Let’s go to MB1. I’ll tell you on the way.’

After a slow walk with bikes, while I tell Lola my story of last night, we arrive at MB1, a quirky place that used to be an internet café back in the day when you had to go somewhere to get online. Now it offers perfectly serviceable free Wi-Fi, like every other café, restaurant, shopping centre, etc. It means I can follow what Lo and Rhid are following via my laptop. It is also pleasantly cluttered, full of old books, and mismatching furniture and does an amazing hot chocolate.

We find a free table and sit down.

‘This one is classic.’ Rhid brings up a video of a skinny white boy, about nineteen, sitting on a bed with a guitar on his knee. He’s quiet, praying, apparently, eyes to heaven and then he stops and starts singing a sentimental acoustic song dedicated to Kasha. As the song progresses, fuzzy downloaded photographs of Kasha flash up. Underneath he’s written, *I can’t*

believe it! Just looked at your pages and you sound cool. What evil there is in this world to take someone like you with so much to give. Rest in peace. This one is for you.

‘Perfect viral schmaltz.’ Rhid scorns.

Dad’s Skype face pops up in a window on my screen again.

‘It’s Dad,’ I say. ‘I better take this.’

I carry my laptop out back to a quieter room and take a seat.

- *How’d the presentation go? (He’s still in his hotel room.)*
- *Good thanks. It goes towards the final assessment for that module so I kind of had to do it.*
- *I’m sure you could have postponed, they’d have understood.*
- *Probably but it’s done now.*
- *(I can see he’s not sure how to continue. cautious.) How are you feeling? I just can’t imagine...*

So, I help him out. I tell him everything except me calling the number I found dialled out from my phone, and the conversation with Phone-woman who thinks she knows who killed Kasha. I’ll leave that out for now. Once I’m done there’s a few moments of silence as he pictures what I’ve told him.

- *How old was she?*
- *Eighteen. She wanted to go to college to do music. She’d just won a talent competition—had an amazing voice.*
- *Sounds like she had a bright future ahead of her.*

We’re silent again.

- *I thought you were coming home this weekend.*

- *It was all going well. Flights all booked, etc. then the bastard CEO at Rovinet called an emergency meeting. Things will have calmed down by the end of June hopefully and then I'll be back for a while.*

Silence. Dad looks at me in that way parents do when they're trying to work out what their offspring really feel, behind what they're telling.

- *Had any more thoughts about the summer internship?*
- *I'm still undecided dad. Sorry. Can you buy me a bit more time?*
- *Sure, but it's a highly competitive position. Hundreds would kill for it.*
- *I'll let you know in a few days. Promise.*

Silence.

- *Sorry, I've got to go. I've got a meeting downtown.*
- *You know what they say, Dad? All work and no play...*
- *Did your mother tell you that one?*
- *Dad, c'mon.*
- *Sorry. How is she? Well? Covered in plaster?*
- *You just spoke to her, didn't you?*
- *We talked about you.*
- *She's ... happy, I think. Got a run of commissions.*
- *That's great.*

I can't help thinking: what does he feels about her now? I still struggle with the idea that after twenty years of happy marriage they got divorced. It doesn't make sense to me. I understand people change, grow to want different things, but

what's different about any of the things my parents want? A comfortable home. A few nice holidays abroad every year. A reliable car. Trips out to nice restaurants every so often. Dinners in with friends. They have the same friends. Both want me, their only daughter, to be happy and successful. What changed exactly? And when?

I change the subject.

- *Quickly, tell me what's San Francisco like?*
- *You'd love it. Full of weirdoes, lots of weirdoes...*
- *Sounds like my kind of place.*
- *Lots of music, clubs, galleries ... other general artiness.*
- *Ditto.*
- *It is. Really. Come and see me next time I'm here. We can hang out. It'll be great. I'd love to show you around.*
- *I know.*
- *(He laughs.) Ok. Don't let that put you off. Listen, I have to go.*
- *Ok. Love you.*
- *Love you, fluff cakes.*
- *Jesus Dad! Fluff cakes?!'*

We laugh.

- *Love you too Dad.*

'Look.' Rhid says as I re-join them in the café front room. 'It's a website, Justice for Kasha.tv.'

‘Blimey, that was quick.’ Lola enters the URL to her browser, and I do the same. At the top of the home page below a short paragraph outlining the website’s purpose, there’s a video with the words JUSTICE FOR KASHA filling the frame. I press play and see Cyd sitting on a large leather sofa in a smartly furnished room. She’s sharp and poised dressed in a black silk bomber jacket, white drainpipes, high-heeled grey suede ankle boots; her glossy white-blond hair, cut into an asymmetrical bob, chocolate brown streak blazes through a pointed heavy fringe falling over her right eye. She peers at the viewer with the other and begins: *If you’re watching this, chances are you’ve already heard about Kasha and the terrible way she died.* Cyd pauses, looks away, takes a deep breath and returns to the viewer. *Kasha brought light and laughter to everyone who knew her. She brought song where there was silence.* Cyd pauses again. *She was a beautiful person... and my dearest friend.* Cyd wipes her eyes. *I can’t begin to imagine how much I’m going to miss her.* Cyd’s mood changes. She grows angry. *If anyone knows anything that might help find her killer, anything at all, please, please, please, please contact the police. We can’t let whoever did this get away with it. There must be justice for Kasha!*

There’s a fundraising link underneath called The Justice for Kasha Campaign Fund. We stare at the screen in silence for a moment, trying to make sense of what we have just watched. I’m finding it hard to see how the Cyd I know could become so... motivated to do something so... right. It doesn’t add up.

‘So, Kasha and Cyd were close?’ I ask.

Scrolling through Cyd’s Instagram I find hundreds of pictures of her and Cyd out, dressed up, pouting at the camera, arms raised and smiling on the dance floor, laughing over restaurant dinners, in swanky bars and clubs. Over on Kasha’s, it’s a different story. Lots of quotes about creativity, poems about becoming yourself, lyrics, reworked images of artists

and albums she loved. I'm surprised to come across a still made of my anti-bullying video the moment when I ask; *who's guiltier? The girl who locked up the boy or the one who didn't stop her?* Kasha's marked up the image in neon blue with the words *we're all guilty. we all need to forgive.* She'd watched my video.

'Look. They're holding a vigil tonight.' Lola's reads. 'Let's go.'

'There is no way you're getting me to that vigil.' I say.

'Why? You have to go. YOU found her, Taylor.' Rhid agrees.

They work on me for about 10 minutes until, reluctantly, and against all that sane in my head, I agree.

The vigil doesn't officially start until 9pm so we arrange to meet up in two hours.

At home I find mum sitting in the dark. It is dusk outside, but the curtains are already pulled. The gloomy glare of the TV news throws her body into silhouette. She sits up when she hears me and changes the channel.

'Don't change over on my account.' I kick off my boots in the hall and join her.

'I've had enough news, that's all.' Mum grabs a leaflet from the coffee table and pretends to read. This is her way of dealing with things. Switch over. Change channels. Do something else. Mum drops the Shiatsu for Pets flyer and looks at me while some celebrity with impossibly glossy hair promises the viewer they're worth it.

'Come.' She pats the sofa next to our old brown Labrador called Bo. I do as I'm told taking the remote, squishing in next to Bo who's sprawled out and not moving.

‘How are you feeling?’ Mum looks at me in that way dad did earlier, trying to read between the lines.

‘I’m alright I think.’

Mum nods. ‘Are you sure?’ She strokes my hair.

‘I am fine, Mum.’ I know how it sounds. I’m fine: The classic teen brush-off hiding a stratospheric range of feelings and generally code for the exact opposite, but how can I explain how I feel when I don’t even know myself?

‘It’s such a terrible thing that’s happened. A terrible thing you’ve seen.’

She wants to go on but my look’s telling her otherwise. She backs off.

‘I just need you to know I’m here. Whenever you want to talk.’ I’ve seen Crisis Mum once before when she and Dad told me they were getting divorced, two years ago. It’d involved lots of difficult conversations about how I felt and way too many offers of hugs.

‘I know, Mum. Thanks.’

‘Here. Mum hands me an old I-Phone with a slightly cracked screen, It was a couple of generations behind the one the police now held in custody.

‘I thought you sold this?’

‘Didn’t get around to it. I’ve got a sim too... here.’ She jumps up and rummages in the sideboard drawer. She finds one and hands it to me.

‘How’d it go?’

‘The police or the presentation?’

‘Both.’

‘Police have my phone. Thankfully didn’t want to lock me up. Lola and I powered through the presentation like a pro. Everyone managed to not ask any questions about last night. It was, really, weird.’

Mum nods. ‘Well, I’m glad the police have your phone now. Do they think they can trace the call?’

‘They said they were going to try.’

Then looking at her watch she opens her laptop on the desk by the window.

Br-ing, Br-ing.

Another incoming Skype. This time from ...

‘Auntie V?’ I pull a face.

‘I may have dropped her a text.’

I roll my eyes. Auntie Viv. I fix my face into happy and click the green phone.

- *Taylor. Helen told me what happened. Jesus Christ.*
- *Hi Aunt Viv. I’m fine.* (She’s also in a hotel room. It’s plainer, far less luxurious, with one small bed and one small table.)
- *I can’t imagine what you must be feeling.*
- *Worse for the girl who’s dead, right?*
- *Indeed. Your mum asked me to call... not that I wouldn’t have but well you know ... anyway, I’ve had some experiences, unfortunately, seeing some pretty nasty things...I think she hopes I can help somehow.*
- *I’m fine really. But thanks.*

- *No one knows how they're going to react to something like this. Some react straight away some much later.*
- *(I nod.) Where are you?*
- *Bogota, Columbia. Helping some villagers negotiate land rights with the local government. They're not being that co-operative with the government that is. Local cartels got involved so that's not helping...*
- *Wow.*
- *Anyway, I've got to come back to the UK next week. Let's meet up. Do something nice.*
- *That'd be good.*
- *Great. Meanwhile, if you need to or want to... can call me any time. I mean it, Taylor. Any time.*

She looks at me and says nothing. Just studies me, taking me in.

- *Bye-bye, favourite niece.*
- *Bye-bye, favourite aunt.*

We always sign off like that. Our little joke—because she's my *only* aunt and I'm her *only* niece.

Chapter nine | the sadness of strangers

The moment we leave the house I regret saying yes to the vigil idea. Rhid's car smells of last night's fried food, pink pine air freshener and diesel. We pick up Lola from her house and sit in silence. Rhid is driving, I'm shotgun and Lola leans between us from the back, a position called 'riding bitch' I recently learned. Nice.

'I don't think I can do this.' I say after about three minutes. We're nearly at the roundabout which will take us on the ring road to the Light Park car park where the vigil's taking place.

'It'll be fine.' Rhid reassures and passes a small joint as if that's going to help. Against my better judgement, I accept. I draw down slowly, opening out my lungs, hold and exhale. We drive through the night, past rows of closed shops and curtained houses in silence. Stars sparkle between the gaps where broken streetlights cast shadows into the dark sky. Rolling down the window I slip my head into the night. The effects of the smoke move through me like a warm bath, easy and slow, softening the edges of things. Relaxing. Releasing. A recent shower scatters early spring blossom, transforming the rough texture of the tarmac road into tiny jewels of polished jet glistening in the headlights.

'No moon.' I look up feeling like I've got something wrong again. Like I've remembered something that didn't happen or forgotten something important that did.

I check the time on the dashboard clock; it reads 10.58. I think anyway. It is a bit hard to tell as it has a large crack across the middle.

We pass the spot where Rhid drove us back to Daisy's, where I realised I forgot my phone, and before finding Kasha dead. We pass a large road sign that reads: Warning: High Casualty Route – Stay Alert, Slow Down, Stay Alive. I'd always thought this sign was over the top but now it seems perfectly reasonable. Life is short. Staying alert can indeed mean the difference between life and death. A steady stream of people heads in our direction.

'Let's park here and walk.' Rhid suggests, stopping the car ahead of a young female officer directing traffic. We find a spot off a side street, grab our coats and weave through the parked cars, people and a small crew of local news media.

'There's that reporter.' I spot Edie, the reporter covering the story. I pull Rhid a sharp swerve away but it's too late. Spotted.

'Taylor Millar, Rhidian Smith.' She calls, 'Edie Conway, BBC Cambridgeshire. Could I have a few words?'

This is exactly what I didn't want. 'No.'

'Later maybe? After the ceremony.' Edie's not giving up that easily.

'Yeah, maybe.' Hopefully, that'll get her off our back.

'You both OK?' Edie goes for the human touch.

'Yeah fine. Thanks.' I step away,

'Look sorry we've got to go.' Rhid hooks his arm through mine, guiding me away.

'Catch you later then.' Edie calls.

A crowd of about eighty people gather around the police-taped crime scene, marking its parameter. They're young, teenagers mostly, but there are people too, and more are arriving

every few minutes. The nearest streetlamp is out, allowing the soft glow of the candles to light the growing pile of gifts. There're candles everywhere, large ones, small ones, multi-coloured ones, balanced between cards, flowers, soft toys and wreaths.

I shiver suddenly with a strong feeling of déjà vu. Rhid feels it too. It's because we're here. At night. Although the place looks different now it's still the same – the same place we found Kasha less than 24 hours ago. We look around for somewhere to stand and realise people are letting us through. Word has spread.

The kids who found her are here.

'We should have brought something,' Rhid mutters, worrying what people will think. 'A candle or flowers or...' his voice trails, a place opens near the front of the crowd, close to the police line. We move into the space and wait for things to begin I notice an attempt has been made to clean the blood from the floor where Kasha was laid before being bagged and taken away. There's a pile of flowers on the spot where I threw up.

Everyone quietens down when a middle-aged black man with shiny eyes steps forward and turns to face the crowd. He wears a sombre sage two-piece suit, an orange shirt, a knitted green tie and knows how to speak to crowds. He has a gentle, sympathetic smile.

'I didn't know Kasha very well.' He speaks with a strong Ghanaian accent. 'She came to our church only a few times but during those times I saw a girl who was beautiful.'

More mourners arrive and settle in at the back.

'Not just that kind of beauty we can all see on the outside – Kasha was blessed with that too – but the real kind. The kind that comes from within.' He pauses. 'From deep, deep

down inside – from a place only God can truly see. I know now that Kasha had no family. She grew up in the care of local children’s services after tragically losing both her parents in a road traffic accident at a young age. She was one of God’s children and as such, we were all her family.’

He stops, allowing his audience to take that in.

‘We gather here tonight, in memory of this girl, this young woman who has been cruelly taken from us. We gather here with great sadness in our hearts, but we gather also – let us not forget—to celebrate the gift of her life, however short. It is hard for us to feel anything but a loss now, at this dreadful, dreadful time, but we should fully celebrate her life, her talents. The song of life she brought to everyone who knew her and which she wanted to share with the world.’

Everyone listens with their heads bowed, but I watch on, only half there. This doesn’t feel real to me. Occasionally someone nods as the comforting words of the reverend filter through the sadness. The familiar language of mourning mending shattered worlds, at least for a little while.

‘I feel as if I’ve been here before.’ I whisper to Rhid. He pulls a ‘what?’ face. ‘...like I’ve seen all this before, on TV or online somewhere...’ Rhid shrugs, he’s not sure what to say. I continue, ‘It feels so unreal. Like everyone is in shock, wondering what to make of it.’

‘Do you know what to make of it?’

I shake my head, of course, I don’t. People stare half-lit at candles cupped in their hands like heavenly guardians holding Kasha’s spirit safe, protecting it.

‘Where was everybody last night? No one was there to protect her then.’

No one except me. Rhid looks at me funny, wishing I'd shut up.

Can you stay? Keep me company till Daisy gets back? Kasha's words ring around my head.

The preacher steps down and someone else takes his place. She's wearing a large hooded coat making it hard for anyone to see exactly who it is. Anyone except me that is. That walk. That turn. That swoop into position can only be one person.

Cyd.

'Thank you, Reverend Markham.' Cyd pushes back her hood. She wears the same clothes as she wore in the video we watched earlier. Markham bows graciously. She mirrors and smiles before turning back to her audience. 'My name is Cynthia. I only knew Kasha for a little while but in that time, I grew to love her like a sister.'

Cyd takes a few steps to the right.

'Kasha was full of life. She was bright, beautiful and talented. She had everything to live for. Everything. And now that's...Now she's gone.' She looks down. 'You may already know that some of Kasha's friends and I have started a memorial website where you can leave messages of remembrance. I invite you to have a look. We want you to write Kasha's name in as many places that you can and in as many ways as you can. Use stones, shells on a beach, leaves, petals on a lawn. Anything. Let your imagination be free. You can also light a virtual candle, leave a poem or post a video. Help us keep her memory alive. Help us keep her alive.'

Her tone changes. 'We've let Kasha down.' She looks up and fixes the faces of her audience with a stare that's more like a dare. A challenge to contradict her. Piercing,

uncompromising, chilling. 'Who was around to help Kasha last night? Anyone? Does anyone know anything that might help the police find who did this?'

The crowd look at one another, some shake their heads. My mouth is suddenly dry. I feel woozy, faint even, my vision collapses, Cyd, the crowd, the lights, everything swerves and contracts to a point, like water sucked down a plug hole and I reach out for Rhid.

'You ok?' He asks. 'You've gone white.'

I nod and hold his arm a little tighter. Cyd continues, 'We should look out for each other, protect each other, but when do we make the time? When?'

The crowd quietly mumble, not much, not often enough.

Cyd looks around again, straining to touch a nerve, to light a stronger response from the crowd, then she breaks down. 'The police will be asking questions and we must tell them everything, anything might lead us to Kasha's killer. If the people who do this go free there is no hope for any of us. We must help as if our own lives depend on it because, in all truth, they do.' A murmur of approval breaks into applause. For a second, I think I catch her eye, but she acts as if she's not seen me. It's hard to tell if she has or hasn't. Cyd's a bit of a master at concealing what she feels.

Reverend Jim Markham steps up. 'Let us pray.'

On finishing the Lord's Prayer, the reverend invites everyone to say their private prayers for Kasha and as the silence begins Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings swells up from a portable stereo.

'I'm confused,' I whisper to Rhid, 'About Cyd's involvement in all this. What's in it for her. She's only known this girl for what? A few months?'

Adagio for Strings fades out and Cyd steps forward to speak again. 'I want to end with something from Kasha. *These Things*, the song she wrote, performed and won the best song for at Talent East last year. It's beautiful, emotionally honest and unique—just like she was.' Cyd steps back and nods to the ever-present Shani. The song starts up from somewhere. A guitar strums in a few bars then a gentle, and controlled humming vocal part fades up. Next, the voice I've got to know so well in the past twenty-four hours fills the space around us. Kasha sings.

These things they don't need names

These things, but I learnt them all the same.

I found a voice for my tears

Made stories from those years

Stories to tell over and over and over and over-

Until you come back to me

Unforced, distinctive, her voice reverberates with a rich and soulful sound. It's sincere, as though she's singing about something specific that has happened to her, but it's impossible to tell what exactly the story is behind the song. As Kasha builds to the chorus people begin to join in, singing along with the dead girl. Quietly at first but soon they grow in confidence. Rhid too, sounding not like him at all but sombre and calm. The girl standing next to him recognises him. She nudges the girl on her other side and, turning back, catches Rhid's eye. He smiles back, awkward and unsure, but when the pretty one mouths are you ok with a pout and sad puppy eyes Rhid's smile widens.

'Look at you. You're enjoying this!'

'No, I'm not.'

‘You. Are. You’re at home in this... charade.’

‘Oh, Taylor please- don’t take this the wrong way but can’t you just stop being *outside* everything all the time.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just *be here*. Feel what everyone else is feeling.’

‘But I don’t feel what everyone else is feeling. I feel like I’m in a film and someone’s forgotten to give me the script.’

Kasha’s song continues. *Stay? Keep me company till Daisy gets back?* Kasha’s last words cut through the song—a beam of dark matter reminding me of the guilt I’m trying to avoid.

‘OMG.’ Someone else arrives upfront. Someone I also recognise. It’s Jonty—and without much brotherly love about him. He’s angry. *Very angry*. Cyd’s further back into the crowd now but she’s still in clear view. Jonty storms up and grabs her arm hard. He eyeballs her in a way I’ve never seen him do before. Cyd doesn’t bat an eye. She returns his look unfazed, cool as glass. Jonty leans in and says something close and private. She fixes him with a piercing stare and three tightly formed words. I can’t tell what they are but whatever they are they stop Jonty dead.

I’ve been on the end of that look. That mouth.

Suddenly Jonty storms off.

What was that?

The candle on the floor by my foot goes out. It’s stubby black wick smokes, sending a thin grey line into the air. The moon appears from behind a cloud.

I pick up the dead candle and finding a lighter in my pocket, relight it, then, as Kasha's song reaches the chorus, I cup it protectively. The way I've seen others do.

Chapter ten | last thing she ever said

Sunday. Two days after Kasha's death.

The next morning is bright as the bells of St Luke's Church ripple through my duvet's warm cocoon—a happy, light-filled sound, full of optimism for the day ahead and the complete opposite to how I feel.

Downstairs the kitchen table is laid for four. This confuses me.

'We've guests for breakfast?' I flop into my usual seat by the window. Even though we live together we don't see each other much. I'm busy with college or friends or sleeping in while mum loves early mornings and time in her studio. Occasionally we meet over cereal or toast and I try to not sound too grumpy while mum tries not to be too wide-awake-perky. As a result, breakfast can be tricky.

'The police. Well two actually: DCI Layton and PC Kendal.' Mum looks up at the kitchen clock. 'Shit, they'll be here in a minute.'

'What?'

'They called last night when you were at the vigil. They want to ask you a few questions.' Mum places a plate of eggs, bacon, veggie sausage, mushrooms and toast in front of me, the eggs scrambled soft, not too sloppy- just how I love them.

'And you said come now?' I consider escape routes.

'You cannot not speak to them.'

‘I might have arranged it a little later in the day.’ I scowl, adding salt and pepper to my egg.

‘I can send them away.’ Mum pushes over the ketchup bottle. I squeeze some on the side of my plate and dip a fork piled with bacon.

Knock, Knock!

Mum looks at me with her best silent film star what-do-you-want-me-to-do look. I take a deep breath and blow out my cheeks, ‘Go on then.’

A few moments later mum ushers DCI Layton into the kitchen, closely followed by PC Kendal.

‘Good morning. How are you?’ Layton’s bright and cheery – another bloody morning person, just my luck.

‘All right thanks.’ Is the best I can do.

‘Sorry to interrupt your breakfast, but I’ve got a few questions about Friday night. Is that all right?’

‘Fine.’ I say, hoping it sounds sincere.

‘Please, don’t let me stop you.’ He gestures to my loaded fork.

Despite losing most of my appetite to a sudden surge of anxiety I put the food in my mouth and load up another. Layton helps himself to a chair.

‘Tea? Coffee?’ Mum offers brightly. They place their orders.

‘This is a lovely house.’ Layton admires what he can see of the kitchen and living room beyond. ‘How long have you lived here?’

The question’s directed at me but mum, pulling two mugs from the cupboard, cuts in, ‘About fifteen years.’

Layton smiles at me. ‘About fifteen years.’ I confirm, adding. ‘She often does

that.'

'Does what?' Mum turns to me.

'Cuts in...' I address Layton. '...answers questions to me on my behalf. I've had a word, and she's promised not to but as you can see...re-programming is impossible.'

Layton and Kendal laugh politely. 'So, you grew up here?' Layton continues while mum distributes tea. 'Yep. Hard to tell, right?' He smiles. I am the quintessential white middle-class girl, this, the quintessential white middle-class home. It's what used to be quaintly referred to as the Cambridge *muesli belt*, describing a growing suburb populated by baby boomer families. Politically liberal, professional classes, hippy weekenders. 'What did you want to ask me?'

'Was there anything else about that conversation with the woman on the phone... anything you can recall that you haven't told us? Anything in the background? Anything that might give us a lead?'

'Just the accent, which I told you. Did you trace the number?'

'It's been disconnected.'

'Pity.' Layton stirs his tea. 'We dusted the handset. Aside from your prints we also found Kasha's.'

I put my fork down. 'Kasha used my phone?'

Kendal nods adding, 'She must have known that number by heart.' Everyone thinks about what that means.

'What about that Polish truck guy?' I ask.

'We interviewed him. We found his prints on the counter where you'd expect. Customer side. Nothing's suspicious turned up in forensics. Nothing connecting him to the

attack.' He sips his tea. 'You didn't see anyone else? No one else in the service area?' I shake my head and immediately think back to the figure in Daisy's splash-back.

Was it Pete?

I don't want to tell them about that. Not yet anyway, I don't think, and to buy some time I look down at my breakfast, fill a fork and eat slowly.

'Are you sure?' Layton picks up on my hesitation. I've always been a shit liar.

'Well, I thought I might have seen someone one, reflected in the splash-back, you know the metal around the food prep area... but when I turned back there was no one.'

'You didn't recognise them?' He pursues.

I shake my head.

'What time did you get back to Daisy's? The second time?' Kendal chips in.

'About ten-thirty. Then I realise something. 'Wouldn't you know that from the CCTV?'

'Just confirming.' Layton states.

'Confirming I'm reliable?'

'If you want to call it that.' He makes no apology.

'Did you see if Kasha had a phone with her that night?' Kendal asks.

'Haven't you got it?'

'No.'

'Of course, she did. Why would an 18-year-old not have a phone with her? She was on it when I arrived the first time. It was white, with a silvery snakeskin case and big. One of those Galaxy notes maybe?' Kendal writes that down. Everyone sits in silence for a moment.

'What about that deleted post? Of Kasha's on Cyd's Facebook wall?'

'We haven't been able to recover it.'

‘You can do that?’ Mum asks. ‘Retrieve deleted messages and find out who deleted them?’

Layton nods. ‘Usually.’

‘Why not this time?’

‘We’re working on it.’

If Cyd did delete Kasha’s call for help, what does that mean? Could she be trying to hide something?

‘She asked me to stay.’ I say suddenly. I’m not sure why. Everyone turns to face me.

‘Who?’ Mum is confused.

‘Kasha. It’s the last thing she said to me. I thought she just wanted some company but maybe there was more to it. Maybe she knew something bad was going to happen.’ I suddenly feel sick. Really, sick. The feeling rises quickly from my toes, tensing my body followed by something bile tasting in my mouth. I can’t breathe. I need to get out fast. Bo pushes through the dog flap and stands in the middle of the kitchen wondering what’s going on.

‘That could have been the last thing Kasha said to anyone.’ Kendal says what everyone’s thinking.

That’s it. I can’t hold it together any longer. Pushing back my chair, stumbling over Bo, I rush out of the room.

EXT. LIGHTPARK: FRIDAY NIGHT 10.35pm

Beep. Beep.

Kasha and I check our phones. Finding mine blank I look up to see Kasha opening a message. A holographic unicorn hangs off a key ring attached to her phone and it bobs slightly as she types, shooting tiny rainbows across the counter. She's writing a long message. You can tell a lot about what someone's texting by the way they're texting it. This one looks like it contains a lot of capitals and cusses and emojis. Her glossy purple nails stabbing at the keys.

ME

Everything all right?

KASHA

What this? (She holds up her phone.)

Yeah. Fine. (Beat). Boy trouble. You know.

She smiles conspiratorially and returns to prepping the food.

ME

I do. Boys mean trouble. (Beat) What time you on 'til?'

KASHA

Twelve. Boss has popped off on an errand.

ME

I used to come here a lot last year, but the college keeps me pretty busy now.

KASHA

What are you studying?

ME

Film and Media.

KASHA

Which do you like best?

ME

Both. All of it.

She flips the burgers again.

KASHA

I want to study music. I write my o songs. Sing a bit.

(Beat). You know. Everyone sings.

ME

Well, no they don't. For instance, I don't. But you do. I heard just now.

(Beat.) What music do you like?

Cheesy question I know.

KASHA

No, it's not. All sorts. UK grime dance,
dubstep, hip hop, broken beat. A pretty
wide mix really. I also love old songs from the
sixties, jazz, bluegrass, some folk, gospel, protest
songs...that kind of stuff.

ME

Good to meet a fellow diversifier...

KASHA

Big Billie Holiday fan too. She adds.

ME

She's the queen. (I say because she is.)

My Mum plays her all the time.

KASHA

Mine too.

We laugh.

Or at least she used to.

I wonder about that used to.

The food's ready. KASHA sets out the boxes and buns,
performs one final flip on the burgers and lays out
everything on paper. I stand there wondering how to carry

it all. I put down my phone, stuff the cans in my pockets and pile up the rest. Kasha looks over to the Polish HGV.

KASHA

Big Favour alert:

Would you stay until my boss gets back? That guy over there's giving me the creeps.

She nods over to the HGV where a man she served earlier has vanished.

You could just pop this food over to your friend and come back? I'm sure Daisy won't be long.

I think about RHID waiting in the car and right on cue:

Beep, beep: RHID'S sends me a red angry face and a dog with an empty bowl.

ME

My friends waiting. He's got to get up early.

A yawn arrives.

KASHA

(Taking a deep breath.)

No worries.

ME

Sorry.

I mumble, pulling my best sorry face.

KASHA

It's fine. Really. (she smiles.) Go! Go!

And she shoos me off like a naughty cat.

Chapter eleven | a dark human-like shadow

I awake about an hour later with my face stuck to the pillow, eyes glued together. The quiet coming up from downstairs tells me Layton and Kendal have gone. Mum's probably in her studio.

I wander onto the landing and peer down to the garage skylight and sure enough there she is. At her bench. Leaning over something, filing or rounding or chipping. Laughter rises up through the skylight from the small digital radio she keeps by the sink. A gift from dad last Christmas. The studio is a newly converted garage and very much her space. A sanctuary for her post-divorce career of lifecasting., which means she takes casts of people body parts and turns them into three-dimensional sculptures. I've only set foot in it once. Maybe twice. TBH I've avoided it. I can't quite get used to mum's new take on life post-dad. Her hair's short now, she buys style magazines and follows style blogs. It all seems a bit, *not her*. Not her I grew up with anyway. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever be comfortable in this new family set up. Then again, I'm eighteen, right? An adult in numbers and legally. It's shouldn't matter, but of course, it does.

I wander downstairs and commandeer mum's battered sheepskin UGG boots which are three sizes too big, discarded by the back door. I shuffle across the patio.

'Jees, it's cold in here.' I misjudge the door, knock over a rake, and freeze as it clatters loudly to the floor.

‘Make an entrance, why don’t you?’ Mum laughs, looking me up and down. ‘Well, if you will wear skinny jeans and a thin cotton T-shirt on a freezing April night then you’re going to be cold.’

I wrestle the rake back into place while mum, clad in heavy denim overalls and with a black and white checked cashmere scarf tied loosely around her neck, lights the pilot of a small gas heater. The radio has given way to a playlist and a Billie Holiday track is playing. All of Me.

‘Seriously, how do you work in here? It’s freezing.’ I complain, shivering so violently I feel like I’m on one of those vibrating weight-loss machines from the eighties.

‘Look.’ Mum draws attention to two top layers under her overalls and sheepskin boots. ‘Layers. Layers are the answer.’ She sounds tired. Like I really ought to know this stuff by now.

The studio space is lit by three fluorescent tubes hanging from the ceiling casting a harsh white light over everything. Strong shadows hang to the walls like carpets cut into shapes and two work benches run along either side of the room. There’s a plaster-splattered swivel chair in the middle and the walls are lined with pots and bowls, brushes, rags and a range of plastic gloves. A line of different sized knives lay on a bench along with three life cast models at different stages of completion. One is of an elderly woman’s folded hands; another of a younger woman’s foot; the third is a baby’s right foot.

‘These things are creepy.’ I announce, but the last one catches my curiosity and I lean in more closely.

‘I suppose they are a bit.’ Mum regards them, as if seeing them for the first time, and not as their creator who’s been working on them for weeks. The toenails are tiny and perfectly shaped. I squint my left eye then my right, making the toe jump from side to side, a

simple optical illusion that amuses me for a few moments before I remember how completely freezing I am and huddle back to the heater.

Mum sits at her bench. 'They possess an uncanny realism. They seem real but they're not real, like the waxworks at Madame Tussaud's but more interesting, I think anyway, because they're real bodies, embodied, solidified, not glossy, make-believe look-alikes.'

I jump up and down as close to the fire bars as I dare and considers Mum's use of words. 'Uncanny. That's one word for it. Freaky is another. This foot looks as if it's about to wiggle. Like it's about to get up and walk away.'

'I hope not. Its owner is picking it up tomorrow.' Mum smiles.

'Why does she want a cast of a foot? Whose foot is it anyway?'

'It's her foot.'

'Got a thing about feet then?'

'She hand-makes bespoke shoes for celebrities, so I guess you could say that.'

I fold my arms, partly for warmth, partly in consternation at other people's bizarre life choices.

'Take my cardi.' Mum points to a long brown knitted shape on the wall by the door and settles back into filing the edges of her current project. I don't need to be told twice. I take the long grey cardigan and drape it around my shoulders like a cape. It smells of mum—a mixture of rose facial oil [her favourite face product], mint and plaster of Paris.

'Whose are these?' A pair of old man's hands lay on the bench, folded, right over left.

'They are the hands of Larry Frank. I cast them last month at the behest of his wife, Ginnie. Just in time too. He died last week. I need to get them over to her.'

'He's dead?'

'Yes.'

‘Why someone would want to make a cast statue of some part of someone? I’d rather remember them alive – in motion.’

‘He wasn’t dead when they were made.’

‘It’s like they’re still here – but they’re not. As if he’s mummified or something.’

‘But that’s precisely why people want them. It’s like a photo, a frozen moment, except in 3D. You can touch it, hold it even, just like a person. Although it’s cold and bumpy and chalky smelling. And unlike a photo, it casts a shadow. A dark, human-like shadow.’ Mum ponders, reflectively.

It does indeed cast a shadow. ‘Right. Creepy.’

Mum smiles at me in that way that says one day you may think differently, but thankfully she has the sense not to say this out loud. I mean, I understand I’m young and therefore know very little by anyone over the age of thirty’s standards, but frankly, they are creepy, and I’ll not be convinced otherwise.

Beep, Beep.

I dig in my jean pocket for my phone. It’s an Instagram notification. Someone’s posted a comment under a blurry photograph that’s been uploaded to my feed.

‘Feeling a bit better now?’ I can hear mum’s speaking to me, but I am distracted by what’s on my screen. I didn’t upload this photo. I didn’t take this photo.

Someone’s hacked my account.

‘Tay?’ Mum’s waiting for a response. ‘Speak to me.’

‘Sorry. What did you say?’

‘I was asking how you are. I came by your room earlier, but you were sleeping. I thought it best you rest.’

‘Sorry. Yes. I guess it just all got a bit much. All the questions, thinking about last night again...you know.’

‘That’s completely understandable.’

‘What did the police say after I left?’

‘They hoped you were ok. Offered some support services. They’ll call if they have any further questions.’

‘Ok.’ I say and move over to the door, hiding my phone from mum and looking at what appears to be a photo that has been taken accidentally. It’s blurry and shows something I can’t quite make out at a funny angle. It’s the kind you click by mistake when you grab your phone to stop it from smashing on the floor or parents blame on their kids. Underneath there is a comment from someone calling themselves user6345hahanotreallyduh. It reads: I thought you had nothing to do with Kasha’s death? So, what is this doing here? Delete it right now or you are a liar. Liars don’t last long in my world. Trust me.

What?!

I know exactly who that comment’s from. It’s *Phone-woman*! Incognito.

Who else could it be?

‘You mustn’t feel guilty, Tay.’ Mum continues completely ignorant of the bomb that’s just landed on my phone. ‘It’s not your fault what happened. I know you said she asked you to stay and you didn’t but that doesn’t make what happened your fault.’

I’m trying to work the photo out. Where is it? It’s taken at a strange low angle looking up at the ceiling... There’s a strip light... out of focus but no... WTF? In the corner of two of the photos is an S and a Y and an ‘s in neon pink. Daisy’s Café? I zoom in on the other blurred and fuzzy corner until a lighter shape and contour emerges...I hold the photo away from me and suddenly realise what it is.

It's the edge of a back of a head of cropped bleached hair.

Kasha.

I lean back on the chair and feel my face drain.

'You OK?' Mum stops what she's doing.

'Yes. Err. Fine.' I stuff the phone in my pocket, pulling the cardigan tighter I go over and rest my head on her shoulder. There's no way I can tell her about this.

'I'm wondering ...' Mum's working up to something.

'Yes?'

'I'm wondering if you'd like to talk to Jenni about any of this.'

Again, I'm hearing her words, but I can't respond. I need to get rid of this photo. Not just because the scary woman is telling me to but because I don't want it in my feed, looking like I took it. Then a thought occurs to me.

I should show the police.

I save the photo to my phone which means I can delete the public post, forward the saved image to Kendal and take my account offline.

'Taylor?' Mum's trying to be patient.

'Jenni? Your psych friend?' I refocus.

'Psychotherapist yes. She's very good.'

'Um yeah. Maybe...' I'm sure I sound super vague.

'Really?' Mum's surprised. 'She's very experienced. She helps people who've been through all sorts of difficult experiences.'

'Err. Yeah. Why not?'

'Oh great. That's great.' Mum reaches for her phone. 'I'll text her and let her know.'

I delete the photo.

I delete crazy Phone-woman's comment.

I take my account offline.

...and instantly change my mind. Should I have responded first? Asked who she was, or something?

Mum sends the text. 'I'm glad you'll talk to Jen. You can tell her anything. She's helped me out several times.'

'I wonder if that's a good idea?' I leave my spot by the heater.

'What?'

'Sharing the same shrink as my mum.'

Mum laughs, picks up a brush and dips it in a jar of dirty water. 'Fancy a go?'

'What?'

'At making a cast.' I think for a moment still reeling from what just happened. 'I could teach you. The basics are fairly straightforward.'

'No thanks.'

'What about letting me make one of my number one daughter?'

'Me?'

'As far as I know, you're the only number one daughter I have.'

'No.' Is my first reaction but I'll admit I'm slightly tempted. Mum stands and walks over to the sink. She runs the water over the brushes, working them apart with her fingers releasing the plaster wash. There's a particular grace to the way mum moves. She has ...what do you call it? Weight. That's it. Unhurried, calm and careful, despite the bulky overalls and scarf-wrapped hair. I often wonder what other women see when they look at her. Do they see what I do? A kind, attractive woman in the prime of her life searching for answers?

Over on the far side of the bench, there are three pink moulds laid out in a row. They look like living flesh but in negative, inverted and inhuman. One's a palm of a hand down with neatly rounded nails, gently cupped and resting on the bench. It's the hand of a young woman. I approach cautiously and extend my finger.

'Can I touch this?' I ask.

'Not that one – the hand – it's setting. Try the next one.'

I move my finger to the next mould on the bench, the right hand of what I presume must be the same person. It's like jelly, the soft, pliable pink substance smooth to touch, like living skin but cold.

I pull back. These things are making me queasy. They remind me of Kasha. Of her handprint in the bread. They remind me of her still and lifeless body, of her reaching out for self-protection, in pain.

It reminds me of what lies in the bag in my satchel at the bottom of my wardrobe.

I breathe deeply and move away. 'What's happening here?' I point to one of the pink moulds nearby.

'They're curing.'

'I thought that was something you do to pig products.'

'It is.' Mum laughs. 'But in chemistry, it has another meaning. It's the process of hardening a polymer material.'

'OK. You got me. Which is?'

'Polymers include plastics and proteins, silicones, silly putty, amber even. Stuff that's good for bonding. Basically, material you can shape and that firms or sets hard at some point, usually either when it's cool or dry or when it is mixed with other things.'

'Clever.'

'Yeah.'

'I didn't know there was so much chemistry in this. I thought you just splashed a load of plaster about and bingo.'

'It may look like that but there's a bit more to it. If you let me make you a cast, you'll see how it works.'

'Mm.'

'You'd be preserved forever.'

'I'm not sure I want that.' Small pause. But, yet... I may have use for it.

I think about my satchel for the first time since Friday. I think about what's inside.

Something from *that* night.

A secret.

Mum returns to filing the folded hands I inspected earlier, smoothing out rough edges, making sure gaps in the surface are filled seamlessly.

'Pass me that file, will you?' I do as I'm asked. 'I know it's not the right time...' mum continues cautiously. '... but I'm aware you need to decide on this internship by next Friday.'

'I know.'

'It's an amazing opportunity, Tay.'

'I know.' I watch mum making a small mental calculation as she measures how best to proceed.

'It's difficult out there.'

'in London?'

'Well yes maybe, probably, but I was thinking more generally out there: The world of work and employment. The world beyond the comforts of free bed and lodging.'

‘Did you know what you wanted to do with the rest of your life when you were my age?’

‘You mean aside from marrying your father?’ Mum holds up the mould she’s working on and inspects it. ‘I wanted to be a theatre designer.’

‘A theatre designer?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What happened?’ She takes a clean cotton rag from a drawer, spreads it out on the bench and folds it into quarters. ‘Nan thought I should do something that would pay the rent.’ She places the head back down gently on the thick folded square of rag and places both on the shelf by the window.

‘So, you ended up teaching for thirty years when you could have been wowing the world with your amazing stage designs.’

‘Or getting into hideous debt trying to. Nan had a point.’

I hate these kinds of points and pull a face. Frankly, I do what I can to ignore them, but they keep coming up. Mum laughs.

‘Did Aunt Viv always want to save the world?’

‘Yes. She volunteered locally from when she was about 12. Always knew she’d work helping people.’

‘She did what she wanted.’

‘She’s very good at her job, makes it pay.’

‘That’s called *successful and happy*, isn’t it?’

‘I think so. But she’s had to make sacrifices.’

I wonder about those sacrifices. ‘You mean being a wife or mother?’

‘Domestic life, yes.’ Mum turns away and becomes a bit distant. I wonder what’s she thinking. She comes back to the room. ‘You know... about that internship? A bright girl like you. I’m sure there’ll be other opportunities. It’ll still be there or something similar when you’ve graduated. Maybe something better.’

‘You think I should I just get on and finish my degree, don’t you?’

‘I think maybe you should concentrate on one thing at a time.’

‘But I’m Gen Z mum! We’ve evolved to multitask. It is our USP—paintbrush in one hand, a device in the other, Yogic posture in full effect...’ I illustrate by adopting the tree balance. Mum laughs.

‘Will you still love me if I’m not successful?’ I pout, trying to look cute.

‘I’ll do better than that. I’ll love you even if you are.’

Chapter twelve | something tied

I arrange to meet Rhid and Lola at the F-Hub, the dreary student café-refectory in the centre of campus. Sunday lunchtime is usually dead, and today is no exception. Our favourite sofa is free, so Lola and I, armed with full strength chocolate fixes of milkshake, brownie and a Snickers, head over. It's an unnecessary amount of chocolate by any bad day standard, but I'm in no mood for apologising today as I wonder whether I did the right thing taking my Instagram offline.

'Do you think I should have replied to phone-woman first?' I ask Lo after explaining what happened.

'Maybe. How can you get in touch now?' Lola asks.

As I'm thinking that through Rhid rushes in waving a crumpled piece of paper like a possessed gambler with a winning slip. 'Read this before I put it online, will you?' He flops down on the sofa beside me, knocking my shake hand.

'Careful! Read what?' Rhid hands me a scrappy piece of paper stained with black ink folded an impossible number of times. Squinting, I try to decipher Rhid's scrawl for a few seconds before admitting defeat. 'I can't read this.'

'What?' He takes it back. 'Of course, you can.'

I look again. 'Nope.' And hand it back. 'Anyway. More important news. Someone hacked my Instagram and posted a picture of Kasha at Daisy's when she was being attacked.'

Rhid stares at me blankly, 'What?!'

‘It was very blurry and hard to make out, but it was definitely taken at Daisy’s and definitely her. See?’ I show them the archived photo, on my phone. ‘Also, Phone-woman, which is what I am now calling the woman who said she knew who killed Kasha, saw it and threatened me.’ Rhid sits up and concentrates. ‘She said if I didn’t take it down, she’d come after me. Paraphrasing. She accused me of knowing something about Kasha’s death. She told me to take it down or else.’

‘Or else what?’ Lola is literally sitting on the edge of her seat.

‘Just a classic or else. She’s got lines I’ll give her that. I wouldn’t buy them in a film but in real life, they’re weirdly effective.’

Rhid thinks. ‘Who took the photo?’

‘No idea.’

Focusing he helps himself to my shake. Classic Rhid. ‘Why did she hack into your feed?’

‘No idea.’ I retrieve my drink and look at the crumpled paper.

‘Why didn’t you write this on your phone in the first place?’ Lo asks the question on everyone’s lips.

‘Call me old school.’

‘Ok Old School.’ Lola beams, ‘Why didn’t you write this on your phone in the first place?’

‘Ha, Ha.’ Rhid pulls a face.

‘Read it out and I’ll type.’ I offer. Rhid passes me his phone, smooths out the paper and reads. ‘It’s a lovely day. The birds are singing—’ He begins.

‘Does this...whatever it is... have a title?’ Lo interrupts.

‘I haven’t got that far.’ I can see him thinking. ‘How about “Rhid’s Obituary for Kasha”?’ I check to see if he’s serious. He is. He’s excited and for a moment he looks like his Dad.

‘Genius.’ I put my head down and type the words at the top. Rhid continues to read. Very slowly.

‘It’s a lovely day full stop the birds are singing full stop new line but I’m sad comma sad as sad can be comma new line we lost our angel comma sweet comma sweet Kasha comma new line taken in a terrible total heart-break tragedy full stop new line but she’s not gone full stop new line not really full stop not gone new line we’ve our memories full stop her sun smiling soul full stop new line peace full stop new line she’s here with us full stop new line always comma in all our song full stop.’

I key in the last word and read it over.

‘So?’ Rhid’s popping off his seat. ‘What do you think?’

‘It’s...sweet.’ I say, hoping that’ll be enough.

‘Sweet-sweet, or sweet-cute?’

‘Sweet-cute and sweet-sweet.’ I’ll only hurt his feelings if I tell him the truth, besides, it’s bound to go down well online.

‘You think so?’

‘Yes.’

‘Cool, cool. I’m texting you now. Print it out. I’ll sign a copy if you like.’ That’s taking things a bit far. I skim it again. ‘Is it an obituary though?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s more of an ode.’

‘An ode?’

‘Yes. An ode.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A poem of praise or remembrance.’

‘Rhid’s Ode to Kasha. Even better.’

I change the title, save and pass the phone back. Rhid copies the poem into a post on Kasha’s memorial.

‘Look. Earlier Kasha had 2976 friends. Now she has 5297!’ Rhid pulls out his phone and brings up a photograph of a huge multi-coloured graffiti banner with the word Kasha stretched over two concrete bridge supports. I know the spot. Down by the river under the motorway. ‘I did something else. Look.’

‘When did you do that?’

‘Last night, after I dropped you off. I couldn’t sleep so I did this...’ he holds up his phone. ‘But my mind was racing, and mum was out so I thought—time for a little nocturnal art-making.’

‘It must have taken hours.’

‘Slept like a babe when I got home. Only woke up an hour ago.’

We look at the mural again. It’s incredibly detailed and uses about fifteen different colours. I’m genuinely impressed.

‘How did you two meet, exactly?’

‘At a party. Not that Ramsey’s one I told you about—before.’

‘When?’

‘About six months ago. Kasha was looking for stuff to do and people to roll with so we hung out a few times but soon as she got on Cyd’s radar...well, then it was harder to see her. You know how Cyd values exclusivity.’

‘I do. It’s one of the reasons we fell out, as you know. No one tells me who I can or cannot see.’

‘Kasha was cool though. She still had time for lesser mortals. One time we were hanging down by The Ferryman—Cyd, Kasha, Jonty, me and a few others—when Pete arrived.’

‘Pete Rivers Pete?’

‘Who else do you know called Pete?’

‘No one.’

‘Exactly so he came straight up to Kasha, excited, kept talking about this project he was doing. Something about secret places—anyway he gabbed away for a while with everyone watching and laughing, smoking and drinking and then he realised everyone was kind of laughing at him and he got angry. He told Kasha she should leave. With him. She shouldn’t be here with these bad people. But she wanted to stay. Anyway, after a lot of come-no-come-no, he declared that he loved her; that she was too good to stay hanging with the likes of Cyd and us, and that she had to come with him. Now.’

I see the scene unfold in my head as clearly as if I’d been there. This is another reason it might have been Pete I saw in the splash-back Friday night.

‘Cyd burst out laughing of course. Very loud. Hurt his feelings. Kasha was furious. She turned on her. Told her to apologize—but she wouldn’t. So, Kasha walked off, taking Pete with her.’

‘Impressive. Very few people contradict Cyd. Publicly anyway.’

‘True.’

‘And Cyd still wanted to be friends with her?’ I ask.

‘Apparently.’

I take this in. The Cyd I know would never allow anyone to speak to her like that. 'Why do you think Cyd was so keen on Kasha?'

'Easy answer: She was easy to like.' He picks at a small stone stuck in his trainer. 'But...'

'But what?'

'There was something else going on if you ask me.' He picks away at the stone. 'What?'

Why do you say that?' Lo asks.

'Hard to say. Like there was something else going on between them, something none of us knew anything about – or was invited to ask.' Rhid flicks his nail under whatever is in his shoe and it flies across the room, narrowly missing a serious-looking middle-aged woman eating her lunch. She glowers at us and we look away quickly, feigning innocence.

'Any idea what that was?' I ask quietly.

Rhid shrug blankly, 'Your guess is as good as mine.' He yawns, adding the photograph of his graffiti piece. I bring it up on my phone.

'You've put a lot of work into that. Not quite Banksy-level marks for visual innovation or social comment but...yeah, it's great.' I squeeze his knee.

'Thanks, Tay. I think it's my best piece yet.' He studies his work. 'I've got Duna coming later to take some shots with his digital SLR. Get some high-res pics asap in case someone decides they don't want it there. Council pretty on it at the mo.'

'What's that?' Lo points to a newly uploaded video entitled 'Vigil for Kasha'. Rhid hits play. A low light night-shot video effect makes the Light Park car park look grainy and pixelated, its colours smudged black and brown. The tarmac is lit by two streetlamps washing an orange, ethereal light over everything, skimming the tops of things. A growing pile of flowers wrapped in cellophane, cards, hand-scribbled notes and assorted gifts are stacked around the police cordoned zone. The outlines of things are indistinct. The crowd, strange

and unfamiliar. There is a montage of Highlights from the vigil covered in a range of shots rhythm edited to Barber's Adagio for Strings plays too loudly, sugar-coating the soundtrack.

'Where are we?' Rhid scans the crowd.

'We'll be somewhere near the front. There.' I see myself looking awkward and small at the front while Rhid looks...well like he's been doing this all his life.

'I look like I'm in the wrong story.' I say.

'What do you mean?'

'You look totally at home. Like you've been waiting for something to put you into the spotlight all your life.'

'No, I haven't.' He says but he's grinning. I know him too well. 'OK. No point trying to hide it I suppose. There's just something exciting about all this. I can't help it. I know it's bad. Kasha being killed like that is bad, horrible, but everyone's really come together over it.'

'You like the idea of being centre-stage of something. First, it was skateboarding, then BMXing...you're better than average at both but not quite good enough to turn pro...'

'Shut up.'

'You have other talents: You're musical, make a good chicken risotto, you're great at climbing trees, you can find your way home under any conditions making you a fantastic party buddy. And most importantly of all, you listen to your heart, making you a great person to know, but none of this is going to get you onto the wider public stage where you think you need to be to truly count.'

Rhid stares at me for a moment, considering his response. 'Wow. You finished?' Rhid

'It's no biggie. You're not alone. Lots of people think like this. They want their fifteen minutes of fame. Without it who's to say your life matters at all right?' I continue.

'What about you then Ms Millar. How are you so different?' Rhid asks.

‘The best way to stand out nowadays is to try and not stand out. Try and be a Good Person. Capital G, capital P. Think about things before you do them, the consequences. Don’t hurt anyone. Be kind. Help people.’

Rhid looks at me in disbelief. He probably thinks I’m being a massive hypocrite right now. ‘And you follow this strategy... how?’ Bingo.

‘I’m not saying I do all the time. Or even much. I’m just saying living like that would be a way to distinguish yourself.’

He’s used to my speeches. He’s used to me saying what people should or shouldn’t do and, even when I’m far from being a shining example myself, has always taken time to listen.

‘Well, you’re right about one thing.’ He says sitting up straight. ‘Too few people do that.’

We watch the video play on mute as the camera pans down to a close-up of a candle. My stomach clenches with nausea.

‘You know, Kasha asked me to stay. To wait with her until Daisy came back.’

‘She did?’

I nod, ‘I should have stayed ...but I was tired just wanted to go home to bed.’

Rhid takes this news in. ‘You aren’t to blame for what happened to her.’

‘Aren’t I?’

‘No, you’re not.’

‘But I know that I am. And once you know, you can’t un-know it.’ A thought takes shape. ‘But perhaps I can do something to help undo it. Maybe if I re-instate my account, reply to her comment, maybe I can ask her some questions. For instance, what she said she knew earlier, on the phone.’

‘What?’

‘She said she knew who killed Kasha.’

‘Maybe you should just leave that side of things to the police.’ Rhid holds up his phone. ‘OMG. Check this.’ He’s showing me a scope of almost the exact same camera angle of the video we just watch of the vigil but through a video streaming app. A wobbly hand-held landscape-wide shot shows the pile of memorial gifts and a policeman tidying yellow carnations that have spilled into the road. I can see the boundary around the forensics tent has been widened since last night. The wind flutters police tape marking out the perimeter, flashing the words ‘Police Caution’ every metre or so. This place between places has become something else since Friday night, a place that is now known to hundreds of strangers, thousands even, from all over the world, people who have never been there and never will.

‘Who’s taking this?’ I ask.

‘Someone called riverboy24.’

Suddenly a stout woman appears in the shot wearing a large rain mac, a pink beret, white jeans and bright green pumps.

It’s Daisy, as in Daisy of Daisy’s Café.

She looks tired, worn out. She looks miserable. She walks tentatively up to the edge of the pile of offerings and stands a moment before laying down her contribution: a wreath of white Lilies. She adjusts its position a few times, making sure not to cover anyone else but also making sure her dedication note is clear to read, then she bows her head. A few moments pass then gathering herself she dries her eyes. She leaves the way she came, and the screen is empty of people again, except for the policeman standing guard.

I listen to traffic from the nearby dual carriageway off-screen, a muted distant roar, like waves rolling up a pebbled beach. At the bottom, left-hand corner of the frame the wide-angle lens bows the image and the light from two candles flicker in distorted arcs. I blink, and

they blow out simultaneously, the place where they glowed now dark and shapeless. We stare at it together until the silence is interrupted by the chorus of Miley Cyrus' Wrecking Ball wailing out from Rhid's phone.

'Really?'

'It's Duna. Long story.' Rhid answers his friend. 'What? You're there now?' He jumps up revealing quite some bare inches of stomach flesh. Was that a six-pack? I knew he'd been spending some time in the gym but good grief. 'OK, OK calm down. I can be there in like, 15 minutes. Wait for me.' Rhid grabs his bag and jumps about unnecessarily. 'Please. Wait. Just wait.'

He hangs up, shoves his phone in his pocket and fixes me. 'I've got to run.' He steps closer, holding my arms down on both sides and moving his face closer. 'What are you doing now?'

'Um, probably shoot off home.' Lo and I are slightly disorientated by this new version of Rhid. This is a different Rhid. An I-know-what-I-need-to-do Rhid. He hugs Lo, kisses me on the forehead (paternally) and leaves over the back of the sofa.

Lola and I stand for a moment slightly stunned until Lola says, 'Listen I have to shoot too. Mum on the text giving it all this,' She uses her hand to mimic a nag. 'I better go see what she wants. You going to be alright?'

I nod. 'Yep. Think so.'

'Good. Call you in an hour.'

First things first. I reinstate my Instagram account and reply to Phone-woman's comment:

my account's been hacked. it's not me posting this or taking it. what I told you before is true.

the only one who knows anything about who killed Kasha is you! you must tell the police.

Rather than staring at the screen for the next however long, waiting for a reply, I download the video stream app Rhid just used, create an account and search for riverboy24. Sure enough, the stream from Kasha's memorial is still live.

What if I'd stayed that night?

CUT BACK TO THAT NIGHT:

KASHA

Would you stay until my boss gets back?

KASHA nods over to the HGV where a man she served before has vanished.

ME

Sorry. I mumble, pulling my best sorry face.)

My friend's waiting.

KASHA

Ok. It's fine. Just a thought.

(she smiles.) Go! Go!

I'd been given a second chance. The universe, God, Karma, whatever, had given me a chance to make amends for the mess I'd made of things before, and I'd blown it. I didn't do the right thing. I did the *easy* thing.

That's going to change.

Chapter thirteen | fixing it

‘Have you tried this hack?’

Rhid looks at the line of code on my screen and shakes his head.

‘I’ll give it a go.’

While Rhid’s been off photo-shooting his art, I’ve spent the past two hours trying to retrieve Kasha’s deleted Facebook message and printing screenshots of the growing memorial pile at the murder scene via the live video feeds. I’ve not had much luck with the former, but I’ve gone way into my printer reserves on the latter. Now my wall is covered with photo printed, fuzzy blue shots of police tape, flowers, cute teddies with hand-written dedications, Hallmark condolences, candles and crying faces. I’m looking forward to adding the string and pins for the full murder scene investigation effect.

‘What’s this?’ Rhid throws a hand towards the wall.

I ignore him. Eyes on my screen’s error message. Damn. The hack hasn’t worked. ‘Just a little project I’m exploring.’

‘A memorial project? Didn’t you do one of those before? Year 11?’

‘Yes, I did. I’m surprised you remember.’

‘I make a point of remembering your oddest moments.’

‘Well, get your memory banks ready. You can add this.’ Kneeling by my wardrobe I carefully extract my satchel, open the buckle and flap with further cautionary speed and,

finally, pull out a black bin bag containing something small and bulky, using both hands. I lay it on the floor in front of us.

Rhid looks down at it, then at me. 'What are you doing?'

'Wait.' I slowly untie the knot and pull back the sides of the bag. A pile of white sliced bread is visible through a nearly clear bread bag.

'What's that?'

'Kasha's handprint in a pile of bread.'

Beat. 'It's what?'

'You can see where Kasha's fingers have pushed down, see?' I hold it up and point to the place where a contour of indentations is clearly visible. 'It's almost as if she's still here.'

Rhid looks at me weird, 'How do you know it's her handprint?'

'I found it right by her. At Daisy's.'

'You took it from a crime scene?!' Rhid sits down.

'I also found this.' I show him the broken purple nail with the small gem at the tip
truck at the finger point. 'It's hers.'

'Tay. What are you thinking? This is important evidence. It could have the killer's DNA on there.' We stare at it in silence. 'What are you planning on doing with it?'

'I don't know yet.'

'You have to give it to the police.'

'You think?'

Just then Mum shouts up from the living room. 'Cynthia's on TV!'

'Cyd?' We say together, but don't move. Rhid's still waiting for an answer.

We stare at each other. 'I don't want to be a bystander anymore. I want to drive the action. Make things happen. I want to right wrongs. Or at least not keep letting bad things happen right by my front door. To people I care about.'

'Noble wishes, dear friend, but what have they got to do with that?'

'I need to change my outcomes that's all. I know I can. I know it's in me to do that. Somewhere. I just need to find it.'

We look at each other for a few moments. 'I realise that's not an answer but it's all I have right now.'

'S'okay. Let's go. See what Cyd has to say.'

We race downstairs to the sofa fighting for the middle position until Mum comes, and we part like reluctant waves.

'Wisdom before youth.' She sing-songs smugly. 'She's being interviewed any minute.' Mum settles in, as the news anchor-woman introduces the next feature. The shot cuts from the studio to Kasha's car park memorial and we see the reporter is Edie Conway again, this time pointing her microphone at Cyd. Edie fills in some of the backstory before beginning the interview, standing beside a wreath of pink carnations with the words *KASHA Never Forgotten* spray-painted across the middle. Cyd stands sharp and proud in a black, gold-trimmed blazer and wet-look brown leather leggings.

Edie: So, you were good friends with Kasha?

Cyd: I guess you could say that.

Edie: Tell us what she was like.

Cyd: I'd only known Kasha for a short time, but in that time, she, I don't know, really blessed my life, you know? She was beautiful in every way. Honest, loyal and kind. And a singing voice like an angel.

Edie: Can you think of any reason why anyone would want to kill Kasha?

Cyd: No. As I said, Kasha was well-loved. A peacemaker. She just didn't make enemies. That wasn't her style.

Edie: You've set up Kasha's Facebook page as a memorial and asked people to friend her and post images of her name written in any way they can.

Cyd: Yes. We're confirming hundreds of friend-requests every day. There are photos, videos, song written especially for her coming in from all over the world. An incredible reaction.

Edie: Some are very moving. What do you think this kind of online memorial achieves?

Cyd: I think it gives people a chance to connect even if they didn't know her, her story is touching thousands of people all over the world. The site will mean Kasha and what happened to her isn't forgotten. I hope people will visit the page and not only celebrate Kasha's life but also think about the way she died: Alone, violently, on the street with no one to help her. No one should die like that. [Her eyes glisten large wet tears].

Edie: Of course, they shouldn't, and the fact the memorial is proving so popular shows many others agree with you.

Cyd: [Cyd composes herself] It's also an opportunity to spur us to find the evil... [Cyd takes a breath, working hard to control her rage] EVIL person who did this.

Edie: Thank you, Cynthia. If you would like to know more about ways to remember Kasha or think you can help police in their enquiries, please go to our website, or call us. The information about how to get in touch is running along the bottom of your screen now.

We don't move.

'What's she playing at?' I ask finally. Rhid shrugs.

‘What do you mean? ‘What’s she playing at?’” In addition to answering other people’s questions another one of mum’s annoying qualities is she thinks the best of everyone. ‘It seems like Kasha didn’t have any family. None that have stepped forward anyway. Someone needs to speak on her behalf.’

‘Ok, but since when did Cyd care about anyone other than herself?’

‘Harsh.’ Rhid leans back. ‘But true.’

‘Maybe she’s changed,’ Mum offers. ‘You’ve not seen her for a while. Maybe all that stuff with Pete had an impact on her after all. People change.’

‘11 months and 14 days. And I doubt it.’

‘I think you’re being unkind.’ Mum leaves for the kitchen, slightly cross.

‘So, what are you going to do with that handprint?’ Rhid whispers the moment mum is out of earshot.

‘I haven’t decided yet.’

‘You do realise that’s a really weird thing to do, don’t you?’

‘I do. Yes. Thank you.’

‘What made you take it?’

‘I don’t know. I just saw it there and her and... the thought just popped into my head. I couldn’t stop myself.’

‘You are one seriously weird girl.’

‘Seriously weird *woman*. Thank you.’

‘Apologies.’

‘By the way, I replied to Phone-woman. Told her my account has been hacked.’

‘Has she replied?’

I check again. 'Nothing. If she knows who killed Kasha, why isn't she going to the police?'

'Good question.'

'Here's another; who deleted Kasha's message? It was on Cyd's wall, so it can only be one person, right?'

'Cyd.'

'But why? Why do that? Unless you have something to hide?'

'What about your Code Club mate? Hench? Wouldn't he be able to retrieve it?'

'I'll call him.' Rhid's just about to when my phone rings. A withheld number. I resent withheld numbers the person on the other end holds an advantage over you before you've even begun.

'Hel-lo.' I answer, cautiously.

'Is this Taylor Millar?' I recognise that voice.

'Yes. Who's this?'

'Edie Conway. BBC Cambridgeshire. We met last night at the Kasha Stone vigil?'

'I wouldn't say we met exactly.'

'What a turnout, hey?'

'Hey.'

'Would it be convenient to have that interview now? If you're feeling up to it of course. I'd like to talk to you about what happened. Get your account of things.'

Then Edie adds, 'What you say could help find who did this.'

She's appealing to my sense of social responsibility and my guilt. 'I don't want to go over it all again. Besides, I've told the police everything I know.'

‘But if our viewers could hear the story of that night from you, a close witness, it might make a huge difference.’

‘How?’

‘You might say something that jogs someone’s memory. Remind them of something important. It might help the police find her killer.’

‘Mmm.’

‘Is that’s a “yes”?’

She’s very good. I let her sweat for a moment, thinking she’s hooked me.

‘Sorry, I can’t. Not now.’ Silence. I can hear the cogs in her mind weighing me up: should she push harder or end on good terms and hope I’ll change my mind. She softens.

‘That’s fine. I understand. You don’t feel up to it. You’ve been through a lot.’

‘I have.’

‘I don’t want to put you under any pressure.’

‘Good.’

‘I’ll text you my number just in case. If you change your mind, call me. Do you think your friend Rhidian would feel differently?’

‘You’d have to ask him.’ I hang up.

‘Why did you say no?’ Rhid’s deflated and put out by not being asked.

‘I just don’t want to Ok?’

He sulks. ‘I would have done it.’

‘You can. She’s going to call you. We shouldn’t waste our time filling local news airtime when we can be trying to find out who deleted that message and if there are any more deleted messages like that one hanging about in the ether with important information about who might have killed Kasha.’

‘Whoa, ok, but that’s a lot of maybes.’

‘It is but what else have we got?’

‘Nothing. Except for Phone-woman—and the fact investigating Kasha’s murder is not really our job.’

‘I’m making it our job.’ I stare at him hard. ‘You in or out?’

‘In, stupid.’

‘So, let’s call HENCH.’

Beep, Beep.

We check our phones. It’s Rhidian’s. A text from an unknown number.

Hello Rhidian, Edie Conway here from BBC Cambridgeshire news. I’d like to interview you about finding the murder victim Kasha Ray. Would you be available?

He shows it to me. ‘You were right. If at first, you don’t succeed.’

‘Find another route.’

Chapter fourteen | a plastic bag moment

At the library, we swipe our cards and head up to the third floor where—even on a Sunday afternoon—we know we’ll find Hench in archaeology.

‘I love the smell of libraries.’ I say, taking the lead and striding up the narrow wooden stairway to the top floor. Rhid sniffs the air.

‘You mean sweat, cortisone and energy drinks?’

‘No, books, stupid.’

It’s three weeks until the end of the semester. Hundreds of sleep-deprived students wired on too much caffeine and sugar read, write and rewrite in the overheated space with limited desks and too few windows, desperate to complete assignments that will release them into summer.

‘Don’t you think there’s something reassuring about the places where books live?’

Rhid’s running out of breath and signals a time out by the lift. A few seconds later the doors open, and six first-year students wired to devices and loaded with books jostle out. We step back to let them pass and are ousted out of the way by three chatty black girls with neon stripes in their hair and long glossy nails, watching the lift doors close with the girls inside. Impatient, I lead us back to the stairs where we finally reach floor 5, pass through Biology,

Psychology, Anatomy, and turn into Archaeology where HENCH is sitting by the DVD section, as predicted.

‘Dude.’ Rhid slaps HENCH on the back, by way of greeting, knocking him forward and the poor guy bangs his head hard on the desk. ‘Ah mate, Sorry.’ Rhid puts his arm around him, fussing about apologising. HENCH pushes his headphones back. ‘Hi Rhid, err, Taylor. Hi.’

‘HENCH my man, how are you?’

‘Good. Was good. Jesus, Rhid.’ He rubs his head. HENCH looks like a hobbit, or rather Tony Robinson crossed with a Hobbit to be precise. Character type: fully mixed genre, somewhere between comedy and epic fantasy. The complete opposite of HENCH. I’m not being mean BTW- there’s no getting around it. He’s small, wears black-rimmed glasses and his chin’s nubbled like a knee.

‘And you?’

‘Good. Good- well you know as can be expected given...’ Rhid suddenly realises maybe he hasn’t heard the news that’s gone through campus like Freshers’ flu. HENCH isn’t the most sociable. ‘Did you hear about us? Finding Kasha dead?’

‘Yeah. I read about it. You alright?’

‘Yeah. Yeah. A bit, you know...’

‘Freaky.’

‘Right. Anyway. Listen.’ Rhid pulls up a chair and sits close to him. ‘We’ve got a favour to ask.’

As they wait for HENCH to work his magic, I notice someone in the next cubicle is watching the 1999 American film American Beauty. I know the scene well. It’s the one where Ricky shows Jane a video of a white plastic bag tossed to and fro by a sharp winter wind in the frozen grey suburban street near where they lived. He hasn’t shown it to anyone before and

the moment marks a significant change in their relationship. As Jane watches transfixed the bag transforms. It becomes something extraordinary and reminds them about the beauty in ordinary things.

It's a film I've watched many times.

Suddenly, the student—some third year I don't recognise—presses pause, removes his headphones and leaves.

I look around. Rhid's on the case with Hench...

...no one's watching. So, I take the student's chair, quickly put on the headphones, rewind the scene and hit play. As misunderstood neighbour Ricky shows main character Jane a grainy blue video of a white plastic bag being tossed about in the wind on a street, he looks out of the window to the quiet, leafy street beneath. He talks about why he filmed it. How it was a cold day, minutes away from snowing when he noticed this bag dancing around in the wind. That it seemed to stand for something. Something so meaningful, so profound he just had to film it. He says that was the day he realised there was this entire life behind things we can only guess at. That there was a benevolent force that wanted him to know that there was no reason to be afraid. Ever.

I pause, staring at the frozen screen.

Funny how a film can speak to you when you need it to.

This is an important moment in the film- a turning point in Jane's perspective on the boy-next-door, and for him. I don't believe exactly what he's saying ...it's hard to imagine a benign force behind everything, and as to no reasons to be afraid? Well, I can name a few...scary phone-woman for a start. But still. It's an epic screen moment. Two misunderstood people, vulnerable and alone sharing a moment of connection. We discussed this scene in class last semester and like Jane, I was transfixed by the video of the flying bag. I was also

mesmerised by how such an ordinary object as a discarded plastic bag could become so beautiful and full of meaning by a small effort of imagination. And a camera. A camera can transform anything, however dull, or every day, into something worth looking at.

This is why I love film.

‘Look closer.’ Rhid leans over, echoing the film’s logline and theme.

‘But what when you look closer and don’t find a benevolent force. What if instead, you find something dark and...?’

‘Malevolent?’

‘Exactly. What then?’

‘You run.’

‘Bingo!’ Hench announces loudly, making me jump. Three nearby students shush him sternly. ‘This what you were looking for?’ He whispers leaning back to give us a view of the screen.

Cyd r u online? I have 2 speak 2 u. I’ve been calling 4 ages. Msge me, call me, anythng. Quick!! I have to speak with u now. No word of a lie.

‘It was posted at 9.31 p.m.’ I see.

‘An hour before we got to Daisy’s.’ Rhid adds.

‘Anything else?’ I ask. This is good because it proves I’m not going mad but it’s not explaining much else. Like why did Kasha need to speak to Cyd so desperately?

‘Not obviously but I could dig. It’d take time. I know this is important, but it’s not my important. Not right now. I need to get back to this essay.’

‘Could you look for it soon?’

‘Ok. Tonight. But for now...’ He gestures to his essay, ‘...if you don’t mind.’

‘Sure. Sure. Thanks, Henchy.’ Rhid tries to pull me away.

‘There is another thing.’ I add. HENCH sighs. ‘Someone hacked my Instagram and posted a photo of Kasha the night she was killed. I’ve no idea who took it any chance you can trace who did it?’

‘Do you have the photos?’

‘Yes.’

‘Send me a link to your account and the photos and I’ll see what I can do, but now... please go away!’

‘Star. You are.’ I peck him a kiss on the cheek and he blushes.

We leave via a shortcut through the book stacks and come across Lola, head down at a desk.

‘Hi.’ I stick my head between her and the screen. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘It’s a library. I’m a student. I’m trying to make a start on that adaptation assignment. What book are you doing?’

‘Probably *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.’

‘But that’s been done so many times.’

‘Not like this.’

‘Oh Shit. Have you seen this? I was just about to text you.’ Lola pushes a local newspaper under my nose.

I read, ‘Suspect Identified in Girl’s Brutal Murder. CCTV footage from the night Kasha Stone was brutally murdered had thrown up a suspect. Police have matched fingerprints found at the scene of the crime with those of an eighteen-year-old Cambridge resident... Pete Rivers.’ I look at Lo and then Rhid. ‘No. Mr Rivers was at Daisy’s Diner shortly before Kasha was killed...’ she continues, ‘... and now cannot be found. If anyone has any leads as to where

police may contact Mr Rivers, please call Cambridge Police Station or Crime Stoppers, urgently.'

I scan the rest of the article. 'They've got CCTV of Pete in the area at the time she was killed.' I stare at Rhid, 'So, it WAS him I saw.'

Lo grabs the paper. 'He's been reported missing from the psych hospital since Tuesday.' She looks up. 'What? The one over in Fulbourn?'

'Probably.' I take a deep breath and try to think. Then I make a call.

'Who are you calling?' Rhid asks.

'Mum, to get Pete's mobile number...Mum. Hi. Can you give me Pete's number? I know. Just quick. Please.'

I write it on my hand with a pen Rhid's found on a desk, say a quick bye and call but there is no reply. I stare at Rhid, wild-eyed, full of questions. 'We've got to find him!'

Rhid's not moving, 'Do you think Pete could have...'

'No way! Rhid! It's a mistake.'

Rhid looks at his watch. 'I was supposed to be at work an hour ago. I've got to go.'

'Ok. I'm going to Pete's Nan. See if he's there.'

Lola looks up, closing her laptop. 'Fancy some company?'

We take the shortcut to Pete's house through the underpass between East Road and Newmarket Road. It's one of only a few places in Cambridge that doesn't look like Cambridge, not the postcard version anyway. Four long subterranean walkways converge on a dishevelled flowerbed, the anonymous kind of urban landscape you can find anywhere across the UK or

Europe for that matter. Some attempt has been made to brighten it up. The dark tiled tunnelled walls are painted in bright pastoral scenes, a community art project now faded with time. The childlike representations of cows, sheep, trees and happy people look worn out and forlorn.

We turn into the subway, braking gently as we turn the tight corner into the underpass. Suddenly we're overtaken by a chubby girl on a BMX in a thick quilted jacket and silver cap, peak facing back. She whizzes down the pedestrian side of Subway Exit 3, narrowly missing us. Before we have time to shout a complaint the girl turns an impressive 180-degrees, skids to a halt and lands facing us.

'Cyd says "hi".' The girl raises her chin and squints down her nose in a who-the-fuck-are-you-looking-at stare I can imagine her rehearsing in her mirror at home.

'Cyd?' Lola asks.

'She says she's sorry you two haven't met up yet.' The girl waits for a response but I'm not sure what to say. A few moments pass.

'Sorry. What's your name?' I ask and she shifts uncomfortably, the conversation taking an unexpected turn.

'I'm Dormouse—I can sleep anywhere. My peeps call me Dor.' Neither Dormouse nor Dor constitutes a real name in my opinion. Something small and furry, but not human. What is this really about?

Dor returns to her script. 'There's a memorial party under the A14 on Friday.'

'Okaaay.' Still confused.

'For Kasha.' Dor adds as if that's the part that needs explaining.

‘That’s nice.’ I push off, freewheel a few feet but Dor cuts me off. Something about all this is making me feel played. I don’t like games at the best of times but particularly when no one explains the rules.

‘It’s to mark the first week anniversary of Kasha’s death.’ Dor continues. ‘It’s down by the river, under the A14 bridge. Cyd said you’ll know the spot.’

‘I know the place.’ It’s right by Rhid’s graffiti. ‘Cyd will be there.’ Dor shows off a tricky balance- standing on her bike with both feet on one pedal. She swaps sides.

‘Great. Thanks for letting me know.’ I let my bike roll on.

‘In fact, it’s more than likely she’ll be there.’ Dor swaps sides and blocks Lola’s path too as she tries to move past.

I’m annoyed now. I know the response Dor’s gunning for now, but I don’t want to give it. But then how long do I want us to have to stand here?

‘We’ll try and make it down.’ I mumble.

Open sesame.

Dor jumps her BMX onto the raised flowerbed, spins her handlebars 360 degrees, lands and pedals full pelt, out of Subway Exit 4.

Chapter fifteen | casting doubt

‘Hello, hello, dear, how lovely to see you! Come in, come in, do come in.’

Pete’s nan, Ida, is a fragile-looking woman with grey-pink hair and thick glasses but with eyes as sharp as an eagle. She spots us from the kitchen window before we’ve even parked, waving enthusiastically, the back door open before we close the garden gate.

‘Come in, come in, don’t stand there making a draught,’ Ida fusses. We do as we’re told and are ushered through the spotless kitchen into the even more spotless front room.

‘So lovely to see you. So, lovely. And who’s this?’

‘Lola. Lola meet Ida, Ida, Lola.’ They shake hands.

‘Lovely to meet you, Lola. Lovely name. How’s college? Going well? Come on. Sit down. Tea? ‘Of course, you’ll have tea. Sit yourself down. I won’t be a moment.’

Leaving us alone Lola takes a quick look around, ‘Doesn’t look like Pete’s here. No Mr Rivers senior then?’

I shake my head. Ida’s looked after Pete since he was ten, when his mum, her daughter, died after a short battle with cancer. I know nothing about Pete’s dad and since no one ever mentions him it’s unlikely I ever will. I take up position on the small guest armchair to the left of the electric fire where I’ve sat many times before.

‘Can I give you a hand?’ Lola calls out to the kitchen.

‘No, no, thank you. I’m fine. Just make yourself comfortable.’ Ida pokes her head through the serving hatch—teapot in hand—before popping back.

I look around. It's been over 18 months since I was last here. A lot has changed since then for us all but not in here. Ida's house is exactly the same. A smell of custard creams mixed with Lily of the Valley room spray dominates the room, there's a china King Charles spaniel on the hearth, a little Dutch boy peering at her mischievously from the windowsill, and a china shepherdess paused forever in a moment of dew-eyed dreaming next to some freshly cut pink carnations. It is all a lot. It's old fashioned, kitsch but charming. Reassuring and permanent somehow.

I take a photograph and am about to upload it when I remember my Instagram's offline. I save it for later. Countless other trinkets litter the room, and not a speck of dust on any of them. There's a photograph of Pete I've not seen before, taken recently by the look of it. He's in a garden centre, dirty with mud, and holding up a freshly planted spring flower basket brimming with yellow primrose, miniature daffodils and snowdrops. He looks happy.

Ida bustles in with a tray set with her best china – teapot, cups, saucers – and a plate full of speciality biscuits, including her signature custard creams. 'I expect you've come to ask about Pete.'

Straight to it then. 'Do you know where he is?' Lola asks.

She shakes her head. 'Haven't seen him since early Friday evening – he was home for the weekend and then popped out after tea. Said he'd gone to read in his room but when I went to check if he wanted anything about an hour later, he wasn't there.' The carriage clock on the mantelpiece ticks loudly. 'It's so unlike him to stay out for this long.' Ida's wide-eyed. 'I'm afraid he's in some bother.'

Understatement of the year, but perhaps if you've lived through a world war you have a different idea of bother, most people I know slip into cardiac arrest if they lose Wi-Fi. I

completely respect Ida's putting on a brave face, but I need to make her see how serious all this is.

'Is it true you found the girl who was murdered?' Ida asks delicately as she pours out tea from the gold-trimmed china pot.

'Me and Rhid. Yes.'

'How awful.'

'We'd been out at a party. Stopped at Daisy's for a snack before home when I left my phone on the counter by mistake. We drove back, to pick it up, and... that's when I found her.'

'Oh, my!'

The carriage clock continues ticking steadily. The no 21 bus pulls up outside. Ida's rarely lost for words. She reaches out her hand, freckled and wrinkled with paper-thin skin, and places it on my knee, her hands shakier than I remember them.

The bus pulls away as the carriage clock chimed off-key.

'How awful for both of you. I'll get Father Laurie to give you all a special mention this Sunday.' Ida isn't sentimental. Not when it counts. She loves china dogs, whimsically gazing shepherdess, devours a silver-screen matinee, preferably a musical, and only reads romances, but she's not sentimental about the big things.

'I haven't seen Rhidian for months. How is he?'

'He's OK.'

'Good. Lovely lad.' She winks at me. She's always winks at me when I mention Rhid.

'Did you see the news?' Lola asks. Ida nods solemnly, looking down at her hands.

'They think Pete had something to do with that girl's death. They say he had a crush on her?'

Lola ends that last statement as a question.

‘He was sweet on someone a while back. You know what he’s like.’ She studies the picture of Kasha that’s printed with the article. ‘Pretty. Not the kind of girl who would go for our Pete of course. Any fool would see that.’

‘Except Pete. No offence.’

‘Except Pete.’ She picks up her cup. ‘Love is blind!’ She announces. ‘As they say.’ She takes a sip of tea and her smile drops. She’s looking at the photograph of Pete in a garden centre. ‘From what I can tell he’d met her a few times. She spoke to him a few times. More than most, I suppose. He thought he was in with a chance.’ I try to imagine how Pete would have responded to a pretty girl like Kasha giving him the time of day. Most didn’t.

‘You know Pete—always looking for love! He’s never had a real girlfriend. Girlfriends but not a proper Girl Friend, if you know what I mean.’ We nod. Ida leans forward and refills our cups. She draws our attention to the biscuit plate. I take two custard creams and lay them on the saucer. Lola does the same.

‘When was that taken?’ Lola points to the photograph.

‘About a month ago March time—he had a part-time job there—at the garden centre up by the airport. He’d been going two days a week for well, nearly a year now.’ Ida beams proudly.

‘He looks happy.’

‘He loved that job.’ She takes another sip, ‘...I should have known it couldn’t last. He was asked to stop working there three weeks ago.’

‘Why?’

Ida pauses not wanting to say. ‘He hit someone.’

‘Pete?’ I sit up, surprised.

‘I know. Someone said something bad about this girl, Kasha. Pete saw red. He pushed this man down and hit him twice in the face. No broken bones, just a few bruises and a great blessed shiner.’

‘I can’t imagine Pete getting angry enough to hit anyone. He must have had it bad for Kasha.’

‘Things have got harder for him recently. He seems to have lost his confidence. I don’t know why. He just doesn’t seem to see the point of anything anymore. But that job gave him focus. After, he decided to spend some time in hospital, get some proper help and support. He’s supposed to be there now in fact.’

I sip my tea and nibble the biscuit. ‘Really?’ Now I feel terrible. I had no idea Pete was going through such a tough time. Of course, I didn’t. How could I when I hadn’t spoken to him for months? ‘I’m sorry I’ve not come around. It’s been ages.’

‘You’re young—busy making your way in the world. We know that.’ She looks up. ‘But we have missed you.’

‘I’m going to find Pete. Before anyone else—I’m going to find out exactly what’s going on.’

She looks out of the window—wistful, alone and looking older than I remember. ‘You don’t think he did it, do you?’

‘No. I don’t, nor does Lola—and nor do you.’

I pull up Pete’s number on my phone, ‘Is this still his number?’ Ida leans forward and peers closely through her thick glasses, and one at a time, mouths the digits silently. She nods. I try it. We watch the phone ring unanswered. I cancel the call.

‘Can I take a quick look in his room?’

I've only ever been in Pete's room once. A few months before the Locker Incident. We watched *The Third Man* at the cinema and argued about whether it was better than Orson Welles' earlier work *Citizen Kane*. I said yes, obviously, because it is for so many reasons. Pete tried to convince me otherwise and persuaded me to watch the opening scene one more time. We ended up watching the whole film and Pete thinking he'd won his case.

He has the same duvet cover and wall posters, and his desk is covered with notes and cut out pictures from magazines and photographs he's printed. There's a picture of them together meeting his Monty Python hero Michael Palin at the Cambridge International Film Festival two years ago stuck to his pinboard. I can't see anything to help me figure out where he is now though.

I'm just about to leave when I knock over a pile of magazines. The front cover of the top one reads, '*Romans Today—bringing antiquity to life*'. They're all *Roman's Today*.

'Pete's latest hobby.' Ida shakes her head affectionately as I pile them back up. 'Mad about all things Roman. He spends hours over these. Or at the museum.'

'Big Roman collection there.' Lola confirms.

'I go with him sometimes. Nice and quiet. Good tea and scone.' Ida smiles.

'Keep trying his number.' I finish tidying the magazines.

At the kitchen door. 'If he's got his phone, he'll at least know we're thinking of him, trying to find him. 'Ida opens the back door and I step out. 'I'll come and see you soon.'

Ida nods again. She holds my hands for a few moments, turns inside and shuts the door.

FLASHBACK:

MONTAGE OF MY LIFE SO FAR WITH PETE - THE PAST 3 YEARS:

INT. COMMUNITY HALL - KNIT CLUB TWO YEARS AGO

MUM and IDA try and teach PETE (17) and ME (17) how to knit. We curse and fail and laugh. A lot. I'm hopeless, ending up with a mess of yarn tied together with needles. Pete on the other hand, concentrates hard, working slowly and methodically. It's not long before he achieves some very convincing rows that soon build to a significant length of fabric.

CUT TO: Some weeks later. He's gotten fast with practice and I'm none better. He finishes his stripy scarf casts off and wraps it around his neck proudly and to the applause of everyone there.

INT. CLASSROOM - First day at my 6th form school:

Pete is introduced to the class. He is nervous and unsure and then he sees me at the back and a smile stretches over his face.

INT. MY HOUSE:

MUM is drinking tea with IDA in the kitchen. PETE and ME are looking through dad's DVD collection. When he leaves Pete touches me on the arm and smiles. He walks out and then returns and touches me on the arm again. He does this three more times before IDA coaxes him away.

INT. CINEMA CAFE:

PETE and ME are heatedly discussing a film we just watched. CYD and SHANI enter. They buy drinks at the bar and walk towards us.

CYD

Hi.

(She raises an eyebrow behind PETE's back.)

ME

Hi. What are you seeing?

CYD

Captain Fantastic.

ME

It's great. Just saw it.

PETE

Well, Taylor thinks it's great. I'm not so sure. I think the father isn't such a great father making his children live in a forest and read all those books and run about all wild and...

He looks up at CYD. Who is giving him a 'was I talking to you?' look.

CYD

Oh.

(CYD blanks him)

PETE grows nervous and reaches out to touch my arm. CYD nudges SHANI.

CYD

Well, I'll let you alone Tay, with your *new* friend.

As they leave, they laugh quietly at each other and take a place on the far side of the café.

INT. SCHOOL CANTEEN:

PETE trips up in the line for ketchup. His tray—full of sausage, mash, lots of gravy, jam roly-poly, custard and squash—smashes all over CYD's new All Saints jacket.

She looks like she's going to blow. The canteen holds its breath.

But, to everyone's surprise, she just smiles.

INT. SCHOOL CORRIDOR - A FEW DAYS LATER.

CYD bitches about PETE. She's plotting something with Shani and another girl and me. I tell her it's a bad idea and she tells me it's not. It's a great idea. They laugh. I join in because I feel I should. I spot Pete walking towards us. He hangs his head as he passes. He looks at me, at Cyd then back at me. I look away.

ME V/O

Have you ever been in a situation where you've completely and utterly done the wrong thing? Where you know you've just been a total jerk and congratulate yourself with something like ...well, CONGRATULATIONS Taylor! One Stupendous Major Fuck Up. Except that it isn't THE ONE Stupendously Major Fuck Up it's just THE FIRST.

THE FIRST Stupendously Major Fuck Up of who knows
how many.

It takes Lola a while to extract herself from Ida, but once she's out we hop on our bikes. She's got to go home so I head off to the police station alone, all fired up to let them know what kind of person Pete is. The police need to know that they are looking for the wrong person. They are completely barking up the wrong tree.

The sun is out as I cycle, the roads dry and fast. I almost feel optimistic.

I'm there in record time and locking my bike outside the police station I call Rhid.

'Any news on Pete? How's Ida doing?' Rhid asks before I have a chance to say hi.

'I'm not sure she understands how bad this is. The last time she saw him was Thursday afternoon. on a weekend release from the hospital, but he left early evening without saying where he was going, and he's not been home since.'

'Why was he in hospital?' At first, I am shocked to hear Pete's been in hospital. I didn't even know. Then I feel ashamed.

'He'd admitted himself after he'd attacked a work colleague.'

'Attacked?!'

'It's not as bad as it sounds. He was defending Kasha's honour by the sound of it. I'll explain later.'

'So, Ida doesn't know where he's been since Thursday night?'

'No.'

'What are you doing now?' Rhid sounds like he's getting ready to join me.

‘I’m at the police station. I’m going to speak to Layton about Pete. They’re looking for the wrong man.’

‘But they have CCTV placing him at the time and scene ...it’s understandable they want to talk to him.’

I spot Layton driving into the station car park. ‘Got to go.’

I hang up and rush over to the car. Passing through the barriers to the police only car park I knock on Layton’s window. He winds it down slowly and everything comes out at once.

‘Why are you looking for Pete Rivers? He hasn’t got anything to do with this. You’re wasting your time. You’ll just upset him and...’

‘OK, OK, slow down.’ Layton puts the sandwich he’s been eating on the dashboard. What the matter?’

‘Pete is the matter.’

Layton pauses and looks at me. ‘Yes, he is. He’s reported missing and he was at the scene the time Kasha was killed.’

‘He may well have been there, but he’s got nothing to do with the murder.’

Layton reviews the situation. ‘Can I ask you how you know Mr Rivers?’ Layton answers my question with a question. It must be something they learn at police school. First page of the manual.

‘He’s a friend. He was in my class at school. We hung out.’ Layton’s surprised. ‘We both like old films.’ I add offering an explanation. ‘But since I started uni... well, we kind of lost touch.’ I can’t lie. ‘I lost touch.’

Layton nods understanding. ‘It happens. New friends come along. Old ones are discarded.’

‘He wasn’t discarded.’ Like I need more guilt. ‘I know him. I know he couldn’t do this.’

Layton opens the car door and I'm forced to step back. He's looked at his watch at least three times during this conversation. 'We just want to find him, first and foremost. Then we'll speak to him.'

'It's because he had a thing for Kasha, isn't it?' Maybe if I bring this out in the open it might not be such an issue. Worth a try.

'We heard.'

'That doesn't mean he killed her, does it?'

'No, it doesn't.' Layton finishes his sandwich and screws the wrapper up into a perfectly round ball. 'Well... I need to get to a meeting and the general public aren't allowed in this area so...' He holds his hand out, gesturing for me to leave. Polite but firm.

'He repeats himself a lot.' I spurt. Perhaps if I flesh Pete out a bit for him, so he can see him as a person. 'He often forgets what he's said. He worries about the news – particularly viruses – virtual and real.' I think about how long it has been since I've even spoken to him. That maybe smile at the party Thursday night the only contact for nearly a year. 'Whenever he passes a tree, he has to touch it—like that American TV detective Monk— have you seen that show?' Layton shakes his head. 'Well, he watches it a lot. He also touches people when he meets them and when he leaves—three times—usually somewhere on the arm or shoulder.'

I remember how he used to touch me and how it annoyed me, but now, suddenly, I miss it. I miss it like crazy.

'Unusual.' Layton says.

'I guess. Depends where you hang out.'

Layton smiles wryly. 'Yes, it does.' He turns to enter the building again.

'Any luck finding Kasha's phone?'

He turns back. 'Not yet.' Takes a step towards me. 'Look. I get it – it's been a shock finding this girl and now an old friend you feel guilty for dropping is in the frame. I can see why it feels like it's your business.' He fixes me with one of those leave-this-to-the-grown-ups looks I thought I was too old for. Apparently not. 'But it's not. It's ours.' He draws himself up. 'This is a complicated case. There's more to Kasha than you know, a background to all this we're slowly putting together.'

'What exactly? Tell me. I can help.'

Layton shakes his head. 'I can't tell you anything. Apart from various legal restrictions, it's dangerous stuff. There are some nasty people in this world. People you don't want to get to know. Trust me. You need to give all this a wide birth. Leave the investigation to us, Taylor.'

Chapter sixteen | looking for Pete

Back at home, I dump my backpack bag on the kitchen floor and help myself to an apple from the bowl on the table. The sounds of early Sunday evening waft in from the living room; The Antiques Roadshow is on TV and mum's snoring lightly on the sofa surrounded by Sunday newspapers.

'Everything alright?' She calls out—mum-dar in full effect.

I run a glass of water, drink it down and join her in the living room. 'I went to see Ida. See if she had any idea where Pete might be.'

'Any luck?'

I shake her head.

'How's she doing?'

'She's worried.' I start on the apple.

'I'll give her a call.' Mum reaches for her phone.

I don't want to see anyone so head upstairs to be alone and look at the pictures on my wall. Where is Pete? I open my laptop. Kasha's Facebook friend's count has grown again. She now has 9,062 friends, over nine thousand more than she had when she was alive. The story of her death has gone viral. Cambridge Post's news website has a bunch of comments under an article written by Edie.

- *What a sicko nut-head. Pete should be shot.*
- *People like him should be locked up and never let out on the streets again.*

- *People like this freak Pete should be rounded up and put out of our misery!*

Rounded up? Like an animal on a farm, a fugitive in a Western? The comments make me sick. I sit back at my laptop for a snoop on the legal spy instrument that is Facebook and see that Kasha and I have several other mutual friends. OK so this may seem like some unrealistic plot point or peculiarly rainbow-unicorn-likely event, but we are living in the same [small] town, and Cambridge is not in any way unusual in that everyone is connected to everyone by some degree far less than nine, and that means everyone knows everyone else's business, so yes. I have mutual friends with *The Dead Girl*.

There's Pete of course. His timeline hadn't much activity. Apart from a status update of a sad face this morning and a shared blog post about some archaeological finds in a village 10 miles out of town (Roman), he hadn't posted anything for months.

How come Kasha knew Pete?

I mean really. It's an unlikely pairing. Kasha was clearly some very cool and very talented young woman going places and Pete, kind and thoughtful and lovely though he is, well... isn't.

I look at a publicity photo of Daisy's Café I printed off earlier. I found it on the website and shows its Americana themed glory in full effect at dusk. All smooth edges, chrome and neon. The shiny chrome splashboard runs around the middle of the kitchen area. I think about how I last saw it, splattered in blood.

I open the video stream app and check in with riverboy24.

Then it hits me.

Riverboy24.

Pete Rivers.

PETE.

OMG and he's streaming another video now!

Same spot.

This time he props his phone on a wall or lamppost of somewhere and walks into frame.

He walks towards the memorial pile where I can see more flowers, more notes, letters and gifts have been left. He's wearing the baseball jacket and cap dad gave him two Christmases ago. It's pulled low over his eyes and he seems uncertain. He stops, looks around and takes a few steps forward.

I hold my breath as he kneels on the pavement by Daisy's wreath. He reads her card, statue still for several minutes. I grab my digital SLR, photograph the screen and examine the image on the camera's LCD.

Then, he seems to remember why he's there. He pulls something out of his pocket, cupping it secretively between his hands, sharing a moment with what's inside. I crane to see what it is, but the camera angle won't allow. A siren wails somewhere off-screen. The city carries on around him. He glances at his watch nervously and seeing no one about except the policewoman, whose back is still turned, Pete carefully puts whatever it is he's holding on the pile of gifts and pauses.

He looks like he's about to leave. He can't leave!

I call his number. A few moments later his phone rings. I can hear it through the live stream. 'Answer it, Pete, c'mon.'

Pete looks over at his phone. Towards me. He walks over and peers into the screen. He doesn't recognise the number but then he wouldn't, would he? This is a new phone, a new number. I ring off and text him:

- Pete, it's Taylor. I've got a new phone. I'd need to talk to you. Can you call me? Or answer. I'll try you again. X

I press send and call again. He opens the text and as he's reading my call comes through. He's surprised. Confused.

'C'mon Pete. C'mon.'

For a moment, it looks like he's going to answer me, but he changes his mind.

'C'mon...' I urge, desperately wanting to speak to him. If only I can explain, tell him I'm on his side. That whatever's happened we can put it right...everything will be alright.

But no.

He rejects my call, puts the phone back in his pocket and makes to leave.

'No!!' I rush downstairs, calling him repeatedly. Yanking on my worn Vans, grabbing a coat and charging through the living room, past Mum on the phone to Ida.

'Back soon.' I call out, slamming the kitchen door and run to my bike locked in the side return.

I rush out the side gate, pushing my bike in one hand, calling Pete with my phone in the other when mum appears in the front garden waving a high vis cycling cape.

'Really?'

'It's going to rain.' Mum pulls the cape over my head. 'What's the hurry?'

'I've found Pete.' I leave her, mouth open, full of questions and pedal off full pelt.

Mum was right: large wet drops begin to fall before I'm at the end of the road. I slam over speed bumps, dodge a cat and skip a red light, cycling like a crazy woman with the fluorescent yellow cape billowing behind me.

I have one thought in my head: *I've got to get there before he leaves!*

Eight minutes later, completely out of breath, legs throbbing, I turn the corner to the industrial estate to see the memorial up ahead. Piles of sodden flowers, cards and candles tumble over the curb, beyond the barriers. There's the policeman—and a green-haired girl with a blonde boy pinning a photograph to a bunch of flowers

But. No. Pete.

Panting I look around at the routes Pete could have gone. I try to think which is the most likely and head off towards the main road. I look up and down. Nothing.

I look over the other way, to the club by the railway track.

Nothing.

Shit.

I turn back to find what he left. Space at the memorial is premium and respect waning as old offerings are pushed aside for new. The rain continues, smudging handwritten notes, adding a visual pathos to what's written there.

I take a few photos with my mobile but stop suddenly, feeling self-conscious.

Then I see what Pete left behind.

A small cabin made of Lego, ten centimetres wide, twelve centimetres high and fifteen centimetres long. It has a yellow door and blue-framed windows. I recognise his handwriting straight away, on the handmade card attached to the toy with wrinkled sticky tape. I read, sheltering it from the rain.

Here's a place for you to rest now forever. Your new home. Where-ever you are.

No more running. No more pretending. I'd never hurt you, Kasha. You know that. Thank you for believing me.

I love you and will never forget you for as long as I live. P x

His handwriting's childlike but careful, with his distinctive curly Ys, and full circle dots on the I. Your new home. What does that mean? Only a borrower could live in this house.

No more running? No more pretending? What does that mean?

I focus on what I do know. This is exactly the kind of thing Pete would do. Not kill someone.

I check around, lean over and slip the cabin with the note under my cape.

Rhid calls. 'I just spoke to Helen. She said you've found Pete.'

'I did. Lost him. He was at Kasha's memorial.'

'Where are you?'

'At the memorial. I saw him on the video stream app you showed me earlier.'

Riverboy24 is him. I tried calling but he didn't pick up. He was placing a gift for Kasha.'

Silence.

'Odd thing to do if he's hiding out. Very public.'

'Not if you've got to put something on a memorial for someone you were sweet on.'

Not if you've got nothing to hide. Not if you're Pete.'

Silence.

'And not if you want to be found. Moon in 10?' Rhid suggests our favourite meet point—and to be honest, there's no-where I'd rather be.

The Moon and Compass is our local. It's basic, student friendly and Rhid and I have been drinking here since we were sixteen. Hugh the landlord never lets a dodgy looking ID get in the way of a sale. I'm first to arrive and get the drinks in, a pint of cider for me, a Guinness for Rhid. Hugh pours the drinks as the local TV news rolls headlines on the TV behind the bar. 'Looks like they know who it is then—the bloke who killed that girl over at the Light Park.'

'No, they don't.' Typical. Why do people always assume the police have it right?

'They've identified a suspect.' I remind him.

Hugh let the Guinness settle and start pulling my pint. 'Terrifying, to have a nut-job like that on the loose.'

Ok so Pete has some quirky habits but he's not a nut-job. 'You seem very convinced it's him.'

'They've got CCTV and matched his prints, haven't they?'

'There could be tons of reasons why he was there. It's a public place.'

'You seen the latest online?' I pull the blank face. 'They say he had a bad crush on her, the dead girl, that was unrequited.' He puts my cider on the bar and moves over to finish the Guinness. 'People want justice.'

'You don't know it was him.' I insist.

'No smoke without fire and besides, all I'm saying, and he's got a history of violence.'

'What do you mean?'

'He beat up some poor disabled guy a month or so back apparently, put him in A & E. Got sectioned.'

'He's got a learning disability you know.'

'Mental issues. Exactly. Friends of the dead girl have started an online campaign to find him. People will find him if the police don't.'

All the more reason why I have to find him first.

Rhid arrives as I'm carrying our drinks to the table. 'I can't believe how quickly this has grown into a witch-hunt. We have to find him before anyone else.'

We sip our drinks in silence like two old men, while Rhid pulls up the riverboy24 video on the video stream app. 'BTW. Did you see the feedback on the ode? I'm a hit. Everyone loves the piece on the bridge too—both of, The Mighty Rhid's offerings have gone down very well.'

'Great. That's great, Rhid. Really. Listen, 'I've been thinking about a few places Pete might have gone, places we used to hang out when we used to... hang out. Coming?'

Rhid looks at his watch. 'It's quite late, nearly 10.'

'Ok, so we'll have to hit the museum, cinema and cafe tomorrow, first thing. But we can swing past by the lock on the way home.'

I browse through Pete's Facebook history with Kasha. Simple posts: comments about the weather, observations on the changing seasons, a recipe for peanut butter fudge. Nice stuff. Helpful. Funny. Then I notice an album called Special Places in Pete's photos. I click through a slew of holiday homes, small bungalows, wooden houses, beach huts, converted barns, windmills all sorts of appealing hideaways.

They remind me of something. I pull up the photo of Pete's Lego landscape and run through the photos again. There's the beach hut, the cabin, etc.... the waterfall, the stretch of coast with the large limestone escarpment. Then I see a photo of a red pinewood log cabin in a tall fir forest. It has a bright yellow door and blue-framed windows—just like the Lego cabin in my pocket, under the picture Pete has written:

This is perfect!

Someone called Riley Ray has posted a comment.

Super-gorgeous!! Let's live there!!

'Look.' I show Rhid the photo and pull the Lego cabin from my pocket. I place it on the table next to the photo.

'What's that?'

'Pete left it at the memorial.'

'And you took it?!' Rhid looks at me like I've swiped his nan's pension or something.

I show him the note. We look down at the cabin and back at the photo. 'It's identical.' I return to Pete's Facebook page. 'I wonder who this Riley girl is?'

Rhid drains the last of his Guinness. 'You're really embracing this detective business, aren't you?'

'I want to find out what *really* happened to Kasha, don't you? And I have to find more about who she was before I can do that.'

I send the Riley girl a friend request with a message:

Hi, you don't know me but I'm a friend of Pete Rivers and I met Kasha Stone just before she was killed. And I was the one who found her dead. I'd like to know more about her. Are you a friend? Is there any chance you could tell me a bit more about her or could we meet?

It's a long shot but a good detective should follow every lead.

I sit back in silence. 'It's unlike Pete to disappear. Pete likes his life to run like clockwork. He likes his breakfast at 7, his lunch at 1 and his tea at 6. Snack at 4. He only

wears navy socks and black shoes and always walks towards oncoming traffic, even when he's on the pavement. He doesn't like not knowing what's coming next. He doesn't like that at all.'

Chapter seventeen | where is Pete?

Monday. Three days after Kasha's death.

First thing the next day I check if there's a reply from Riley.

Nothing.

So, I pull on a tee – seek and ye shall find (possibly) – skinny black jeans and select my silver DMs from the cupboard, reaching past the bag with Kasha's handprint.

Downstairs the kitchen is empty except for Bo asleep in his basket so I fill a thermos full of coffee, pack two rounds of peanut butter sandwiches into a clip box and leave a note on the table for mum.

I decide to begin my search at the wildlife reserve by the football ground via the newly built bridge on the edge of town. It's a bright day in early summer. White fluffy clouds dotted across a blue sky promising lazy warmer days ahead. Here the river slows past sprawling low-cost housing, stretched out across a grassy flood plain. I cycle past these houses and long bull rushes, avoiding steaming cowpats left by free-roaming cattle, and on through fields filled with buttercups. For a few moments, I forget all the difficulties of the past few days. I'm absorbed by immaculately engineered, tiny gossamer dandelion parachutes floating precious seed cargo across my path. I cycle on around to the back of the football ground and peer through the fence. Empty terraces stacked up high, a boarded-up kiosk but I can't see much else. I try the gates but they're locked.

Pete loves this time of year. He often spends hours in the city's parks walking and sitting, taking in the sights and sounds. Lying on sun-dappled grass or spotting ducks and other river life, noting it all down in his book. I joined him for a while last summer, despite everything. He knew I felt guilty about not stopping Cyd lock him in the locker and although he didn't know whether he should forgive me or not he didn't know how to tell me to go away either. So, we hung out.

That was before I had the idea for the anti-bullying website and the video that went viral, and everyone thought I was a hypocrite.

I lap the park, keeping my eyes peeled especially by the bushy hedges bordering the common where people sometimes camp out although there are signs saying you're not supposed to. I follow the river down to the railway where the city boundary ends, and the countryside stretches out. I look behind the large crumbling willow we had a picnic last summer and behind the boathouse where he hid for 24 hours after Cyd did her worse.

But no Pete.

I think back to what Ida said about Pete's interest in the Roman Antiquities and decide to check the museum. The Fitzwilliam Museum is a grand building built in the classical style, a mini-British Museum housing a huge collection of valuable and rare artefacts from all over the world. I park my bike, step up into the towering colonnaded entrance and wonder where to start my search when I see a sign saying CLOSED.

It's Monday. Of course, it's closed.

Next up, the art cinema, but that won't open until 12 so I pop to St George's Church cafe near the market, which is filling up with breakfast trade. I order a cappuccino and speak to the woman standing aimlessly by the till in a brown apron and scraggy bleach hair. 'Oh, I know him. Jacket potato, cheese, beans, Diet Coke. Here every Tuesday.'

‘Can you remember when he was last here?’

She looks at me suspiciously, “You a relative? Friend?”

‘Friend. He’s missing. His Nan and I are extremely worried.’

She opens up. ‘Not seen him for a couple of weeks thinking about it.’ It seems she hasn’t heard about the murder. I leave my number and ask her to call if he shows up.

I ask around in two more cafes further along the same street, the central library and by then the arts cinema is open for business.

‘Any luck finding Pete?’ Rhid’s cleaning out the coffee machine when I get there.

I shake my head. ‘I tried the cafes and library- the museum’s closed Mondays of course so I’ll try that tomorrow.’ Rhid sets a glass of iced water on the counter for me, my usual, and I sit at the bar watching him work. ‘Would you say Kasha was a player?’

‘No. Not like Cyd but she wanted in with the right crowd.’

‘So, she was hanging around with you...why?’ I can’t resist.

‘So, kind. Anyway, we didn’t hang. Once Cyd got her claws in access was pretty limited.’

‘Unsurprising.’

‘She was ambitious. That’s for sure. Serious about her music. She wanted to make that happen for herself, more than anything I’d say.’

‘You said before that you thought Cyd and her had some connection – some secret? What made you say that?’

Rhid gives his answer some thought. ‘As I said before, it was like something else was going on. Something only they knew.’

‘That tied in with the content of that deleted post. Perhaps it was something Cyd didn’t want anyone to know about. Something else in those deleted posts. Wish we could see. Did Hench call yet?’

Rhid shakes his head. ‘Cyd’s asked me to recite my ode at the Memorial Service on Saturday.’

‘Service?’

‘Yes. On Saturday. I’ve never addressed the public before. Coach me?’

‘Coach you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You’re kidding?’ I look up. ‘You’re not.’

‘Please.’

I think a moment. ‘Just keep it slow and look up—and believe what you’re saying. You can get away with saying anything so long as it’s delivered with conviction.’

‘Tay that’s exactly why I asked you. You know about this stuff.’

‘Only because I watch and listen to people.’

Suddenly someone jumps me from behind. ‘OMG! Taylor? It’s been a time! How’re things?’ A girl with long brown hair and bright pink lips bounces on the stool beside me.

‘Shani.’ Yay. ‘Fancy seeing you here. Come to see something?’

‘I have.’ She beams. ‘I’ve come to see this chunk of hunk here.’ She gestures to Rhid who cowers like a puppy caught peeing on the best chair.

‘I’ve just been with the police. Mad. *Totally* mad! They asked me so many questions, my head...it’s spinning.’

‘Why did they want to speak to you?’ Shani looks at me like I’ve walked in from Mars.

‘We were flat-mates. And mates. Really good mates actually.’ Poor Kasha. ‘I just came back to all this. I’ve been away in Manchester – seeing Mum.’ She waves her arms about as if everything she says is exciting and important. ‘Bad for you Rhid mate, you were sweet on her, weren’t you?’

‘Not really...’ He mutters unconvincingly. ‘... a short-lived chemical crush...a few months ago...that’s all.’ He tries to brush it off.

WTF?! I shoot Rhid a look of horror. He shakes his head vigorously, in denial.

‘And you guys found her. OMG.’ Shani is still for a moment. ‘Sounds like she was in a real mess.’

Silence.

‘What was Kasha like?’ I ask, breaking the silence.

‘That’s just what the boys in blue were asking.’ She’s enjoying being the Kasha expert. ‘She was lovely, good fun, a real laugh. Did her share of the cleaning and shopping and cooking, and all that. A good flatmate.’

‘How did you two, meet?’

‘Cyd brought her to a leaving party for my flatmate Flick when she moved to London. Got a job working as some PR assistant—lots of parties and perks, lucky bitch. Anyway, I needed a new flatmate. Kasha needed a place to stay.’

‘What else did you tell the police?’

‘That she didn’t talk much about her life before—except to say both her parents died when she was very young. She was brought up by her grandma apparently and she also died—last year. I told the police all this but of course, they already knew.’

‘Kasha’s parents are dead?’ I think back to my conversation with her that night she died. I’m sure she referred to her dad in the present- when she said they were big Ella Fitzgerald fans.

‘That’s what she said.’ Shani sips her coffee. ‘We went out a lot, the three of us.’

‘You, Kasha and Cyd?’

‘Yeah! We had the best times. Kash was a real laugh. Loved a party.’

‘You told them quite a bit by the sound of it.’

‘Not everything.’ Shani raises an eyebrow.

‘What do you mean?’ She makes them sweat while she sips of her coffee. Putting the cup down she looks around, leans in and whispers. ‘I found a used pregnancy test in the bathroom.’ Rhid shifts uneasily. Did he feel more for Kasha than he’s admitting?

‘Go on.’ I prompt.

‘She’d wrapped it in tissue and hid it at the bottom of the bin. But I saw.’

‘Could have been a friend’s or anyone’s – your flat’s busier than a... meme with a Trump speech.’ Rhid offers.

Shani’s convinced though and shakes her head. ‘It was hers. I had had my suspicions. When you live with a girl you get to know their cycle right, and she was overdue.’

‘You knew her period timetable?’ Rhid pulls a face.

‘You get in sync when you live together – it’s a girl thing.’

He looks at me.

‘Yes, it happens.’ I confirm. ‘Apparently, I never experience it first-hand have to say....’

‘Girls are another species,’ Rhid declares.

‘What did it say?’ I try to keep Shani on track.

Ever the performer, Shani looks left then right, then straight at us. ‘Positive.’

Rhid turns pale. I mean pale. A terrifying thought flashes through my mind. I stare at him. Please tell me it's not yours?

He pulls a very definitive no way face.

Phew. That's one more level of emotional complication I can do without.

'Who was she seeing?' Shani looks meaningfully at Rhid,

'No one as far as I knew. Not then anyway.'

'Recently?'

She shrugs. 'It wasn't just that she was late – she'd changed. The past few weeks she was moody. Quiet. Didn't go out. Spent a lot of time online. I mean A. LOT.'

Interesting. 'Why?'

'Search me. Hormonal maybe?' Shani keeps adjusting her hair and looking over to Rhid.

'When did you find the test?' I'm not convinced about this story.

'Early on Friday evening just as I was getting ready to go and visit Mum. She must've left it in the bin after she'd gone to work. It wasn't there earlier because I emptied it the night before.'

'Did you tell the police?'

Shani shakes her head.

'Why not?' Rhid asks my next question.

'Didn't want them to start asking questions about her love life. I mean they'll find out soon enough anyway if they don't know already right? With the autopsy and everything. They'll see.'

Shani leans in further. 'I kept it safe though.'

Rhid pulls a face. 'What?'

‘The test.’

‘You kept it?’

She shrugs. ‘Never know when you might need something like that.’

Now that’s thinking ahead. That’s thinking like Cyd. Arming yourself with information that can be used against someone later if needed.

I wonder about the real reasons Shani didn’t mention this vital bit of information to the police and what she might be trying to hide.

Of Kasha did find out she was pregnant that night—just before she was killed—it went some way to explaining why she was so upset.

It’d explain that desperate post.

It might also explain why someone would want to delete them.

Rhid’s manager just walked in so he’s back restocking the fridge. I text him.

- *Get yourself over to Shani’s and send me a photo of that pregnancy test. I want to know if she’s telling the truth.*
- *How am I supposed to do that?!!*
- *Romance bro.*
- *[scream emoji] You pimping me out?*
- *If you want to put it like that. Yes xxx*
- *Is nothing sacred?*
- *No Rhid. Nothing’s been sacred for a long time. Didn’t you get the memo?*

Chapter eighteen | a strong impression

Monday afternoon.

From my position on the landing, I can see mum busy in her studio. I watch her for a few moments before returning to my bedroom I lock the bedroom door and pull my yellow satchel with the black bag inside onto my bed. I unfastened the buckles and pull the bag out carefully, undoing the knot. The contents are relatively undisturbed. If anyone else were to look inside they'd see was a bag of white bread going stale, bagged and ready to bin—a few crusts put aside to feed the ducks. But this is much more than that to me.

I hold the mound of bread towards the light and examine what Kasha left behind. The imprint is faint, the outline broken, but I can still see the impression left by her right hand. A private moment in the death of Kasha Ray.

I rest it on my left hand and hold my right over the soft, compacted dough. Our hands are a similar size. Were a similar size. I place it on some paper on the radiator, covering it with an old cotton scarf. That should dry it out nicely. Keep off the mould.

Back on the landing, I look down again at mum in her studio. I think about what she said earlier, about wanting to make a cast of me and a plan begins to take shape in my mind.

This time when I enter the studio I make sure not to push the door too hard. In fact, I hardly make a sound. The first thing I notice is one of the fluorescent tubes is broken meaning

the large space is only half-lit making it feel colder. Mum's moved all her stuff over by the sink where the light is best.

'Any luck finding Pete?' She lifts her head from her work as I enter. She's moved the gas heater too and the side of her face is highlighted with an orange glow.

I shake my head.

'I saw the police want to talk to him.'

'Someone's making it look like he killed Kasha.'

Mum pulls on a pair of heavy-duty black rubber gloves. 'They have his fingerprints at Daisy's apparently and CCTV of him near Daisy's that night.'

'They have my fingerprints all over that place too and I'll sure to be on the CCTV. Does that make me a suspect?' I look at the now finished casts of Larry Frank's hands.

'You've seen a horrible thing, Tay. It's a shock.' Mum smooths off a corner she's been working on, sits up and straightens her back

I position myself out of the light. My arms are getting that tingly feeling again. 'Why did I find her?' I ask touching the tips of my fingers into some soft pink gel in a nearby tub. It feels cold and soft. The question suddenly hits me making me want to disappear. Perhaps I could submerge myself in this pink goo. Totally immerse and disappear.

'Kasha's probably asking why me too.' Mum adds.

I slowly pull my finger out and look for something to wipe them on. 'Do you think things happen for a reason?'

'I don't know.' Mum hands me a rag. 'Possibly'.

‘Possibly’. I won’t get any sugar-coating from mum. Life’s always just life with mum. No frills, no false dreams, no impossible promises. I’m disappointed though. Once in a blue moon I’d like some of the jazz hands optimism I see other mothers shower on their offspring. Some might just simply call it positivity.

Mum smooths the base of Larry Frank’s hands for a few moments before turning away to the sink. Her plaster-covered hands held aloft, like a surgeon interrupted mid-operation. I can see she wants to say more. She’d like to but can’t. Not without lying to herself or me.

Mum examines the details of the outer epidermis markings of Larry’s hands. The crisscrossed lines and indentations where Larry’s tiny hair follicles no longer grow. Like the less subtle marks in the bread with Kasha’s handprint these are evidence of hands that no longer holds, no longer touches, no longer feels.

Beep, Beep.

A text from Edie.

- *Interview tomorrow morning?*

I’m still unsure what this interview will achieve. I leave the text unanswered.

‘Thought any more about letting me make a cast of you?’ Mum asks.

‘You know what?’ I stand up. ‘I have. And yes.’

‘Really?’ Mum’s ridiculously excited. Her whole face is suddenly illuminated. She can barely contain herself. She stops what she’s doing and dances about like a flamingo on hot stones. ‘You’ve got a deal honey bun!’

I am forced to high five.

‘What part of you shall we cast?’

I know exactly which part. 'My right hand.'

'This is wonderful!' She continues, trying to calm down. 'Finally, you're taking an interest in your mother's work.' She shoots me an I-know-I'm-winding-you-up smile.

'Now?'

'Now.'

Mum lays out the materials she needs on the bench by the sink. A bag of alginate, some slightly warm water in a glass mixing bowl, a paper container tall enough to surround my hand, an old hand whisk, a measuring jug, plaster of Paris, a plastic bowl, rags and paper towels. While she mixes the alginate, I sit on the stool and think about how I should hold my hand for the pose. I think back to the position of Kasha's hand in the bread and visualize how it would look cast. It's hard to transform the negative imprint into a positive cast-shape in my mind, but I do. Somehow, I know how mine needs to be.

Once the alginate is mixed, mum pours it into a cylindrical paper container leaving a five-centimetre gap from the top to allow for the rise in level as her hand goes in. She slides off the stool and knocks the edge of the bench. The alginate moves like thick paint and tiny circular waves rippled out. They contract to a point at the centre and vanish.

'Do you miss Dad?' I practice the pose, holding up my hand.

'Of course. Sometimes.' She holds my hand steady. 'Ready?' I nod. 'Lower your hand in slowly, until your fingertips reach the bottom, then back up about a centimetre. Be careful not to touch the sides.' She watches carefully as I follow her instructions. 'I miss his warmth, his humour, his sense of clear purpose and action.'

‘How did you find out about all this?’ I nod to my hand, or rather; the end of my arm that now appears abruptly amputated in the pink milk-jelly-like goo.

‘I saw a pamphlet.’

‘Where?’

‘At the funeral directors. Making arrangements for Gran’s funeral.’ Mum examines the container to make sure it’s not leaking.

‘How much longer do I stay like this?’

Mum nudges the can. It doesn’t ripple this time. Just a slow wobble. ‘Not long now. Just a few more minutes.’

‘I wish I knew a way to help Pete.’

Mum pauses a moment before answering. I know she doesn’t want me anymore involved in this than I already am. ‘Why not do that interview with Edie? Set the record straight about the kind of person Pete is.’

I look at Mum and then at Edie’s text from earlier. Perhaps it is time to talk.

Chapter nineteen | being the news

Tuesday.

Edie's suggested we record the interview by Kasha's memorial, so with butterflies taking over my belly, I cycle over. As I'm locking my bike she arrives with a heavy-set bearded man and a camera.

'Hi, Taylor. Good to see you. Thanks for agreeing to do this.'

'No problem.' We shake hands.

'This is Artie.' Artie looks up briefly from setting the camera on a tripod as Rhid whizzes in.

'I've asked Rhidian to join. Hope that's OK.' I say watching him dump his bike

Edie recalibrates, extending her hand to Rhid. 'Sure. Great to have you along.'

'Thanks for agreeing to this. Our viewers will be fascinated. You're the only eyewitnesses. Quite something.' Artie props a reflector board into position.

'Ready?' Edie asks.

I take a deep breath and involuntarily adjust my hair.

'You should know there's potential for follow-ups in a few months if you're interested. How the experience has affected your life, how you've moved on, etc.' I pull a face. 'Only if you're interested.' She reassures.

Artie hands Edie a microphone and looks overhead, scouting for planes and other interruptions.

'1, 2, 1, 2...' Edie tests the mic. Artie nods that he's hearing her and presses record.

'Edie Conway interview with Taylor Millar and Rhidian Smith on the Kasha Stone murder.' She pauses, composing herself for the camera. 'Police have released no more information about the tragic murder of talented teen Kasha Stone last Friday. Little is known about the background of the victim who despite being popular revealed little about her life before Cambridge to her friends. I have with me today the two people who found her ...' She turns to us, 'Rhidian Smith and Taylor Millar. If I can start with you Taylor: Am I right in saying you found the victim?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Could you describe that moment for us? In your own words.'

'It has to be my own words I don't have anyone else's.' I try not to sound too sarcastic. Edie smiles patiently. 'We'd been out, at a party out of town and dropped by Daisy's for a bite to eat on our way home.'

'And that's when you found her.'

'No. That's was when I picked up some food and accidentally left my phone, on the counter. When we went back to get it- 15 minutes later- that's when we...I... found her.'

'Did you speak to her when you ordered your food?'

'A bit.'

'What did you talk about?'

'Not much. Chit chat about the night.'

'How did Kasha seem then?'

'Pretty normal, I guess. Bored.' I wonder whether I should say anything about how worried she looked or the message that upset her. 'Although...'

'...what?'

'...she did seem a bit worried about something...after a text she got while I was there.'

'Do you know what it said?'

'She said it was boy trouble.'

'Was it?'

I shrug. 'Don't know.'

'Do you have any idea who might have done this?'

'Of course, I don't. I only met the girl 15 minutes before she was killed.'

'Some random evil psychopath.' Rhid adds angrily.

'Random?' Edie doesn't think so. 'Kasha was very popular, especially popular with the boys.' She looks at Rhid who can't help but look embarrassed then Edie takes a breath. As if getting to the real purpose of the interview, she turns back to me. 'This man Pete Rivers the police are after...he's a friend of yours?'

'What?'

'Is it true that you are a friend of the chief and only suspect, Pete Rivers?'

What? What did she say? 'Hold on. I am not... I mean I am his friend...but...'

'But you... fell out? Your anti-bullying blog People Like Us—nice project by the way—seems to attempt to re-addresses an incident of bullying against Pete you were involved in, from what I understand?'

I don't know what to say. There is a long pause while I try to figure it out. 'It's complicated.' I look at Rhid. 'Really complicated.' Is all I can say. Then, 'We were at school together yes. School friendships, cliques, hormones...as I'm sure you remember...are complicated. He's a good person. Special.' I instantly regret using that word.

'I heard that.' She pauses briefly referring to a note on her Ipad. 'Learning disabled with mild OCD.'

‘That’s not what I mean.’ She’s done her homework. ‘I mean that he is kind and compassionate and absolutely incapable of doing what I saw.’

I look to Rhid for help. ‘Pete is not a suspect by the way.’ He corrects Edie. ‘The police are looking for him because he’s missing and vulnerable.’

‘Sure. But he went missing on Friday, right? The same night Kasha was killed.’ She’s twisting everything. ‘And he had a big crush on her. Quite a public one, by all accounts.’

Whose accounts? Who’s she been talking too and where’s she going with this? This is what journalists do, right? Charm you into a false sense of security, then ask you questions you don’t want to answer.

‘That doesn’t mean he has anything to do with this!’

‘Of course not, but unrequited love is a powerful thing. History, art, literature is full of it.’

‘Sure, but that’s not Pete... he...’

‘Had a bit of a thing for you once didn’t he Taylor?’

What?! How did she know that?! ‘Back in school?’ Edie presses.

‘Ok. No way. This interview ends here.’ I’m beyond furious. How the hell dare she...?! I’m turning to leave as Rhid takes the mic and speaks.

‘Look. I’m not sure what agenda you have here, but we agreed to this interview to talk about Kasha.’ Rhid gently pulls me around. I’m fuming and want to get the hell out of there but Rhid is taking control. ‘We want to jog someone’s memory about that night.’ He looks at me, hoping I’ll follow him, take the interview in the direction we want. ‘I remember a bit about who was around. There were a couple of bouncers at the club and a couple of clubbers who haven’t stepped forward yet. I’m giving you a chance to do that now. Go down to the police station and tell them what you know. If you saw anything that might help. Please.’ He

looks at me. I manage a weak smile, though I feel more than that inside. I am proud of him. Really proud.

‘Also, Pete River’s is a vulnerable young adult,’ I add, ‘...he’s missing, and we need to find him. So, any if you know anything about where he is then come forward too. That’s what we need to focus on.’

Rhid gives Edie a look I’ve not seen before saying firmly, ‘That’s all we’ve got to say.’

‘Ok. So, there you have it: A BBC Cambridgeshire exclusive. Any witnesses that haven’t come forward or anyone else who has any information about that night or the whereabouts of Pete Rivers should contact Cambridgeshire Constabulary as soon as possible.’

Chapter twenty | in which I ask some difficult questions and make

Rhid and Lo ride along too

After the interview, we head over to The Hub to meet Lola for a debrief. There's a long cue tailing back from the service area, so we grab drinks from the machines and take a seat by the window.

'Well, that was terrible.'

We catch Lola up to speed and slump down.

'So, what's next?' She asks like I have all the answers, which BTW I don't.

We sit in silence. 'Maybe we should start asking some difficult questions of our own.'

'What do you mean?' Lola's excited.

'Like why is everyone so obsessed with pinning all this on Pete? Who else was in Kasha's life?' Suddenly I have an idea, born out of desperation maybe but some good ideas are born that way.

'Stream this.' I scroll through my photos to the picture I took of Ida's most recent photograph of Pete, all happy at the garden centre. 'Time to put our own position out there.' I hold the photograph facing Rhid and sit up. 'Ready?'

Rhid, confused but compliant, holds up his phone.

'Recording.'

I begin.

‘This is Pete. He’s a happy, clever, funny warm person who will be feeling extremely bad about things right now. He had a bit of a crush on Kasha but that doesn’t make him a pervert or a murderer. It makes him a normal teenage boy. He doesn’t always know how to behave in a way to make people accept him or even like him. Which also makes him a normal teenage boy, or girl for that matter, and that’s our problem, not his.’

I pause. What else should I say?

Rhid winks some encouragement and I find a second wind.

‘We need to accept people the way they are. Just because Pete doesn’t always respond to things in the way society says he should or behaved in a way we think is acceptable doesn’t make him a bad person. Perhaps if we gave people a bit more space to be themselves and not try and fit in with everyone else then maybe the world would be a better place for everyone.’

I nod for Rhid to cut.

‘Good job sister.’ Lola high-10s me again.

‘What shall we do with it?’

‘Share it. Share it everywhere.’

So, that’s what we do.

After about 15 minutes of sharing Aunt Viv’s Skype face, pop’s up on my screen.

‘Should I go?’ Rhid asks.

I look at him undecided then answer with my shiny happy voice.

- *Hi Aunt Viv!*

'I'll go and chat to Duna.' Rhid whispers, spotting him by the recycling bins stroking his shaved leopard printed head. A fresher's week dare that's stuck.

- *Hi Tay? How're things?* I turn back to my phone.
- *I'm OK.*
- She nods. Good.
- I hesitate, not sure how to continue. *Well, not great actually... do you remember Pete?*
- *Of course.*
- *Well, he's missing. The police think he killed Kasha.*

Beat.

- *That's ridiculous.*
- *He had a bit of a thing for her apparently, got jealous of the time she was spending with...get this—Cyd.*
- *She was friends with Cyd?*
- *Besties. Can you believe it? She's fronting a campaign to find Kasha's killer and managing her memorial site...*
- *Blimey.*
- *I think there's something fishy going on.*
- *Like what?*
- *I don't know but I intend to find out.*
- Aunt Viv goes all quiet and serious. *Don't do anything stupid Taylor.*

- *I won't.*
- *Have you decided about that internship yet? Didn't you need to let them know around now?*
- *Next Monday.*
- *What're you going to say?*
- *I still haven't decided. Mum wants me to stay here.*
- *She's worried about you.*
- *But the worst thing that ever happened to me, happened right here. On*

my home doorstep.

There's an awkward silence. I can see how worried they are, but I don't know how to help them with that. I'm worried about myself too, but I have to do something. I need to help Pete. I have to find out who killed Kasha.

Well, look, I need to go.

- *Me too.*

Beat.

- *Speak soon ok.*
- *Yes.*
- *Look after yourself. You know you're my number one niece, right?*

I smile. I do.

Rhid arrives, phone outstretched, 'Responses to the video are coming in fast.'

'Already?' I read the screen.

- *Can't believe he's been named a suspect! What are the police thinking!*
- *Just because he behaves and looks a little different people think they can use him as a scapegoat. Has no one heard of neurodiversity? It's not right to treat him that way.*
- *No smoke without fire.*
- *Police have evidence. He's not just being scapegoated cause he looks funny.*

Chapter twenty-one | archaeological evidence

Tuesday, 2 pm.

Outside the sky is blue, cold and bright. It's time to reboot my search for Pete at the museum. My video is gaining some nice coverage, but I need to stay active. I cycle fast swerving around traffic and skipping lights passing under trees heavy with blossom snowing down on busy streets filling with tourists ahead of peak season. I turn the corner from Downing to Fitzwilliam Street and the large classical façade of the museum looms into view. Cutting across in front of a catering lorry I lock my bike to the railings and head for the large Roman and Greek Antiquity department in the basement. It's the part of the museum I know least, but if Pete's seeking solace anywhere or just plain hiding out, it might well be here. I need to find him, before the police and before anyone. God know what could happen if I don't.

I take the steps down to the basement and walk down the ramp into a low-ceiling, spotlit exhibition space. The rooms are quiet and warm and empty of visitors. The walls are painted warm terracotta and lined with glass cabinets of various sizes. The one nearest contains a beautifully wrought gold wrist cuff supported on a clear plastic stand lit from above. It's exquisite. The soft carved metal looks warm and soft I imagine what it would feel like to wear such a thing. How it would feel next to my skin. On one side of the main small gallery, smooth white marble busts of young men line the wall. One has a missing arm, another a broken nose. On the other side, a block of white marble tells scenes of battle and Roman life as fresh as if they've been carved yesterday. A mosaic on the opposite wall grabs

my attention. It's been painstakingly reconstructed, the faded earth tones and elaborate outlines of birds, trees and people are delicately spotlighted from above. It's as if time itself has been reconstructed. Frozen and mended.

If only real-life could be rescued like this.

A party of excited school children suddenly swarm in, carrying clipboards. They tumble into the gallery chatting and laughing as their teacher ushers them over to where I'm standing, and I'm forced to step aside. The teacher mumbles an apology before settling everyone quickly and beginning her talk. I never liked History at school, too many numbers and names to remember, but I like stories, so I listen closely as the teacher describes the history of mosaics in general, then the story of this one. She went into detail, pointing out the various flora, fauna and people illustrated and explains their significance. When she's finished, the children fill in the fact sheets on their clipboards, based on the information the teacher just gave them and from the interpretation boards around the gallery. I sneak a look over the shoulder of a nearby child and sees that the task is framed as questions in a criminal investigation:

A horrible crime has taken place! It's up to you to find out whodunnit! Take the first letter of the correct answers to the following five questions, unearth the mystery and solve the crime!

Unearth the mystery and solve the crime.

Exactly.

I walk through the rest of the museum peering around every nook and side gallery but find no Pete.

As I wander back to the main entrance something in Prehistoric Briton catches my eye. Inside a large glass display case is what appears to be a pile of dirt. Looking closer I see it's moulded into the shape of a man. The information board reads: 'Local Man Found in Sandpit c. 936'. He's curled in a foetal position; his head is twisted and stretched and reminds me of Munch's famous *Scream*. I can't take my eyes off him. In this strange, corroded form, these human remains used to be a living, breathing person. A mere accident of geology, climate and serendipity brought him here, to this moment in time, where thousands of years later, here I am gawping at him in a glass box.

I think of Kasha and the imprint I have in my wardrobe of her hand in the mushy bread dough. It's a pretty weird thing to do, as Rhid pointed out, but maybe it's my version of this ancient man in peat. My *archaeological evidence* of Kasha's life once lived.

Back in the grand entrance hall, wondering where to look next I see a young security guard staring at a wall of monitors in a glass-walled side room.

OMG.

'Dewey!' I poke my head inside the open office door. I know Dewey from school – real name Tom Helman but everyone calls him Dewey because he used to hang out with two dudes called Huey Smith and Louis James, and as in Disney's Donald Duck's cheeky nephews, the three of them had a reputation for making mischief. The last person, I'd expect to see in a uniform, though I can't say it looks altogether bad.

He swivels around and looks me up and down, 'Taylor Millar!'

Ignoring how uncomfortable that look makes me feel I take a step forward. 'How long have you been working here?'

'Third week. Still training.'

'Never thought I'd see you in a uniform.'

‘Real-life gets to us all in the end.’ He sighs.

Another, older guard sits behind a filing cabinet watching proceedings behind his paper. ‘I’m going on lunch.’ He leaves with a cheeky grin and a wink to Dewey, making no attempt to hide it from me.

A stack of six monitors flicks through different galleries every few seconds. The Antiquities gallery with the large mosaic pops up. ‘You remember Pete Rivers, don’t you?’

Dewey nods. ‘I think so. Aren’t the police looking for him in connection with that girl’s murder?’ The other guard chips in.

‘No. I mean yes...kind of but they’re not looking for him because of that but because he’s missing. Missing before the murder. His nan is really worried about him.’

Dewey narrows his eyes at Taylor. ‘Okaaaay.’

‘They’ve got it all wrong.’

‘Who?’

‘Everybody. The media. The police. There is no way he could have killed that girl.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘Because I know Pete.’

‘Oh yes, you two were friends before the whole Cyd-Pete-locker thing, weren’t you? I remember. That was a new low high, even for Cyd.’

I nod.

‘And what about that video you made?’

‘Don’t. Pete’s not forgiven me.’

I suddenly feel my arms doing that numb thing again.

‘You alright? Here sit.’ Dewey pulls up a chair and gives her a bottle of water. ‘I thought that video was brave. Took balls for sure.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You found her, didn’t you? The murdered girl?’

I nod.

‘That’s a shitty thing to have to see.’ Dewey sits down beside me. His concern seems sincere and that surprises me.

‘You haven’t seen him about, have you?’ I feel better when I’m focusing on finding Pete. ‘Here at the museum maybe? Still looks the same- short dark hair, slightly podgy. He might be wearing an American football jacket. Washington Redskins if you know what that logo looks like?’ I pull the image up on my phone and show it to Dewey. ‘He’s into the Romans so he might have been down in the basement?’

Dewey pauses a moment and thinks again. ‘Red baseball cap and jacket?’

I nod.

He looks blank. This is a stupid idea. I’m just about to say goodbye when Dewey suddenly swings around and retrieves a DVD from a stack. ‘You know I think I might have seen someone answering that description.’ He ponders, using security-speak. ‘The jacket caught my eye. Follow a bit of baseball myself. Now... when was it?’

He opens a folder on the desktop marked ‘Sunday’. He opens another named ‘West Basement’ and starts fast-forwarding through the footage.

‘There!’ I shout as a blurry figure in a red jacket flitted by on-screen. Dewey slams pause, rewinds and soon we’re looking at Pete standing in front of the Roman mosaic. Exactly where I stood just a moment ago.

‘Well spotted.’ Dewey hits play. A steady stream of visitors’ drift by, pausing briefly at exhibits then moving on, their movements jerky and disjointed in the time-lapse of the CCTV. Pete is still, like the statues. Minutes pass. People pass, but he doesn’t move. He looks

shrunk and small despite his bulky frame. He points his finger, scanning the air in front of the mosaic, his lips moving.

‘He’s counting the tiles in the mosaics.’ I whisper. ‘Why’s he doing that?’

Nervous, Dewey looks at the door. ‘I shouldn’t be doing this.’

‘When is this?’

‘Sunday...’ He checks the timecode on the display. 16.06.’

‘What time does he leave?’ Dewey fast forwards and we watch Pete leave the gallery fifty minutes later at 16.56. Just before the museum shut at 5 pm. ‘Can we see where he went after that?’

Dewey pulls up footage from other the entrance cameras when the other guard returns. He quickly closes the folders.

‘My Mrs. certainly knows her cheese and pickle.’ The old guard announces as he packs his empty lunch box into his locker. There’s nothing anyone can say to that, so we just nod- relieved to have got away with what we have just done.

‘Well, I better not hold you up any longer.’ I stand. ‘Great to catch up. ‘We should meet up sometime. Maybe go for a drink?’

‘Yeah ok.’ Dewey looks awkward. I’m keen to see if that other footage holds any clues to where Pete went next.

‘Give me your mobile number then, stupid.’ I pass him my phone. The old guard gives Dewey another wink as Dewey taps his number into my contacts.

After a brief goodbye, I step out onto the colonnade and ponder my next move.

I text Dewey.

thanks for helping. text me if u see him again. it’s important. v important.

A few moments later a reply comes through.

will do.

Back at home, unable to think of anywhere else Pete might be, I find myself watching the 6 O'clock news and, specifically, my interview with Edie. She's cut the part describing what I said about Pete and added an interview with the man who Pete hit at the garden centre.

Pete doesn't come off too well.

'Stupid cow!' I scream at the TV and pull out my phone.

'What's wrong?' Mum walks in from the kitchen where she was watching from the doorway.

'That's not what we recorded. That Edie reporter bitch has made Pete seem like a complete freak. I'm going to tell her exactly what I think of her...'

'Don't call her now. Wait until you've calmed down a bit hey?'

'A text?'

'No. Give yourself some time to work out what you need to say.'

I let mum think I'm following her advice but can't help just a little text.

- *Just seen that 'interview' you butchered. You should be ashamed. Expect a call soon.*

I press send and wander out to the kitchen for a glass of water. My cast hand is on the table.

Mum follows in. 'So? What do you think?'

'It's strange seeing a part of you disembodied like that.' Mum considers my reaction. I peer closer. 'Apart from you but a part of you. Ha, ha.'

‘Turned out good.’ Mum’s pleased. ‘There’s still some finishing to do of course...but it’s nearly finished.’

I wonder if I can do anything nearly as good with Kasha’s handprint. I’ll need to be creative. I only have half of her hand – the palm and underside...But, you know, it could work.

‘Fancy something to eat? I was thinking of omelette?’ Mum starts rustling in the larder for ingredients.

‘No, I’m alright thanks. Had something earlier. I think I’m going for an early night.’

‘If you’re sure.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Good idea.’ She comes over and pulls me in for a hug. ‘Good night love.’

‘Night Mum.’

Upstairs I inspect Kasha’s imprint. What am I thinking? Can I make a cast from this?

I hold it up and place my hand in the indent made by Kasha’s, careful not to damage the shape she left behind.

My hand fills the space and I imagine her hand there. Perhaps I can make this work. I put the hardened bread down and check to see if I have a reply yet from Riley. No luck. I look at her page. Still no activity so I scroll through recent posts on Kasha’s memorial. I can’t see Riley’s name anywhere, although to be fair you won’t find mine either.

Riley and me. The only two people in the world—or at least in Kasha’s social network who haven’t posted anything.

Chapter twenty-two | the package

It's Wednesday. Five days since Kasha's death and I'm sprawled across my bed still in the clothes I wore yesterday. Beep, Beep. Two texts from Rhid sent one straight after the other. The first is a photo of a pregnancy test with a positive result clearly showing in the small blue window of a white plastic stick. The second is a pinned map of Walthamstow and the words:

- fancy a trip to London?

30 minutes later I'm on the M11 Southbound with Rhid staring hard at the road. I'm wearing a Truth is Out Their T-shirt, striped leggings, red DM's and have the address Rhid found marked on my Google maps. We're making good time.

'This was on Shani's laptop?' I scale out the map to find our blue location dot lurching towards our destination.

'She obviously didn't want anyone to know about it.'

'Perhaps this address has something to do with phone-woman?'

'Burning fossil fuel for that thought right now.' This squeezes the accelerator a pinch.

I readjust the map and think about what the connection could be. Following the line that is a road Kasha herself may have travelled. I feel strangely close to her as if she's with me now. Her eyes, mine. I imagine her planning her route. Seeing more than the yellow, blue and black lines with names in a grid, cross-referenced with coordinates. She'd have seen something, or someplace or someone she knew. Cared about maybe?

What did she expect to find at this pinned address? What will we?

‘So... how was your night?’ I turn my attention to more immediate questions.

Silence from Rhid.

‘...with Shani? Hey?’ I wink.

He’s silent. ‘A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.’

‘Yeah sure, but I’m asking you.’

‘Ha, ha.’

‘Really? Nothing?’

He shakes his head firmly and I leave it there.

It’s 2 o’clock by the time we pull off the motorway’s straightforward three-lane traffic system and merge with the no-rules multi-lanes of London traffic. We just about navigate the post-war suburbs around the North Circular, a jumble of dead-end suburban closes and maze-like, similar-looking housing estates, until we find the place.

Darwin House is a fifteen-storey tower block, one of a group of three with green and orange metal panels peeling between shabby windows. We pull up by some broken garages and battered AstroTurf football pitch littered in drink cans and smashed glass. We take the grubby, urine smelling lift eleven storeys to Flat 1103. I’m about to knock on the door when I stop.

‘What are we doing?’ I’m suddenly nervous. ‘Anyone could be behind that door. What if it’s Phone-woman?’

Rhid thinks. ‘We’ll just say we’re friends of Kasha and want to know if there’s anything we could do to help.’

I pull a face. 'Lame.'

'It's all we've got.' I take a deep breath, lean forward and knock. Loudly.

Nothing.

I look at Rhid and knock again.

Nothing.

'No one home.' Although my heart's in my mouth I'm disappointed. 'Come on.' We turn away when the door opens two flats down and a crumpled Asian man in his fifties wearing striped pyjamas steps out.

'No one in. Not seen anyone for days.' He spits, chewing on a vanilla stick.

'Do you know who lives here?'

The man shrugs. 'Serious woman—seems all right. Not around much. Leaves rubbish out here for weeks though. Bloody annoying. You friends' of hers?'

'Friends of his daughter.'

'She has a daughter? Darkhorse. Seen her young man and baby boy but haven't heard of any daughter.' He pulls his glasses down to the end of his nose and peers at them. 'Some girl left a parcel for her a few days ago. Perhaps that was her.'

I look at Rhid. Kasha? 'Mind if we have a look?'

The man disappears into his flat and comes back with the parcel.

'It says it's for DD. Some nickname maybe?' He shrugs again and passes it to me. On the front in black pen are the words 'DD'. A smiley face has been made using the two capital Ds as two mouths, with two eyes and a nose.

'Can you remember when she left it?'

'Last Tuesday. About four. Interrupted Deal or No Deal. Bloody annoying actually – missed a crucial moment.'

‘We could take it for her if you like. Take it off your hands?’ I’m dying to know what’s in that parcel.

‘Don’t be bloody stupid! Think I was born yesterday. You could be anyone. No, I’ll keep it right here until she comes back, and I can ask her what this all this about! A daughter. No one bloody tells me anything.’

‘Had a daughter.’ Rhid corrects jumping to a bunch of conclusions. It seems likely to be Kasha that brought this but is she this woman’s daughter or not?

Who knew?

‘Had? What do you mean had?’ This man sure gets irritated quick.

I explain. ‘A girl was killed last week, up in Cambridge. Kasha Stone? You may have heard about it on the news?’ The man stares at me blankly. ‘Anyway, we ...’ I must be careful not to the giveaway we’ve snooping. ‘...think she visited someone at this address early last week. That maybe this DD and Kasha are connected.’

‘Jesus, blimey.’ He pulls his hand through his hair, more anxious now than irritated. ‘You seem a bit young for this if you don’t mind me saying. What are you two? Work-experience detectives or what?’

‘We just want to help place some facts around our friend’s death.’

‘I don’t know. You say she has a daughter, but I never heard of any daughter. Young boyfriend and baby, like I said, but no teenage daughter.’

I look at Rhid. We need something else to convince the man to let us keep the parcel. C’mon. C’mon.

We draw a blank and pass it back, reluctantly.

‘Well, if that’s all, I need to be getting on. If you find her tell her I have this. God knows whatever it is. Bloody hope it, not a bomb.’ He adds as he mutters his way back indoors. We turn and make our way to the stairs. Within seconds the door opens again.

‘Take those bags down with you, will you? God knows when she’ll be back. I really have enough to do.’ The door slams.

For some reason, neither of us can explain, we do as we’re asked. God knows why as it takes us at least 15 minutes to find the rubbish point hidden around the back of the parking area. As we offload the heavy smelly bags a thought suddenly occurs to me. ‘We should have searched them for clues.’

‘Searched what?’ Rhid wipes his hand on his jeans.

‘The rubbish bags: If the woman who lives there, DD or whoever she is, is connected to Kasha we might have found something that proves that.’

‘Like what?’ Rhid is covered in some sticky and pink. I find a tissue in my bag and pass it to him.

‘Some ladies shampoo, Tampax, ID...anything.’

Rhid is sceptical about the usefulness of this idea. ‘I wish we could have seen what was in that package.’

‘I wonder what DD stands for?’

Rhid shrugs. ‘I wonder what was so special about it that she came all the way down here in person to deliver it?’

The two of us think about that a moment. ‘If it was her.’

‘What should we do now?’ Rhid asks as he sits in the car, key in the ignition.

‘Fancy a trip to Fulbourn psych hospital?’

Chapter twenty-three | unexpected visitor

Wednesday afternoon.

Once home, after a quick kitchen pit-stop where Rhid consumes most of what we have in our fridge and bread bin, we head upstairs to prepare for the visit.

A few minutes later Rhid's staring at himself in my full-length mirror wearing a poorly fitting, red-checked shirt, chinos, brown leather brogues two sizes too small and his hair's slicked back with way too much gloop.

'I can't believe you still have a dressing up box.'

'Well, it's mine and Mum's.' I push him out of the way. I need to see how my vintage-inspired outfit is shaping up. I've opted for a chocolate brown iron-straight bobbed wig, a spotted dress and some black court shoes. 'For festivals, fancy dress parties. You always need dressing up clothes.'

'I don't. I don't know why I've got them on now either, to be honest.'

'Because we don't want to be recognized snooping around at the psych hospital.' My bed is covered in old ski suits, evening gowns, retro-chic, granddad suits, leisurewear, designer wear, a ball gown. 'Ida said Pete had been there about a month before he went on day release last weekend. He's not been seen since. Maybe we talk to some of the other inmates. See if they noticed anything.'

'I think they're called patients.'

‘Sure patients.’

‘I still don’t understand why we have to go in disguise.’

‘Because someone’s pulling some strings somewhere on this situation: they’re framing Pete and ... god know what else. Something fishy. And if someone is playing this they might be on the lookout for snoopers.’ Rhid looking at me like I’ve flipped. ‘Hence the disguise.’

‘That’s a lot of supposing right there.’ Rhid’s sceptical.

‘There.’ I ignore him and add a tie to his look. ‘We’ll pick up some flowers on the way.’

We cycle out to the ring road, Rhid balancing a bunch of purple One Stop carnations on his crossbar. ‘Remind me again why we have to do this?’

‘Because we don’t want people to know who we are.’

‘I get the disguise part. I mean, what exactly do you expect to find at the hospital?’

‘Ida said she thought Pete was getting worse in hospital. It doesn’t make sense. In the past when he’s gone in it’s because he’s having a bad spell. He’s there to get better, they adjust his medication; he enjoys the art and sports therapies. All that order and structure, the close attention suits him.’

‘He’s been hospitalised before?’

‘Last summer after you know... he went in for four weeks.’

We cycle up to the hospital boundaries and hide our bikes in a hedge just out of range of the hospital’s CCTV cameras.

Fulbourn Psychiatric Hospital's an odd amalgam of imposing Victorian buildings and purely practical prefab extensions. The centrepiece of the campus an old Victorian purpose-built hospital that has gradually been added to over the years. We follow the main pedestrian route past the avenue of spruce and through the busy car park to the visitor's entrance. The receptionist looks vaguely familiar, thick-set with heavy, unsmiling eyes, but I can't quite place her.

'We're here to see Ned Kimberly.' I announce, all bright and cheery. 'But I've forgotten what ward he's in.'

'Mr. Kimberly?'

I nod and the receptionist types into her screen.

'Mr. Kimberly?' Rhid mouths, to one side making sure the receptionist can't see.

'Yep.' I nod. 'Trust me.'

'All the wards are named after birds.' The receptionist informs. 'Supposed to be easier to remember.' She rolls her eyes then casts an irritated look at Rhid's purple bouquet. 'They're... colourful.' She disapproves. For a receptionist, I'd say she lacks some basic people skills. 'It's Raven Ward, ground floor. Follow the yellow line and you'll find it.' She points to the corridor. 'Round to the left, keep going until you reach the end. Last ward on your right.'

We sign in first with false names naturally and do as we're told. The yellow line leads us into the heart of the building, a maze of corridors and rooms.

'How did you know a Ned Kimberly was here?' Rhid asks, as soon as we're out of sight.

'Checked with Ida before we came.' I grin, feeling on form.

Rhid also decides to enjoy himself and starts to skip like a girl. 'Follow the yellow brick road, follow the yellow brick road. Follow, follow, follow, follow, follow the yellow brick road.' He swings his arms as he sings, like some badly stuffed scarecrow on too much Night Nurse.

‘What are you doing?’ I whisper loudly with what I hope is a very serious expression.

‘Following the yellow line as instructed.’

‘We’re trying to be inconspicuous.’ But I can’t hold my serious face for long. ‘They’ll admit you.’ Rhid stops abruptly. Thinking it’s because of my possible internment suggestion, I’m about to launch into some witty reference to the most brilliant of all crazies’ film (and the only film I can watch with Jack Nicholson) *One Flew Over the Cuckoo Nest*.

But it isn’t.

Rhid’s looking into a large room with a long glass wall. On the other side, there’s an art class in process. Six patients – two men and four women in nightwear and leisure suits—are hunched over tables spread out with plastic sheeting, paper, paint and brushes. In between brush strokes, they admire their work, chat and make regular trips to a nearby table set out with tea and biscuits. The walls are covered in artwork. Calming panoramas of expansive land and seascapes. Dreams of natural escapes. Of fresh air and freedom, away from disinfectant and people trying to feel better.

We walk sensibly to Raven ward to find Ned sitting up in bed.

‘Mr. Kimberly? Ned?’ He’s lost in thought and doesn’t look up. ‘Ida sent us.’ I take a step forward. ‘To give you these.’ Ned looks up from his Sudoku, confused. ‘She’s sorry she can’t come today but she’ll come tomorrow.’

A moment later, as if he just remembered something, a light works its way across his face. ‘Ah. What a lovely woman. I hope she’s all right.’

‘She’s fine, Ned. Absolutely fine.’ He looks frail but kind of OK. ‘But Pete’s in trouble though. You remember Pete?’

‘Trouble? What kind of trouble?’

‘He’s been arrested. It’s complicated.’ I begin to explain but don’t get very far. Ned loses focus and turns away. I try a different approach. ‘Were you in here with Pete?’

‘Yes. He was in a different ward, but I’d see him every so often in the day room.’

‘Did you talk much?’

‘A bit.’

‘What about?’ I notice a ward cleaner, a worn-out looking man in his mid-thirties, slowly working his way up the line of beds on Ned’s side.

‘All sorts and nothing. Birds.’ He laughs. ‘The feathered kind.’ He laughs again and winks at me. Cheeky git.

The receptionist walks into the ward looks around and waves at us. Then she goes over to the ward desk and speaks to a nurse.

‘How was he?’

‘Fine. Fine. Well, he was in here so not so fine but...’ He stretches his face into the face of a comedy mad person. ‘...as fine as can be expected.’

The cleaner reaches Ned’s bed and wipes his mop around our feet. I’m sure he’s earwigging. I wish he’d go away.

‘Did Pete get any visitors, apart from Ida?’ I turn my back on the cleaner and notice the receptionist is keeping a close eye.

‘Not that I saw. They keep a record though, on their computer.’ Ned points to the computer where the receptionist and ward nurse are chatting. I look at Rhid.

‘We need to have a look. Distraction. Now.’ Rhid looks blank. I think it’s his thinking face. Then he has an idea. He bends over double and lets out an almighty cry. ‘Ooooh, oh, ooh. My stomach. It hurts!’

It’s as hammy as hell but it does the trick. The receptionist and nurse rush over and I slip away, back to reception.

The coast is clear: I slide behind the desk and move the mouse to wake the screen. ‘Please don’t have auto log out.’ I mutter. Bingo! It doesn’t.

I scan the desktop for anything resembling visitor admin. Nothing obvious so I try the documents folder. I find a folder named ‘Admin’ arranged in years. Inside, about thirty to forty files are arranged with various titles in alphabetical order. I scroll down and find one called ‘Visitor Records’. Inside are documents listed by month. I open April’s spreadsheet which has the name of the visitor in the first column and the person they visited three columns along. I enter Pete’s name into the search function and pull all his visitors for that period up to at the top. The only person listed as visiting Pete during that period is Ida.

I quickly close the folders and hurry back down the corridor. My heart is beating out of my chest, but I manage a casual walk back into the ward to find Rhidian’s Oscar-winning performance in full flow. He’s lying down on a bed moaning and crying and holding his stomach like some alien is about to break out. I better come up with some excuse for my exit. ‘I, err, went to see if he had his medication. In his bike bag.’ I grab two paracetamols from my purse. ‘Phew. Here take these...an ulcer yes. It’s very unusual for his age I know. But still.’

Rhid’s instantly feels better. ‘I think we’d better be going.’ We back away from the small, slightly confused crowd of nurses and patients that have gathered. ‘I should get him to his doctor now I think.’

‘Are you sure?’ The larger nurse is genuinely concerned. ‘I think he ought to go straight to A & E. I’ll call an ambulance.’ The nurse hurries over to the office and picks up the phone.

‘Really, it’ll be fine. I’ve got a car. It’d be quicker if we just go.’ I help Rhid off the bed. ‘Bye Ned. Don’t forget Ida’s coming tomorrow.’ We wave goodbye through the corridor window, keeping up the charade until we’re out of sight.

‘Did you find anyone?’ Rhid asks. Once we’re far enough away from the hospital as we make our way back to our bikes.

‘No. Just Ida.’

‘So, all that was a complete waste of time and energy.’ Rhid pulls off his tie and jacket and flaps his shirt to cool off. ‘Who’d have thought acting is such hard work.’

I feel a tap on her shoulder. I look behind me to see the ward cleaner. He’s out of breath and nervous and doesn’t waste any time.

‘You were asking if Pete Rivers had any unusual visitors?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t believe what they’re saying about Pete. I’ve been following it in the news. He’s no murderer. It’s not his nature. He’s a kind man.’

‘We think so, too.’

‘That’s why I’m here. Pete had a visitor shortly before he left the hospital- the night that girl was killed.’

‘What does she look like?’

‘Pretty. Brunette. With a white blonde streak, here.’ He indicates on his head.

‘Cyd.’

‘Trouble if ever I saw it. Anyway, she visited Pete the day before he discharged himself. He was very upset when she left. He didn’t say anything but—’

‘What?’

‘I’d say he was more than upset. I’d say he was scared.’

Rhid and I exchange a look.

‘I just thought I should let you know.’ He hurries back to work.

‘What now?’ Rhid asks, neither of us were sure what this new information meant exactly but it wasn’t a nice a feeling as I’d hoped – having my suspicions confirmed.

‘Home.’

As we weave through the lines of parked cars in the staff car park, the quickest route back to their bikes, a familiar face appears over on the far edge of the car park. It’s Dor, the BMX girl who stopped Lo and me at the underpass yesterday. She’s parking her bike by a silver Honda Accord.

I draw Rhid’s attention. ‘Look.’

Dor waits.

I pull Rhid down behind a car and we peer over the bonnet. A few moments pass and then someone leaves the main hospital entrance and heads their way.

‘It’s the receptionist.’ She walks straight over to Dor and gives her a great big massive bear hug. They chat for a few moments and then the receptionist says something that makes Dor listen very carefully. A few seconds later they look around them, suspiciously.

‘That’s one strong family resemblance.’ I muse.

‘Her mum or aunt do you think?’

I shrug. ‘Don’t know but it might explain how the visitors’ record might not be entirely accurate.’

Rhid and I look at each other unsure of our next move.

Beep, Beep. A text from mum.

- *Hi love, Jenni can you see you tomorrow morning.*

She's had a cancellation.

- *Can you make it to 30 Tavistock Road at 10 am?*

I text back that I can and say goodbye to Rhid.

At home, with my laptop, I take a look at my adaptation assignment that's due in two weeks. Before I can make a start, I'll have to re-read the book I want to adapt. I pull out my old copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, lay on my bed and start to read. I'm always impressed about how calmly Alice takes all the weird things that happen to her. I mean she falls down a really big hole and then eats and drink stuff that she has no idea what it is that says *eat and drink me* which in my book would be a no-no, especially in a place I've never been before. Then she grows extremely big and shrinks to extremely small and has to spar with all sorts of animals talking nonsense. She just seems to sail through it. Nothing phases her.

I need to be more Alice.

Immersion in *Wonderland* is only temporary and soon my mind's racing again with questions about Kasha. Who was she? Really? What I'm hearing about her on the side and who I see online seem to be two totally different people. She seemed together and driven but there's also stuff she's keeping secret. Her pregnancy for one? Whose baby was it? What's her connection to Pete? What's the real connection between her and Cyd? Why did Cyd visit

Pete in the hospital? What has she got to do with this? I mean she knew Kasha sure but what's really going on? And why am I in the middle of this?

Why me?

All those questions hang in the air and look down at the book. Thankfully we've not got to do the whole thing, just an extract, to *show your idea*, but still.

I park my amateur detection for a while. Mum says sometimes you've got to let your subconscious work on things on its own for a while if your conscious mind isn't getting very far.

My conscious mind isn't getting very far.

Carroll's words pull me back in. Pretty soon I've reached the end and know exactly how I'm going to adapt the story.

Chapter twenty-four | transference

Thursday. Six days after Kasha death.

‘OK let’s try an image, a single image from the night.’ Jenni smiles, glancing briefly at the clock on the wall behind me. It’s 10.05. We’ve done introductions and the session has started. ‘An image that stands out for you.’

Jenni’s a tidy, warm, professional woman in her late forties with black shoulder-length hair cut with a severe fringe that looks slightly out of place. I should tell her about Kasha’s handprint in the bread but it’s a pretty strange thing to admit you’ve noticed, never mind take home.

‘One that you keep coming back to you maybe.’ She prompts, sitting across from me in an expensive black leather chair, set at a forty-five-degree angle. There are red poppies on her skirt. Everything about her and the room is designed to be un-confrontational and empathetic.

‘Kasha’s... unicorn ear-ring.’ I should come up with something. Jenni nods but says nothing. ‘It was caught up in her hair seared against the hotplate. It was white and tacky, with rainbow sparkles along one side...bubbling and popping in the heat.’ I can smell it. Scalding plastic, hair, skin and cooking fat. The word rancid pops into my head and fills my nose. I retch. Scouring bile rises in my throat and...

‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t be. Here.’ Jenni passes me a glass of water. I take a sip, setting it down on the small oak table by her side.

‘Her face was pressed down...’ I stop. ‘What was the point in reliving this? I left her there. That’s the issue. I should have stayed with her like she asked me to.’ Suddenly light-headed I wriggle her fingers trying to bring their numbness back to life.

‘Do you feel Ok?’

‘No, I don’t feel OK.’

‘Breathe. Have another. Don’t try to recall anything right now. Just look at me and listen to the clock’.

Tick, tock.

‘Is that supposed to calm me down?’

‘Reminds me of my grandparents living room when I was a girl.’ She smiles. ‘Carefree days.’

‘Carefree would be good.’ Despite not wanting or expecting to I do feel calmer. I put the glass down and lean back in the chair.

‘Why do you think this earring has stayed with you?’ She thinks I’m looking at her brooch. ‘Do you want me to take this off?’

‘What?’

‘This brooch? It seems to be bothering you. Do you want me to take it off?’

‘Why would I want you to take it off?’

‘It’s white, plastic. To close a resemblance?’

I shake my head, but Jenni is right. It is making me uncomfortable. Or maybe it’s just being here.

‘Take your time.’

I have practically forgotten what I'm supposed to be taking my time over. My head's a swarm of images from Friday night. The tomato-shaped ketchup bottle, the patties sizzling on the griddle, the movement of Kasha's purple-painted fingers across my screen as I text.

'Sorry, what are we doing?'

'Why do you think Kasha's earrings have stuck in your mind?'

I close my eyes. Jenni writes something.

'Ear-rings are such a girly thing.'

I begin.

'A silly accessory that Kasha thought to buy and then how to wear, what they go with what they don't. All of that. It reminds me she was alive not so long ago and had these thoughts. Ordinary, boring thoughts but they were her thoughts and she had a right to keep on having them and that right has been taken away by some sick maniac who's probably miles away by now thinking he's got away with it!'

My face crumbles red and bursting with tears.

Jenni looks at me calmly, professionally detached. 'It's important to remember that this event did not happen to you. And, it is not your fault that it did. We don't know why this happened. We may never know. But we do know that it wasn't your fault.'

She watches me closely.

Beat.

'Empathy is a powerful thing. Kasha was a girl, about your age, with similar tastes in music and boys.'

She's right. Empathy is a powerful thing. I tuck my legs under me. Trying to contain all the feelings of regret and guilt churning around inside. 'It was just a short conversation, but... I don't know...it felt like we connected.'

We're quiet. 'Have you seen her online memorials?' I ask after a few moments.

She has. 'Incredible response.'

'What's it all about do you think?'

Jenni pauses. She's given the online mourning phenomenon some thought. 'There is an important idea in psychoanalysis called transference. It's the idea that people shift emotions from one person or object to another as a way of externalizing or sharing emotions that otherwise have no outlet.'

She's hit the nail on the proverbial. 'Did you notice how all the messages are addressed to her? Don't you think that's odd? Like she's going to read them in some digital afterlife, or something?'

'Traditionally people do address the departed at funeral memorials. They are, after all, the reason for the event.'

I suppose.

Jenni continues. 'You seem a little sceptical about the public reaction to Kasha's death. Would that be true to say?'

I shrug. 'Yes. You could say that.'

'You think people aren't genuinely sad about Kasha's death?'

'No. It's not that. I just find it hard to see why so many people who don't know her feel the need to share their grief online. It's as if it's the letting other people know you care matters more than the actual loss of a particular person.'

'I know what you mean. It feels fake. Just for show.'

'Exactly.'

'But understanding it as a form of transference can help understand why people are doing this. Perhaps they have things going on in their own lives that make them sad but have

no safe way to express that sadness, in a safe place. This gives them a way.' Jenni offers, recrossing her legs. 'It's also just about social bonding. Bad things draw people together.'

'Mm.'

She looks at me wondering about her next move. 'What do you think people should be doing?'

'I don't know. Trying to find who killed her?'

'Is that what you want to do?'

'Yes. Yes, it is what I want to do.'

Of course, I want to find Kasha's killer.

I want to know a lot of things.

I want to know why I found her.

Why I have the same friends as her.

Why I'm the one who spoke to someone who says they know who killed her.

Why I'm the one who knows that a girl answering her description delivered a parcel to someone at an address she searched using someone else laptop? Why there are so many connections between Kasha's and my life?

Jenny looks at me while I think all this.

I feel like I need to give her something else.

'There are a lot of things everyone should be doing rather than trying to out-do each other posting smulchty sentiments online.'

She asks me few more questions, I describe the night again, break down, cry. Then our time is up.

Outside, the sun's bright and Spring's set nature up to induce a general air of optimism and calm but it's wasted on me. I'm exhausted and can't face talking to anyone. I nip home, collect my swim things and cycle over to the pool on Jesus Green—a secluded turquoise oasis and the perfect place to clear my head.

Opened in 1923, and at one hundred yards, it's the longest outdoor swimming pool in Europe. I used to come here every day in the summer holidays. Leaving home early to grab a pitch before the good spaces were taken. It's a great place to people watch, and when the weather's like this, all blue sky and hot sun you have to wonder why people spend their money, travelling to Ibiza, or Mallorca or Greece when July and August can be beautiful here.

I set up under the sycamore, the usual spot, strip and stand on the edge of the gently rocking blue rectangle. I always need a few minutes to steel myself before going in. To acknowledge and get over anticipating the shock of the cold to come. And it's always cold. Bloody cold.

Taking one deep breath, I dive. Hitting the surface with a glacier smack, a bolt of liquid electricity shoots through me so sharp I can hardly catch my second. Just swim. Push through each stroke. My arms feel amputated with cold. I force myself to breathe. Slow, deep, breaths calming my lungs.

Stroke, breath, stroke, breath.

Blood slowly returns.

I have to stop after one length. These are no ordinary lengths. These are 91 metres long, ice-cold-water-that-strips-your-breath-as-you-swim kind of lengths. Pulling up my knees I reach the end, turn and pause. The crystal-clear waters reflect the turquoise paintwork brightly, making me squint. The sun, warm on my skin. I close my eyes, set off again, launching into a leisurely backstroke for the return. I let go of everything. Water laps my ears,

clearing my head. A lifeguard lazily scoops out limp brown leaves blown down last autumn's fall. In a few weeks, these last-season-leftovers will be replaced by bright green leaves of lime. And they, in turn, will be replaced by the softer, combat-green of the sycamore tree.

Stroke.

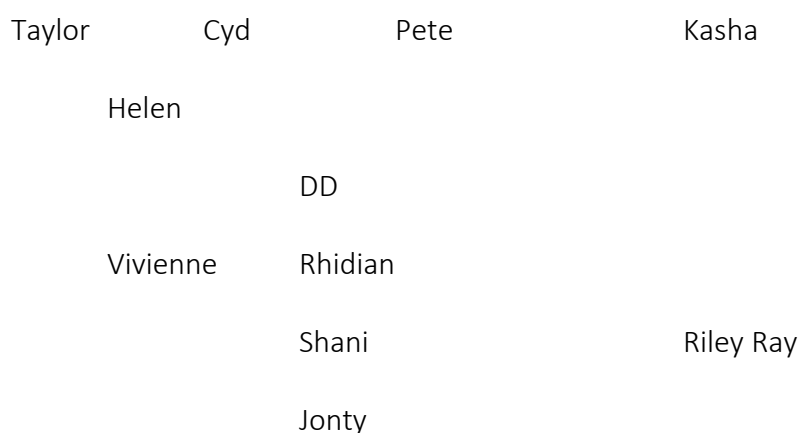
Stroke.

Stroke.

I power back through the water for length three. But as my body tires, my thoughts travel back to Kasha. Who was she? The outgoing, talent contest winner online, optimistic for a bright future ahead doesn't match the one I met. That Kasha was nervous, anxious, unsure. Was she just good at putting on a show or was there something going on that night? How come Kasha knew so many of my friends? Is that why I found her? Our lives map themselves out in my head. I visualise our interconnecting friendships like a network diagram.

Something we've been looking at in a Media Theory class.

Thinking of everyone I know as a node.



A hub to which everyone else is connected. A network of connections.

An infinite combination of possible relationships.

All with unpredictable consequences. Impossible to detect...

BANG.

I swim into the side of the pool.

Back on land I rub down and stretch out on my towel. Again, I close my eyes, enjoying the sun's warmth on my face.

'You here for the day?' Rhid dumps his bag down, breaking the moment.

'Maybe.' I offer, propping myself on my elbows as Rhid strips. He wraps a towel around his waist, whips off his underpants and pulls on a pair of surprisingly fitted blue trunks.

'What are you doing?' I shade my eyes and refocus as I watch him adjust some state-of-the-art goggles over a swimming cap.

'Preparing for my swim.'

'You hate swimming.'

'Not anymore – I'm in training.' He lunges one way, then the next. I sit up, cross-legged and confused. 'For a sponsored triathlon.' He explains. 'The Kasha Stone Memorial Committee is fundraising for a permanent memorial.'

'Okay...closely followed by, there's a memorial committee?'

'They're about to announce it.' He confirms. 'I thought I'd get a head start.'

'Did Jenni ask you if you had an image from that night that you particularly remember?'

'How do you know about my session with Jenni?'

'Mum told me she set you up. So...?'

'I didn't have an image, more of a taste. I told her about how that chilli burger tasted the second time around.'

'A food memory. How unexpected.'

‘Just thinking about it makes me want to barf again.’ Rhid does look like he is about to be sick. ‘What did you say?’

‘I told her about Kasha’s unicorn earring.’ I turn from the wall. ‘How it was melted in her hair, tacky and gloopy and just beginning to bubble.’

‘I don’t remember that.’

‘That’s because it was a clothing accessory and you’re a boy.’

‘Finally. She notices!’ Rhid flicks some water at me.

‘I could have told her about lots of things.’ I continue. ‘I could have told her about the pretty blue neon bars of the insect killer reflected in Kasha’s blood. I could have told her about the way the top of the bone in Kasha’s leg stuck out from a tear in her jeans. I could have told her about the blood. How much blood there was – everywhere.’ Rhid remembers. He tries not to remember – and then suddenly his mood changes. I follow Rhid’s scowl to Jonty strolling along the other side of the pool- and heading our way.

‘Look who just minced in.’ Rhid mutters. ‘I’m going in. Coming?’ His eyes said you know there’ll be trouble if you don’t, but I look straight past this boy and his well-intentioned message to the other one approaching.

‘I think I’ll stay. Catch some more sun.’

Rhid narrows his eyes at Jonty and his parting words are, ‘Be careful you don’t get burnt.’

He heads off to the pool in a huff.

There’s something about Jonty that’s a little too good to be true. Perhaps it’s the model looks, the strong bones, smooth chin and thick dark hair. Or perhaps it’s the walk, nonchalant and easy flowing. Or perhaps it’s the intense green eyes that do that thing of

seeming to peer deep into your soul, though I'm convinced that they do, or even could, but they certainly seem to.

'Mind if I join you?' Jonty towers above me, smiling and statuesque and one hundred per cent sure of the answer.

'Help yourself.' Shielding my eyes from the sun I watch Jonty unroll his towel and lay it next to me. Suddenly feeling self-conscious I change position, pulling my swimsuit lower over my behind in what I hope is an imperceptible one-movement bikini-line conceal. Jonty strips off his combat shorts and last year's Glastonbury T-shirt to reveal a brown and well-toned torso. He lays on the towel, mirroring me, on our backs with eyes closed, and for a while, we enjoy the sun. The gentle splashes of swimmers provide a summer infused backing track although I can hear Rhid's disapproval in every stroke. After a while Jonty pushes back his sunnies, squinting as his eyes adjust to the light.

'So, how are things, Tay? How's uni treating you?'

'Good. Yeah. Uni's great. What've you been doing?'

'This and that. Bar work. Here and London. Sharing a flat over by the station which is good for that—with the sis.'

'Bar work must be well paid to afford a flat there.'

'It's Dad's but he's hardly ever here. I do alright.' He sits up.

'I bet you do.' I have a pretty good idea of the kind of work he does. I glance over to Rhid pounding his way through the water.

'Listen. There's something I need to ask you.'

'Ok.'

'About the night you found Kasha.'

'Okay.'

‘Did you speak to her, you know, before...?’ He suddenly sounds tentative, unsure.

Very un-Jonty.

‘A bit.’

‘How was she?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘How did she seem to you?’

‘OK, I guess.’

‘She didn’t seem worried or upset?’

Why’s he asking that? This is strange. Rhid marches up, wet and dripping he reaches for his towel and soaks Jonty.

‘Ah. Sorry, mate.’

Jonty jumps up and moves away. Rhid winks at me from behind his towel and I roll my eyes as Jonty dries himself, unruffled. ‘I better be going.’ He directs at Rhid not bothering to disguise his hostility.

‘Ah. So soon? Not taking a dip?’ Rhid does mock sadness.

Jonty looks over at the pool, up to the sky and back. ‘No. Don’t think so. Sudden change in temperature’s put me off.’ He puts on his shirt and shorts and turns to me. ‘See you later?’

‘The memorial party?’ Rhid cuts in before I can answer.

‘We’ll be there.’ I say

‘Maybe we can grab a moment.’ He does that thing again of holding my gaze longer than necessary. It has a strange though not altogether unpleasant effect, even with Rhid scowling in my peripherals. Rhid and I watch Jonty walk back around to the exit in silence,

with very different thoughts going through our heads. As soon as Jonty's out of earshot Rhid turns to me. 'What're you doing?'

I shrug, grinning. 'I don't know.' I let out a small giggle as Jonty's graceful, lean-legged stride passes through the turnstiles. 'Catch up?' I offer.

Rhid's annoyed. 'Can you please stop being so dreamy- it's messing with my concentration.'

'What do you need concentration for right now?'

'My training.'

'Actually.' I say, snapping out of it. 'There are a couple of very specific reasons why I want to meet up with Jonty.'

'And they are?'

'Firstly, I want to know why he asked how Kasha was when I saw her. And secondly, if you get to spend a night with Shani, I'm also entitled to some fun.'

At the barriers, Jonty glances back. Sunlight sparkles on the water beneath him dancing light shadows on his face. Our eyes meet, holding each other's gaze, neither wanting to be the first to turn away. A few moments pass. Then Jonty smiles. He nods a goodbye, pushes through the turnstile and is gone. My eyes linger on the empty space.

Chapter twenty-five | optical tricks

Thursday night.

That evening the sun sinks early through moody grey clouds shooting yellow and pink across the fields. Down by the river under the motorway bridge, Kasha's memorial party is getting underway.

It's Lola's first visit, 'This place is legendary. I remember DJ Snikit interviewed about it. He used to throw all sorts of cool parties down here back in the day. Everybody's going to be here.'

Some girl pushes past me. 'Hey! sure no worries. Happy to move aside...'

She turns, 'Sorry!' And laughs.

'Too many people!' I swig from a bottle of cheap prosecco as we make our way along the river with the slowly moving crowds. A fountain of bubbles whooshes up my nose, spilling out of my mouth.

'Nice.' Rhid pulls a face.

'It's ridiculous! I splutter. 'How many of them even knew Kasha? There must be some Teen Death Junkie Network out there I don't know about with hundreds waiting for some poor kid to die just so they can have some new thing to feel miserable about.'

Lola reads her phone, 'Kasha now has 8999 friends on her Facebook memorial page. Can you believe it? And the views on #rememberkasha is crazy.'

The main route to the party from town was along the towpath. Groups of two or more hurry excitedly following the river's flow, carrying candles, drinks or smokes, whatever they need to enjoy the night. Every so often they stop to look at the memorials dotted along the path. All shapes and sizes, bought and handmade, candle cherubs, angels, teddy bears, flowers, handwritten notes spelling out her name. I take a photograph of one that's made of orange smarties—her favourite apparently—and add my own #found_it and then #rememberkasha.

Moving back to get a better shot of a pink plastic angel and candle combination I step on a teddy bear. It squeaks, startling me and I kick it to one side.

'Harsh.' Rhid picks it up, brushes it down and puts it back.

'Is everyone so repressed, so full of unexpressed sadness in the face of the misery of their own pathetic little lives, that they have to transfer it over everyone?'

Rhid pulls on a small joint which he offers. I refuse. 'Can you even imagine how much pointless self-indulgent tearful cyber babble is out there clogging up the Internet? Millions of millions of terabytes worth!'

'Tay?' Rhid pulls me around by the arm, stopping me from talking. He smiles broadly, opens his palm and reveals two aspirin-sized white pills. 'Shut up and have one of these.'

Forty minutes later I'm not caring so much about the social impact of online public mourning on a nation of melancholy consumers, instead, I'm sitting on a brown velour sofa with two other girls grinning at some star-shaped fairy lights. They flicker along with three concrete bridge supports which make up the main dance area, colour-shifting outlines flashes blue, green, yellow, pink and repeat.

‘They’re so beautiful.’ One of the girls’ whisper, exhaling on a cigarette. Somewhere nearby a strobe light pulses at high speed making the smaller bridge supports dance like robots. The two girls wear matching stripy tops and skinny jeans, leaning into each other glazed and smiling and giggling between long drags. Light spills onto the black-green surface of the slowly flowing river until a breeze ripples their reflection, like a mirage but in reverse. Thick dubstep beats roll out of the sound system, making everyone move. Suddenly I need to be in there, on the dance floor and I push inwards, the heat from the bodies hits me, a sharp contrast to the cold, dark air around. People make way as I move into the heat of the dance floor, into the music.

I’m not sure how long I’m on there but suddenly I need to find Rhid. I make my way through the crowds to the other side and look around. He’s nowhere. I search over by the river, moving away from the dancers, as the music moves on, more upbeat now with rolling baselines reverberating through the dark.

It’s quiet by the river. A swan glides into view, like a ghost from another world. It turns its head, showing a passing interest and pushes off—powerful feet invisible beneath the dark watery highway.

‘There you are!’

It’s Rhid. Grinning like an idiot and no doubt in need of a hug. ‘Give us a hug!’ We hug deeply. ‘Mm, mmm. Smell that sweet summer night air.’ I feel Rhid inhaling, burying his nose in my neck. He’s sucking me in, and I’m doing the same.

In moments like this, I think I could spend a lifetime with this boy. No one knows me as well as him and there’s a part of me that knows we’ll always find each other. The trouble is

I don't want to feel like this. It feels too predictable. Written too early. I need to feel I have options, parts of me I've not explored yet.

I pull back shivering. 'It's freezing.'

'Take this.' Rhid puts his Parker on my shoulders. I wriggle my arms into the sleeves.

'What about you?' I tug the zipper up to her chin.

'I'm fine.' He puts his arm around me and we stare into the night, bobbing Our heads in time to the music.

'Where did you get that stuff?' I ask without caring too much where if I'm honest.

'You want more?'

'No. I'm good.' I temporally forget my question. Then I remember. 'So, where?'

Rhid pauses, 'Cyd.'

The music cuts out. A loud synchronised protest cry rises from the crowd, followed by muffled chatter and laughter. Someone by the sound system shouts out something. A name. A few moments later the putt-putt of the diesel generator is heard again, chugging into action. A huge cheer from all. A track winds up to speed and everyone picks up where they left off.

'Where is she?' I look around. I've forgotten about Cyd.

'Over by the decks. Chatting to Trix, the DJ.'

'Proper little party team.' Then I see Shani heading our way and before either of us know it she kisses Rhid on the lips. Holding it there long enough for Rhid to raise his eyebrows at me. I roll my eyes in return.

‘Come and hang with us.’ I nod towards the decks where Cyd, Trix and a few others are chatting. She grabs his arm and smiles flirtatiously at Rhid and me. I look at him. ‘You go if you want.’

Shani looks at me with narrow eyes. ‘Oh, give it up Taylor. Water under the bridge and all that. Come and have fun. Remember Kasha.’

‘You go. I’d just rather stay over here.’ Shani doesn’t push. If she has her eye on Rhid she knows it’s best to keep in my good books. We stare into the crowd, watching the dance floor pulse like a single living organism.

It’s Rhid who’s the first to speak. ‘Got any cigs?’ Shani and I shake our heads without moving. ‘Off on a mish. Back soon.’ He leaves us standing alone, together and awkwardly for a moment and then she follows on after, tracing Rhid’s tracks through the dance floor.

‘Enjoying yourself?’

I turn around to find Cyd sipping on a can of gin and tonic.

‘Yeah. Nice party.’ I gather myself.

Cyd surveys the crowd. ‘Kash liked a good party.’

‘So, I hear.’

‘So, did you. Once.’ She looks at me accusingly.

‘Still do.’

Cyd pulls a face. ‘Just not with a certain company.’

‘I just said this is a great party.’

‘You said nice.’ Cyd looks around as she speaks. A social multitasker by nature, always on the eye for someone else to see, somewhere else to be. ‘How’s college?’

‘You want to do polite chit-chat?’ I ponder aloud. ‘Okay.’ I pull myself up straight. ‘Uni is good thanks. Nearly done for this year. Just a couple of projects to finish and then the summer’s my own.’

‘Got any plan?’

‘Maybe go visit my dad over in San Francisco. He’s lined up an internship in some new media company. I should take it, but I haven’t decided.’

‘Sounds like a no brainer.’

‘That’s what Rhid says. What about you? Heard you were doing music stuff in London?’

She nods. ‘A bit of promotion here and there. Y’know. Met some interesting people.’

‘If I’d landed work experience at a place like Chime Bar, I’d have done the same: jacked in college and gone for it. Probably.’

‘No, you wouldn’t. You love studying. You’re good at it.’ She smiles. I smile. The back story of our friendship burns through despite recent hostilities. Some things aren’t easily forgotten.

‘Do you think you’ll go back to college?’ I ask.

‘Never say never. But I’ve got other fish to fry right now.’

‘What you doing now? Exactly?’ Maybe this was an opportunity to dig a little into her relationship with Kasha.

‘This...’ Cyd indicates around at the party, ‘...and managing Trix over there.’ She smiles at a good-looking black guy in a purple cap, red Ralph Lauren polo shirt and expensive jeans mix another track. ‘That’s my man over there.’

‘Boyfriend?’

‘If you want to give it a name.’

‘Nice set.’

She nods and walks around me. ‘So, you found Kasha?’

‘Me and Rhid. Yeah.’

‘Pretty gruesome. The way she was killed.’

I nod. ‘It seems you two were pretty close. You’ve put a lot into today and online.’

‘Kasha was a good friend.’

‘How did you two meet?’

‘At some party like this one. I don’t remember exactly.’

‘Occupational hazard.’

‘What?’

‘Not remembering parties like this. I’m struggling to keep up this conversation.’

She shrugs. ‘You’re doing alright.’ Trix brings in a popular rolling dubstep track and lifts the crowd again. Cyd looks over to the river, lights a cigarette and offers one. I think about not taking it then decide against it.

‘Besides I remember things pretty well.’ Cyd holds up a light, I lean forward and take a drag. ‘I remember we had a big plan to go travelling.’

‘Before you went psycho.’

‘You mean the stuff with Pete? That was just a bit of fun.’

‘A bit of fun?!’

‘You got that all wrong.’

‘You humiliated him with that video.’

‘And then you humiliated me.’

‘I told the truth.’

‘And used me as an example. Of how not to be. Didn’t do too badly out of it- for your blog I mean. Subs went sky high.’

I bristle and any warmth of the old friendship I felt earlier dissipates fast thinking about that time. I want to walk away.

‘Hear you’ve been helping us to find him?’ Cyd walks over to the river and peers down.

‘I’ve been trying to find Pete, yeah. I think people should get their facts straight before jumping to conclusions.’

‘You don’t think he’s got anything to do with Kasha’s death?’

‘No way. And what’s with the online witch-hunt?’

‘Nothing to do with me. I’m merely encouraging the community to pull together to find Pete. What happens in the forums and message boards isn’t up to me.’

‘You just pour on a little fuel every so often.’

‘You know he had a crush on Kasha? Had it bad. Love can make people do crazy things.’

‘Particularly if they’re a bit crazy in the first place, right?’

‘He’d fallen pretty heavy. You should have seen him. Kind of pathetic. He actually thought he stood a chance.’ She pauses. ‘Kasha was never going to be his girlfriend.’

‘Doesn’t mean he killed her.’

Cyd moves over to the wall where Rhid’s graffiti piece shouts Kasha’s name in the half-light. ‘He was there. At Daisy’s.’

What?! ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because he was.’

‘How do you know? I haven’t heard anyone else say that.’

‘Haven’t you? It’s fairly common knowledge. Police know. Saw him on the CCTV around the time you arrived.’

So, I *did* see him that night.

‘Apparently, he’d escaped from the hospital that afternoon—been sectioned for ABH.’

‘The thing in the garden centre? That was a misunderstanding. Someone called Kasha a bitch. He was upset, defended Kasha, a little too bluntly maybe, but no charges were brought. And he wasn’t sectioned, he self-admitted.’

Cyd isn’t listening, she’s only ever interested in her version of things and she moves on to thinking about who’s walking towards her.

Jonty's tweed cap is pulled down low, beneath its peak his eyes peering up and out, twinkling irresistibly. This is the third time I've seen him this week. He slides up to Cyd, whispers something briefly in her ear before coming over to me. He lolls both arms on my shoulders, leans in and kisses me. Actually, *kisses me*.

Mouth lingering warmly on my cheek. I'm totally thrown off guard.

'Long time no see, Tay.' He winks, keeping our pool rendezvous a secret huh? 'And, how are you?'

'Good.' What's going on? 'You?'

'Oh, not much. You know. Enjoying the party. Kasha would have loved this party.'

Jonty moves off and whispers something else to Cyd. Something passes between them and they smile. This is the way they always are conspiratorial, cliquey. I want to ask Cyd, about the deleted post. I want to ask why her stressed-out-brand-new-bestie couldn't contact her the night she was killed. But I don't. I don't think direct questions won't get me the answers I want.

I wish I knew what was going on.

'We've got to go.' Cyd proclaims and they turn to leave. 'See you later?'

'Maybe.' I shrug.

'Good luck finding Pete.' Cyd walks away. Jonty gives me a broad, slightly crooked smile, holding my gaze, tipping his head to one side. Then he follows Cyd, disappearing in the crowd.

What are they playing at?

It's just before dawn, the coldest part of the day and I'm sobering up. I pull Rhid's fur-trimmed collar around me and look up at the sky to see the moon as a sliver of paling light, thin and crescent against the emerging pinks of dawn. It's exactly one week after finding Kasha.

'Mish accomplished!' Rhid arrives waving three large Rizla papers. 'What did Cyd and Jonty want?'

'Don't know.' We sit on the floor and Rhid begins to roll a joint.

I suddenly feel dead beat and lean on his shoulder. 'Let's go back to yours.'

'Err well actually Shani's just invited me around theirs.'

'Ok, if we must. But not staying long.'

'Well, actually she just invited me.'

'Oh, I see.' I nudge him hard in the ribs. 'You want to go?'

He wants to go. 'I'll walk you home first.' He offers. Gent to the last.

Beep, Beep. An Instagram message alert. Jonty's commented on my Smarties-bear memorial photo. Nice pic. Jesus, though, right? Smarties? WTF! drink back at mine?

I consider the invitation. 'You know it's OK. You go ahead. I'll find someone else to walk back with.'

'You sure? Don't walk back on your own. Promise?'

'Promise.'

15 minutes later I'm standing by the Smarties Teddy, some way off from the main party. I wonder if this is a mistake. What if this is a wind-up? I look at my phone. It's been

nearly 18 minutes since Jonty's comment. No further messages. Fuck it. He's messing with me. I'm about to walk off home when a purposeful, soft and gravelly cough sounds out close by her ear.

'Ahem.'

I turn. A not altogether unpleasant shiver of excitement vibrating down my neck.

It's Jonty. He looks down at the Smarties teddy and after a brief pause kicks it into the river. 'You know Kasha hated Smarties. Especially the blue ones.'

It's irreverent, outrageous and hilarious. I splutter-laugh and instantly grateful I don't snot myself. We look around guiltily to see who else has noticed like naughty school kids but no one has.

'Well, it's true.' He shrugs, laughing and beams one of his big smiles, pushing his arm through mine. We are happy to leave the music and noise and fake grief of Kasha's memorial party.

We walk away silently, into the misting air of dawn.

Chapter twenty-six | in which I'm slightly distracted

Saturday, 5 am. Eight days after Kasha's death.

Jonty and Cyd's Father's rarely used flat is in a new development by Cambridge station, a forty-five-minute train ride from King's Cross and 5 minutes from where Kasha died. Its clean, urban minimalist design looks, and is, extremely expensive. It's the kind of house someone like their banker father buys as an investment, not as a place to live, which suits his children just fine. It was time he invested a little something in them.

'Nice place.' I watch Jonty heading straight to the fridge, 'Mind if I look around?'

'Help yourself.' He's surveying the options. 'Drink?'

'Diet Coke if you have.' I wander through the spacious living room diner decked out with all the latest tech. Google hub, 48-inch 4D flat screen, expensive designer furniture and animal hide rugs.

I wander into a bedroom with another large flat screen, two gaming consoles and assorted gameplay accessories. 'Yours I presume?' Jonty's bedroom is untidy, to say the least. As well as the gaming paraphernalia, there are records, a set of high spec decks, boxer underpants and about twenty pairs of trainers scattered everywhere.

The room next door, by contrast, is pristine. It too has a large though not so large flat screen, an Alexa voice recognition unit, a huge floor to ceiling wardrobe with every conceivable clothes and shoe storage facility and a smaller unit for her jewellery. Jonty hands me the Coke, ushering me out, and pulls Cyd's bedroom door shut.

‘Dad bought it last year, for when he’s in town, but he hardly ever is. Mum’s moved to Bristol with some new bloke.’

I peer through the floor-to-ceiling window to the lights of an early train, eight floors beneath. ‘Are you sure Cyd’s not coming back here tonight?’

‘She’ll crash at Trix’s.’

A song comes on that I recognize but can’t quite place.

‘Remember this?’ Jonty, who’s selected the track from his phone, plays it through a spectacularly awesome speaker system.

‘Sort of.’ I try to remember. ‘To be honest, no.’

‘Cyd’s 16th?’ He reminds me with that cheeky wink again. ‘When you barged in on me taking a piss and refused to leave.’

‘I was bursting. It was the nearest loo and you were taking ages. On purpose. You refused to leave! What was I supposed to do?’

‘I didn’t expect you to push me out the way, sit down in front of me and do your business.’

‘Yes. Well...’ Embarrassing. ‘Needs must.’

‘Straightforward as I said.’

‘And then you wouldn’t let me leave until I’d kissed you. You held me in that toilet against my will.’

‘You could have gone any time.’

‘Really?’ Closer.

‘Of course.’

‘Really?’

‘Any. Time.’

‘Everything’s just kind of real with you, isn’t Taylor? No bullshit.’

‘Life’s complicated enough.’

Jonty goes over to the kitchen and reaches for a glass. ‘Tell that to my sister.’ He fills it from the tap and downs it.

‘I did remember. That’s why we don’t hang out.’ I finish my Coke, ‘One of the reasons anyway.’ I wonder how to start the conversation I really want to have. ‘How long had you known Kasha?’

‘About 6 months.’

‘Did you know her well?’

‘A bit.’ He shrugs and scrolls through his music.

‘What was she like?’

Jonty looks up. ‘Bright, clever, beautiful. People wanted to be with her. And that voice...it was something else. She was going to do something with it. I believed she was.’

I haven’t seen Jonty so taken with anyone before and as you’d expect Jonty’s had a few girlfriends in his time. Being his sister’s wingman for so long meant I saw him through most of them. Except for the past year of course.

A thought occurs. ‘You two never...?’

He smiles. ‘Never what?’

‘You know.’ He knows.

‘Why would you be so interested in that Taylor Millar? Why would that be, eh? Eh? Eh?’ He pokes me. ‘Eh?’ Poke. ‘Eh?’ Poke. ‘Eh?’ His index finger stabs at her ribs then her back then under her arms. I am terrifically ticklish. He moves closer. Kiss.

I pull back. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Something I should have done a long time ago.’

Jonty takes both of my hands in his and starts to sway. It feels like he's going to make me dance... oh no, here he goes... cheek to cheek. I feel his warm face next to mine and the lines of his bones, hard and strong beneath his soft skin. Perhaps it's the pills or the tequila or the music or the smell of old times but I forget about asking questions.

I forget about Kasha and Cyd and Pete and Rhid.

I forget about the points of no returns that set me off on this trajectory –
and surrender.

At some point during the night, lying in his bed listening to the muted trains rattle below he whispers. 'How was Kasha when you last spoke to her? Did she seem OK to you?'

'I'm not sure. She seemed...preoccupied.' I look over him, watch him become distant.
'Jonty, why are you so interested?'

'I just can't bear to think of it... that time before she died. I hope she was happy. I hope she wasn't afraid.' He turns away, uncharacteristically small and sad.

Where did that come from?

I wrap my arms around him, and we fall asleep.

Chapter twenty-seven | too little, too late

Saturday, 1 pm.

When I awake Jonty's nowhere to be seen and my head's banging like a steel drum. I need to find some painkillers fast. I figure the bathroom is the most likely place but no luck, so I try the kitchen. Bingo. I down two with water before seeing Jonty's note.

Didn't want to wake you. Had to go out. Msge you later x.

Suddenly, last night hits me. I've wasted valuable time doing... whatever that was, and probably most likely I've made a massive mistake. I turn on the coffee machine and TV and wonder about my next move flicking through the channels. I stop at the 1 o'clock news headlines. DCI Layton's making a statement outside the police station.

...important new evidence has been found connecting suspect Pete Rivers with the murder of Kasha Stone on Saturday, May the eighth. A Redskins American football jacket and cap known to be worn by Mr Rivers on the night of the murder have been found stained with Kasha's blood. They cut to a photograph of a duplicate jacket and cap. Mr Rivers is now a key suspect in the investigation and we urge anyone with information about his whereabouts not to approach him if they see him but to contact us immediately. I repeat please do not approach this man.

I recognise the jacket and cap instantly and it's as if someone has poked me hard with a very pointy stick. I call Rhid.

'I wonder where you have been, *Little Miss Dirty Stop Out?*' Cambridge grapevine's as effective as ever I see. Rhid's on my back about last night before I even have a chance to say hello. 'I told you, didn't I? Don't lose your head!' He spits and hangs up.

It takes me five more attempts before he answers again.

'Rhid you've got to listen to me. Something important has happened.'

'What?'

'Haven't you seen the news? They've found Pete's jacket and cap covered in Kasha's blood.'

'What?'

'And that's not all. They also have CCTV footage of him wearing them that night.'

The phone is dead for a few moments. I can hear sulking. 'See what happens when don't take my advice?'

'Don't see what that has got to do with me having a night out with an old friend.'

'Don't you?'

'Well, you said you think someone's pulling the strings on this whole Kasha/Pete thing, right? So, don't you think it's a bit of a coincidence that the night serious evidence against Pete turns up you were busy "elsewhere"?' I can hear his air quotes.

I hadn't thought of that. 'I don't think my being busy or not would have made a big difference to the police or the murder, Rhid. I think you are overestimating my significance here. Besides, it was just one night.'

'The point is you were with Cyd's brother...the murdered girl's best friends' brother and ex.'

Silence.

'What?' My voice does that quiet thing again. Like before, with Phone-woman.

I clear my throat.

‘You heard. Shani told me last night.’ Rhid explains, ‘Apparently, it was all very hush-hush. Cyd didn’t approve.’

I feel the blood draining from my face. ‘That’ll explain why he wanted to know how she was before she died.’

‘What?’ Rhid asks.

Beat.

‘OMG.’ I’m suddenly overcome by a need to stand.

‘What? I mean specifically what are you OMG-ing about. There’s kind of way too much going on here worthy of OMG-ing about for me to process.’

‘Well here’s something else. If Kasha was pregnant then Jonty is the father.’

Beep, Beep.

It’s a text from Jonty.

- *Are you up? Free? Meet me on the corner of St Andrews St in 30? x*

What does he want?

Jonty stands on the corner of St Andrews street with two rainbows coloured lollipops in hand, all cute and looking way too hot. As I approach, he holds one out to me but I’m so not in the mood for cute.

‘Something I said?’ He pulls the lollipop in.

‘No. Something you didn’t.’ Silence.

‘Want to discuss it?’

‘Why the fuck didn’t you tell me you and Kasha were an item?’

Jonty rolls his eyes and looks up the street. 'Kasha and I broke up months ago. It had been over between us for a while.'

'Really?'

'Well, weeks anyway.'

'Did you know she was pregnant?'

Jonty goes white.

'Shani found a test in their bathroom. She still has it. Here.' I pull up the photo-message Rhid sent me yesterday. Suddenly he doesn't look so well. 'But that won't bother you, hey? If you broke up months ago? Oh, sorry you said weeks. How many weeks exactly?'

He faces me with strange cold eyes and walks away without a word. I follow him into the park, away from the busy street.

'Bitch.' His voice is barely audible.

'What?!'

'Not you.' He shakes his head which is full of things he wants to say but can't, his hands white and pinched with anger. If that 'bitch' wasn't for her, then who was it for?

Checking the time on his watch Jonty's mood suddenly changes. 'Tay, I'm going to have to go.'

'Go where?'

'I'm sorry. Listen, thanks. I mean it.'

'Thanks for what?'

'For being honest. There's not been much of that around here for a while.' He manages a brief smile before hopping on his bike. As he turns, I notice a small holographic panda hanging off his belt.

I've seen that exact same charm somewhere else.

I wrack my brain to remember as I watch him cycle over the crossroads and disappear into the traffic.

I can't remember.

Then—

There it is.

As clear as day.

Kasha's phone.

FLASHBACK: EXT. LIGHT PARK – DAISY'S DINER – LAST FRIDAY NIGHT

ME (to KASHA)

...Two double cheese chilli burgers, large chips

and two cokes please. [Beat] Make one a Zero.

Got to check those calories where you can.

Beep. Beep.

KASHA and I check our phones. Finding mine blank I look up to see KASHA opening a message... *A holographic panda hangs off a key ring attached to KASHA'S phone. It bobs slightly as she replies, shooting tiny rainbows across the counter.*

Chapter twenty-eight | old friends

'I hear you've been shagging my bro.'

Straight to it then.

Cyd can't have had more than a few hours' sleep but she still manages to look glamorous and cool, leaning on the breakfast bar of her flat in a grey silk dressing gown sucking a large rainbow lolly.

What is it with these siblings and lollies?

She wears grey silver wrist cuffs on each forearm that scoop over her hands, just below the thumb.

'I'm not sure that's any of your business.' I reply, unconvincingly.

'Bit weird. Seeing him and Kasha were an item.' She takes the lolly out to speak, momentarily.

'You knew?'

'Of course, I knew.' She grabs a bottle of rum from the fridge and drops in four ice cubes from a dispenser into two tumblers. She holds up one. 'Drink?'

'Bit early for me.'

Ignoring her, Cyd pours out two generous slugs of rum over the ice topped with less generous portions of Diet Coke from the fridge and hands me one. 'Of course, they thought they were being clever keeping it from me. But seriously? Nothing goes on around here without me knowing. Even you'd agree with that.'

‘I’ll give you that.’ I raise her glass. Cyd mirrors me graciously.

‘Why did you visit Pete when he was in the hospital?’ I take a small sip and then spit it out. It’s way too strong, not to mention early. I watch Cyd take in that question, washing down her drink which I’m sure was equally strong in one gulp.

She does a quick calculation. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Don’t bullshit me, Cyd. I know you did.’ Cyd walks over to the large floor to ceiling window and peers down at the traffic below. ‘Why would you do that? He’s the reason we stopped hanging out.’

She turns. ‘He’s not the reason.’

‘What was then?’

‘You. About a year ago you said it was him or me. A year ago, next week if memory serves. *You’re* the reason.’

‘You made me choose.’ We look at each other. Stalemate.

Cyd steps back. ‘You know Pete. He’s kind of sweet, but difficult. Hard to have around. I know you know that. Didn’t take you long to drop him when you started uni.’

‘I did not.’

‘You did.’

How does she even know that? Not that I’d put it that way. ‘You’ve still not answered my question. Why did you visit Pete?’

Cyd makes her way towards her bedroom. ‘I need to get ready.’

I follow her into a light and spacious bedroom with another floor-to-ceiling window, this time over-looking the railway. A black dress trimmed with white and grey lace is laid out on the bed with a pair of some very expensive Prada wedges on the floor.

‘He was a lovesick puppy with Kasha. Sad, pathetic but harmless. A month or

so ago he came into Froosh. Can you imagine?’

I can.

‘I was promoting the club’s opening week and the whole crowd was there. He came up to Kasha and declared his undying love for her. Again. Said he had to know there and then if she’d be his girl. His words. She’d told him a hundred times she was already seeing someone. She was being too kind to him in my opinion. He wasn’t getting the ‘no’ because of her being so nice about it. Trying to not hurt his feelings. Well. Then he went crazy.’

‘What kind of crazy?’

‘Oh, the Pete kind. He stomped about pushing anyone who laughed at him and threatening to take Kasha away.’ As she speaks Cyd holds a couple of different necklaces next to the dress before deciding on a simple long silver chain with a lozenge-shaped pendant. ‘He’d had a few drinks. As he pleaded, he pulls the weirdest face. We thought he was going to explode. Someone burst out laughing. Then everyone laughed. It was funny. Even you would have laughed.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Anyway. He was angry and humiliated.’ She drops her dressing gown and picks up the dress. As she does, I notice a scar on her right shoulder it’s about five centimetres long. Cyd pulls on the dress and straightens the short scallop-shaped sleeves that cover the scar perfectly. Checking her back in the mirror she zips up the side.

‘What’s that?’ I point to the scar.

Cyd’s silent for a few moments. ‘Accident. A long time ago.’ She makes it clear she has nothing more to say. ‘I thought you wanted to hear why I visited Pete in Hospital?’

‘And why there is no record of your visit.’

I wonder about that scar. It wasn’t there last summer. Judging by the way it’s healed it must have happened a while ago.

Cyd continues. ‘The day after the incident in the club Pete hit that guy at his work “defending Kasha’s honour”. The police came and “it was recommended” that he spent some time at Fulbourn. Sort himself out.’ She straightens her dress. ‘So, I visited him a few times.’

‘That was kind.’

‘Yes, it was, wasn’t it?’ She flashes a wide, fake smile.

‘Still doesn’t answer the why. What were you going to get out of it?’

Cyd does a good impression of being offended. ‘I just felt sorry for him. I know what it’s like to give out in a relationship and get nothing back.’

‘You do?’ I’m genuinely surprised.

Cyd fixes me in one of those looks she does. The ones that cut into your soul. ‘You still don’t get it, do you, Taylor?’

‘Get what?’ She’s playing me for something. This is her style. Insinuating. Vague. Unsettling.

‘I *care* for him.’

‘You’ve come to take an interest in him. There’s a difference.’ I look at her. She looks at me. We review each other, trying to work out what the other is thinking.

Neither of us letting ground.

CUT TO MY ANTI-BULLYING VIDEO – THE MOMENT WHEN

CYD and ME stare at each other.

Neither of us give way.

Neither says a word.

Neither move.

Neither backdown.

I'm not going to let her get the better of me this time.

I'm not going to let her decide how this plays out.

Cyd disappears into the bathroom as the intercom sounds a delivery has arrived downstairs. She pops back out to answer, 'Coming'.

Then to me, 'Back in a tick.' And leaves, putting the door on the latch.

Result.

It may be the rum, but my mind kicks into gear fast. Here how I play this my way. If that panda charm dangling off Jonty belt is Kasha's then what else could be hiding here in this flat? *Her phone?*

Jonty's bedroom mess makes it's hard to know where to start. The wardrobe is full of clothes and skateboards and trainers. I rummage through, searching pockets and drawers. I look behind the curtain. Under the bed. All around the floor. Dark odd-shaped shadows on closer inspection reveal more skateboards, an old Play Station console, more trainers, more socks.

I listen out for sounds of Cyd returning. Silence.

Just to be sure I don't get caught out I put the door on the latch. She'll have to knock to let her back in.

Time for her bedroom. I search cupboards, under the bed, in her wardrobe, bedside table, then a large five-drawer chest of drawers. I start with the top drawer first, slowly work my way down. Feeling through the neatly folded clothes, around the edges, along the back. Systematically. Replacing everything so it looks undisturbed. I reach the bottom drawer thinking where else I can try.

I feel along the back.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Then –

Bingo! I pull out something hard wrapped in a cream corset of all things. It's wrapped up tight, tied with the laces. I have to work hard to undo them, checking over my shoulder and listening out for Cyd. I loosen and pull I feel a shape. Something hard.

Knock, Knock. 'Taylor?!'

Shit. Cyd.

I pull the bundle out from its hiding spot and double bingo, Kasha's white Galaxy Note complete with a holographic snakeskin case falls to the floor.

'Taylor?! What's going on? Open this door!'

She's getting pissed off. I stuff the phone in my pocket, replace the corset at the back of the drawer.

'Coming!' I run into the bathroom and flush the toilet. 'Sorry. Nature called!'

Hurrying over to the door I take a deep breath and let Cyd in.

'Why's the door locked?'

‘Don’t know.’ I shrug, trying to seem as casual as possible. ‘Locked itself when you slammed it, I expect.’

‘I didn’t slam it.’ Suspicious, Cyd looks around. ‘I left it on the latch.’

‘What’s in your parcel?’ I continue, super upbeat, hoping to distract her.

‘Nothing. A top.’ Cyd puts it on the table in the kitchen and heads for the bathroom.

‘I’ll open it later.’

‘Ok. So...’ I continue the upbeat chitty-chat mode. ‘I’m interested...what was Kasha like? I mean really like.’ I call through to the bathroom.

Cyd emerges wearing a pair of black satin arm cuffs with small covered buttons up the inside seam. Part rock, part Goth, part glam. ‘Kasha was an interesting character. Lots of layers.’

‘Not what she seemed you mean?’

‘No. She was everything she seemed to be. But she was also more.’ She pulls the soft leather Prada sling-backs around her heel.

‘Aren’t we all?’

‘Perhaps. But Kasha already had a past.’

‘What kind of past?’

‘I think that’s her business, don’t you think? Especially now.’ She stands up, applies lipstick and takes one final look at herself in the mirror. Then she turns to me.

‘How do I look?’

‘The part. As always.’

I smile. A part of me remembers what it’s like to be friends with this girl. The laughs. The always-being-part-of-something-special-ness. The togetherness. That’s what Cyd’s good at. Making you feel special. She knows it’s the best way to make people do what you want.

Everyone wants to feel special. To feel that someone really sees them. That's her special skill.

Cyd may never go to college, may never get a degree or other formal qualification to move her through life, but she has a PhD in that.

Cyd looks at her watch. 'Time to go.' She checks her clutch bag, adds house keys from a dish on the living room table, wraps a grey cashmere cloak from the peg in the hall around her shoulders and stands ready to go. My cue to leave.

In the corridor, I push the down button at the lift, and we wait.

'This has been nice. Catching up.' She says. Oddly I feel like she means it.

'In a weird way yes, it has.' The lift arrives and we enter. Her first so I can check the phone in my pocket. I can hardly believe I just did what I did. My heart must be going 180 bpm.

We descend in silence.

'Going anywhere nice?' I ask as we reach the bottom. I'm not good with these dramatic silences.

'Of course.' She smiles, offering no other information. 'See you around, Tay.'

'Sure. See you around.'

As I watch her stride off towards the station, her cape flows behind her, a thousand questions bullet around my head. First, though, I have to find a charger, see if this really is Kasha's phone and then ask the biggest question of them all: why did Cyd have it?

Chapter twenty-nine | dangerous evidence

After buying a charger nearby I head for F-Hub—the only place I can think to sit for a while charging a phone without anyone bothering me. I take a table by a socket, plugin and then call Rhid and Lola. I get no reply from either of them, so I text:

Where are you?!! Meet me at the F-hub double ASAP! URGENT! x

Leaving the dead phone on charge I grab a coffee from the vending machine. When I return, the screen is still blank so to kill time I watch the rolling news on the wall in front of me. And there's Edie, outside the police station. The chief suspect in the killing of Kasha Stone has been caught. After an anonymous tip-off police apprehended Pete Rivers at Cambridge bus station trying to leave the city late last night, close to where police found clothing stained with the victim's blood just one night before. The camera cuts to Pete being hustled past photographers and bystanders into a police van- a dirty grey sweatshirt thrown over his head for protection. He's frightened and cowers to avoid angry outreaching hands from the crowd.

'They've found him.'

Lola arrives first, catching the end of the report. 'No! An anonymous tip-off?'

'Could be anyone.'

We hug. 'Seen Rhid?' I ask.

Lola shakes her head.

'I think he's in a mood.'

‘Why?’

‘I spent the night with Jonty.’

‘You did what?’

I shrug.

‘You fox!’ She elbows me hard with a dirty grin. Then Lola paces. She’s trying to work things out. ‘So, you think Pete’s being framed? But what would anyone gain from pinning Kasha’s death on Pete?’

‘A decoy. To take attention away from the real killer.’

‘Who is that? The sixty-four-million-dollar question.’

We think.

‘Phone-woman knows. At least he said he knows.’

‘Can you get back in touch with him?’

I turn to the charging phone, now lit up, and try switching it on. If I am right about this phone and it is Kasha’s maybe there’s a number in her contacts that matches the one I have for *phone-woman*.

This time the screen lights up. Lego cabin Pete left on her memorial.

It’s Kasha’s. I try to access her contacts, but I can’t because it’s passcode protected.

‘Can’t get in.’

The police can access it later. Right now, I’m more worried about the question of why was it in Cyd’s drawer?

Beep, Beep.

A text from Rhid:

- *Hench has something for us. Can you meet him? I've got to do something for mum. How did it go with Jonty?*
- *all good. Or rather not. Can't say here. Where shall I meet Hench?*

Rhid texts me the location.

By the time I reach the chalk pit Hench is sitting on a turf mound, cross-legged, like a hobbit. He's peering into his laptop, looking up every so often. He's nervous.

'Hi.'

'Hi, Hench you alright?'

'I'm good. Listen, I've found an IP address for that user that posted to your blog. 'He's active from an address in...' he shows Taylor. 'Walthamstow.'

'Walthamstow? That totally makes sense. So...that was Phone-woman?'

'Who was phone-woman?'

'We followed a lead to a flat in Walthamstow and found a girl answering Kasha's description left a parcel there for someone called DD.'

'Kasha knew him? It would explain why she knew his number off my heart.'

'But who is he? What numbers does anyone know off heart?'

'People you're close to. Family, best friend, boyfriend, girlfriend.' Hench reels off.

'Mmm.' I ponder.

'I found a few items of interest re Cyd and Kasha's relationship, too. After seeing that post on Cyd's wall I undeleted a few other coms which show lots of bad feeling shall we say. There's nothing majorly incriminating, nothing evidentially substantial—Cyd's too clever to let anything like that get online—but still.'

He points the screen in my direction where a document reveals a series of exchanges between Cyd and Kasha.

Hench pulls the screen back. 'Get the picture?'

I do. 'It seems like Cyd was trying to blackmail Kasha.'

'Looks that way.'

Hench hands me a USB stick. 'I've put everything on there. Basically, any deletions in the past month.'

'Thank you.' I slip the stick next to Kasha's phone in the side pocket of my satchel.

'Well, if they will make it this easy...' He beams, chuffed up. 'I've made an immaculate job of covering my tracks so if my name ever comes up in connection to any of this, I'll deny everything.'

Understood. We say a brief goodbye and I duck back through a broken fence. I turn a corner onto a narrow cycle path and notice a black transit van parked on the road ahead.

I'm sure it wasn't there before.

I think about taking a different route back for a moment but can't think where to go so I decide I'm just being paranoid and carry on towards the van. Its engine starts. Coincidence? Bloody hope so. I dig my nails into the palm of my right hand. Keep calm, carry on.

I walk. Faster this time, more purposeful.

The van pulls forward.

What's going on?

I sneak a peek at the driver, a furtive glance that I hope passes for not-really-looking. He's a severe-looking man in dark glasses and a black cap and the very definition of dodgy.

I take a deep breath and continue.

It's quiet. Too quiet. The kind of quiet they put in films before something really bad happens.

The van pulls up beside me, the side slides open, two men pull me inside and then slam the door.

Fuck.

I'm thrown to the floor with a bang. Pain shoots up my left side as I land on something sharp. Someone grabs my satchel, pulling it roughly over my head.

Bang. Clash. They empty its contents. Kasha's phone and the USB Hensch just gave me fall to the floor.

'What are you doing? Who are you?!

'Shut it or I'll tape up your mouth.' It's a rough voice with an Eastern European accent.

I do as I'm told.

A sack is shoved over my head and the driver pulls away fast. He hits a curb and I'm thrown sideways, landing awkwardly. One of the men pushes me to sit up and grabs my hands. He ties them with plastic cable. Its sharp edges cut into my wrists. The van runs over a bump and the cable cuts in more. The pain makes me catch my breath.

In. Out. In. Out.

I'm suffocating. I can't move. Where are they taking me? Who are they? A thousand thoughts race around my head.

I can't breathe.

Someone grabs my right leg, pinning it down with both hands. I stop trying to move. Someone presses down on me, heavy and hard. I feel a sharp scratch. A needle. They're injecting me.

‘What are you doing? What are you doing to me?’

No reply. I am too scared to move. All I can do is wait for whatever has been put inside me to take effect.

‘What... have... you... given... me?’

I feel sick. So, sick. Then. I begin to relax. My body feels light ...lighter and lighter and then... then...I’m gone.

I have no idea how long I’ve been out or even if I’m still alive when I wake. It’s dark. I’m cold and the effects of whatever I’ve been given are wearing off. I conduct a roll call of body pains. My shoulder, bruised. My thigh, same. My wrists, sore, very sore. I’m still wearing the cable ties. They cut into my skin.

In the silence, I make out a sound.

Thud, thud, thud.

Thud, thud, thud.

It’s faint. Deep. Rhythmic. I listen, trying to work out what it is.

It’s familiar. Something I’ve heard before- but where...?

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

It’s a wind turbine. The thud the propellers rotating, turning wind into electricity by some clever engineering magic. Ok, so that’s something. I could be in the Fens or somewhere south of Cambridge. There are wind farms all around the city.

A van's stereo fuzzes in and out of tune nearby. Radio 1, by the track playing. I couldn't tell you exactly what it was. But it's Radio 1.

I look around. I'm in some sort of a disused farm building. The door locked with a heavy padlock and moisture on the grass by the window. The earth floor smells damp and I can smell animal food and chemical fertiliser. The wooden walls rattle as wind cuts through the gaps between panels. I wish I had a warmer jacket.

My satchel lays on the floor beside me, empty except for my purse, notebook, sunglasses and a half-eaten packet of polo mints. A narrow slit of light shines from a crack in the door and catches my eye. I peer through it to two men huddled in the cab of the van eating kebabs and drinking beer. A third man appears to be guarding my door near a pile of recently discarded cigarette butts on the floor around his feet. He's smoking, taking deep drags and blowing out hard.

'Is there a toilet around here?' I call through the crack. My voice thick and dull like I haven't spoken for days. I clear my throat and try again. 'Please.'

He hacks up something from deep in his throat and it lands with a splat. 'You'll find the current accommodation comes with a fully equipped en-suite bathroom. Otherwise known as the floor. With our compliments.'

I ponder this a moment and look for a suitable place to squat. There's a bag of something rotting in one corner that's away from the door for decency. I watch as my pee makes a channel in the compacted earth and wonder what's next. I presume they've got what they wanted- Kasha's phone and the USB of deleted posts- so why am I still here?

I find a tissue in my pocket, dab and put it in an old crisp packet from my other pocket.

I don't feel too bad. Whatever they gave me doesn't seem to have had much of an after-effect.

A thought occurs. A thought so obvious and new I hold my breath:

These are Kasha's killers. These are the people who killed Kasha.

I freeze. Why else would they want Kasha's phone and the USB except to protect whoever killed Kasha?

I have to get out of here.

I walk around the room – quietly- testing the walls, prodding the ceiling with a stick I find by the door to see if there are any break-out opportunities. I find none.

I don't know what to do. I am blank.

Time passes. Nothing happens.

I think about Kasha again.

FLASHBACK: EXT. DAISY'S BURGER VAN – LAST FRIDAY 10.15 pm

I'm standing at the counter studying the menu.

Beep. Beep.

KASHA and I both check our phones. Finding nothing on mine I look up to see KASHA opening a message. The holographic panda hangs off the key ring attached to her phone, shooting tiny rainbows across the counter. It's a long message containing a lot of capitals and cusses and emojis. KASHA's glossy nails moving fast across the keys.

When KASHA sends her message and both she and the panda are shaking.

BACK TO PRESENT

Night comes. I fall asleep.

For the first time since finding Kasha I dream:

It's night and Daisy's van is huge and pink and lit with neon. Empty and still. I walk through it alone, I'm looking for something or someone, but no one is there. It's eerie and I'm anxious, expecting something to happen but I don't know what. Suddenly I'm overwhelmed by a sense that I've missed something, I look around frantically. I can't for the life of me think what it could be. The airstream van begins to rotate. It turns and turns on some invisible axis as if caught up in a hurricane. I'm in a scene straight out of The Wizard of Oz. The food van tossed up into a tornado of air. Condiment bottles fly about. I grab onto the red Formica counter for dear life. A large tomato-shaped ketchup bottle starts to spew thick red sauce. The neon blue insect killer crackles as large drops of ketchup drop over its electrifying bars. A butterfly flutters directionless. Pink and glittery and plastic: a hair clip. It rises and flies around. It's joined by other pink butterfly hair clips. They fall into the insect killer one after another. Zap. Fizz and fall, immobile, dead. I look behind. Kasha has appeared. She reaches out to me. Our hands nearly touch - but not quite. We try again. And again. But we cannot reach each other...

I wake in a sweat, panting, my breath shallow and fast.

I look around. Take two long slow breaths. Then two more.

My heart slows. My sight clears. It's dark but as I stare out across the cold earth floor, I see the space growing lighter. Objects on the other side of the barn emerge blue from the black of night. Birds song fades up from the silence. The first song of the day. Simple. Clear. Optimistic.

'Taylor?' A gruff voice calls from outside the door. 'You awake?'

'I am now.' This isn't one of the men I heard before, but something tells me this is no rescue.

This man's voice is thick, older and yes, a London accent.

'Time for a little chat.' I wait for the door to be unlocked but it isn't. I can hear keys jingle. The man makes himself comfortable outside.

'Why don't you let me go. You've got what you wanted.'

'Yes, we have.' Says the voice. I move toward the door and peer through the crack. The man lights a cigarette and inhales. The tip glows deep orange for a moment and fades. I wait for more but all I hear is another long drawing in of breath followed by an even longer exhalation.

My heart's beating so loud I'm sure he can hear it.

The lines of his thick-fingered hand holding the cigarette. Partly in shadow. It's pockmarked and gnarly, a good match for his voice. His nails, in contrast, are neatly manicured.

'What's going to happen to me?' I can't disguise the crack in my voice.

'One of two things. One: Nothing. You're released. Go back to your cosy life. Carry on with your nice little arty degree, or...' He takes yet another long drag on his cigarette before replying. 'Two. You remember how Kasha looked, the last time you saw her?' I'll never forget. 'Well, let's call that a Level Eight.'

Ok. I have to ask. 'Of how many?'

'Ten. We don't give out tens very often. Only when absolutely necessary.'

Ok.

'Your future is becoming a little bit necessary to us, Taylor Millar. Which isn't good. For you, that is. In a moment, my men are going to take you for a little ride and let you go. You'll be able to find your own way home. You're a resourceful girl. Too resourceful perhaps.' He inhales and blows out smoke. 'We can get to you any time Taylor. Do you understand? Anytime.'

'Yes.'

'Leave the investigation alone. The police have the man and evidence they need. Leave it as it is. Or else. You understand?'

'Yes.' I whisper, my voice small and quiet.

'Good.' He stubs the cigarette on the floor. 'It's been nice talking to you.'

A few moments later I'm in the back of the van with a sack over my head. I'm not tied this time. We drive for about fifteen minutes then stop. I'm let out and made to sit on a grassy verge, still with the sack over my head. I can smell the unmistakable scent of rape flower. I could be on any one of the large arable farming estates around the north or south of the city. Once the van is out of earshot I bend forward and let the sack fall to the floor. I'm at the crossroads of a remote fenland farm track. To one side fields of rape as far as I can see. To the other, dykes and grazing cattle. There's a raised level in the distance. A river perhaps?

I run.

When I reach the river, I hurry over a small footbridge to an empty car park on the other side. The road to her left stretches out as far as I can see. There's not a soul anywhere.

I start to walk. And walk.

I walk for about forty minutes, through fields glowing yellow with rape flower, along a narrow bridge over a wide stretch of the river, across a carpark until finally, some distance ahead, I spot a car coming my way. The battered blue Fiat Panda bumping slowly down the track. I step up the pace, break into a run.

My legs are weak, really weak, but I force myself.

I run. Fast. Towards the car.

I run. Arms outstretched, waving like my life depends on it.

Chapter thirty | no more meddling

‘What happened?! Are you OK?!’ Sunday church bells trickle like water as I enter the hall to find mum, Rhid and Lo at opposite sides of the living room staring at the floor like zombies. As soon as they see me, they charge into life. All three jump up and run over—barraging me with questions.

Where have you been?

Are you alright?

Where have you been?

We’ve been calling you all night!

Where have you been?

Eldest but fastest, Mum’s first by my side first. She holds me with both hands and stares at me boggle-eyed—panic and sleeplessness shadowed across her face.

‘We’ve been freaking out.’ Lola hugs me.

Rhid comes up behind. ‘We’ve been calling you all night.’

‘My phone—they took the battery.’ I manage a weak smile, ‘I’m fine. I fine.’ but as the corners of my mouth rise whatever’s been keeping me going suddenly vanishes, completely vacuumed out. I collapse to the floor.

‘Taylor. Oh my god. Tay are you alright?!’ Mum cradles me down on the floor. Rhid too, I look up at them peering down, all worry and hurt. I look past them, up to the original plaster ceiling rose mum always points out to guests, to the Victorian glass lamp shade we bought

from a Norfolk antique fair last year. The light bulb shines through the blown glass surface, spangling the light.

‘I’m home.’ I whisper, barely audible. ‘I’m home.’

A laugh wriggles out of me, unexpected and distant.

Then sobs. Seismic deep belly sobs. Uncontrollable, they take me over completely and I slide to the floor in a heap.

Less than an hour later, DCI Layton and PC Kendal arrive. I see them sitting on the sofa surrounded by cushions and blankets, a mug of hot chocolate warming my hands. Mum’s filled them in, as much as she knows, but it’s up to me to do the rest.

‘So, you see, I was right.’ I say finishing up on what I felt to be a fairly detailed account of the past 12 hours, ‘Someone is trying to cover up what happened to Kasha and blame Pete.’ Layton and Kendal absorb what I’ve told them in their official police-people way which means I don’t have any kind of a clue what they make of it or even if they believe me.

‘But without the evidence, there’s not much we can do.’ I think Layton believes me or is at least willing to award my hypothesis a reasonable chance of plausibility.

‘Perhaps we can get those deleted messages back again.’ Rid suggests, ‘I can make a call.’ He’s careful to keep Hensch’s name out of this as we promised.

‘Yes. Who did do that as a matter of interest? Police interest.’ Kendal asks.

We ignore her. ‘But they’re not enough on their own.’ I realise that now. ‘They don’t tie anyone to Kasha’s murder.’

‘The phone is a big loss.’ Kendal reflects. ‘It may have had fingerprints we could have used.’

I’m gutted. ‘Oh, my god. How’s Pete?’

Kendal looks at Layton. ‘Not so good. There have been some nasty scenes at the station- public protests, that kind of thing. We’ve moved him to a secret location.’

‘Can I see him?’ I have to ask even though I’m pretty sure he’d say no, and I couldn’t blame him.

‘If his guardian agrees and he wants to.’ Kendal offers. ‘Meanwhile, could you show us where you were dropped off?’

I agree and Layton, Kendal, mum, Rhid and I drive out to Barrow Fen where I was picked up. There’s no room in the car for Lola so she stays behind.

Kendal’s drives and we sit in silence as no one has anything to say until we approach the turn-off and bump our way down the rough farm track.

‘I have forgotten how pretty it was down here.’ Mum says. ‘Used to walk Bo down here with your Dad, years ago.’

‘Here’ I say. Kendal parks and we all get out.

‘Do you know from which direction you came?’ Layton asks.

‘The other side of the bridge, over there. I point across to the footbridge over the slowly moving Ouse, raised river-banks stretch out either side to flood plains as far as the eye can see.’ I look both ways. ‘I ran across that field. They dropped me off over by a lane by a farm.’ I point north, towards a massive field of nearly ripening rapeseed. Small yellow flowers peek through the bright green buds, stretching out as far as the eye can see.

‘It’s quite a way, perhaps we should drive around.’ Mum says.

‘We can cover this route on foot later. Once we’ve found where they held you.’ Layton adds.

We all pile back in the police car and drive slowly in the direction I think I came. I feel nervous and put my arm through mum’s arm. She squeezes it tight and takes a deep breath. As we drive. Looking out and silent I see the shape of two tall structures on the horizon. Then three, four, five come into view. The huge propellers of the wind turbines rotate in time like jumbo jets with the aircraft body bit missing, weirdly dismembered monumental Junkyard art.

‘I heard turbine propellers.’ I state. ‘The farm buildings were near a wind farm.’

Layton and Kendal look at each other and then back at the road. There is a turning off to the right a few hundred yards ahead. Kendal takes it and we slow speed to steady pace on the bumpy farm road. We follow it for about half a mile. Again, in silence. I close my eyes. The bumps feel familiar. The grind of the stony track under the tires. The turbines grow before our eyes, closer and closer. Massive towering eco giants. I open my window, push my head into the wind stream I look up. Each propeller must weigh a ton. I imagine it spinning off and crashing into us. I imagine them cartwheeling over these massive crop fields of crops, destroying everything in its wake.

Kendal stops at the end of the line in the middle of a group of farm buildings with corrugated iron roofs, mostly empty except for one which has a padlock and chain across its battered door. Kendal switches off the car engine and we step out. We stand in silence for a few moments and look around. A breeze sweeps through the yard as Skylarks soar overhead, a buzzard circles an overgrown dyke and there it is –

thud, thud, thud.

The wind turbine, loud and clear. Layton tries to force the padlock, but it’s stuck fast. He searches for something to break it.

I stare at the door remembering the voices of the men who kidnapped me just a few hours before. I hear the voice of the man who threatened me with a 'ten' if I didn't stay clear of the investigation and wonder if I'll ever stop hearing these voices.

Layton tries a piece of pipe on the chain, levering it back and forth, a screeching, rusted sound that sets my nerves on edge.

I can't move.

I don't like it here.

Kendal notices. 'Why don't you stay in the car while we have a little look around.'

I'm happy to comply.

Mum stays outside, taking it in. Slowly. I watch her for a few moments until she notices me watching her and joins me in the car.

'You must have been so scared.' She says, her heart tight with pain for what I went through. I can see it all over her face. She pulls me in. Unable to hold it together any longer streams of tears, tears from somewhere deep, deep down, a place I didn't know I had. I empty myself into her arms soaking her jumper as my body shakes and shakes and shakes...

...

Shortly after Kendal drops us back home Ida arrives with a man in a grey suit, immaculately white shirt and spotted pink tie. Lola's made pancakes and starts dishing them out, a variety of fillings present themselves.

'Ida!' I throw my arms around her small, bony frame. Goodness knows how she must be feeling. She feels frail, extremely frail. The past week has taken its toll.

'Taylor. How are you dear? Goodness Helen told me what happened.'

I'm Ok. Thanks. How's Pete? Have you seen him?'

She steps aside, 'I want you all to meet Mr Redfern. He's a solicitor.' Ida wears a strained, polite smile like she can't believe she's in a situation that needs a solicitor.

'Monty. Please to meet you.' Monty briskly introduces himself and I take his extended hand.

'He didn't do it. I know he didn't.' I blurt and instantly wonder how many times he's heard that. To his credit, Monty does a good impression of looking sympathetic.

'Well, the fact that the evidence they've presented so far is circumstantial is positive. Hopefully, it stays that way and nothing else turns up. Then we're in the easy street.'

'Mr. Redfern is looking through Pete's medical records to build our case.' Ida adds.

'Diminished responsibility is looking like the best option. We're going to forward a plea of not guilty.'

'Hospital didn't suit him. The longer he spent in there the worse he seemed to get.' Ida adds.

'I may have an idea why that was.' I say. Everyone waits for my explanation. 'Someone was visiting him.' Monty and Ida wait for more. 'Someone who didn't have Pete's best interests at heart.'

'He didn't say anything to me...' Ida ponders.

'I think it was Cyd.'

'Why do you think that?' Mum's quick to question my accusations as usual.

'Just a hunch.'

'Who's Cyd?' Monty is following.

'Cynthia Mendes. The girl who's leading the online memorial ...' Rhid explains.

'...and the witch-hunt to find Pete.' I chip in.

'Bit of a turncoat?' Monty's quick to read between the lines.

'You could say that.'

We all think quietly for a moment. 'Visiting someone in the hospital isn't going to connect her to the murder.' Monty muses. 'In fact, it almost implies the opposite. Friendship.'

'Can't we just ask Pete about this?' Mum bring Ida some tea and a biscuit.

'I could try. I'm going there after this. Baked him his favourite. Chocolate brownies.'

Ida pulls a lunch box packed with the dark chocolatey cake from her bag.

'Or I could?' I suggest. 'Could you ask Pete if he'll see me? Please? I need to...not just for this...I just need to see him.'

Ida looks broken. Like she's preparing to accept a truth about her child that no one should have to. 'I'll ask. About both: if Cyd visited him and if you can, but I warn you. Be prepared though: He might say no. He's ...very hurt. Doesn't know who to trust.'

I pull out the Lego cabin I've kept in my pocket since leaving home to meet HENCH yesterday afternoon. It wasn't that I thought it come it'd come in useful rather I felt better with it near me. Pretty stupid I know.

'Give him this, will you?' I place it in Ida's hand, folding her fingers over its roof. 'He'll know what it is ...and that it's from me.' I think about telling them where I got it. That I saw him put it on Kasha's memorial, watched him ignore my call and run off in the rain and how I stole it to be closer to him ... to feel more connected. To show him I'm still a part of his life if he'll let me.

But I decided against it. 'He'll know what it means.'

Chapter thirty-one | putting the pieces together

The next four hours move slowly as I wait to hear back from Ida. I go to my room and try to sleep but can't. I play something on Netflix, a new Scandi crime drama Lola's been bugging me to watch, and it keeps my mind off the present long enough to binge four fifty-minute episodes back to back. I search the video stream app to see if Pete's recorded anything since that last video but obviously, he hasn't. It wasn't long after that he was arrested. I don't suppose they let him have his phone in custody. I'm just letting episode 5 play in when I receive the call I've been waiting for.

Ida says Pete will see me.

I must be at the detention centre at 10 tomorrow.

Mum insists we leave at 9.15 so what with the roads being clear, the route very straightforward we find ourselves waiting in the car park at 9.40, twenty minutes too early for the appointment. We sip hot chocolate from a thermos until it's time.

'Want me to come in with you?' Mum asks draining the last of the drink and screwing the lid back on tight.

I shake my head.

'Ok. Send him my love.'

'I will.'

I show the guard at the gate the letter PC Kendall had given me confirming who I am and my appointment time. He buzzes me through to where another guard checks my ID and directs me to a table at the end. I've no idea how Pete's going to react when we meet. What if he's only agreed to see me vent? To pull me up for all the months of neglect. I couldn't blame him.

I take a breath and open the door.

The room is bright but plain. There's one bed, a wash basin, a toilet, one small table and a chair. The officer shows Me in, 'Leave the door ajar.' He says and steps outside.

I turn to Pete sitting at a table carefully pressing a small red glass square into some rolled-out clay.

'Hi, Pete.' My voice is uncertain. I try again with more conviction. 'How are you doing?'

Green, blue, purple, yellow tiles are scattered around him like pieces of a jigsaw. He makes no sign or effort to greet me, his attention stuck firmly on his work.

I step forward nervously. 'What are you making?'

He doesn't look up. 'A mosaic.'

I move closer. He lays another tile, pressing it tightly next to the previous one.

'They said I could make something for the garden.' He mumbles reluctantly, eyes down.

'What's it of?'

'Can't tell you.'

I'm confused. 'Why?'

'Don't want to.'

'Oh.' This is harder than I expected.

Sensing the awkwardness, he adds, 'Thanks for coming.'

'I wanted to come earlier Pete, but they said you didn't want to see me.'

'I didn't.'

He lays another piece as I take that in. I don't need to ask why. 'What made you change your mind?'

He shifts in his seat, uncomfortable with the question. 'Romans invented mosaics you know.'

'I did know.' I remember something about this at the museum.

'Romans were here a long time ago.' He points to the ground by his chair. 'Right here.'

'I know. They got around those Romans.' This is, in fact, all I knew about the Romans.

'They built a road over the hill by the woods.' He adds.

'The Roman road over at Wandlebury?'

'Yeah. Been up there loads with Gran. We look for mosaics and bits of pottery, but we never find any.'

'A lot of that stuff's probably already in museums. I saw a bunch of it when I was looking for you a few days ago.'

'You were looking for me?'

'Yes. Me and Rhid and my friend Lola, and the police—we looked all over.'

He takes that in 'What will people in the future find of us in a thousand years?'

'Not much worth keeping, I bet.'

He nods. 'We hardly even print photos anymore and no one knows how long all this digital stuff's going to last. No one will know what we looked like.' He looks sad and regards his work. 'Did you know that in Pompeii, Italy, the place that had that big volcano hundreds of years ago, you can see people captured in time? In molten lava. You can see what they looked like and how they lived in the murals, mosaics and sculptures they left behind?'

‘I remember learning about Pompeii at school. The mummified people freaked me out if I’m honest. Creepy. Like mum’s casts.’

Pete laughs then shifts uncomfortably. He lays a blue tile. ‘They think I killed Kasha.’

‘I know.’

He dabs at the glue pot with a brush. ‘I didn’t.’

‘I know.’

Pete looks up. ‘How do you know?’

‘I know you couldn’t do that.’

Pete thinks this over. ‘Can’t know what a person can do. Not even that person. Not even you.’ He looks at me properly for the first time. ‘They found her blood on my clothes.’

‘I know. But that doesn’t prove—’

‘Makes a pretty strong case though—that’s what Monty said.’

‘Monty doesn’t think you did it either. He’s on our side.’

‘Our side?’

‘Yes. Our. You, me, Ida’s, Rhid, Mum—and a bunch of others too. Our side.’

Pete looks at me strangely.

‘I saw your videos.’

That got his attention.

‘Why did you video yourself at the memorial? Were you trying to be found?’

He shrugs. ‘Just wanted to record it. I like making videos.’

‘Did you know everyone was looking for you?’

He nods.

‘What happened that night, Pete? What really happened?’

He tenses from head to toe.

'I know it's hard, but I can't help you until I know what happened.'

His eyes well and his hands shake. 'So much blood, so much blood.' He cries, hugging himself. The officer peers around the door. 'Everything OK?'

I put my arm around Pete, I can't bear to see him like this.

'Did you see who killed Kasha?' He stops, holds his breath, looks at me and shakes his head defiantly.

'I didn't see. I didn't see anything!'

Over by the door, the officer shuffles, eager to move things on. I've only got a short time.

'Pete, there something I need to ask you.'

He looks up nervously.

'Did Cyd ever visit you in hospital?'

'Yeah. Few times.'

'She didn't say anything to upset you, did she? Ask you to do anything you didn't want to?'

'No.' He shakes his head again, unconvincingly. 'Cyd is my friend.'

'I'm not sure I'd call her that.'

'You're jealous!' He explodes. 'What do you know about friendship? You don't know anything! Cyd IS my friend, MY TRUE FRIEND!'

'Shush. You'll get me thrown out.'

'Good idea: get us both thrown out!' Pete shouts again.

The officer pokes his head in. 'What's going on?'

'Sorry. My fault.' I come around to Pete's side of the table and put an arm around him again, finger to my mouth. 'Shush, will you? Please. I don't want to get thrown out. I'm sorry.'

‘I want to go now. Why won’t they let me go?’ Pete’s voice changes. His body slumps from excitement to tears.

‘I’m sorry we haven’t seen much of each other recently.’

Pete looks at his feet. I can see him wrestling with conflicting emotions—you can always see what he’s feeling.

“Sor’ right.’ He looks up. ‘You’ve been studying. I know that. Film Studies.’

‘I could have called. Made time to see you. But I haven’t.’

‘You’ve been busy.’ He continues, pausing and adds, ‘People are always busy.’ I remember Pete often said deep, true things simply and without fuss. I love this about him. It reminds me of what drew me to him in the first place, the honesty their friendship was built on.

‘Yes, they are.’ I hold one of the red mosaic tiles, brushing my thumb across its cold smooth surface. ‘Anyway, I just want to say, I’m not going to be so busy for a while. We can spend some time together. Go to the cinema. Bowling. What do you think?’ I place the red tile in a spot next to his.

Pete nods and smiles and for a moment we are like we used to be, as if nothing of the past year happened, just two friends staring at an emerging picture.

‘5 minutes.’ The officer glares at me and Pete straightens up, instantly becoming stiff and formal.

Pete pulls out the Lego cabin. He puts it on the table. ‘Why did you give me this?’ He sulks, ‘I gave it to Kasha and you stole it.’

‘I wanted you to know I saw you: The day you put this on Kasha’s memorial. I called you. You knew it was me I know you did.’ He squirms in his seat again, uncertain what to say. He knew.

He thinks a moment. 'Put it back.'

'I will put it back. Promise. But will you tell me what means? Why did you leave this for Kasha? And... why was a picture of it on someone's called Riley Ray's Facebook. I saw she was a mutual friend of you and Kasha.'

Pete starts rocking. Back and forwards just a little. 'It's private. Between me and Kasha.'

I know this is making Pete uncomfortable, but I need to know the answers. I press a bit further. 'There's a hashtag- #rnp_escape? Only you and one other person used it. Lots of pictures of secret hide-way places, remote cabins, tree houses, huts in jungles, caves...all sorts. In it, there's a photo of this Lego cabin and a real one that looks just like it.'

Pete's rocking increases.

'Were you planning to run away? With this Riley person?'

Pete looks at me, angry and hurt. I squat down in front of him so I'm looking up and put my hands on his knees, trying to calm him. I look straight into his eyes.

'I just want to help. To understand. I want to know who killed Kasha, because I know it wasn't you and to know that I need to know who she was. Truly was.'

Pete stops moving.

'Who is this Riley girl?!'

He looks over to the window, turns and looks me square in the eye, 'Kasha. Kasha's real name was Riley Ray.'

Chapter thirty-two | a girl called Riley Ray

www.blogable.com/thisisrileyray

If You Could Have a Significant Conversation with Anyone Alive, Dead or Not Yet Born – Who Would It Be?

Billie Holiday [b.1915 – d.1959]

Riley: Billie?

Billie: What is it, honey?

Riley: I wish you weren't dead.

Billie: Oh, shush now. We all gotta die sometime. I'm just glad I made a bit of use of myself when I was around.

Riley: You inspired millions.

Billie: Why thank you.

Riley: You inspired me.

Billie: How did I do that now?

Riley: The same way you inspired all sorts of people to get out from under whatever foot is holding them down. By showing how important it is to be yourself and be proud of who you are and of fighting for what is yours. But fighting in a good way. With songs and love and peace in your heart.

Billie: Well, if I have done half of that, then I sure am proud.

Riley: It's the only way.

Billie: What is, sweetie?

Riley: Songs and love and peace in your heart.

‘Look at the date.’ I lean back from the laptop, sipping on a Coke. It’s mid-afternoon and the pub’s empty except for Frank, who’s wiping glasses.

‘It was written while she was living here, in Cambridge.’ Lola observes.

I take another sip. ‘It’s so weird reading this. I can hear her voice so clearly. It’s like I’m back there with her at Daisy’s. We even talked about our dads being big Ella fans.’

‘She’s the queen.’ Rhid scrolls through the post archive.

To be honest, I’m still reeling from the revelation, still trying to refit the what-you-see-is-what-you-get image I had of Kasha with the new faking-it-imposter I now know her to be.

It’s going to be a difficult adjustment.

‘Explains why Riley Ray didn’t reply to your friend request.’ Lola.

‘Good job she gave Pete the password.’ Rhid.

‘Seems like she wanted at least one person to know the real her.’ Lola again.

‘Maybe she knew something like this might happen and she wanted the truth to come out?’

I scroll through the archive of blog posts.

‘It’s kind of cool. A life/diary/journal she made when she was in care in London. I thought it might tell us something about who might have wanted to kill her. Each post seems to be in response to some kind of brief or assignment.’

I squint wandering which to read next.

‘What about this one?’ Rhid points to the screen and I click on the title.

Write Your Life Story in 500 words or less

I was born on the 16th of March in the year 2000, the Chinese year of the monkey, which makes me a monkey, ha, ha. Dad died of an overdose when I was four, so Mum brought me up on her own, which was hard given that she worked shifts in a packing factory. I was on my own a lot. The family next door kept an eye on me when Mum was out, let me stay over some nights, which was fine until their eldest Jayden started taking an interest if you know what I mean. Shame. His parents were nice. Then Mum lost that and got behind on rent. The council were about to throw us out, so she borrowed money and we got to stay but before long the sharks who loaned her the rent wanted it back with interest and that's when everything started going wrong. They offered her a way out of her debt if she did a few jobs for them. Turns out these jobs weren't entirely legal. Drugs running mostly. Around the estate at first but then, well, they started making her do bigger drops. Lots of money and gear changing hands. Knives. Guns. Too much testosterone flying about. Mum was nobody's fool, but this was out of control. He could play that game, but it wasn't him. He knew it was wrong. It couldn't last. It was killing him. Then she found out these guys sold the junk that killed Dad. She went crazy, I mean cra-zy. That was where it all started you see. Dad's death was when everything started going wrong. I think she'd just had enough. Can't say I blame her. She put two men in hospital and was arrested on my thirteenth birthday. She pleaded guilty, got six years and I went into care. The police however had other plans. They wanted to get these men, part of a big London cartel and told Mum she'd be out by the end of the year living somewhere far away, with me and new identities if she helped. What would you say?

It was a classic movie style sting with Mum in the middle and they got every one of the headmen apart from one, which was a shame because I was the worst of all. The police changed our names and gave us a safe house but that turned out to be not that safe. I found us, and we were lucky to get out alive. Mum said it was probably best if I wasn't around her: Life together was too risky. So, I went back into care, but we spoke every day on the phone. I'm

16 next month and that's it. They can't keep me here anymore. Mum says I should live somewhere else. Start again. But what's the point if it's not with her.

The gaps of the girl we knew as Kasha falls into place. A difficult life that was full of heartbreak and hard choices. 'No wonder she wanted to reinvent herself. How do you get on with your future when you're tied to all that?'

Kasha hadn't just changed her name and appearance, she wanted to change everything

I open another tab and Google Deedee Ray. 'Sure enough, there's an article dated the same year that describes Deedee's arrest.

'Police Raid Pulls in Major Drugs Haul- Cambridge Evening News.' I read. 'This says it was a "landmark operation significant not only because of the amount of heroin seized but for the exemplary model of cooperation between Cambridge and Metropolitan Police forces."'

I stand up. A thought hits me. 'You don't think this was why Cyd wanted to be Kasha's friend so badly? To get in with her Mum and her contacts?'

Rhid's uncharacteristically quiet. 'There were rumours...' He begins.

'What rumours?'

'That Cyd got into some trouble when she was in London—running errands for the people she worked for.'

'What kind of errands?' Rhid shrugs me a knowing look. 'You think they were drug-related?'

'Could be.' He clearly thinks they were.

'But Deedee's big league. What did she want with her?'

‘Contacts. Influence. A reputation.’

‘But why? She doesn’t need the money.’

‘To impress other people. That what she always wants.’

‘Look at this.’ Rhid’s gone back to the post archive and clicked on a post entitled: What Is the Most Valuable Thing You Own? A photograph of a pregnant black girl with long glossy hair, and red lips in a tight black mini dress. She can’t be more than eighteen or nineteen. She’s smiling and tightly holding on to a handsome young white man wearing expensive jeans, a leather bomber jacket and a pork pie hat, with a green, gold and black trim.

What Is the Most Valuable Thing You Own?

This photo of Mum and Dad. It’s the only one I have of them both together. They’re holding each other and leaning into a fierce wind on some cold east-coast beach. Mum’s heavy with me in her belly but she’s smiling. She had this great big mouth that stretched from ear to ear. I’d get lost in it, closing my eyes and holding it there in my mind in the dark so I wouldn’t forget. Even as a baby I knew that smile wouldn’t be around for long. Dad’s looking miserable, complaining about the weather, as usual, struggling to keep his hat on. He couldn’t stand the cold. ‘Should be used to it.’ He’d complain, ‘Not like I’ve lived anywhere else.’ And Mum would remind him of her Jamaican roots and tell him it should be her complaining ‘Genes remember better than brains,’ she’d say. ‘It’s not like you’ve lived anywhere else.’ According to her genes, she should be somewhere warm, with sunlight 365 days a year and sweet air and long drinks and palms shading you from the heat of the day. Fat chance, Dad would say. He was right.

The photograph of Riley’s Mum and Dad is underneath with the names ‘Deedee Ray’ and ‘Denis Smith’ below.

Underneath that, there's an anonymous comment:

- Nice picture. Interesting parents. We need to talk.

'That was posted the night she died.' Rhid observes. 'Who else had access to this blog?'

'Pete said she'd only ever shown him.'

'Well someone found their way here. Someone who wasn't Pete.'

Share A Memorable Digital Encounter

On my 15th birthday, I hadn't seen Mum for over 3 years. I missed her like crazy, but it was just too dangerous to meet, what with J still out to get him. I overheard someone talking about Life 2—a virtual reality world you hang out, make stuff, a home... do whatever you like. It was impossible to meet up in the real world, so why not here? Mum wasn't that keen at first but once we joined, she loved it. I designed myself a super sexy power babe avatar with a fab pad. I nearly fell off my chair when I saw what Mum had made for herself— a cyber-Rasta chick! LOL!! She was tall and curvy in all the right places with a huge red, gold and green-knitted shanty and orange silky Adidas tracksuit with blades and Nike Airs. I laughed so much it was a while before I could touch the keys. All the years I'd missed her hit me and I could barely type. She'd called himself DD. I used Miss Yelir (Riley spelt backwards). She'd built a tropical island paradise with palm trees that swayed and turquoise sea with brightly coloured fish and a little bamboo hut with hammocks swinging outside. We spent hours there chatting, adding new dreams to our world—a world where no one could hurt us—and we could be together.

I sit up to see Rhid, head down, staring intensely at his phone. 'What are you doing?'

'I thought I'd try that Life 2 account. I've always wanted to give it a go.'

‘How far you got?’

‘The username “missyelir” clears, but I’m stuck on the password. Tried D.O.B, mother’s name...’

I have a think. ‘Try *Don’t Stop Believin’*? No spaces, no “g” at the end.’ Rhid gives me a weird look. ‘That single release’s artwork is on her Instagram—her mum’s favourite song apparently.’

‘Ok.’ Rhid types it in, presses enter. Beat. ‘Bingo!’

We explore the world she’s made there using her avatar that looks just like Kasha. More bling, sexier, but then aren’t they always? The page pictures a map showing all the different places they have created. There’s a glitzy house on an island surrounded by flowers and palms and a pool in the shape of a heart. We walk into the garden, through the bright clean open-plan kitchen to a room full of musical instruments. Even here music’s an essential part of her life. We back out and move upstairs to the large bedroom with a waterbed and palatial outside balcony.

Suddenly a tall Rastafarian in a brightly coloured tracksuit stride in. What the hell do you think you are doing here? Who are you? It’s Deedee and even through words-on-a-screen, he sounds angry. I grab Rhid’s phone and type. It’s Taylor. I found Kasha. Or should I say, Riley? I spoke to you the day after she was killed. Remember?

Nothing.

Your number was on my phone.

Nothing.

I need a hook.

There’s a parcel for you in Walthamstow—it’s being held by your neighbour. He said a

girl delivered it the day before Kasha was killed. I think it was Kasha. I think she tried to see you.

Deedee's colourful Rastafarian avatar is suddenly still. Frozen like an animated puppet with its strings cut. For a while, I think she's gone and wonder what to do. Then, after what seems like an age, it moves. I'll send someone for the parcel.

I type as fast as I could, worried that might be it.

Did you know the man they've arrested for Kasha's death was a friend of Kasha's? And mine. He couldn't have killed her. He couldn't.

Nothing.

You said you knew who killed her. It was you on the phone last week, wasn't it? You spoke to me remember. Your number was in my phone. Kasha had tried to call you that night from my phone! You have to tell me. You have to tell the police!

Nothing.

I can't help.

But you HAVE to. Pete's innocent.

Nothing.

I spoke to her just before she was killed. She was worried about something. Do you know what that could have been?

You spoke to her?

Yes.

Taylor waited.

Let's talk.

Chapter thirty-three | life is consequences

Monday. Nine days after Kasha's death.

There is no way Lola or Rhid are going to let me go on my own, despite it being the specific and only conditions under which Deedee would meet, so the three of us cycle over to the meeting point.

'I can't believe you're actually going to meet this guy.' Lola is excited. Too excited.

'I have to. You heard what she said. No police.' We cycle up to the corner of Silver Street by the Anchor bridge.

'But I still don't see how it's going to help Pete.'

'I'm going to persuade her to tell us who killed Kasha. Riley. She said she knew on the phone, before. I just hope that wasn't bluffing.'

We turn down Mill Lane past the punt flotilla and park our bikes. From here we can see the meeting point, by the millpond weir. Public. Safe. Cows walk across the path ignoring tourists and students, splatting at will.

'Here's a good spot.' Rhid and Lola wedge themselves between a wall and punt tour sign. 'We'll stay here, out of sight. If you go anywhere, we'll follow. Keep your hand in your pocket on your phone. If you don't like how things are going give me a call.'

I nod, putting my hand on my phone as instructed and to show I've understood. 'Don't take any risks.' Rhid uses the same serious tone he used before I went out with Jonty but I'm listening this time. This situation is considerably more dangerous. I suddenly feel as nervous

as hell. I breathe in deeply, feeling the air enter and fill my chest. It's the exhalation I need. It's the exhalation that smooths out the anxiety.

'It'll be fine.' Rhid reassures, not entirely convincing. He smiles nervously and ducks to his wall spot, as I walk out towards the bridge.

Deedee doesn't look like I expect, but I recognise her straight off. Something about the way she leans on the bridge near the weir by one of Cambridge's oldest colleges. It's like she belongs here, even though her life couldn't be further from this place. She wears a dark grey shirt, worn Diesel jeans, expensive trainers and a well-cut brown leather jacket. Her hair is glossy and medium length—unlike the long dreads of her avatar. A few lines of silver pepper otherwise jet-black hair. I guess she's in her late forties, but I might be wrong. She has Kasha's smooth skin, a shade darker, but glowing still, from the inside. Attractive in an uncomplicated way—quiet and confident. Her all-seeing eyes take in the picturesque scene—happy tourists, punters, students going about their business in the summer sun.

I wonder what she really sees.

She's lived a very different life, in a very different world from this. A world driven by street laws, dishonesty, exploitation and reputation.

Perhaps there's more in common than I think.

'You must be Taylor.' I approach her but she's the first to speak. Her voice is deep, soft and familiar. It's the voice on the phone, confident and measured.

A lot has happened since then.

'Hi.' My voice does that failing thing again. Like it's gone somewhere else. I clear my throat and try again. 'Hi.' That's more like it.

'Hi. Pretty place you got here.' She smiles. 'I can see why Kasha liked it.'

‘Thanks very much. I generously open it out from to time. You know. Let the public enjoy the sights.’

She keeps smiling. ‘Very generous of you. Very generous.’

I find myself grinning too. I hadn’t expected it to be like this.

‘Shall we move somewhere more private?’ She’s upbeat and polite but there’s something sad about her too. Unsurprising, as the woman *has* just lost her daughter.

‘I know where we can go. Follow me.’

We walk along the weir bridge until the cobbled road on the other side gives way to tarmac and a pedestrian crossing. She says nothing while we wait for the lights to change like she’s somewhere else. I look around, checking to see if Rhid and Lo are following. Their bikes are gone so I’m hoping they’ve ducked behind a corner somewhere.

‘I’m so sorry about Kasha.’

Deedee turns and nods as the light changes from green to amber. ‘Let’s find a place to sit. Then we’ll talk.’

We walk through narrow lanes and more cobbled streets and back over a smaller bridge to a quiet green. It’s one of the few college spaces open to the public. Not many people know about it. Even in the peak of summer, when tourists take over the city with their tour guides and cagoules this place is an oasis of quiet. The occasional blackbird fight or duck chase the only action for hours.

We sit on a bench by the river, overlooking the neat arches and colonnades of a college library. I spot Rhid’s hoody peeking out above the bridge wall.

‘Thank you for making us meet. I know I haven’t been...that approachable.’

‘How about threatening and down-right intimidating.’

‘Force of habit. Sorry.’

'I read about what happened to you, the situation with the police and ...the people you... worked for...' I choose my words carefully.

'Used to work for—because I had no choice.'

'So, what happened to Kasha?'

'She died because I was a fool.' She turns to me with a hard stare. 'But don't be so quick to judge. Not until you've walked a mile in another person's shoes.'

'Who killed her?'

'Jimmie.' She says, more to herself than me.

'Who's Jimmie?' Is that the "J" of Riley's Story of Your Life post?

'Jimmie Lake. He pretended to be a friend but all he gave me was heartache and then more.

'You were friends?' She nods. 'Or at least I thought so. He helped me out, lent me money to keep a roof over our heads. It was that or the street. Looking back, I'd say the street might have been a better option.'

'I can't imagine living on the street is ever a better option.'

'I don't suppose you can imagine what it's like to live in an ever-increasing debt that you see no way of getting out of. A life of service to bad men doing bad things to bad people. Everyone you love at risk...'

'No. I can't.'

'You've lucky.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. We're dealt the lives we're given. Everyone's got their crosses to bear.'

‘So, when you were arrested you decided to have your revenge.’

Deedee smiles. ‘Done your research then.’ She seems amused. ‘I didn’t want to miss Riley growing up. I told the police what they wanted to know, and they promised me early release and a change of identity for me and my daughter.’

I stand and walk off a few paces, thinking to myself, ‘So...Kasha’s murder...I mean Riley... was revenge. To get you back for getting him arrested all those years ago?’ Deedee nods. ‘Because you put this Jimmie away all those years ago?’ She nods again. ‘This Jimmie must be one seriously fucked up dude. No wonder Layton and Kendal went a bit grey when I mentioned him.’

‘Layton and Kendal?’

‘The police.’

‘That sting lost them millions. Not least his reputation. I thought I’d won. But no. Jimmie got what he wanted in the end. He’s made me pay for what I did to him in the worse way he could.’

‘So how did Riley end up here as Kasha?’

‘There was no way we’d be reassigned new identities together. Jimmy’s men would find us too easily. We lived apart- total social media blackout. No communication except for in Life 2, as you know.’ She looks over to where two Japanese tourists were taking pictures of the punts on the river. ‘...she left the care home where she was staying the day before her 16th birthday when they’d have kicked her out anyway.’

I stand up again and pace around in front of the bench. ‘You’ve got to tell the police. Tell them what you’ve told me.’

‘I *can’t*. I have other people to think about now.’

‘But you have to! Pete’s innocent!’

'I can't. I can't let all this happen again. I have people I need to protect.'

'This is your chance to make something right. You can't let Jimmie get away with this, can you? He killed Kasha!'

Silence.

'Can you let an innocent man be charged with her murder? Can you let Jimmie win again?' I'm so angry I can hardly speak.

'I have People I told you.

Who?

A friend's brother and his baby. Mum's gone. I'm all they have between a safe life and a dangerous one. I can't do anything that'd risk their safety.' She's working hard to stay composed.

I stand apart from her now. Staring, wondering what else I can say to make her change her mind. I think about telling him about Riley being pregnant but decide not to.

That would be low. A dirty jab-kick to his already broken heart.

Maybe she'll find out one day but not from me.

'Life is consequences. Everything you do and everything you don't – you carry it around until the day you die.' Deedee's talking about herself. 'Guilt. Regret. Don't fade with time. It just keeps on growing. And growing.' I can see how Jimmie has ruined Deedee's life. 'Sometimes I wish I was religious.'

She's the reason for all of this. For Kasha's death. For Pete being arrested. For me being here now, up to my neck in all of this. I briefly wonder what I'd be doing right now if I hadn't found Kasha that night.

My overdue film assignment most probably.

'All this because of a photograph posted on the internet.'

‘She was stupid to put that up. I told her not to. The internet is a slippery thing. Sticky and forgetting. She’d stayed too long in Cambridge, she knew that, but she had made friends. Thought she had anyway. Fallen in love.’

Jonty. She had loved him. ‘She was trying to put the past behind her. Make a fresh start.’

‘Fresh starts are dreams for children. Life doesn’t work that way.’ She sounded cynical for the first time.

‘But she was a child.’

Deedee’s quiet. ‘Circumstances are a curious thing. They can raise you up then spit you out. They don’t give a damn about you or anything you love.’

We sit in silence lost in thought as a punt full of French tourists pull up on the river nearby. They click their cameras, admire the architecture but they might as well be in a different universe.

‘Did you get the parcel?’ I suddenly remember she said she was going to. I was dying to know if it was from Kasha.

Deedee nods. ‘It was from Riley. She wrote me a letter, explaining a few things and recorded a few bits.’ She pulls out a phone and some buds, passes me one keeps the other, selects an audio file and presses play.

‘Hi, Mum, I’ve been trying you in Life 2, but you must be away. I’ve been missing you this week. Cyd’s being a bitch, ignoring me. I thought she’d got over wanting to meet you, but it seems not. She worries me. She’s on a mission. Some agenda of her own and I don’t know where I fit in anymore. A part of me thinks I should leave, but then another says I should stay. I’m tired of having to keep moving on. Things with Jonty and me are a bit uncertain too. He’s stuck in the middle. Half of him sides with his sister, the other with me. I’m not sure where he’s

going to land. Cyd thinks she can control everyone's life. She's hiding something twisted inside.

If I have to move again, I'd do it. You know that, don't you? Just say the word.

I thought you might like this song. It won the Cambridge Got Talent Competition. The judge's lined me up with some big-shot producer as part of the prize, pretty cool. Seeing him next week. Wish me luck! I was thinking of you when I sang it. I think that's why it sounds so good. blessings and love to you, Mum. Always your Riley-roo xx

Then she sings.

These things they don't need names

These things, but I learnt them all the same.

I found a voice for my tears

Made stories from those years

Stories I'll tell over and over

Until you come back to me

Until you come back to me

I turn away, eyes swollen wet and burning. It's all I can do to stop myself from curling up on the floor right there and sobbing like a toddler. I hand back Deedee's bud.

'Truth is plastic.' I say. Something I'd been thinking suddenly popping into my head.

Deedee eyes me curiously. 'You mean it's bendy and life has a habit of knocking it out of shape?'

'Something like that.' She got it. I wipe my face with my sleeve, and she smiles at me briefly. Apologetically. Perhaps she's wondering what I'm thinking—but if she is, she's not wondering for long.

‘Goodbye Taylor.’ She turns and walks away leaving me standing alone, with the one question I’d hoped to clear up still running through my head. How was I going to save Pete?

Rhid emerges from the colonnade. It’s Rhid.

‘Everything alright? What did she say?’

‘It was Jimmy. He killed Kasha...Riley...whatever.’

‘The man who kidnapped you?’

I nod. ‘Revenge, like we thought, for getting him arrested.’

Lola pops out behind him. ‘Will she tell the police?’

I shake my head. ‘She’s scared. Jimmie might want more revenge and she feels she’s paid enough.’

‘So, what now?’ Lola looks at me like I might actually have a clue.

I shrug and stretch and look at my phone where I have a missed call—from Cyd! I listen to the message. *Meet me at the chalk pit. It’s important.*

‘Who’s that?’ Lola asks.

‘Cyd. She wants to meet.’

‘OMG. When?’ She’s suddenly very over-excited.

‘Now.’

‘Well come on! Let’s go.’

‘She just wants me.’

‘So fine, we’ll hide. You’re not going up there on your own.’

‘There was something weird about her voice.’

‘What?!’ Rhid and Lola chime together, as they hurry me over to our bikes.

‘She sounded like she’d been crying.’

Chapter thirty-four | same but different

It's dusk. Low in the sky, the sun shoots crepuscular rays through the fresh green of early summer trees lining the narrow road. We cycle our way up to Lime Kiln Hill the steepest hill for miles around and towards the South chalk pits. We compete for road space with the tail end of speeding commuter traffic, cutting corners and accelerating fast round a sharp blind bend. Much to her disappointment, I sent Lola home under strict instructions to call the police if we don't contact her in 1 hour. We set timers. Right now, mine reads 13 minutes and 23 seconds.

A shiny grey Mercedes SL swerves past too fast, and I wobble onto the verge. I stop and catch my breath.

Some distance ahead, Rhid realises I'm not behind him and shouts back. 'You Ok?'

Deep breath. 'Yep.' I gather myself. 'Be there in a minute.'

When we reach the entrance to the pit at the top of the hill I'm completely out of breath. Rhid looks like he's just cycled down our road. He comes here regularly to use the tracks. Unlike the other chalk pits dotted around Cambridge's South East rim, this one hasn't been flooded into a lake, and mountain bikers and BMX riders, hungry for anything resembling a gradient have claimed it as their own creating a complicated network of dirt tracks, ramps and jumps circumnavigates the pit. Night's falling. The place looks deserted.

'I'll wait over here.' Rhid walks his bike over to a nearby tree by the fence. 'Call me if you're even the slightest bit worried.'

I call him. He answers. 'Rhid. I'm worried.' He smiles and disconnects. 'Something's wrong. I've never heard Cyd sound like. Ever.'

Rhid's also worried. 'Well let's find out...that's why we're here right? Or... we could just go to the police. Tell them what we know. Let them deal with it.'

I shake my head. 'It's not enough though, is it? What we know. We need something concrete to clear Pete.' Rhid nods. 'Also, I need to know how Cyd is tied up in all of this.' We leave our bikes at the gate. I straighten my satchel and walk inside.

The chalk pit overlooks a rare vantage point of the city, one of the few around for miles. The lights of the dark buildings below twinkle and countless soaring cranes topped with red flashing torches like lighthouses signalling the city's restless expansion. The surrounding countryside is dark but the pit itself is strangely bright. A blue glow from the chalky white cliffs pulses like electricity, bouncing off the hard limey clay dotted with small scraggy yellow flowers.

It's otherworldly, beautiful and spooky.

I walk up the side of a cut earth mound, along a narrow path, onto an earth platform and wait.

Cambridge stretches below, silent and twinkling in the half-light.

'Why do you always have to mess things up?' Cyd sits on a half-pipe, legs crossed, cigarette slowly burning in hand. Out to bat first as usual.

'What do you mean?' Despite Cyd confrontational tone I try to keep the question friendly. There's nothing of the upset, vulnerable Cyd I heard on my message less than an hour ago. The Cyd I thought might need my help. 'You mess things up for yourself.'

Cyd looks away. 'Some people's choices are made for them.'

'You think so?'

'I know so.' She drops down off her perch and faces me, her face serious, heart cold. I wonder what she means. Then I remember something Deedee said.

'Life is consequences.'

'What?'

'The choices we make have consequences.' Probably best not to tell Cyd about meeting Deedee. I take a step closer. 'Cyd. I know what you did.'

'What do you know?'

'I know you found out that Kasha Stone was really Riley Ray and that her dad had some connections you thought would be useful to make you essential to your music industry mates, then when she wouldn't introduce you, you sidestepped her and found your own way. To Deedee's old boss. Jimmie.'

Cyd's mildly impressed. She walks a few paces and looks out across the strange chalky moonscape, the light fading.

'Did you tell Jimmie where to find Kasha?' I ask. Cyd turns away.

No reply.

'Why did you ask me here?' I'm annoyed now. 'Why were you so upset on the phone? Why am I here?'

A car approaches in the distance. 'I've got to go.' Cyd's suddenly got nervous. She looks over her shoulder.

'But we only just arrived. There's so much more we need to talk about.'

'Not leave here, the chalk pit—although I do—but here, Cambridge. I asked you to meet me because... I need to lie low for a bit.' She stops and turns around again.

'You're not getting away with this Cyd. I won't let you. You led this psycho Jimmie to Kasha. You may not have killed her yourself but what you did. It's not far off.'

Cyd didn't like that. She walks right up to me like she going to head butt me but then looks around nervously. 'I had. No. Choice.' She whispers, conspiratorially. Like she's trying to tell me something but can't say.

'There are always choices.' I say. Sounding like a broken record.

Cyd shakes her head. 'Not with these people.' She moves them both away, near the cliff face. 'There was a guy...' She stays close, whispering still, '... sorting me out for a few favours. You know, just mates and friends you understand. Anyway, he took a shine to me. Followed me online. Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook. You know. The usual. He did what everyone does. Nosed about. Well, he saw Kasha in a photo and recognized her straight away as Deedee's kid Riley. He showed Jimmie and Jimmie saw a way to get revenge on Deedee putting him away all those years. But he couldn't just kill her. The police would know instantly who to blame.'

'They needed a fall guy.'

'Someone who could be made to look so indisputably guilty that there would be no need for the police to dig any further.'

'Pete.' I can't believe she set Pete up. This was beyond way beyond anything I thought her capable of. I was disgusted. Speechless. 'How could you?

'As I said. I didn't have a choice.'

Then it dawns on me: Jimmie threatened Cyd too. I fix her straight in the eye. 'What level did he say he'd do to you?'

Cyd's surprised. 'How do you...?'

'Jimmie kidnapped me. Stole Kasha's mobile that I took from your flat by the way, and a CD of those posts you deleted between you and Kasha...'

‘No way?!’ Cyd almost smiles. ‘I knew you were up to something. Resourceful *Little Madam*, aren’t you?’

‘Which level?’

She pauses. ‘10.’

‘Me too. Said Kasha had been an 8. I don’t know how...’

Cyd shakes her head. ‘Jimmie is full of shit. Thinks he’s in a movie most of the time but his temper’s real enough. He’s a complete and utter 100% psychopathic bastard.’

Crack.

A stick breaks nearby and I look about. Rhid’s waving at me from behind a bush. I check my timer. We have twenty minutes left before Lola calls the police.

I look back to Cyd. She has her head down, eyes on her phone and didn’t hear.

I mime for Rhid to get the hell down and shush. He starts texting furiously.

‘So, you said you’re leaving?’

Cyd looks up and nods. ‘But you’ve got to tell the police the truth.’

‘What? And get myself arrested or killed? No thanks.’

‘But Pete?’

‘He’ll be alright. They’re not going to put him in proper prison are they, not with his learning difficulties. ‘

‘What will you do now?’

‘Well, well.’ Jimmie’s rough voice cuts through the air as he steps towards them. He holds out both hands, palms up and open. ‘Two birds. ‘He turns both hands onto his chest. ‘One stone.’ Grins. ‘Me.’ Another man in a dark suit steps out from behind a bush. Cyd practically flinches, nerves to ultra-alert like a rabbit at the hoot of an owl. I’ve never seen Cyd lose her cool like that with anyone.

I'm now officially scared.

Two more men of a similar build step out from the shadows. One's a pasty blonde with steely blue eyes and the other is young and black, the whites of his eyes shining back at them like a machine.

'Fuck.' Cyd's thinking through her options fast. She checks her phone.

'Fuck indeed. Ah. Taylor...' Jimmie takes a few steps forward and blows smoke in my direction. I see what Cyd meant about Jimmie thinking he's in a film. There's something about his whole attitude that reeks of gangster film cliché. 'You didn't listen, did you?' Something tells me this is a rhetorical question and I keep quiet. 'I told you—gave you due warning. Leave. Well. Alone.' He says the last words so slowly it's as if his brain's spelling out each letter. Has a certain unhinged quality to it.

It's effective, I'll give him that.

Jimmie turns his attention back to Cyd. He takes a few steps towards her putting his arm around her shoulder, smiling. I watch her looking for an exit. It's making me think I should do the same.

'Remember what you said?' Cyd growls at Jimmie.

'I remember. But then again—perhaps I don't. Sometimes it's hard to remember what I have or haven't said. I say so much all the time. Gabber, gabber, gabber. Such a chatterbox me. Just ask Frank here.'

The man with shinning machine eyes, Frank nods. 'Right chatterbox. Shit memory.'

Jimmie takes a step forward. The other men do the same and I step back instinctively. They approach again. Cyd and I both take another step back. They approach. We step back—approach, and another and another...then...

'SHIT!' My foot drops away.

The edge of the ledge we've been backing onto crumbles. I slip down the steep loose chalky cliff until my chin hits the loose rough, dry earth. The pain is sharp and uneven—the taste of blood in my mouth like metal as it seeps from the growing cuts in my face. Cyd—who's managed to stay on firmer ground—lunges forward and grabs the nearest part of me: My satchel. It pulls up over my chest, twisting my jacket, sliding over my back as my weight pulls me down. It's about to come off completely so I arch my back, lower one arm, hold my body rigid. Anything to stop it coming off.

Cyd reaches for my hand but we can't quite touch. She tries to find something solid to brace against but everything's chalky and crumbling away. She finds a root and has just enough time to wriggle her arm around and up. Cyd works her hand down the jacket and grabs hold of my arm.

'For God's sake. Help me here!' Cyd calls out.

Jimmie doesn't move. 'How touching.' He's got a nice line in sarcasm, a quality I'd admire under different circumstances.

'Help me!' Cyd demands. 'I can't hold her.'

I slip, pulling Cyd off the root safety platform and large chunks of chalk dirt crash to the ground several metres below. On her knees Cyd leans back, holding my wrists braced with all her weight. 'I'm so sorry, Tay. I hoped to get you away before they came.' Cyd pulls harder. 'I was hoping to see you, to explain to...I don't know and then I was going to disappear. Ugh.'

Cyd pulls with every muscle she has as I scramble for a footing on the loose earth. I finally find a root I can push up off.

'I didn't want you to have to see ...' She doesn't finish her sentence. A shot rings out—ricocheting around the pit. Deafening. Heart-stopping.

Followed by a moment of silence.

Cyd arches her back, eyes looking up, wider than I've has ever seen them before. 'I messed up, didn't I?'

'Yes, you fucking did.' I sob, trying to keep eye contact through tears. At that moment, the girl looking back at me is everything she used to be.

My childhood companion: the girl I grew up with, the girl I spent hours with, days with. Years.

My best friend.

Then she's gone.

She collapses forward, diving over the cliff's edge like an acrobatic. Beautiful. A near-perfect score.

Trust Cyd to find the coolest way to die.

Then.

Thump.

The sound of flesh and bones landing on hard ground.

I scream. I scream for what seems like a while and my scream comes back to me echoing around the solid white cliffs.

When I stop, I look down.

The place where she landed, splayed on chalky rocks, is surrounded by blood.

My foot slips.

Someone grabs me.

It's Rhid.

He pulls me up and up, our arms in agony until ... finally on firm ground at the top of the cliff, panting to catch my breath. I wrap my arms around him. Tight, so tight.

Policemen and women scatter everywhere. Jimmie and his men are rounded up, arm locked, ruby tackled, handcuffed into police cars, one by one.

"You alright?" Rhid asks.

I nod but something else is on my mind. I pull my phone from my pocket.

It's still recording, thank god.

I press stop, and check the file:

It reads a length of 00:23:06.

'I have it.' I whisper and look down at Cyd lying dead on the ground below. 'I have what we need to clear Pete.'

Chapter thirty-five | after

‘It’s all my fault! My fault, don’t you see? I should have stayed with her like she asked me to. If I’d stayed, she’d still be alive now. Cyd would still be alive. Everyone one would be fine!’

It’s late, I’m tired, and safe to say, just a little bit emotional. Sobbing uncontrollably, I run to my room and Mum, in her infinite wisdom, recommends I stay there for a bit and try to get some rest.

‘It’s not your fault, Tay. None of this is your fault. Shush.’ Mum hugs me tight, rocking me slightly on the edge of the bed. ‘Dad’s on his way. He should be here any minute.’

‘Really? He’s coming home?’

‘Yes, of course. He’s been so worried about you.’

I calm down slightly. Suddenly a wave of extreme tiredness comes over me and let myself fall back onto the pillow. Sleep takes over me like a welcome cover. Somewhere far away I feel Mum slide off my jeans, stroke the hair from my eyes and tuck the duvet around me. She’s stepping out quietly when Dad arrives. I see him at the door through half-closed eyes and for a moment seeing them together, their warmth, familiarity and shared concern fills me with love.

Some things are the same.

Some things—good things—remain unchanged.

‘Don’t wake up.’ He kneels by my bed and leans in to kiss me like he used to, when I was younger, stroking my forehead gently. ‘Sleep. We can talk when you’ve had some rest.’

I smile, he smells of pressed cotton shirts, light sweat and travel. I love that smell.

As he leaves, shutting the door without a sound, I hear a knock on the front door downstairs. Mum opens it to Rhid's Mum and Dad then all I hear are excited concerned voices and Mrs Smith speaking mixed English and Bangladeshi at Rhid who's trying to reassure her he's ok.

When I come down later, Kendal and Layton are sitting in the living room, with Dad and Mum, Mrs and Mrs Smith, Rhid and Ida.

'Hello, Taylor. Feeling any better?' Layton asks as Mum gives me a big hug. Dad makes room on his armchair for me.

I nod a "sort of".

Layton explains what happened to everyone, which makes me feel better but not any of the parents in the room. It's worse than most of them thought.

When they finish, Layton looks around the room. 'Should be enough evidence to not only get Pete out of custody...' He smiles warmly at Ida, '...but also help build some a case against Jimmie Lake and his men.' Ida cries with relief and Mum comforts her.

'I can't believe you went there on your own.' Says Mum.

'I didn't. Rhid and Lo were there.' Taylor smiles at him, sitting unusually quiet and holding Bronwyn's hand.

Layton speaks again. 'Taylor and Rhid put themselves at risk. The kind of risk we would never have supported if we knew about it, but they've returned some valuable evidence.'

'Is it enough to put Jimmie away?' Taylor asks.

'Hopefully.'

Someone's phone rings. Everyone reaches into their pockets to check. It's Kendal. She looks at the screen and makes to leave the room. 'Sorry, I need to take this.'

‘Well, I think tea is in order...’ Mum offers. A polite murmur of consent ripples around the room. ‘Or something stronger?’ She adds as an afterthought initiating a louder, much more enthusiastic response.

Mum heads to the drinks cabinet and starts issuing gin, whisky, brandy where requested. Kendal and Layton share a small whisky *just to be sociable*.

Mum even gives us a small shot of brandy in crystal tumblers. It’s strong and earthy and burns Taylor’s throat but the after-effects are more than welcome.

‘That was Deedee.’ Kendal returns to the room, beaming. Everyone stops and listens. ‘She says she is going to testify.’

There is a wave of relief and excitement, ricochets around the room. Everyone’s lifted by the thought that Jimmie might now finally get what he deserves.

Even Layton sounds uncharacteristically upbeat. ‘Fantastic.’

‘Will Pete have to stay in custody?’ I can’t bear the thought of him having to stay locked up a moment longer.

‘We should be able to secure him a release very soon.’ Layton promises.

After the drinks are drained Kendal and Layton announce they’re heading off. Everyone says their goodbyes and follows Mum and Dad to the kitchen for a snack. The mood is light and chatty, thanks to the alcohol and the feeling that a very large weight has been lifted from everyone’s shoulders.

‘I can’t get that image of Cyd my mind.’ I whisper to Rhid. ‘Just laid out at the bottom of the pit...’ I can’t finish my sentence, too choked.

‘Me too.’ Rhid hugs me, wrapping his arms around me tight and long so neither can move. We stand like that for a few moments, apart from the others, alone in the hall.

'Aunt Viv sends her love.' Dad interrupts, handing Rhid some pizza and garlic bread.

'She says she'll Skype you later.'

Rhid, clearly excited by the prospect of food, piles three pieces of pizza on a slice of garlic bread and heads off to the kitchen.

I can't eat anything.

'Did you say you've got extensions for your assignments?' Dad sits with me.

'Yeah.'

'Good. Don't rush. Just do them when you're ready.'

I nod. Dad nods and wraps his hand around mine.

Chapter thirty-six | end thread

Later that evening, after everyone has gone home and mum's asleep, I find what I need in mum's studio, carry it up to my bedroom and lock the door. I unwrap Kasha's bread print and examine it. It's dried hard but in good shape, all things considered, just some fine green mould around the edges that should dissolve nicely in casting.

I lay out a plastic sheet on the floor and mix the plaster and alginate, reminding me of messy play as a child. When I've made up two bowls of the gloop, I fill the area where Kasha's hand has been with the white plaster paste and smooth off the top. This will give me only half a hand, so I set about making a mould of my upper right hand, which will make the top of Kasha's hand.

I'll still have the important bits.

I think of them like that—important bits. The palm and the fingers. The bits that make the cast uniquely her.

Holding my hand submerged in the liquid alginate I wait for both to set and with my free hand search for updates on Kasha's story on my laptop. I scroll through a post of two days ago I missed. It's a stop-frame animation of a girl writing Kasha's name in fir cones and leaves in a Scandinavian forest. She's added Kasha's song to the soundtrack. It works well. I click on #rememberkasha which has an incredible 189,000,624 posts. There are posts from India, Australia, American, Russia and China. Everywhere.

Soon this will join them.

I open a word document and stare at the white screen.

I do this for a while, thinking back over the past few weeks.

So much has happened...how can I begin to put this down?

But then it happens. A sentence forms in my head. Fingers move over the keys.

Slowly at first. Partly because I'm only using one hand, but also because the words are coming out that way. Reluctant. Rubbing their eyes.

Emerging into the light.

For a while, we travel side by side you and me. We walked on the same street, ate at the same places, bought clothes at the same store, loved the same music, but it wasn't until you died that we really got to know each other.

We've travelled side by side. Found a kind of friendship. Together we found some truth. We know that now more than ever we're all connected. So why do we still hurt each other? Still cause each other pain?

Perhaps you're out there now in some afterlife somewhere, slipping through the digital highways of our computer networks, checking our statuses, liking our links.

You've held my hand through the past few weeks. Guided me through bad times.

In some small way, I feel I held yours too.

I look down at what I've written.

Five pages of single line spacing, 12-point font.

I read it over, make two or three edits and save it.

I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it. Maybe that will come later.

I mix more plaster, cut the mould of my hand in half with a knife, discard the bottom (palm) half and filled the top (knuckles and nails) with the plaster. I now have two casts. Kasha's palm and the top of my own. I lay them down, like two halves of a walnut, and regard them for a few moments. I apply fresh plaster and solder them together.

I head over to the studio to fetch my hand cast, the one mum made, and a file, to smooth out the edges. The first rays of morning stream through the skylight. The belly and breast of the pregnant woman's torso glow transformed, as the light casts its morning shimmer over everything. For a moment, the rough Frankenstein hand I've just made also glows, transformed by light and otherworldly.

I can't find a file anywhere. I open a cupboard and shuffle through jam jars stuffed with brushes and sticks and tools of all shapes and sizes. A shoe box falls to the floor and I jump. In the scattered contents, there's a small pile of handwritten letters tied up with ribbon.

My first thoughts are. How long have these been here? Closely followed by. Who writes letters anymore?

Then I recognise the writing.

It's Aunt Viv.

The letters are addressed to mum.



Dear Sis

Thank you. What else can I say? I know it's the hardest decision of your life. It's the hardest decision of mine, but it's the right one. I know it is. You want a baby, and me, I have other things to do with my life. This is just not what I had in mind, but I think it's going to work. Don't worry. She'll be yours. I want you to raise her. It almost feels as if I'm not giving her up because I know that the first person I loved most in the world will do everything for the person who will come second, only in time.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Will be in touch over Christmas when I know where I'm going to be for the birth.

Your forever loving sister

V.

It's dated December 3rd, 1999.

Boom.

I sit on the floor and read it again.

Then I read all four letters. Eyes wide—like a possum in a night forest.

Then my world slips away.

Everything I know pulls out from under me.

How could they...?

Chapter thirty-seven | come back to me

‘What do you think?’ I click on my most recent Instagram story to show Rhid. The picture of mine and Kasha’s cast hands holding each other has already received 134 likes and 56 comments. I also posted parts of the piece I wrote.

‘So that’s why you wanted it?’ He ponders the sculpture sitting on the table by the window.

‘Apparently.’ I smile.

‘I still think you should have given it to the police.’

‘It wouldn’t have helped. If there’d been any DNA on it, it’d just have been Pete’s like all the rest.’

‘Might just trump the death networking project for ‘Taylor’s oddest moment award.’

‘Maybe.’ I turn the screen back to me. I like it. *It is* odd but that’s ok. It’s true. True to how it feels.

FLASHBACK EXT. LIGHTPARK-DAISY FOOD VAN-NIGHT.

KASHA is behind the counter, flipping burgers, making fries. Singing along to the radio...

ME V/O

When I first met Kasha, she was looking forward to the end of her shift. We chatted as if the worse thing in the world was how boring the night was. We wanted it over. We wanted to be home. I remember exactly what she said. How she spoke. Even how she passed my chips over the counter - carefully and in two immaculately manicured hands.

Funny the things you remember.

The next time she was dead.

Murdered by a man revenging her mother because she had done, something she hoped would change their life for the better.

I remember her hands. Immaculate. Shiny with polish and a jewel on the tips of each nail.

Mum says, hands say a lot about you—not always the thing you expect.

BACK TO PRESENT:

‘Goes to show—there’s no escape where you’re from.’

‘Sometimes there is.’ Rhid stares up at the stain on the ceiling that today looks like a smiley face. ‘My parents are from Bangladesh remember?’ He points his camera. CLICK. And draws on a smiley face on the stain and uploads. He looks away and puts his hand on mine.

‘Where’ve you been?’ I ask.

‘Had to pop over to Shani’s.’ He pulls his hand away.

‘Really?’ I frown. ‘You two getting serious?’

‘Nah.’ Rhid does a funny twisty thing.

‘...and yet your body language says yes.’

He shrugs, pretending not to care.

‘Bet you think I need someone with more...mmm how would you put this...oh yes.

Depth. Someone who gets me. Properly. Someone who sees beyond the weird bicycle obsessions and strange sound collection habit to the kind and considerate hero-of-a-human being that I truly am?’

‘Sound collection habit?’ I sit up.

‘New hobby. I’ll catch you up later.’

‘Ok. And yes. Exactly. Some who gets you.’

‘But that’s you.’ Rhid crosses his feet, adjusts his headphones and presses play.

I have to hide how glowing that makes me feel. A frown is my first retort. ‘I can’t believe a single photo was all it took to undo Kasha’s life—a deleted one at that. All that she’d built and worked towards.’ I flop down on the bed beside him.

‘Her life was too short for sure.’

‘And her child’s even shorter.’ I think about the kind of life he or she might have had. I think about myself inside mum—and then I readjust. Not inside mum. Inside Aunt Vivian. OMG. What am I going to do with that revelation?

'So, what are you going to do?' Rhid asks out of the blue.

'What?' I suddenly worry if I've said that last thoughts out loud.

'About the internship?'

'Oh, that.' Phew. I think about San Francisco. I think about me there. I see myself in film images, the only images I have of the place. I see myself by the Golden Gate bridge, jumping on trams, gliding up the steep roads lined with the large houses I've seen so many times in films. I see myself gazing up at Sequoias mesmerised and small like Jimmy Stewart in Vertigo.

I sit up. 'Yes.'

'Yes, what?'

'I'm going to go. You're right it's a no brainer. A fantastic opportunity... and... I need to get away.'

'Great. I can come and visit!'

'That'd be good.' That would be truly good. The idea of getting away from here, far away, suddenly seems very attractive.

Rhid closes his eyes and his breathing slows. I lay back down, on my back, letting my hands drop by my side. I look down.

His hands are soft and young. Boy's hands. Not yet a man. Mine are smaller, splattered in plaster of Paris and chipped with yellow polish. Our hands nearly touch. I feel the warmth of his. I want to sleep here, right here until the morning. I want to wake refreshed and plan my future.

Even though we're different, you and me... I look up at the ceiling... it's like we're made of the same stuff. The way our hands rest. The way we can just lie here and do nothing and no one and nowhere in the world seems as important as being here right now.

‘Come with me. For all of it. Come with me to San Francisco...’ I say urgently, turning to face him but he’s fallen asleep.

A distant plane flies overhead.

Beep. Beep.

It’s Rhid’s phone. I slip it from his pocket and see a text from Shani.

- Can’t wait to see you tomorrow. Hugs kisses n other stuff!! xx

Other stuff?

I don’t want to think about it.

I pause.

A moment passes, and then I press delete.

End.

Left intentionally blank.

II. Exegesis

Introduction

i. Overview

In this introduction, I set out my aesthetic statement and methodology, present the scope of the creative writing research study and discuss its limitations and originality. I outline my investigation of digital culture, narrative practice and young adult literature, and consider to what extent my previous practice, teaching and scholarship in film, writing and media have influenced this work. My interests in the intersectional potential of these usually separate disciplinary subjects date back to 2009 when I received Arts Council funding for a project exploring digital identities through a multi-media and creative writing project; this can be traced through subsequent teaching, research events, conference presentations and publications, including co-editing the book and technology-focused journal, *Book 2.0*¹ (Intellect, 2011-present). A separate, but equally important part of this dissertation, consists in tracing a personal writing journey that at its beginning felt like migration from screenwriting to prose fiction, but which now feels more like dual citizenship: an unforeseen outcome that conveniently addresses my research questions and affords exciting creative and pedagogic possibilities going forward.

¹ An academic journal publishing leading research into digital technology and the book.

ii. Aesthetic Statement

Towards a digital aesthetic in book form

My novel aims to realise *a digital aesthetic in book form*. I seek a textual aesthetic that draws on the intertextual, multi-literate world of digital technology, social technologies in particular, through which much of my novel is narrated. It is an aesthetic that reflects the material and experiential consequences of digital culture, offering the reader a narrative space for meaningful reflection on the impact technology has on our lives. It is an aesthetic that, during the course of writing this novel, as I gained a deeper understanding of the work and the traditions to which it belonged, evolved a necessary parenthesis:

Towards a digital aesthetic in book form (via a multimodal writing practice)

From Trollope's urge to depict *The Way We Live Now* (Trollope, 1875), to Italo Calvino's 1985 publication, *6 Memos for the Millennium*, novelists have sought to capture contemporary life in the stories and languages of contemporary culture. This 'urge' has formed an important part of what has driven me to and through this study. To this end I have been guided by Bakhtin's notion of the novel as a network of ideas, first discussed alongside his ideas on the polyphonic novel (Bakhtin, 1982). According to Bakhtin, not only is the novel the best form for offering a dialogue of different views, opinion and ideologies, the novel as a genre is unique in that it can embrace, ingest, and devour other genres while still maintaining its status as a novel. I first encountered these ideas twenty-five years ago. As an undergraduate fan of the works of Dostoevsky, I came across Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963) in a second-hand bookshop. I was struck by how contemporary

the idea of polyphony seemed and how formative a role it played in Dostoevsky's 150-year-old novels.² Re-discovering these ideas much later, in the preliminary stages of this PhD research, I found them particularly productive in evaluating young adult literature's embrace of new technologies in structuring its fiction. The various voices of self as performed through different digitally *networked* platforms resonated with the intentions for this work and framed my approach to writing as I sought to realise the aim of my aesthetic. Not only has the idea of a novel as a network of ideas permitted me to explore writing techniques, experimenting formatively throughout revisions and redrafting, but it has also been valuable in offering productive ways to respond to a deeply rooted, personal creative imperative to represent the experience of contemporary digital culture within the formal constraints of a printed novel.

iii. Research Questions and Summative Account of Methodology

The methodology adopted for achieving this aesthetic aim has evolved as the project has developed³ and will be discussed in the subsequent four chapters of this exegesis. In summary, its interdisciplinary nature corresponds to four distinct areas of creative and critical practice: firstly, research into the way authors approach the writing of contemporary realist literature for young adults, identifying key formal characteristics; secondly, an investigation into the discourses, languages and practices of digital culture for young adults, specifically

² In the same way I looked backwards, inspired by Bakhtin's formulation, the origin of Bakhtin's idea looks even further back in time to the polyphonic vocal traditions of Russian choral music.

³ An approach formulated in response to key methodological gaps faced when embarking on this research. I'd spent over twenty years engaged in film making practice and screenwriting: I knew how to set about writing, producing and post-producing a narrative drama or documentary film. I knew about films *without* stories experimental and avant-garde films concerned with pushing the language of film and playing with formal conventions. I knew about treatments and step outlines and story synopses. I knew what a first draft of a screenplay looked like, a third, a tenth, but I knew nothing about writing a novel. In particular I knew nothing about writing a novel aimed at readers of YAL.

the appropriation of the language and practices of social media; thirdly, a foregrounding of a multimodal approach to writing prose fiction, remediating past writing experience drawn from screenwriting; and, fourthly, contextualising the above investigations within the discipline of creative writing research within the academy.

The work has been guided by the following 6 research questions (RQs):

- RQ 1 How might a writing investigation into the discourses, languages and practices of digital culture advance this study's aim of achieving *a digital aesthetic in book form via a multimodal writing practice* pursued in the case study of the creation of an original Young Adult novel?
- RQ 2 Which characteristics of selected contemporary realist young adult literature (YAL) could be developed to properly situate my novel within its creative landscape?
- RQ 3 How does selected contemporary realist YAL, including *The Networked Wonderland of Us* address key discourses within digital culture?
- RQ 4 How does selected contemporary realist YAL, including *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, deploy the languages and practices of digital technologies as a narrative strategy?
- RQ 5 How is fictional screenwriting deployed as a narrative strategy within selected YAL and *The Networked Wonderland of Us*?
- RQ 6 How do I creatively narrativize the flow of digital lives back into the analogue world of the novel?

My research into reading and writing contemporary realist YAL has taken me on a journey that I couldn't have imagined before I began. I quickly learned I was not the first author to craft a novel engaged with technology *on the page*, and I acknowledge substantial critical study of this work has been carried out within the field of speculative fiction (Mendelsohn 2009, Applebaum 2010, Flanagan, 2014), but how had the authors of contemporary realist fiction engaged technology in their work? In Chapters 1 & 2, I discuss the mise-en-page of a range of turn-of-the-twenty-first books that take risks in how they present their technology-inspired stories to readers. These novels are not only fascinating to read closely and deconstruct but have offered me an initial path from which to explore my own writing.

Chapter 2 focuses on how the languages of communication technologies themselves, including digital objects such as messages, texts, blog posts, comment threads, photo-shares and videos are presented and co-exist alongside prose passages within the novel. I coin the term *digital backflow* to describe this evolution of my particular multimodal writing process, describing a reflective writing practice where the ideas, practices and languages of digital technologies are translated *back to* the analogue world of people and books via processes of imitation, adaptation and invention (narrativisation). This *backflow* stands in contrast to and against the previous movement of forms, practices and ideas, that of analogue to digital [digitisation] movement, that dominated in the 1990s to early noughties/2000s.

Chapter 3 consists of an account of how I have adapted screenwriting into the main body of the text, evolving the conventional screenplay mode of address from the third person to first, bringing it into line with the first-person address narration of the prose passages. This adaptation came about as a way of imaginatively representing the *way of seeing of* my film student protagonist and articulates a central theme of the novel—exploring the impact of

visual (specifically moving image) culture on identity formation, especially among young people.

Creative writing research and the creative writing PhD is a relatively new discipline within the academy, still establishing the language it employs to describe its methodologies. Unsurprisingly for this discipline, there is a predilection for metaphor in illuminating its processes. In Chapter 4 I contextualise a selection of some of the better known of these against my notion of YA fiction writing as Creative Nexus—a network of ideas about praxis and theory combined in a *scriptive* text (Bernstein, 2011). I also address issues of remediation of practice, redrafting and revision including a further account of how I’ve deployed screenwriting within this prose fiction composition as an example of my own *writing practice remediation*. Described by Barnard as a ‘personalised model of creativity...(enabling) a systematic and ongoing transfer of skills...’ (Barnard, 2019, p.7) the remediation of previous writing practice in screenwriting has proved significant for this work. I emphasise the role-specific genre and gender revisions have played in the development of the work and end with a consideration of how my approach to revising and editing language has led to the formulation of the novel’s current form.

iv. Scope

My interest in how digital culture creates new discourses around self-representation and the implications for literature first found voice in an article I published in 2012 in the journal *Book 2.0*.⁴ In it, I discussed the initium⁵ and practice of an early draft of *The*

⁴ *User: Reflections on the narrativisation of self within social networking sites: A presentation and discussion of the processes involved in a creative work in progress* [+]

⁵ McCormack, Thomas *The Fiction Editor* 1988, he describes ‘what the author had in mind when he began his novel.’ as the initium. p. 190.

Networked Wonderland of Us, then entitled *User*, that I had developed through a writer mentoring scheme (Gold Dust) and was supported by an Arts Council small grant. I comment on, ‘the way the ephemeral marks and objects of our social media pages constitutes points in a dot to dot, the picture only becoming clear when all the dots are joined.’ (Gibson Yates, 2012). Reflecting on the contents of this paper more recently I can see how indicative they are of how I have approached the writing of this novel and the research study. These *marks* on the surface of our social media pages can be read as points in a story much like plot points of a story – the handful of narrative *knowns* I had as I set out writing this novel. Through narrative deduction based on causal inference, imagination and research and drawing on pre-existing structures of story plotting I was able to fill the gaps between what I knew about my story and what I didn’t know to a point where it formed completely.

The Networked Wonderland of Us is fundamentally a response to a real-life story and as such it falls into step with other contemporary realist fiction particularly contemporary crime or detective novels. In 2006 I read an article about Anna Sverdisky, an American teenager whose popularity on My Space peaked hugely following her murder at the diner where she worked (Jonze, 2006). Finding this story coincided with my own [slightly reluctant, digital migrant] journey to social technologies and it stuck with me not only for the arbitrariness of the particular instances of this girl’s death but because of the specific digital after-life phenomenon it highlighted. It framed the tragedy of this girl’s death in a new way and suggested exciting digital (multimodal writing) techniques for telling stories about this generation’s experience of growing up online. I became fascinated with online memorials for a time, especially the phenomenon of friend requests from dead people, still fairly common⁶.

⁶ The question-and answer website Quora.com lists enquiries about this issue as recently as August 2019.

It led to the decision not only to include this haunting event in the novel but to use it as an important point of plot progression.⁷

As I set about thinking about the framework for conceptualising this writing research study I was simultaneously engaged in pedagogic research into digital culture within my post as Film and Media lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University. As I researched curriculum content for an undergraduate Media Studies module about blogging and online identity production, I discovered a body of work investigating the impact of social technologies on human psychology and social cohesion, then a growing field⁸. Early engagement with social media and young people researcher Dana Boyd's PhD thesis, *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics* (2008), discovered online as an unpublished thesis—later published by Yale UP as, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (2014)—afforded me a specific creative catalyst, where ideas I'd been mulling concerning the narrativization of the self through online identity construction suddenly came together. In it, Boyd laid out what was new about how young people communicate in the online sphere and what parallels could be detected with ordinary physical social interaction. Many of her findings chimed with my intuitions and was influential in the early development of ideas for what was to become *The Networked Wonderland of Us*.

v. Limitations

This work is intended for print publication as a novel-text book and is therefore subject to certain formal parameters with regards to its representation of multimodal languages, but

⁷ Taylor's decision to accept the friend request from the dead person of Kasha is the first plot point or in screenwriting terms, the inciting incident, and is taken directly from this real-world online phenomenon. It is the point of action which signals Taylors' commitment to finding out more about Kasha and thus, becoming deeply involved in her story.

⁸ See Rettberg, 2014, Turkle, 2011, Boyd, 2014, Shirky, 2008, Surowiecki, 2004, Gauntlett, 2011.

these have been approached positively as constraints⁹ and have intentionally guided the development of the work. Although there are many digital para-textual possibilities contained within the story, opportunities for expansion of its characters' worlds, and to engage readers beyond the book, I won't detail them here. My principal characters, Taylor, Kasha, Rhidian and Lola, may well have future lives in interactive or mobile fiction but as it stands those ideas are parenthetical to the work itself and conversation to have with a publisher. I also acknowledge the absence of typographical or visual design/illustration considerations laid out here of which there is much potential to be explored arising from the story. However, this is not my area of interest and could be considered a way of avoiding the complexities of digital-analogue integration, certainly in the way I have set out to explore, and so does not appear here. I would certainly be interested to explore possibilities to expand this story-world post-doctorate, or with future publishers should the opportunity arise, but for now, 'The (*novel*) world is everything and that is the case.' (Wittgenstein, 1999, p. 29, italics are mine).

⁹ In something like the way in which the Oulipo authors considered them in their 'workshop for potential literature', founded in 1960: a parameter that enables specific formal linguistic innovations within the field of literature.

Chapter One

Writing Contemporary Realist Literature for Young Adults

‘...an artful depiction of artlessness.’ (Cadden, 1990, p. 308)

1.1 Introduction

I did not intend to write a young adult novel, I set out to write *a novel* but early feedback from a literary agent in 2012 suggested that an early draft I presented could work well as a novel for young adult readers. I had little idea what young adult fiction was at the time. I had no idea how diverse or formally experimental some of it was, nor how much it had to say about young people’s experience of contemporary life, in which I am invested as a filmmaker (over 20 years) and lecturer (eleven years), and more recently, a mother (eight years). I had no idea of the reach of young adult fiction, or of the many discourses that surround it, and, therefore, no idea that it was something I wanted to write. It was true my story had young people as its protagonists but did that make it a young adult novel? To answer this, I posed the following question:

RQ 2 Which characteristics of contemporary realist young adult literature (YAL) could be developed to properly situate my novel within its creative landscape?

In this chapter, I will explore answers to this question, framing critical investigations within the development of the created work.

1.2 Defining YAL: Growing the Mind a Size Larger

‘Fast-paced, diverse, complex, powerful, insightful, innovative’

(Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, Harper, Sage, 2014, p. 303)

The idea of a body of fiction specifically aimed at young adults or teenage readers is widely regarded to have grown from the publication and subsequent commercial success of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* first published in 1967 (Hinton, 2016). Hinton’s story of brotherhood and rivalry between boy gangs from opposite sides of the socio-economic divide in small-town America represented the real and complex lives of teenagers *for teenagers* in a uniquely direct way. Many books had been written about young people’s before, like William Golding’s *Lord of The Flies* (Golding, 1997) first published in 1954, and J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in The Rye* first published in 1951 (Salinger, 2010), but these had been written by adults (and probably *for* adults), unlike Hinton who was a teenager herself at the time. There are many reasons why this novel remains a pivotal turning point in the history of YAL. Hinton captured broader social anxieties about the then-new phenomenon of teenagers and the influence of popular culture, through the very voice of the generation around whom these anxieties centred upon. Reading it today I am struck by the prescient combination of accessible language and easy use of popular references and intertextuality to weave a story that, in many ways, reads as if it could have been written yesterday. The directness and accessibility of Hinton’s writing embody a claim to authenticity of voice and experience that brought new audiences to her work, exciting readers whose imagination had not been previously spoken to before.

Appealing to readers of a particular age range was undoubtedly one of Hinton’s intentions, and this issue of age range is often cited as the way to define young adult literature more broadly. But what age is a young adult and when does adulthood start? Not all young

adult novels take us to adulthood and the question of when we come of age varies culturally, and even within similar cultural locations, such as Britain and America, it is not as clear cut in the 21st century as it once was. At one end of the adulthood definition spectrum, there is a sense of the shortening of childhood with evidence of children as young as 13 or 12 reading books marketed as YAL. At the other end, an extension of youth into age territories usually attributed to adulthood challenges the commonly accepted working definition age range of YAL as 14 to 18, with many YA novels also read by adults. We know that ‘people aged between 30 and 44 are responsible for 28 per cent of YA sales’ (Mushens, 2015, p. 2), but whether these books are being read by younger readers or by the 30 to 44 years themselves is unknown. Anecdotally, I have spoken to several mothers of teenagers who value YAL as a category they can enjoy alongside their teen readers, citing the pleasure of shared reading experiences and the chance to discuss stories, characters and issues raised within the safe space of fiction. It is tempting to adopt the description of YAL as, ‘Anything that any young adult reads’ (Bean, Dunkerly-Bean, Harper, 2014, p. 3), but this position is of little value for a writer seeking formative boundaries with regards to shaping a story for this readership.

Debates around what defines YAL abound, such as those offered by Cart, who in 2001 stressed the widening of the traditional 12-18 range to embrace the new MTV demographic of 15-25 - partly, Cart claims, due to the successes of authors such as Lia Block, Philip Pullman and Chris Lynch, ‘whose sophisticated fiction defies easy categorization except as “crossover,”’ (Cart, 2001, p. 95). Works which rather than heralding the end of YAL as some proclaimed, ushered in ‘a new golden age’ (Cart, 2001, p. 96).

In a fascinating article reflecting on the nature of what constitutes YAL from the two perspectives of scholar and author, Steven VanderStaay discovers the necessity of ‘strict ethical and narrative boundaries’ when thinking about what makes a YA novel (VanderStaay 1992, p. 49). Other discussions around the problems of defining YAL can be found in the

work of Millicent Lenz who in the comprehensive tome, *Young Adult Literature and Non-Print Materials* (1994), describes and critically assesses 600 books categorised as YAL. Gail Gauthier's *Whose community? Where is the YA in YAL?* (2002), locates the problem of YAL in young people not finding themselves in YAL, because the adults who write it miss what it means to be a young adult. That is, neither child nor adult. Antero Garcia's *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature* sets out to show how 'young adult fiction drives cultural engagement for a large portion of literate Americans.' (Garcia, 2013, p. 3). While Crowe discusses the elusiveness of definitions of YAL even by academic experts, pointing to the importance of novels possessing relevance to the lives of young adults in terms of *subject matter*, as one firm indicator in the matrix (*Young Adult Literature*, 1998).

More recently debates about what defines YAL highlights a lack of racial diversity with Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction* (2019) shining a light on the lack of diversity in YA UK publishing, arguing that literary culture aimed at young adults perpetuates racial and ethnic hierarchies. Within YA fantasy, Leah Philips finds important revisions of traditional representations of the adolescent girl-hero that facilitate fluid notions of gender identity and feminine agency. Their co-authored paper *Adolescent Identities: The Untapped Power of YA* (2019) brings Ramdarshan Bold and Philips's research interests together in a paper that evidences how YA fiction is a vital resource for adolescent identity formation, offering what Phillips has previously referred to as 'frameworks for living and being' in the world (Philips, 2019, p. 47) in the context of 'a publishing market where 90% of the best-selling YA titles from 2006-2016 were (in the United Kingdom), featured White, nondisabled, cisgender, heterosexual main characters, reflecting the makeup of the books' authors.' A timely discussion that foregrounds the changing political and cultural landscape in

which authors, publishers and reader of YAL find themselves today, and which urgently need addressing.¹⁰

Boundary fluidity, expansion and inclusion can be said to characterize much contemporary YAL. In a fairly recent paper published in the Children's Literature Association, Amy Patee (Between Youth and Adulthood: Young Adult and New Adult Literature, 2017) stresses the importance of identifying reading audiences in the search for definitions, 'Like the terms "children's literature" and "young adult literature," "new adult" names a reading audience (here, young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four) suggests generic parameters, and operates as a code that communicates value on behalf of this audience.' (Patee, 2017, p. 219). 'Crossover' and 'new adult' are two recent categories that have gained traction in publishing houses and on bookshop shelves over the past 15 years. Crossover fiction, by definition, appeals to both young adult and adult readers, specifically work that has been written for children or young adult but that gains significant adult interest post publication. It includes blockbuster genre franchises such as Collins' *Hunger Games* quartet (2008-2020), Meyer's *The Twilight Saga* (2008-2012) and Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), works that fall outside the scope of this study but prepared the way for this movement of travel for the reader. With regards to contemporary realist literature, best-selling authors John Green, Rainbow Rowell, continue to capture large crossover markets, from their first YA publications—*Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005) and *Eleanor and Park* (Rowell, 2012)—to their most recent *Turtles All the Way Down* (Green, 2017) and *Wayward Son* (2019). Their protagonists range from 16 to 18 and speak directly to their readership, both younger and older than the age of their featured characters over many

¹⁰ Fortunately, as Ramdarshan Bold and Philips point out, this picture seems to be changing. Citing that in March 2019 The New York Times Bestseller List (Young Adult Hardcover) included Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* and *On the Come Up*, and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* in first, second, and tenth positions, they note that 'Both authors are women of colour and all of the books feature characters of colour.' (Ramdarshan Bold and Philips, 2019, p.1)

years growing with them in age, experience and interests. A testament to these writer's ability to author complex likeable characters readers return to.

Writing about crossover fiction in 2008, Falconer discusses the growth of this category of fiction and its impact on children's literature as an academic discipline, 'Although crossover fiction is interesting for cultural reasons, the fact that children's fiction is crossing adult readerships should also allow us to appreciate these works for their formal attributes: their characterization, plotting, style, structure and all the other distinctive aspects of the ways these texts work as fictional narratives.' (Falconer, 2008, p. 30)

New Adult (NA) fiction is a more recent term and describes work targeted to appeal to 'fully fledged' adults within the 18-30 age bracket. Its first use is accredited to St. Martin's Press in 2009 when they held a call for new fiction that was, '...similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult—a sort of "older YA" or "New Adult"' (cited in Patee, 2017, p.219). It tends to focus on issues such as developing sexuality, leaving home, including to university, and onto career progression and is often described as bridging the gap between adult and young adult, for example, Cecily von Ziegesar's hugely popular book series *Gossip Girl* (2002-2011) which was made into an equally popular TV Series Netflix 2007-2012. Rowell's 2014 novel, *Fangirl*, would also comfortably sit within this category as the story is centred around the lives and loves of first-year university students, but has only been listed as New Adult 15 times on Goodreads to date, despite 476, 692 read ratings, showing the term NA still emerging as a category.

I considered my novel in relation to both these categories at different times in the writing process. My protagonists are at university and emerging adults but the broader identification of the text as YA served as a richer, more established topic for critical and creative PhD inquiry. As well as the least problematic proposition for the novel's prospective market.

Even though a reader age definition is useful when thinking about who reads YAL it does not help make a manuscript connect to that readership. As an author wanting to position my work within a competitive marketplace locating YAL's defining formative characteristics would provide me with the stylistic guidebook I needed (per RQ1) British author Melvin Burgess's definition of YAL is as good a definition I've heard and presents four key points which capture something that I need to consider as a writer. He says, '[YAL] has a teenage main character, speaks to the adolescent imagination, has a tight plot and it accessible, that is to say, the language is clear, not flowery or obscure' (Burgess, 2017, cited in Flanagan, 2017).

Burgess's point that a YA novel should have a teenage protagonist is certainly a safe one, though for my novel somewhat borderline, as my core cast range from 18 to 19 years. Nonetheless, I could tick this off the imaginary YAL checklist. Burgess's point about pacey plotting and accessible language are also identifiable in my work. They can be seen in the way the novel drops readers into the catalyst event (Kasha's murder) right at the beginning, with Taylor's recollection, and in keeping with the structure of crime detection plotting. From then on events move at pace, with only short moments of pause or reflection. Since it is Taylor narrating events her voice has been carefully developed to depict her unique voice and the language deployed here is necessarily accessible, relatable and reader-appropriate, and has been made increasingly so as the manuscript progressed through numerous drafts.

But what about Burgess's second point? How *does* a young adult novel speak to the adolescent imagination today exactly?

Taking his lead from Betsy Hearne's observations on the work of YA and children's author Virginia Hamilton as 'growing the mind a size larger.' (Hearne, cited in Hollindale, 1995, p.86), Hollindale asks:

‘How can we discuss the adolescent novel when at one extreme it is a simpler children’s book with added sex, violence, and family collapse, while at the other it asks questions about *Homo sapiens* which most adult readers are too frightened or too stuck in their ways to face up to?’ (Hollindale, 1995, p. 86)

Writing about the YA sub-genre, ‘the adolescent novel of ideas’ Hollindale provides an interesting analysis of how certain work of YAL, notably those by Dickinson, Le Guin and Cormier, can be considered significant works of literature like any other adult work that exhibits a ‘...process of evolving perception, and the very act of conceiving new ideas, within the narrative themselves.’ (p. 93) In this way, just like adult novels of ideas, specific works of YAL can, ‘embody in narrative procedure the mechanistic process which the novel is indicating.’ (p. 88)

The idea that a narrative procedure can embody a novel’s mechanistic process resonates strongly with the aesthetic intentions for my novel. My initial aims for *The Networked Wonderland of Us* were to deploy elements of digital (multimodal) narrative form to communicate ideas about adolescent identity construction, communication and community in online environments and the impact on the lives of young people in this early period of the twenty-first century. The combination of Burgess’s definition and Hollindale’s reasoned case for a group of YA novels, as novels of ideas, signposted a group of YA works with which I could identify key characteristics and a creative landscape to which my YA novel could belong.

Thinking about my novel as a YA novel of ideas that ‘grow a mind a size larger’ proved useful for the development of my writing, as it captured something about what interested me in some YA novels, and what didn’t interest me about others, namely, a work’s ability to engage readers in its narrative at the level of both *story* and *discourse*. I first came

across this structuralist formula for understanding narrative through Chatman's reworking of Structuralist theory's two-part depiction:

Structural theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting): and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the what in a narrative that is depicted, the discourse the how. (Chatman, 1978, p. 19)

Examples of popular YAL that excel at the depiction of narrative at the level of both story and discourse might include Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (Doctorow, 2008) which presents complex, politically charged ideas about state surveillance and civil rights in a digitally dominated near future through its story of young people trying to out tech-smart their government. Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* (2013) represents a positive narrative around fan-culture alongside traditional forms of writing (novels, short stories) through protagonist Cath's character arc, validating wider discourses about fan culture as transformative and self-identity forming, or Alice Oseman's *Radio Silence* (2016) where a podcast becomes the catalyst for a story about the importance of online creativity and participation and their impact on real people and relationships. In my novel the story-discourse relationship can be seen in the way I've engaged ideas around digital culture—our relationship to technology, identity formation, online participation and the network—and feminine agency, in a mixed genre coming-of-age-detective story. One, where the solving of the crime can only be achieved in the protagonist's act of owning and redeeming her past, resulting in a cathartic journey of self-discovery and growth for the protagonist.

The narratives presented in these novels are culturally resonant at the level of story (the what) and discourse (the how), with the discourse adding not only depth and value to the text but, I argue, plays an important role in securing its status as literature.

These complex, layered YA fictional narratives are not communicating ‘wisdom to children’ in the way books for children had done historically—*didactically*—but with a purposeful literary and aesthetic approach. This dichotomy between YAL as art and YAL as an education vehicle is well documented (Hunt, 1994, 2005) and referred to as the literary-didactic split (Nikolajeva, 2005). Rather these adolescent novels of ideas are *dialogic spaces* where reader-author-character interact and explore questions of identity, existence, culture, happiness, loss and more, and as with my novel depend upon innovative formal literary devices and a clear aesthetic intention.

Thinking about my novel as a YA novel of ideas that grew ‘a mind a size larger’ also proved productive in connecting thoughts I’d been having about novels as networks of ideas that I’d found expressed in the work of Bakhtin and Calvino. Firstly, Bakhtin’s ideas of polyphony and intertextuality suggest *arrangements* of distinct elements *in relationship* to one another, and not necessarily linearly or chronologically ordered, which had been the traditional literary preference. Talking about Bakhtin’s conviction in the flexibility of the novel as a form, as distinct from earlier forms of the written narrative he calls epic, Nikolajeva highlights the principle difference being one of, ‘the novel as an eclectic, synthetic, multilayered, multivoiced, dialogical literary form...’. (Nikolajeva, 2010, p. 3) Secondly, Calvino’s edicts for literary style in the twenty-first century repeatedly refers to the novel as ‘a network’, ‘an encyclopedia’, ‘a combinatoria’. (Calvino, 1996) Brought together and absorbed within my creative writing practice these ideas provided a conceptual framework with which to approach the writing of my novel of ideas.

However, it was not until Flanagan's *The Post-Human Subject: Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction* (2014) came along that I discovered an even clearer position for my novel within the landscape of contemporary realist YAL.

1.3 The Technorealist Novel: A 21st-century Adolescent Novel of Ideas

‘...within narratives produced for children and adolescents, cyberspace often functions as a communal, nurturing space that enables young people to achieve subjective agency.’ (Flanagan, 2014, p. 155)

In a chapter entitled, ‘Subjectivity in Cyberspace: Techno-realism and the Merging of Virtual and Material Selves,’ Flanagan identifies a new subgenre of YAL that responds to the changing experiences of young people as they increasingly spend more time online. In it, she traces the emergence, over the previous 10 years, of a movement in YAL where ‘...textual representations of cyberspace in novels produced for adolescent readers has emerged as a new genre of the printed book: technorealism.’ (Flanagan, 2014, p. 155) Responding to accounts of YAL as predominately negative in their representation of technology and its human impact (Applebaum & Buckingham cited in Flanagan p. 337) Flanagan argues for a new wave of YA novels that buck this trend presenting more nuanced and positive representations of technology especially in the way they, ‘endorse experimental narrative forms but also validate the role digital technology in the development of children’s identities and in their perception of how social interactions are conducted.’ (Flanagan, 2017, p. 336)

‘Fictions which offer a positive depiction of children’s engagement with digital technology also function as a riposte to continued representations of digital technology as harmful to children, as they thematically explore the varied ways in which cyberspace can enrich young lives.’ (Flanagan, 2017, p. 337) It’s worth a brief mention of Flanagan’s use of the term cyberspace here, as it connects to broader discourses around human interaction with technology and locates my novel’s negative and positive thesis within a literary tradition wrestling with how to represent technology (Hayles, 2012).

But what is a technorealist text exactly? What relevance did this subcategory have on my writing practice? Flanagan states her definition of techno-realism, thus:

Narratives that can be classified as “techno-realism” employ a range of linguistic and graphic techniques that mimic the use of online social media such as blogs, instant messages, chat room and message board. This particular subgenre incorporates significant textual innovation (fragmented narratives, polyfocalised narration, genre-mixing, linguistic experimentation and so on). (Flanagan, 2014, p.155)

Reading Flanagan’s definition of techno-realism for the first time felt like reading an erudite exposition of my own novel’s aesthetic aspirations, a mirroring of the creative objectives I held for my novel in its early stages. Its discovery helped me to consolidate these intentions as firm aims and methods. I could now see more clearly how I might mimic the languages and practices of social technologies in the storytelling and see examples of how I might best represent textual innovation in the form of the use of adapted screenplay and genre mixing. Two points from Flanagan’s definition were especially pertinent to my process.

Flanagan presents a fascinating discussion of several texts by authors that I had come across, including Cory Doctorow and Lauren Myracle. These discussions opened up new ways of thinking about how I would deploy a range of digital elements in the work. The multiplicity of languages and styles seemed to me to be the essence of what was new about the experience of cyberspace. Flanagan talks about this *multiplicity* in terms of another concept with which I was familiar (Bakhtin, 1984, Calvino, 1996) and predated the emergence of digital technology, that of *polyphony*. ‘The most notable feature of novels that seek to adopt online modes of expression and communication is that they are “polyphonic”, offering readers multiple character perspectives.’ (Flanagan, 2014, p. 164) Flanagan highlights the more extreme and distinctive way ‘contemporary narrative depictions of cyberspace for young readers’ (2014, p. 164) use polyphony by swapping between voices much more rapidly. In the case of *ttyl* (Myracle, 2004), *Entrapment* (Spooner, 2009), or *Want to Go Private?* (Littman, 2011) every line than non-digitally located narratives, (she compared to the example Flanagan provides of *Junk* (Burgess, 1996), where the alternating first-person narration is employed over two or three pages at a time).

Thinking about *The Networked Wonderland of Us* as a technorealist text reveals many interesting formative comparisons. My novel employs ‘a range of linguistic and graphic techniques that mimic the use of online social media’ though not in the explicit way earlier technorealist text do (Myracle, Spooner, Day), favouring a stylistic approach more integrated with the prose, to enhance narrative flow. Instant messages, for example, are indented apart from the main (prose) body text with a hyphen, as this brief text exchange between Taylor and Rhid at the beginning of chapter 2 (p19) illustrates:

- *u awake?*
- *yep*
- *alright?*

- *no*

- *b w u in 30*

Or this video call between Taylor and her father (p. 68):

We've just edited the final slide and noted the cue points and who's going to say what, when dad's face pops up in a window on my screen.

- *Dad! Hello!*

- *Hi sweetie. (He swings his laptop around and sits on what looks like a hotel bed.) Mum's just told me what happened. Good God. Are you alright?*

- *I think I'm fine.*

- *Are you sure?*

- *[beat] I think. I laugh nervously.*

- *What happened exactly?*

The hyphen is used similarly by Green in *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017) and functions as a form of ellipsis denoting a modal change in address without the need to state its origins, which would not only disrupt the narrative flow but likely appear grammatically and graphically cumbersome. The subtlety of the hyphen used thus, represents a maturation in the way authors depict this aspect of YA lives in fiction.

The Networked Wonderland of Us also incorporates Flanagan's technorealist marker of 'significant textual innovation' by offering the reader fragmented narratives as we move back and forth in time, between prose fiction for the present and screenplay for the past creating a poly-focalised narrative address. 'Genre mixing' is also central to my novel's identity and in keeping with Flanagan's definition, in terms of its crime detection setting, action and plot and combining this with the coming of age form, as previously discussed.

Where Flanagan's analysis feels a little out of date is with regards to reflecting on the impact of audio-visual/moving image-driven culture through platforms such as YouTube,

Instagram and after the publication of her book, TikTok. Some YAL has already taken this on. E. J. Lange's *Butter* [2013] is a darkly humorous tale of obesity, bullying and the craving for popularity in the internet age, it addressed the impact of visual culture in the story of an obese boy's self-image and the impact on his mental health. It also cleverly addresses the performative obsessions prevalent across social video platforms and the way their functionality intensifies self-image unease among their participants, with their systems of likes, subscription and comment boards. The British YAL author Alice Oseman addresses audio-visual culture online in her first book, *Solitaire* (2014), through its story about a 16-year-old Victoria Spring drawn into the mysterious world of Solitaire, a blogger who has her in their sights. Her second novel, *Radio Silence* (2016) deploys a podcast broadcast via YouTube as the catalyst for friendship and shared creativity. Both texts can be seen as Technorealist in Oseman's positive representations of technology and how it's woven into the lives of these stories' characters.

I have responded to the impact of audio-visual culture in my novel by including not only texts, blog communication, chats, but also video calls, video playback and, most significantly, the use of *adapted screenplay* to indicate how Taylor is immersed in the audio-visual languages of film. My long-standing interest in audio-visual culture and its increasing role in contemporary digital life led me to explore ways of achieving a digital aesthetic in book form that responds to this distinctly twenty-first-century cultural development. The early application of digital communications and understanding cyberspace could not represent and distribute visual objects in the way we can today. Visual narrative has arguably taken over as the dominant mode of address, particularly with regards to reaching large audiences. Recent social platform app TikTok allows users to create 15-second videos soundtracked by music clips. It is the world's second-most or fourth-most downloaded game app of 2019 (depending on your data source) and has reportedly been downloaded 2 billion times as

of April 2020.¹¹ This obsession with short audio-visual communication is having an increasing impact on literature, as evidenced in the recent rise in production and consumption of graphic novels, and including novels made of gifs.¹² Text or the written word continues to play an increasingly reduced role within digital culture, bringing with it, new challenges and affordances. My contribution to advancing knowledge with regards to this phenomenon's impact on young people can be seen within the characterisation of my protagonist. Taylor finds the ability to process and comprehend her real-life experience shaped profoundly by the audio-visual language of film, in which she is immersed and says so, 'I'm going to write this in screenplay format. Sorry. I know it's unnecessary/annoying/pretentious/stupid—delete as appropriate—but it's how I remember. It's a film thing. Did I mention I'm into film?' (p. 11) It is this need to process life experience through the medium of audio-visual culture that shapes her character and this work, and I develop these ideas in more depth in Chapters 2 & 3.

¹¹ According to statistic found here: <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/>

¹² See the following articles for more detail on these statistics As Comic Book Industry Grows, Smaller Publishers Learn to Adapt, NY Times, 2019 available at: www.nytimes.com/2019/05/08/business/lion-forge-merger.html, and, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3050976/are-gifs-the-future-of-novels> also <https://www.wired.com/2014/12/gorgeous-graphic-novel-gifs/>

1.4 The YA Self: Discovery and (Re)-invention

‘But is he who enters the door and he who closes it the same being?’

(Bachelard, cited in Wynne-Jones, 1994)

The YA self is often a self in transition. A self in a liminal place, at the point of moving from one state of knowledge (childhood) to another (adulthood) and in literature, thresholds are, ‘...physical manifestations of change.’ (Wynne-Jones, 1994). The YA self is frequently found on the cusp of a new life, just as the YA heroine herself is ontologically constructed as such, neither adult nor child. Or both? Readers frequently meet their YA protagonists on the edge of stepping over a threshold or coping with the impact of having just walked through one.

Within my novel, the central protagonist Taylor is on the threshold of a new adult life as she progresses through her first year of university. She’s taking her studies seriously, making a few new friends, driven by a desire to reinvent herself and put the past behind her. She wants to forge a new life without the complications of before but it’s not easy. The image of the fresher student wide-eyed and fresh-faced is synonymous with one idea of young adulthood—innocent, open—but what we more often find on the pages of recent YAL are protagonists who are tentative, unsure—world-weary, even, and cynical.¹³ Taylor falls into this latter category, as can be seen by this comment as she reflects on how things were so nearly going better for her, the evening before finding Kasha murdered, ‘But there you go. That’s my life. One minute I’m happy. There’s a song I love on the radio, the lights are all green on my cycle into uni, no one hated on me today. The next it’s free fall.’ (p. 18)

¹³ But think also of that most famous YAL’s university student, Salinger’s Holden Caulfield (Salinger, 1951).

The threshold experience of the first year at university today can feel diluted by the increasing number of freshers choosing to live at home. Studying in her hometown of Cambridge, Taylor's decision to stay local is driven by cost-saving but also a desire for what she sees as an easier life. But there is a price for Taylor '...the transition to my bright shiny new life is not working out at all.' (p. 41) Students who take, or opt for, life on campus or nearby accommodation must confront not only the challenges of degree-level study and making friends, but also every day chores including laundry, grocery shopping and cooking. Arguably, it is the adaptation to rise to these challenges which enable a young person to grow to adulthood and are an essential part of every individual's maturation process, particularly the experience of leaving home—a formative threshold event.

Threshold recognition is one of the joys of literature. (Wynne-Jones, 1994, p. 48) The young adult self on the threshold, who they are and why we're interested in them, is located precisely in the reader being present at *that* crucial moment, however long or short a time that moment lasts. In Lange's *Butter* (2013) it is the moment Marshall/Butter realizes he doesn't need to go through the humiliating ordeal he's seemingly destined to perform on YouTube, just to be liked; In Jackson's *The Good Girl's Guide to Murder* it's the moment Pippa realizes the true identity of Andie's killer; In *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, it's in Taylor's ability to recognise her complicity and guilt going along with Cyd's plot to broker power over Pete (the bullying incident) that fuels her desire to find Kasha's killer, particularly when Pete is accused, 'It's just like last year. I didn't act then, either, did I? I stood by and let something horrible happen. Only now someone isn't just traumatized. They're dead.' (p. 43) It is our appetite for this moment of transformation, of bearing witness to manifestations of change, and discovering new relationships between inner and outer change, that, Crago argues, drives our species' obsession with narratives, (Crago, 2014).

This relationship between inner change and its external manifestation is a powerful and recurring theme in YAL, one which resonates loudly with the subject of online identity construction explored in my novel and points to another pervasive YAL theme—the emergent self. Going online is a place to discover yourself, to invent and *reinvent* yourself (Bachelard’s ‘door’). Boyd understands the impact on self-identity formation among young people hanging out and spending time in *networked publics*, and a sub-chapter heading in her PhD thesis (which didn’t make it into her book) captured my imagination early on in my writing process. The phrase ‘writing one’s self into being online’ (Boyd, 2008, p. 119) and articulates an active almost ongoing *threshold moment* within the daily practices of digital social media interaction. This can be seen, for example, in Taylor *writing herself into being* as she launches the antibullying website, as a way of countering her guilt and establishing herself as something more than a bystander, ‘I tried to explain my actions in terms of something called the *bystander effect*, which is basically if one person stands by everyone does. It means bad people get away with things they shouldn’t. It just takes one person to stand up and then more will. I made a video about it called *The Bully in the Mirror* which went viral but instead of helping people see themselves in it everyone thought I was trying to make excuses.’ (p. 40). It is also found in Kasha’s remaking of herself from socially disadvantaged care leaver to a talented singer-songwriter with influence through her newly established social media profiles, a fact Taylor is quick to detect, ‘There seems to be not much going on for Kasha In the last few weeks before she died, and nothing before April last year.’ (p. 35)

Young people often experiment with identity, seeking to align their external appearance with who they are inside. Taylor’s style is a 21st-century postmodern update on a 90s indie/goth/Beatnik. Her black jeans, DMs and message tees are customized and on-trend. It only takes a brief sweep across any UK campus or high street to see the influence of the

past 30 years of fashion alive, well and re-appropriated for today's youth (*Cosmopolitan*, 2018). Rhidian's message t-shirts broadcast in an 'old school', material way, displaying statements ranging from the significantly ideological to the mundane. These are deliberate clothing choices, designed to unsettle with the ambiguity of their intended effect—should the reader take them as ironic or sincere? They allude to a full awareness of the meta-modernist sensibility and the impossibility of authenticity in a post-digital, posthuman age while at the same time wishing that wasn't so.

The intentional ambivalence in sincerity and explicit irony in my character's clothing choices embodies the unstable stylistic signifiers of contemporary youth style culture. In the novel I have drawn on them not only in their function as narrative detail, revealing character, but on their irony and humour within specific points in the story. For instance, Rhidian's 'responsible adult' t-shirt overtly references threshold language or when Taylor's 'moody bitch' tee provides a moment of humour in her seeming lack of self-awareness, as she considers what's appropriate wear for crime incident statement provision at a police station. The unstable relationship between inner states and outer appearance denotes ontological questionings of self and acknowledge the acceptance of the need for multiple selves in navigating contemporary life through technology. Thus, situating the novel within a post-digital discourse of metamodernism, intertextuality and remediation. I shall return to this later.

The gaps between the online and offline identities of young adults fit neatly into a threshold model as nowhere is more liminal than the spaces of our self-imagining as we navigate online and offline experience. Although Taylor's first deliberate engagement with public online life (aside from social media for communication with friends) is through her anti-bullying campaign blog she sets up - overall a negative experience. Following on from the reams of negative responses to her by-stander guilt video she pulls, '...the website offline,

and my YouTube channel and vow never to go online again.’ (p. 68). It is Kasha’s use of social media for personal re-invention that highlights the irresistible allure of this moment. For her, the truncated messages of social media are an opportunity to put the past behind and move on with her life. As Taylor reads Riley’s blog ‘The gaps in the girl we knew as Kasha fall into place: a difficult life, full of heartbreak and hard choices. “No wonder she wanted to reinvent herself. How do you get on with your life, when you’re tied to all that?”’ (p. 284). They provide a back story to the beautiful, smiling, stylish girl with the ‘melodious turn of phrase.’ (p. 34) These moments reinforce that what a person chooses to share online shapes not only who they are for others but has a massive impact on their happiness, well-being and—in Riley/Kasha’s case and her posting the photograph of her with her father—her life.

The daily ontological navigations of young people online and offline link back to the origins of YAL within the bildungsroman. With its beginnings in the 17th century, the bildungsroman focused on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. It’s not too hard to see how the irreducible optimism of Voltaire’s titular hero Candide can be found in the indefatigability of today’s ubiquitous posed smiling selfie; the terminable diversions and fake narratives afforded by social technologies hunger for engagement, in Sterne’s unreliable narrator Tristram Shandy’s dubious self-accounting. Candide (1759) and Tristram Shandy (1759) are first-person narratives purporting to be ‘self-writing’¹⁴ but which are fictionalised accounts of lives *imagined by their authors*. The first-person narrative voice is the most popular mode of address among YA authors not least because our stories often connect most deeply with readers who feel they are being directly spoken to by its characters. They experience the events and emotions of the story alongside

¹⁴ I first came across the idea of self-writing in Micheal Foucault’s essay Self Writing (*Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 2000). It is a form of life writing described as hupomnemata and refers to a process whereby the writer embarks upon writing with a double gaze of inner and outer reflection. This seems a particularly apt expression of the writers’ dual persona when engaged in self writing, whether online or not. See also Foster Wallace’s dual consciousness (2005) and Atwood’s writerly duplicity (2002).

their characters and are happy to forget the often adult, puppet-master-author behind the words, making everything work.

These early novels were aimed at adults wishing to take a nostalgic, wistful look back at an idea of childhood as innocent and guileless, but their lineage, to novels with distinctly different narrative-telling intentions—depicting the authentic complex experiences of young people, *for* young people—can be traced to the present day in the development of the notion of the protagonist as a YA Self formed by an openness to discover, desire to invent and create, and possessing a commitment to self-reflection and change seen in Taylor’s self-narration, the lessons she’s learned, the act of writing about her relationship to Kasha/Riley, on making the hand sculpture and sharing it online as a *memento mori*. Liminality, change and transition has become the dominant narrative of post-digital contemporary life, one that puts us in a constant moment of becoming, of authoring self-identity, and suggests ‘the way we use media makes us unaware of the ways we are co-constituted as subjects with media.’ (Dinnen, 2019, p.18)

These distributed narrative territories are especially resonant to the experience of *growing up online* and are woven throughout the narrative of *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, especially in the relationships of the novel’s key characters (visualised on p. 217 as a network graph to amplify their interconnectedness).

1.5 The YA World: Connectivity and Community

“YA has become a platform for a public conversation about the great benefits and great risks of our increasing dependency on technology...” (Musgrave, 2016, p. xi)

Children and young people are unique subjects within fiction as they cannot control the places they are born, or must grow up in, nor can they choose where they live. This problem is exacerbated today by overpriced housing, meaning young people have to stay at home for longer, commonly into their twenties, ensuring their lives continue to be closely influenced by ‘supervising’ adults. Ever since *The Outsiders* conjured a believable teenage world of boy gangs and social divide in small-town American, in a particular moment, YA novels have tackled the challenges and benefits of whatever contemporary landscape its protagonists find themselves in. The realities of these places are often at odds with the stated or implied desires of the young protagonists, and the conflict between these inner desires and outer realities becomes the subject and drama of their stories.

Today’s landscape is more complex than ever with technology affecting every aspect of young peoples’ lives, from how they submit their homework, how they communicate with friends, how they play, create, learn, love and become sexual beings. However, young people’s relationship with technology, its impact and consequences have still only been given a small room on the bookshelves of YAL. Most criticism concerned with technology and YAL has mostly focused on science fiction and dystopian fantasy until recently that is.¹⁵ Today technology provides routes for young people to participate and contribute to the world in a way previously unimaginable. Musgrave notes how adolescent fiction, ‘published in the new

¹⁵ There is even a strand of *social media horror* within the popular Scholastics Point Horror imprint, including such titles as *Defriended* by Ruth Baron (2013) and *Wikipedia* by Chris Van Etten (2014).

millennium, frequently depicts young people as actively engaging with digital technology in ways that are productive and empowering.’ (Musgrave, 2016, p. ix).

The Networked Wonderland of Us is part of this change and part of a larger body of work. Taking onboard Katherine Burkes’ idea that fictional texts enact the symbolic resolution of real-world conflict, Musgrave directly addresses the gap in critical discussions around technology, civic engagement and activism and points them directly at realist YA fiction. Boyd et al, ‘suggest an expanding view of civic participation, based on experimental contemporary modes of communication, play and community building.’ (Musgrave, 2016, p. xvi). Musgrave presents the idea of imaginary activism focusing on realist texts that address gaps in recent literature examining the role of technology. Imaginary activism foregrounds the importance of digital citizenship, framing readings of selected YA texts including Cory Doctorow’s *Little Brother*, as narratives that foreground a particular form of agency implemented through engagement with technology.¹⁶

The transition of YA self from child to adult has arguably never been less clear cut than it is today. Charting a clear narrative journey from childhood to adult is fraught with difficulty and complexity, but also, formative potential. As Bernier Lee says of the web in the face of criticism of its detrimental powers and potential for harm, what we make of it (the complexity and multiplicity of growing up today) is up to us. My response, *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, laid out in the creative element of this thesis, addresses exactly this, through its particular deployment of fractured, technology-driven nonlinear narratives into an accessible work of YAL, as YAL itself comes of age.

¹⁶ This reading can also be applied to older novels, which Musgrave doesn’t mention, such as Tracy Alexander’s *Hacked* (2014) and Malorie Blackman’s *Hacker* (1992) where both protagonists subvert hacking’s reputation as enabler of criminality, rather they apply their computing skills to righting wrongs.

1.6 Conclusion

As I searched for the answer to my first research question—which characteristics of contemporary realist young adult literature (YAL) could be developed to properly situate my novel within its creative landscape—it is clear that despite being many things to many people, there are a set of general characteristics that persist. YAL appeals to readers from 14 years upwards to 35/40, the language is accessible, the storytelling pacey, it is centred around a young protagonist facing threshold moments with an openness to transition and self-realisation. Beyond this YAL is as idiosyncratic and varied as any other literary form and capable of engaging with a wide range of ideas and themes through an imaginative and innovative range of stylistic devices. Contemporary realist literature hasn't shied away from addressing the complexities of life for young people living close to technology by putting these issues, and the narrative they afford, front and centre in the emergent subgenre of technorealism. In the next chapter, I focus on this last point, investigating how the work of selected contemporary realist—technorealist—YAL, including my novel, incorporate digital culture into its fiction, how the languages and practices of digital technology have been deployed as a narrative strategy and how this might be understood with the context of this research's aesthetic aim.

Chapter Two

Writing Digital Culture into Contemporary Realist YAL

‘...the content of any medium is always another medium.’

(McLuhan, 1964, p. 8)

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss how my novel writes digital culture into its story focusing on research questions 1, 3 and 4:

- RQ 1 How might a writing investigation into the discourses, languages and practices of digital culture advance this study’s aim of achieving *a digital aesthetic in book form via a multimodal writing practice* pursued in the case study of the creation of an original Young Adult novel?
- RQ 3 How does selected contemporary realist YAL, including *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, address key discourses within digital culture?
- RQ 4 How does selected contemporary realist YAL, including *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, deploy the languages and practices of digital technologies as a narrative strategy?

Over the past twenty years, along with much other literature written for children and adults, YAL has undergone an unprecedented and radical change. The languages of digital technology, especially social technology, have found their way onto the pages of traditionally

produced texts in a variety of imaginative and form-expanding ways.¹⁷ Old technologies, such as the book, anxious about being overwritten by the new, have found methods by which to evolve¹⁸ rather than allow themselves to become extinct, incorporating and adapting traditional forms of textual, audio and visual representation into new practices and offering new frameworks with which to understand and evaluate those practices.

As I've shown in Chapter 1, and contrast to the morally didactic forms of storytelling traditionally associated with literature for children and young adults, contemporary realist YAL has advanced more than most with regards to embracing digital culture. In 1996, Nikolajeva establishes contemporary YAL as a body of work concerned with formal experiment. She writes:

‘...children’s literature today is evolving towards complexity and sophistication on all narrative levels... reflected in such phenomena as the disintegration of traditional narrative structure and the extensive use of different experimental forms... (and its) questioning of conventional approaches to the relationship between text and reality.’

(Nikolajeva, 1996, p. 207)

In, *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, this questioning of the relationship between text and reality resides in the exploration of the languages, discourses and practices of digital culture. It lays in its examination of the relationship between narrative representation within the book text and the experience of young peoples’ lives mediated through technology. I argue that YAL is the best-positioned mode of literary address from which to explore this new

¹⁷ Interestingly, the book as-an-object has found *its* way into digital culture, particularly within games, mobile and interactive fiction, demonstrating a two-way flow of influence.

¹⁸ For further reading see Salisbury (2018)

relationship between text and reality. Contemporary realist YAL exists at a nexus of potential for formal and thematic change not only because its readers are already so immersed in technology¹⁹ but because, despite regular predictions to the contrary, the publication and consumption of YAL remain healthy²⁰. Not least due to the continued commercial appetite for YA tie-ins in the form of films and television series.

Nikolajeva's book predates the digital innovations with which my novel is concerned but the formal analysis she offers these pre-internet-age, experimental texts not only establishes a certain kind of YAL as literature but also paves the way for other literary critics to explore these formal innovations, and the ideas and cultural influences which drive them. In 1999, children's literature scholar and librarian Elizabeth Dresang published *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age*. It is a work that marks a watershed in the publication and critical receptions of new YAL creatively responding to the impact of digital technology on the lives and reading habits of young people. In a recent paper, I discuss how Dresang '...presented a new breed of digitally engaged YAL that addressed changes in thinking about digital technologies and how young people interact with them.' (Gibson Yates, 2020, p. 59). Dresang's founded her *Radical Change Theory* on three central principles, those of interactivity, connectivity and access. These principles, she argued, best explained what was new about the changes in books for young adult readers in an emerging age of digitality.

Thus, began the building of a significant body of work which has shaped the critical framework for this research. While Nikolajeva is concerned with establishing the literary credentials of YAL, Dresang highlights the necessity of radical formal invention within YAL in representing the significant societal changes brought about by technology. Others such as Olthouse and Koss and Tucker-Raymond, whom I discuss later in this chapter, followed on

¹⁹ According to a recent report from the UK Office for National Statistics (*Internet access-households and individuals*, 7th August 2020) young people unsurprisingly remain the biggest users of the internet and social media often foregoing conversation in person for their phone or device.

²⁰ Bookseller 2018 article on YA market trends.

from this. Alongside my own experience in audio-video practice, Mackay's work on multiliteracy and multimodality (Mackay, 1999, and 2017) proved productive towards developing my understanding and devising innovative approaches to multimodal narrative construction, enabling the move from thinking about social technologies as potential narrative strategies to figuring out how they might work as writing practices within my novel with a focus on a particular form of composition the 'orchestration of scriptive texts' (Bernstein 2011 cited in Mackay, 2017, p.217).

2.2 Discourse within Digital Culture

RQ 2: How does selected contemporary realist YAL, including *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, address key discourses within digital culture?

'With the arrival of the digital media, the world was arguably altered and the way we think of ourselves and the planet (indeed the universe) has conceivably changed forever.' (Creeber and Martin, 2009 p. 5)

A word about my choice of the term *digital culture*. I acknowledge the word culture is problematic within many disciplines from anthropology to geography to digital humanities. The word culture can operate according to a range of specific uses and meanings depending on its context. In this study, I have understood culture in a broad sense as referring to a specific ecology of social, economic, geographical, linguistic and political influences existing at a particular point in time. It is possible to ascribe an outline to a particular culture in a

particular moment but increasingly any perceived boundaries are movable, flexible and fluid, with intercultural exchange occurring at all times and levels. A more precise definition, and one referencing the particular suffix of digitality with which this study is concerned, then Creeber and Martin's emphasis, that any discussion on digital media cannot be '...confined to technological advance...what is key to the phenomenon of New Media is *our relationship to it.*' (Creeber and Martin, 2009, p. 5, my italics) This emphasis on our relationships to culture, whoever we define it, is my fiction investigation's bottom line. Our, young people in particular's, relationship with technology is the very centre of this PhD, because 'Young people are sophisticated and highly adaptive users of new technologies so it's no surprise that their literature would be quick to replicate the linguistic and generic forms common to cyberspace.' (Flanagan, 2014, p.159). The challenge for the writer of young adult novels is to present these online multi-literacies in a way that is both *authentic and immersive as a story*. In addition to considering how the formal languages and practices of digital culture could be brought into *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, I investigated how existing realist YAL addressed four key digital discourses²¹ that were essential to my own story, and further considered how these might be addressed thematically and structurally within my work.

The first discourse arises from a tension between negative and positive interpretations of technology that can be seen throughout the history of technology within literature and particularly within YAL. Studies of technology in science fiction writing for young adults shows a distinct 'anti-technology stance, with stories focusing on the dangers and risks of technology (Applebaum, 2010, cited in Flanagan, 2019, p.336). Musgrave highlights how authors have wrestled with telling authentic stories about technology's impact on young people, suggesting a recent turn away from negative depiction to positive that can mainly be

²¹ Taking as my starting point Kenneth Burkes' notion that 'Fictional texts enact the symbolic resolution of real-world conflict' (K. Burke cited in Musgrave) I began identifying the 'conflicts' my PhD novel sought to symbolically resolve and located them in four distinct discourses.

found in realist YAL. Furthermore, she suggests, this ideological shift in the way technology is displayed as a routine element of daily life is developed and interpreted further as often having a potential force for good in the way it galvanises individual and community sub-action around positive causes (Musgrave, 2016). In my novel this can be seen in the way Taylor deploys a website to try ‘to make up for letting things go too far’ (p.35); in the way Cyd calls for information about the night Kasha is killed via a video shared on social media and stirs up community momentum and support via social media invitations, the ‘unexpected friend request from the dead girl’ (p.24); and in the calls to post photographs of Kasha’s name to a hashtag #rememberkasha (p. 217, p.302) which not only promote awareness about Kasha’s death, to secure information about her murderer but encourage a creative act of catharsis for those affected by the story.

The Networked Wonderland of Us further addresses these tensions in the story and its writing process illustrated by the fact that the origins of the novel are located in two real-life news stories. The first news story concerns the indelibility of our digital identities. In an article lamenting the comic, tragic and potentially harmful implications of not being able to delete online profiles, *The Guardian* journalist Libby Brooks speaks of the unknown consequences of ‘the unamendable nature of that digital fingerprint’ (Brooks, 2010) of which we are still only gradually becoming acquainted. Brook’s idea of an ‘indelible digital fingerprint’ became central to the plot of my novel. Thus, a photograph found on a forgotten blog provides the link between murderer and victim, despite the victim taking pains not to be found in real life by changing her identity and moving location, the internet betrays her whereabouts.

The second real-life news story concerns an American teenager whose popularity on My Space peaked hugely following her murder at the diner where she worked nights.²² The

²² Jonze, T. 2006. *Death on My Space*, *The Guardian*.

specific digital after-life phenomenon this story highlighted uncannily framed the tragedy of this girl's death and suggested an exciting new approach with which to tell a story about a generations' experience of growing up online. The personal impact of this story led to a decision to include this phenomenon in my novel as an illustration of how technology, as well as personifying us and representing us, provides a way for us to grieve collectively and experience solidarity in feelings of loss.²³ This can be seen when Taylor accepts the friend request from the murder victim, Kasha, 'there was only one way to find out' (p. 26), leading to her involvement in Kasha's story. The phenomenon of online memorials and the surrounding online 'chatter' thus becomes a significant narrative plot point²⁴ that embodies Taylor's curiosity and empathy (characterisation), as well as engaging ideas about technology as a locus for both good and bad action, promising neither cyber-utopia nor cyber-dystopia (Musgrave, 2016).

The second digital discourse is identity. It has been argued that more than any other issue, the rise of the internet and globalisation over the past twenty has brought about an obsession with identity and self-representation. Goffman's ideas around the performance of the self, draw on dramaturgical principles to explain what we are doing when we are performing self (1959), and still hold considerable cultural currency today in a world where performing self is normalised by social media apps such as YouTube and TikTok, Instagram. American essayist Jia Tolentino and the popular Netflix crime drama *Mindhunter* (Series 1, 2017) both evoke Goffman's idea that we act or *perform* in certain ways when we are in front of others, according to the audience before us and how we understand what they want or need from us. That it is through this *performance* we give meaning to ourselves and others. It is a

²³ The appetite for this type of collective public grieving having already been demonstrated in the well documented response to the death of Princess Diana in 1997 (West, 2004) albeit pre-digital in era West's notion of public mourning as 'conspicuous compassion' serves this online phenomenon accurately.

²⁴ Hollywood screenwriting expert Robert McKee terms the plot point which kicks off the protagonists' main quest as *the inciting incident* (McKee, 1998)

position with significant implications for understanding identity and the possibility of authenticity. Like most people their age, Taylor and Kasha engage in the practice of presenting themselves online via their daily engagements with social media, constituting not just a self-performance but a complex narrative around that performance. The implications for this activity, mediated now with the additional layer of reality and complexity of technology, continue to interest me as a writer and researcher and can be traced to an article I published in 2011 in the first issue of *Book 2.0*.²⁵ In it, I discuss the initium²⁶ and development of an early draft of *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, then entitled *User*. In it, I comment on the way the ephemeral marks and objects of our social media pages constitutes points in a dot to dot, ‘the picture only becoming clear when all the dots are joined.’ (Gibson Yates, 2011, p. 33). An observation reiterated in the novel text itself, ‘I know, but that’s the trouble with social media. It only tells you part of the story. The parts people want you to see.’ (p. 55)

Participation is the third framing discourse within digital culture that this work investigates because *to be online is to participate*: ‘Youth are more than just consumers of digital content; they are also active participants and creators of this new media culture.’ (Kathryn Montgomery and Barbar Gottlieb Robles cited in Flanagan, 2014, p.70).

Participation is inherent in any kind of online interaction and constitutes a form of digital agency which often has implications not only for online life but offline as well. Participation can take specific forms such as active citizenship, or social, environmental or political activism. Cory Doctorow’s *Little Brother* (2008) explores the latter in a recognisable near-future world where a surveillance state controlling the freedom of its citizens is challenged by the novel’s protagonist and his friends.

²⁵ Gibson Yates. S. 2011. *User: Reflections on the narrativisation of self within social networking sites: A presentation and discussion of the processes involved in a creative work in progress Book 2.0 Issue 1.1.*

²⁶ McCormack describes the initium as ‘what the author had in mind when he began his novel.’ (McCormack, 1988, p.190.)

Set in an entirely contemporary story world, *The Networked Wonderland of Us* also draws attention to the way real-world action can be activated by online action. It's in Taylor's acceptance of Kasha's post-mortem friend request that prompts further investigation; in Rhidian's search of Shani's browser history, revealing Kasha's Google Map search to an address in Walthamstow, that in turn prompts a car journey to London and the acquisition of further important information driving subsequent plotting; and in the reaction to Taylor's anti-bullying campaign website and video which prompts her to get involved in the case at all. Thus, online participation is shown to advance individual action and moral agency within the novel's narrative.

Another form of participation is *creative participation* or *making*. The idea of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 as characterised by increasing levels of interactivity, consolidates the early internet's artistic projects of remix and re-appropriation. The Z Generation, those that grew up with the internet, are at the forefront of innovating technology use from developing new programmes that reshape the way we communicate, to making music, remixing videos, sharing crafting tips and offering book reviews. This generation's prosumer propensities for (re)creation is evident in the work of British YA author Alice Oseman, whose first three novels address technology and life online as integral to her characters' world, which for Oseman (and her characters) means participation (blogs, vlogs, fan culture) and creativity (making podcasts, sharing artwork). Her first novel *Solitaire* (2014) centres around the mysterious interventions of a blogger whose messages and posts draw Oseman's protagonist, a sixteen-year-old, in and provide the plot points of the story. Her second novel, *Radio Silence* (2016), focuses on the protagonists' obsession with a podcast, *Universe City*, which transport her to an imaginary world. Her third novel, *Born for This* (2018) centres around what happens when online fandom relationships become real-world and chart a more typically YA emotion-fuelled melodrama of romance and misadventure. The discoveries

Oseman's characters make online provoke responses in the form of online participation which is sometimes simply a comment or a more time-invested creative project, uploaded later, or a real-world response such as a fan meeting another fan to share their passion or attending a meet-up/concert or other events. A member of the Z Generation herself, Oseman writes for and about her generation, diversifying into graphic novels, a prolific user of Twitter and Tumblr blogger where she regularly interacts with readers and fans. When I interviewed Oseman via email (2019) on the use of technology in her novels Oseman said, 'Technology is everywhere and it's not going away. I can't imagine trying to write a realistic contemporary story without it.' (Appendix 1)

Creative participation as a prosumer choice, and the real-world agency it affords, can be seen embodied in several points of story development within *The Networked Wonderland of Us*. When Taylor finds herself troubled by guilt over her part in the bullying of Pete her response is to set up an anti-bullying blog and make a video showing how standing by is as morally reprehensible as carrying out the aggression itself. It is in Rhidian's graffiti daubing of the word kasha and sharing it online, it is in Cyd's campaign content, the coverage of the candlelit vigil, the party memorial and the final act of Taylor's creative catharsis as she uploads the sculpture of their hands to the memorial hashtag #rememberkasha.

Response is key to participation, but an *absence of response* can be just as significant as its presence²⁷, especially when it comes to characterisation. Taylor's initial response to online expressions of shock and sympathy at the news of Kasha's murder is to not post anything. She finds the outpourings of grief overly sentimental and wonders about the authenticity of the posts, 'How many of them even knew Kasha? There must be some Teen Death Junkie Network out there I don't know about with hundreds waiting for some poor kid

²⁷ The idea of a presence of absence can be found in discussions of realist film theory where cinema is seen as a medium manufacturing presence through the phenomenological insistence of the referents' absence – see the film theory classic text Andre Bazin's *What is Cinema?* (various editions) for an early discussion of this.

to die just so they can have some new thing to feel miserable about.’ (p. 217) And who they are really for, ‘Yeah I read some. It’s weird they’re addressed to Kasha...As if she’s out there still. In some digital afterlife or something. Scrolling through messages, waiting for updates... (p. 45/50) especially when most did not know her in real life. When Taylor does finally post the picture of their hands to it is in a way that allows for a more elliptical engagement, a degree apart from the direct address of a textual comment, gif or emoji. A way of meeting the pressure to perform these online participation practices but on her own terms.

The fourth and final discourse I will discuss, and one that brings the discussion back to this study’s main focus on the creative process of writing multi-modally is networks. Broadly speaking networks are systems that enable interactions between separate entities to take place and as such have become to be understood as the main system for much of, if not all, life. Media theorist Manuel Castells provided ground-breaking work foregrounding the paradigmatic shift in understanding how life is organised as networks and lays the foundation for re-evaluating thinking about networks across all sectors including literature (Castells, 1996)²⁸. The idea of the network represents a shift in the way we conceptualise and visualise the work and provides an apt model and metaphor for describing a novel concerned with representing digital culture, through multimodal literacies.

Later in the 20th century, the Italian author, essayist and Oulipo member Italo Calvino refers to the novel as a network of ideas (Calvino, 1996). Calvino’s essays in this influential collection are prescient of the way writers have approached the challenges of representing the multimodal, multi-literate experience of both protagonist and reader as we’ve turned into the 21st century. With chapter titles, Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility and Multiplicity, Calvino captures much of what we now refer to as a process of textual production and

²⁸ To fully appreciate the revolutionary/radical nature of this idea worth remember that prior to this moment societies, systems were conceptualised via ‘root and branch’ – with the metaphor of the tree often evoke to describe how knowledge originated and moved about.

reception that demands maximum involvement and response from the reader, or, as perhaps the text-receiver might more accurately to be referred to as, ‘the interpreter’ (Mackey, 2019).

2.3 Languages and Practices of Digital Technology as Narrative Strategy

RQ 4: How does selected contemporary realist YAL, including *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, deploy the languages and practices of digital technologies as a narrative strategy?

‘...in this cultural moment fraught with anxieties about the future, fears for the state of the humanities, and prognostications about the “dumbest generation,” remarkable literary works emerge that can catalyse audiences across the generations. These works vividly show that the humanities, as well as our society generally, are experiencing a renewed sense of the richness of print traditions even as they also begin to exploit the possibilities of the digital regime.’ (Hayles, 2012, p. 247)

Fiction has a long history of enlisting the structures of communication technology as a narrative strategy. Pre-digital era communication technologies include smoke signals, drumbeats, pictures on walls, letters, carrier pigeon, riders, messages in bottles, Morse code, radio signals, telephone calls. The digital era has brought us e-mails, instant messaging, blogs, vlogs, media sharing of photographs, video, audio, emojis, gifs, memes, etc., all with their own materiality, affordances and rhythms (Brown, 2016). The languages and practices of particular technologies have been employed by authors writing across the ages to shape the plot, build voice through direct address, enable narrative misdirection, contribute to narrative

complexity and aid narrative resolution. In the telling of stories about what people do and why, the languages and practices of communication technologies have been used in all manner of applications, as varied as their authors and the times they are writing in.

2.3.1 Social Media

‘Storytelling is an interactive process, traces of which can be seen in the conversational formats of social media and are interwoven between online and offline context.’ (Page, 2012, p. 1)

During this research, I’ve paid close attention to the way we inscribe and respond to the languages and practices of a range of social media contexts and found myself echoing the Renaissance practice of *imitation*, understood as the practice of ‘...modelling other’ voices...(and) imitating the structure of others’ writing.’ (Roper, cited in Ells, 2015, p. 245). Although I haven’t brought this distinct practice fully into my work, it is in many ways an apt description of what we do when we participate in social media-enabled communication. As with the compositional method of ‘call and respond’ in music, when we engage in social media, we often mirror the activity of others—establishing a connection via declarations of *like for like*—thus creating important social bonds through reciprocity. Likewise, over the past twenty years, writers of YAL have looked to the languages and practices of social media to communicate the technology-mediated lives of their young protagonists and to find their contemporary voice.

The fact that contemporary realist novels are often found scattered with the marks and

spaces of social media communications is a recent phenomenon²⁹ but while many authors of literary fiction avoided the question of what to do with the increasing presence of digitality in their characters' lives (Millar, 2011), YA authors embraced the challenge from the outset. Work such as Lauren Myracle's popular *Internet Girls Series* (2004-2014), Micheal Spooner's *Entrapment* (2010), and Susie Day's *Serafina67 *urgently requires life** (2008), make effective use of message boards and blog formats throughout and are among the first to deploy the interface between traditional and new forms of storytelling—a form Olthouse refers to as *blended books* (Olthouse, 2010).

Here are some examples:

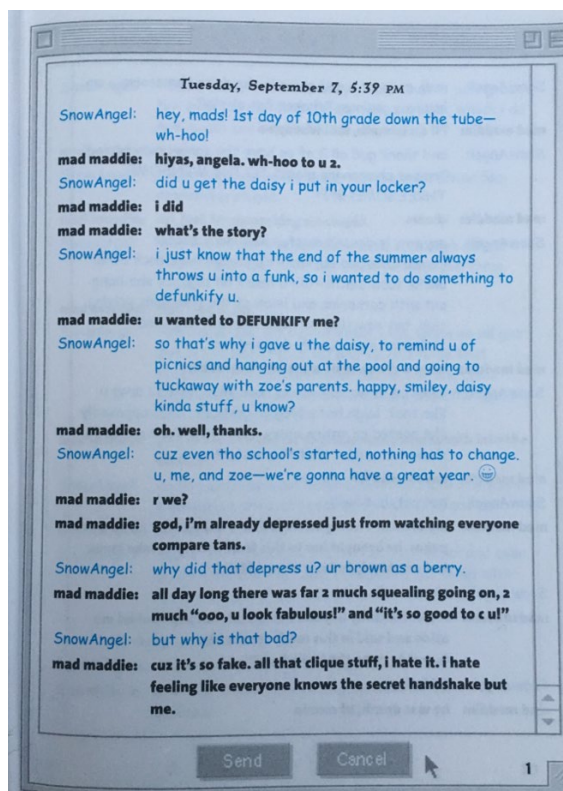


Fig.1: Myracle's *Internet Girls Series* (2004-2014), chat forum page layout.

²⁹ In 2011, journalist Laura Millar asks, where is the internet in contemporary novels of literary fiction? Finding authors going to great lengths to avoid having to address the issue of how to represent these *digital interruptions* in their texts. (Millar, 2011)

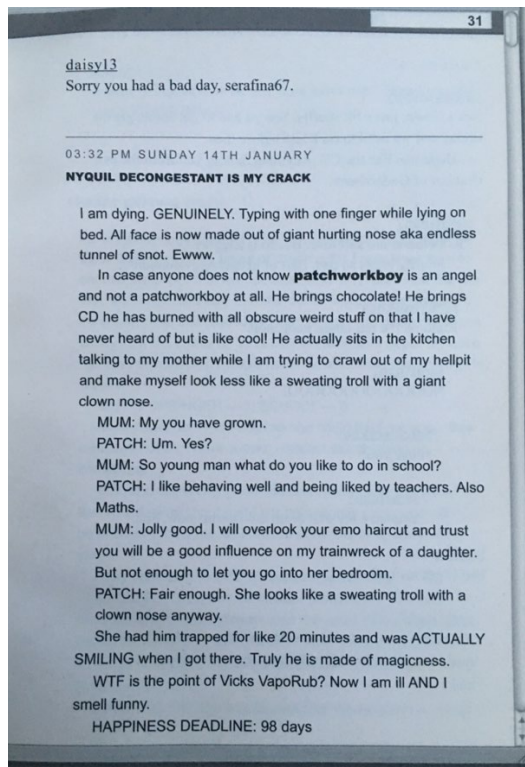


Fig.2: Day's *Serafina67* **urgently requires life** (2008) blog page layout.

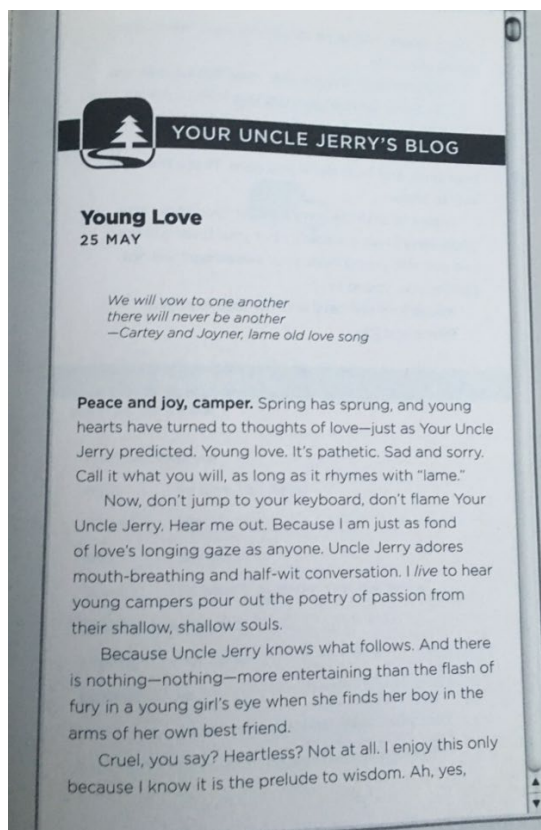


Fig.3: Spooner's *Entrapment* (2010), blog and chat page layout

As you can see these works not only imitate the layout, formatting and language of blogs and chat rooms but embrace the specific narrative suggestions these new forms of narrative discourse afforded in their storytelling, embodying this new technology-mediated voice through simulating (imitation) the software interface (note the scroll bar graphic on all three). In other words, presenting the book as if it were a material version of the software interface itself.

The deployment of the social media software interface within these works affords an additional benefit when considering the role this decision plays as part of a wider narrative strategy to establish character voice through direct address. The desire to captivate and engage readers is particularly prominent for authors of books for children and young adults. As in the case of the choice of diary formatting of earlier and contemporary epistolary young adult novels, the search for new ways to establish the immediacy and reader-character connection of direct address drives authors to explore social media. As British YA author Alice Oseman says in an email interview, I conducted in 2019, ‘Technology is everywhere and it’s not going away. I can’t imagine trying to write a realistic contemporary story without it.’ And ‘I try to include technology and social media in my works in a way that feels natural and real... In *Solitaire* Tori uses Tumblr to blog about her feelings. In *Radio Silence* Frances and Aled use the internet as a creative outlet. And in *IWBFT* (I Was Born for This, 2018) Angel uses social media to cling to her favourite band.’ (Oseman, 2019, Appendix 1) The social media interface allows authors like Oseman to portray their characters realistically through the direct address and not only the social media-tinged direct address of their protagonist but other key characters within their story too. Overcoming a problem often faced by authors committed to using traditional first-person prose and locked into a single POV, that of how to show other character perspectives within a first-person narrated story.

Many of the books Olthouse analyses, as illustrated in figures 1-3, adapt online formatting *wholesale* in the presentation of their stories might more accurately be referred to as *adapted books*. That is fictional works (novels) that have been entirely overhauled by the appearance and language of social media technologies. In this version of categorisation, *blended books*—those that blend traditional prose with other digital and multimodal forms represent a kind of YAL 2.0. The next generation of contemporary realist technology informed YAL and would include more recent texts such as Green’s *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017), where prose is *combined with* digital formatting styles such as blogs, instant messaging technology and photographs to tell the story; or, *Girl Online* (Sugg, 2014) where influencer-turn-author Zoella mixes prose with instant messages, blog posts and photographs to produce a book whose *blended book* credentials extend to various publishing milestones³⁰; or, Rowell’s *Fangirl* (2013) which combines prose and fanfiction uploads; or *Radio Silence* (Oseman, 2017) with prose, podcasts and instant messages; or Jackson’s *The Good Girl’s Guide to Murder* (2019) which adds audio transcripts and production logs to the mix. All of these works—published in the second decade of this twenty-first century—represent the evolution of a body of contemporary realist YAL concerned with normalising social media formatting stylistics within fiction. It is this latter category—YAL 2.0—that has prevailed as the dominant style and reflects this research’s stated aim of creating *a digital aesthetic in book form* while also advancing reflective narrative discourses directly engaging readers in their experience of digital culture, its impact and affordances. And it is social media’s impact on narrative making that interest me most. ‘The story-like fragments found in social media contexts are often ephemeral, small, located on the margins of other kinds of talk...’ (Page, 2010, p. 2) Most frequently these ‘story-like fragments’ come to us in the form of messages, or text

³⁰ *Girl Online* publishing milestones include being the fastest selling book of 2014 and the highest first week sales of most pre-order sales of a debut author since records began.

conversations, comment threads, replies, status updates and posts and demand not only new ways of thinking about telling stories set in these new online/offline territories they *demand* a new way of thinking about the mise-en-page.

The Networked Wonderland of Us doesn't use instant messaging as per Myracle's work via the chat room, but it does use instant text messages. When thinking about how to present these on the page I considered graphic bubbles to frame the messages, mimicking the visual display of message threads on mobile phones, but decided they not only disrupted the reader unnecessarily from the flow of the story but jarred the tone. I experimented with a range of typographical styles. Early drafts favoured the deployment of different fonts, but as I moved the manuscript into third-person narration (December 2018) I favoured incorporating text messages as part of the main body prose, (Green, Rowell and Lang):

Taylor scrolls further down Cyd's wall and finds a post from Kasha that makes her stop in her tracks. *Cyd r u online? I really need 2 speak 2 u. I've been calling 4 ages. Msg me, call me, anythng. quick. I need to speak with u now. No word of a lie.* It was posted from her phone at 10.31 p.m. An hour before they arrived at Daisy's. Just before Taylor met her. She wonders what could have been so urgent to post such a desperate message for all the world to see. But then perhaps it wasn't that extraordinary. She was friends with Cyd after all.

Text messages incorporated into prose passage with italics, December 2018.

Deploying space to set these augmented conversations apart marks the transition of modal address for the reader. The insertion of a line break, and/or an extra margin indent contributes to this signposting and indicates an authorial awareness of intended nuanced changes in meaning and affect. Whereas digital communications presented *within* the prose paragraph

allow the reader to continue with their reading experience unbroken. In these works, the flow of the narrative is uninterrupted by the change in modal address, encouraging the reader to *stay in the story*.

Whether the earlier *adapted works* or more recent YAL 2.0 *blended texts*, these works of YAL deploy digital communication technologies to structure their fiction in a way similar to the epistolary formats of the bildungsroman before them, to communicate the work of identity construction for young people. Koss and Tucker-Raymond examine how digital communication technologies are used as a deliberate narrative strategy that allows, among other things, for a contemporary and immediate first-person direct address that shapes who these characters are for the reader (Koss and Tucker-Raymond, 2014).

The deployment of social technologies within the storytelling also provides creative solutions to the problem of representing the point of view of characters other than the first-person protagonist through which the majority of the story is told. For example, the voice of Cyd, which would only otherwise be presented as dialogue represented through Taylor's lens of narration, is given space in the novel through her social media activity, as if we are listening/watching her speak directly to us, along with Taylor, 'I press play and see Cyd sitting on a large leather sofa in a smartly furnished room. She peers at the viewer and begins: *If you're watching this, chances are you've already heard about Kasha and the terrible way she died.*' (p. 71). Cyd is not only speaking to an anonymous viewer here, through the internet, she is speaking to Taylor and she is also speaking directly to the reader. This form of direct address is consciously explored throughout the novel as a deliberate strategy designed to engage the reader in the story world.

My decision to deploy a blended approach to social media communication and prose representation within my novel, rather than a wholesale adaption of social media interfaces offers creative writing practice innovation in two ways. Firstly, in the fluidity with which it

manages direct address as a narrative strategy. The way it addresses the stated research aim of achieving a digital aesthetic in book form. And this, via the combination of stylistic devices drawn from social media, including font and layout modifications, the inclusion of posts, image descriptions, video descriptions and comment threads to shift point of view, to underline character or action, or to give the sense of forces acting upon my protagonist beyond their (current) understanding. Secondly, they are meant to involve the reader, to connect the world of the novel with their own and even prompt reflection on the role social media plays within their own lives. This commitment to a genuinely multimodal, digitally informed writing practice and its specific narrative effects with regards to direct address has allowed me to experiment with storytelling form and presentation beyond what has already been published within the context of YAL at the time of writing.

2.3.2 Multimodality and Textual Representation of Non-textual Objects

‘...YA literature typically reminds young people of how little agency they have by asserting that digital natives today may be more adept at claiming such agency than previous generations, precisely due to their multimodal digital literacy.’ (Musgrave, 2016, p. xvi)

When thinking about how to inscribe digital culture into my story it has been the problem of how to represent multimodal objects on the page that has vexed me most. ‘Digital culture is multimodal by default so to represent digital culture in writing is to seek solutions to the problem of how to write multimodal communication on the page.’ (Gibson Yates, 2019, p.63)

Multimodal communication includes audio, visual and/or textual information working *in*

combination. Its content is reproducible, sharable, and can be reimagined, re-appropriated and remixed ad infinitum. The implications of this for the author are complex in the way they require thinking differently about the book-texts concerned with multimodal writing. Mackay suggests we think of them as *scriptive*, offering the reader *prompts*, with which I concur, but it's hard to locate what is especially different about this act of reading across a range of *prompts* from *ordinary* reading. As she asserts, 'Reading is the act of orchestrating diverse knowledge to construct meaning from the text while maintaining reasonable fluency and reasonable accountability to the information contained in writing.' (Chittenden and Salinger, cited in Mackey, 2019, p. 218). Either way, the idea of orchestrating knowledge, constructing meaning and fidelity to text seems to me to be at the heart of the creative potential of both multimodal writing as well as the route best followed—at least for now—for developing a deeper understanding of multi-literacy and warrants further investigation.

i. The Still Image: The Selfie & The Accidental Photograph

'Photographs instigate, confirm, seal legends. Seen through photographs, people become icons of themselves.' (Sontag, 1976)

The decision not to reproduce images directly within the text of *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, speaks to my intentions to offer the reader familiar with the pictorial impact of selfies and other technologically distributed images, a *reflective* rather than *affective* point of engagement. An 'outsiders' perspective from which to think about how these images function in their context and, hopefully, view the experience in a new light. When Taylor sees Kasha's selfie, for the first time, Kasha is already dead. She sees her on Kasha's memorialised Facebook page, 'Kasha's profile picture is an unfiltered webcam selfie

taken from her laptop. She pouts playfully at the viewer, the edges of her face dimly lit by the blue glow of her computer screen,’ (p. 27). The word *selfie* is so embedded in our day-to-day language that it’s hard to think of a time when it didn’t exist, but the word entered the Oxford dictionary only in late 2013. It is frequently cited as a certain indicator of millennial narcissism, the emblem of a generation—the Z generation³¹—who can’t seem to get enough of their image. Deaths caused by people attempting selfies in dangerous circumstances reached 259 between 2011 and 2017³² prompting numerous articles voicing concerns of not only the physical but the psychological damage wrought by such an obsession.³³ But there is more to a selfie than simply vanity. In a recent documentary, British artist Ryan Gander investigates this phenomenon not as a signifier of a boom in narcissism but as ‘modern technology powering us to radically rethink who is looking back at us.’ (*Me, Myself and I with Ryan Gander*, 2019, BBC) Gander’s self-reflexive explanation of the role of the selfie in contemporary life is closer to how the characters in my novel relate to its role as an essential practice for social participation and approached with a healthy dose of scepticism. Elson Anderson describes this attitude as metamodernism’s *modus operandi* for contemporary youth. A combination of Vermeulen and van den Akker’s 2010 ‘oscillation between modernism’s optimism and postmodernism’s irony’ and Weil’s ‘nostalgic and cynical, knowing and naïve; manipulative, manipulated and spontaneous,’ (cited in Elson Anderson, 2020, p. 8). As Taylor says towards the end, ‘*it wasn’t until you died that we really got to know each other.*’ (p. 303) inducing a melancholy mix of scepticism, cynicism, knowing and respect.

Boyd describes the process of online self-representation as ‘impression management’ (Boyd, 2014), and although Taylor first met Kasha in real life, this ubiquitous photographic

³¹ The description Z generation refers to those born at the end of the millennium.

³² According to this 2018 study <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6131996/>

³³ A phenomenon which prompted me to write a short story *To Die For* (2018)

self-representation, this modern self-portrait adds a layer of depth and complexity to the person of Kasha, as Taylor understands her. As is often the case in real life, Kasha doesn't meet Taylor's expectations. The photograph is not overly glamorous, posed or altered. Kasha doesn't appear to have spent hours at the mirror before taking it or invested too much thought finding exactly the right location or lighting or time layering the image with a multitude of filters. She hasn't branded herself in the way selfies often are (Rankin, 2019), reproducing a carefully engineered homogeneity to align its subject to other glossy, highly manufactured images in a social media image-sphere driven by the need to monetise the personal image as a product for public consumption.

At the other end of this use of the still image—highly purposed and heavy with intentionality—is the *accidental photograph*. By contrast, the accidental photograph possesses the capacity to reveal something *beyond* the highly purposed intentions of the selfie shot. An accidental photograph is technology acting without a (human) mind to operate it (or at least *consciously* operating it). Its irregular framing, blurred contours and poorly lit contents become hidden codices—secrets to discover. The photographs of Kasha in Daisy's street food van at the moment of her attack, discovered a few days later by Taylor on her phone, reveal moments of the murder itself. 'I'm trying to work the photo out. ... There's a strip light... In the corner of two of the photos is an S and a Y and an 'S in neon pink. Daisy's? I zoom in on the other blurred and fuzzy corner until a lighter shape and contour emerges...I hold the photo away from me and suddenly realise what it is.' (p. 99) And in this way, the accidental photograph performs a significant role within the novel's narrative by visualising a fragment of a scene unseen, showing us Kasha's panic and fear at the moment of her death. It is frenetic and effective, bringing the horror of that attack alive for both Taylor and the reader.

ii. The Moving Image: From Cinema to TikTok

‘...how we engage with film informs how we engage with reality...’ (Frampton, 2006, p.7)

In this section I focus on the moving image as a story-building tool, a shorthand to a host of ideas about culture and identity whereas C3 focus is on film as a *way of seeing* of my protagonist—a way to reinforce narrative POV and focalise narrative perspective. Taylor’s relationship to film stretches far deeper than a desire to study it. For Taylor film represents a way of seeing the world which seems authentic and substantial, a way to investigating and explore that allows for spontaneity but also for control. ‘Film is not simply a reproduction of reality, it is its own world with its own intentions and own creativities. Cinema is the projection, screening, showing, *of thoughts of the real.*’ (Frampton. p. 5).

Taylor’s way of *seeing the world-as-film* informs how the narrative focalisation of the opening chapters are shaped and much of the detail of her characterisation as a film student and obsessive is designed to express the way Taylor views the world through *film thought*. Like many young people, Taylor sees herself as the lead protagonists in the film of her life. In chapter 3 Taylor wonders where she falls on that three-act story arc so loved by screenwriters (p. 25). She tries to picture herself somewhere near the end of act 1 but because life is not ordered in a neat story arc, she unsurprisingly struggles. She tries nonetheless because it is the only way she knows how to make sense of where she finds herself: an existential problem that reveals a deeper ontological uncertainty—who is she? Taylor regards the three-act story structure as a useful tool with which to process feelings about events as she narrates them. Helping her to speak of things about which she is uncertain, even as, at the same time, Taylor is first to admit that she could be wrong.

As well as trying to process her present into meaningful patterns through a form of film-being (Frampton, 2006) Taylor elects to render her past in this way too. Asking analytical, complex questions about being, knowing and self-identity that eighteen-year-old Taylor seeks to work out in ordinary life practice, as can be seen, illustrated when she makes and posts the antibully video with the hope of redeeming her failure to act to help Pete, rewriting herself publicly.

The idea of the screen mind as a powerful interior place, where images of reality, prompted by external referents and filtered by the dual lenses of experience and imagination, can be found as far back as Plato. His image of the cave is deployed to explain how reality is merely a shadow reflection of ideal forms of beauty, truth, etc.: an image, evoked thousands of years later by twentieth-century philosophers concerned to establish a unique set of epistemological and ontological systems of which film can be claimed to consist, and to which it uniquely contributes knowledge. Building his case for future literature as a *combinatoria* of ideas and influences, Calvino evokes Plato's idea of the cave when he refers to memory as a form of *mental cinema*, 'This mental cinema is always at work in each one of us, and it always has been, even before the invention of cinema. Nor does it ever stop projecting images before our mind's eye.' (Calvino, 1996, p. 83) But as with Plato's images projected in the cave. These shadow images we take for reality are not themselves the truth which we seek (Plato's spheres). They are merely their reflection.³⁴

Early cinema falls broadly into two camps: the realism of the Lumière brothers, exemplified by their most well-known early documentary, *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896), and the illusionist fantasies of Méliès' *Trip to the Moon* (1902). This binary lineage of film practice can be detected today in the narrative filmmaking practices of fiction and non-

³⁴ The conceptual interlocking of film/cinema to notions of reality and memory is well established (Carney, 1998) my novel contributes towards the exploration of this connection within creative writing by establishing my protagonist's voice as a 'a filmic kind of thought.' (Frampton, 2006, p. 6).

fiction filmmaking (drama and documentary). Although the boundaries increasingly blur as technology advances with, for example, the phenomenon of deep fakes³⁵ becoming increasingly common at the time of writing. Today's moving images are uploaded to the internet and globally distributed in seconds via video creation and sharing apps such as YouTube, Vimeo and TikTok. Some of these moving-image works, from short films to 15-second duration looped video, trade on the credentials and appeal of realist cinema. Like the Lumières and their audiences, contemporary prosumers are fascinated by the quotidian, the banal and the everyday. Film fixes the ephemeral, iterates the briefly glimpsed, invests the trivial with meaning. Others, as with Méliès' fantasist narrative predilections, prefer the *extraordinary*, seeking superheroes, fantastical creatures and future world speculations, different narratives through which to safely filter our real-world hopes and fears. The technology and presentational context changed. There is no doubt that the move from analogue to digital audio-visual production technologies—as in the case of still photography—has presented a range of substantive, complex revisions to the kinds of reality—imitated or imagined—that film texts can now depict. However, the effects, I argue, of these early formative characteristics in the development of the language of cinema remain pertinent today, and relevant to this discussion.

This tension between old and new technology is a major theme within the text of *The Networked Wonderland of Us*. Taylor introduces herself at the start of the novel apologising for having to tell the reader the story of how she found Kasha in *screenplay* format. Elaborating on the reasons for this, she says, 'I'm a film student. film is my happy place...there's also the fact that everyone remembers significant moments from their life in moving images so why not screenplay?' (p. 12). This is a deliberate device to engage the

³⁵ Face swapping technology Add brief description of 'deep fake' video manipulation (2019) see Anderson TikTok article.

reader from the outset in reflecting on the nature of memory, moving images and filmed stories. Taylor is fully embedded within the performative video-loop TikTok generation, however her engagement with filmmaking draws influence more from historical/traditional modes of production, rather than the immediate and ephemeral appeals of the short-looped video—or as Tolentino describes TikTok’s offerings— the ‘enormous meme factory, compressing the world into pellets of virality’ (Tolentino, 2019). I’ve established the context for Taylor’s appreciation of film by setting her in a film educational setting. She knows the film history canon: of Eisenstein’s montage theory, Kuleshov’s effect, Wiseman’s observational lens, Britain’s kitchen sink dramas and the economic and ideological mechanisms of Hollywood studio production. Playful references to Taylor’s idiomatic mix of high and low culture film passions are woven throughout the novel—the documentary films of Frederick Wiseman (p. 63), *American Beauty* (p. 127), *Human Traffic* (p. 218)—to reveal Taylor’s character. They draw attention to structural and organizational similarities that any author of fiction might deploy as they sort and arrange the furniture of their story—character, action, setting, theme—into particular story patterns, similarities that exist whether you’re writing a novel, fictional screenplay or fictional audio work. They also apply to non-fiction narrative exposition. Perhaps this is one reason why authors love characters that write, or, in the case of myself and a few other authors, *make films*—Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster* (1999), Lange’s *Butter* (2013), Andrews’ *Earl and Me* and *The Dying Girl* (2015) all feature filmmakers as protagonists; a documentary filmmaker, a reluctant YouTuber and experimental/art-house film mimic. They provide a form of meta-narration between author-reader on the nature of constructing stories, whether filmed or written and how the way we construct stories also constructs us.

iii. Sound: Listening Practices and Narrative Effects

Sound plays an active role in several works of YAL. As a writer with a filmmaking past, where thinking about the soundtrack for a film is as integral to designing a filmed work as planning the visual imagery, I tend to notice when sound is being used in a specific narrative way.³⁶ In my teaching of audio-visual production practices, including podcasting, I teach the narrative use of sound to my students, so it wasn't long before I started detecting it in YAL and decided to bring sound—or at least the textual representation of sound—into my novel.

Within sound studies, a field devoted to investigating the production, circulation and socio-cultural significance of sounds and listening practice, the idea of *mental imagery* and how it is created auditorily is much discussed (Barthes, 1977, Rodero, 2012). The unique ability of sound to stimulate mental images drives the auditory design of all narrative audio production (radio plays, podcast, audiobooks, and more) and so it's easy to see why some YAL authors have chosen to deploy specific audio devices in their work. Oseman's *Radio Silence* (2016) and Asher's *13 Reasons Why* (2007) both rely on the affective power of what Barthes referred to as 'grain of voice' (Barthes, 2010). Whereas Oseman positions the fictional podcast *Universe City* of her 2016 novel *Radio Silence* front and centre to the story action. Asher deploys cassette tapes to constitute its main audio narrative vehicle in *13 Reasons Why* tapping into another wholly contemporary yet wholly *analogue* audio narrative proposition. Audio cassette tape captures nostalgia for past technologies that have come to shape many of this generation's trends.³⁷ A cassette is a great prop and as such possesses

³⁶ One of my early jobs on a film set was as an assistant to the location sound recordist, charged with creating field recordings and sound effects for a short, filmed drama. Once I was tasked with simulating the sound of the insides of a man's head hitting a wall following close range ballistic impact. I tried various combination of objects and techniques. leaves of wet cabbage beaten with a wooden spoon created the most convincing visceral audio mimicry of brain hitting plaster board.

³⁷ Alongside recent revivals of vinyl, the cassette tape enjoyed a rise in popularity during the early 21st century, with recording artists not only producing them but the idea of a mix tape (re)entered popular

much narrative potential. You can hide it, find it, destroy it, use it in blackmail and the cassette tape playback quality has all the richness and imperfection we love of analogue recording formats. It has *human grain*.

Evoking the act of listening, rather than relying on the ordinary experience of reading practice, adds a layer of multimodality (and multiliteracy) to the work that would otherwise not be present; for example, the inclusion and repetition of Kasha song allows for her presence through her voice even after she is dead;

These things they don't need names

These things, but I learnt them all the same.

I found a voice for my tears

Made stories from those years

Stories to tell over and over and over and over -

Until you come back to me

(p. 34, p. 88, p. 297)

This song provides a moment of vocal intimacy offering an imaginative opening into Kasha's personality while staying within the frame of a realist work of fiction. Experimenting with recorded audio presentational formats/devices allows the author to activate different narrational strategies, creatively obfuscating certain parts of narrative telling by presenting them as showing. In, *The Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (2019) Jackson deploys voice recordings in her text through the inclusion of transcripts, avoiding the need for her narrator, Pippa, having to *tell us* about the content of these recorded audio conversations.

In, *The Networked Wonderland of Us* there are two key moments when sound is deployed as a way of communicating specific narrative information (or plot points). Firstly,

culture on radio shows (notably BBC 6 Music) and the visual iconography of the cassette side has been appropriated for smart phone cases, wallets and other digital device coverings.

in Kasha/Riley's recording for her mother, in the package sent to her home in Walthamstow grants Denise a precious chance to hear her dead daughter's voice one more time, and in allowing Taylor to listen, when they eventually meet, is an act of trust and show of appreciation to Taylor for all the time and love she's invested in trying to get to the truth of her daughter's death. The second occurrence is Taylor's secret recording of Cyd and Jimmy's confession. A recording that vindicates Pete's claim of innocence, pinning the crime squarely on Jimmy's shoulders (and Cyd, though now dead herself). In both instances, the information drives the emotional through-line of the story and can be thought of as engaging readers in events beyond the limited story-world of Taylor's POV. In film terms, this would be referred to as off-screen narrative information. When something or some event within frame suggests, events *outside*, or, *off-screen*. Within film production activating off-screen space is widely acknowledged as a powerful tool that adds layers of formal complexity and narrative depth to otherwise simple set-ups or scenarios, as can be seen in these two above examples from my novel.

2.4 Digital Backflow

I have coined the term *digital backflow* to articulate a writing method where the forms, practices and ideas arising as a direct consequence of the use of digital technologies are translated *back to* the analogue world of people and books. It is an idea that has been present from the start of writing this novel and, in the intervening years, I have formulated this practice into a workable methodology, as my writing has evolved and scholarship in the field has progressed. *Digital backflow* engages ideas about remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000)

and points to the contemporary nostalgia for analogue mediums of which I spoke in the previous section.

I offer a working definition, thus:

Digital backflow is the process whereby digital elements of form are translated back into analogue forms. An alternative way of describing the process might be *analogisation*, in contrast to the commonly used adjective/verb *digitisation*, which describes the processes of converting analogue material into digital.

This *backflow* stands in contrast to and against the historically previous movement of forms, practices and ideas—from that of analogue *to* digital [digitisation]—by including the languages and practices of digital communications as discussed earlier in this chapter alongside prose passages. It also seeks to find new ways of representing the multimodal experience of the digital lives of young people in textual form through the incorporation of screenwriting into the main body of the text. Thus, representing the audio-visually informed *way of seeing of* my protagonist. I discuss this further in Chapter 3.

So, what might this *digital backflow* look like?

Fig.4 Digital Backflow Diagram. A visual representation of the direction of material and formal influence.

1st Phase 1990s-2000s



2nd Phase: 2000-present



This formulation of a creative writing process as *digital backflow* is a personal response to a specific creative writing problem. However, it is precedent in the idea of *remediation*, first suggested as a defining characteristic of new media by Bolter and Grusin (2000) building on the earlier work of McLuhan. They describe remediation as the process whereby, rather than replacing old technologies, new technology transforms older media, retaining some of their features, ‘the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another.’ (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, p. 59) Their term *retrograde remediation* is particularly apt for my concept of digital backflow as it describes where new mediums are *imitated* by older media, reflecting my writing process aim, that of transforming multimedia objects into textual representations *on the page*.

Nearly 20 years on from Bolter and Grusin's work, retrograde remediation is everywhere. Part of the fabric of digital culture, especially within social media. See it in the Kodak colour saturation and square 4:3/4:4 framing options of Instagram images, a stylistic idiom evoking film cameras and Polaroids which can be credited with a significant portion of its USP and success. Or in TikTok where it the very act of appropriation and reworkings of other material in the form of song and dance routines which shapes the software functionality and drives its outstanding popularity. The idea of remediation is part of a bigger conversation about how humans use technology to communicate, how we draw on previous mediums and their stylistic idioms to create new ways to tell stories about now, with one eye looking forward and the other looking back.

Long before I had heard of the concept of remediation, I was familiar with the process of turning old media into new in the course of my filmmaking practice. After graduating with my BA in Philosophy and Art History I trained in 8mm and 16mm filmmaking at the London Filmmaker's Co-op (now The Lux Centre for Artists Film and Video), where I also went on to learn about digital video production. I began in post-production. All footage was recorded using the digital format of the era—digital videotape—and had to then go through a process of *digitisation* to edit the footage on a computer. This was essentially a process of conversion from linear (the material digital videotape) to nonlinear digital binary data. In these early days of digital video editing (1994-8) editing using a computer was referred to as *nonlinear editing*,³⁸ to distinguish it from linear editing where real film was edited one shot at a time on a Steenbeck flatbed editor. Today audio-visual footage is stored as data on a drive and can be accessed and manipulated (remediated) in any order, that is to say, nonlinearly.

³⁸ Even the design of editing software remediated the processes of linear editing with the scissor icons commonly used cutting, the word for bin and its icon

As an organisational workflow, nonlinearity has much in common with other processes within my PhD and within the context of digital culture speaks to the idea of networks rather than linear systems as the dominant mode of creative writing exploration.³⁹ For instance, it is common within creative writing doctorates that the creative element is written first and only then will the researcher move on to the critical element. The argument here being that creative practice requires time to discover itself *as practice* and too much theorizing will remove or confuse the focus of that process if engaged too early on. Mine has gone partly that way. I certainly had a full draft before researching the critical framework or mapped out the cultural context, but there has been a lot of back and forth, with the critical work influencing the creative work nearly as much as the reverse.

One technique I pursued in this remediated practice of digital backflow lay in printing webpages from blogs and screenshots of comment threads to explore different presentational styles. I experimented with different fonts, using italics or bold or underline, indenting a lot, some, not at all, etc., transforming my relationship to this material. Seeing normally screen-viewed threads laid out on a desk, even when the printouts don't exactly reflect the layout on screen *fixes* them, *materializes* them, *renders them concrete*, defamiliarising their screen processes and languages and drawing attention to the nuanced shifts in narrative perspective and voice that they communicate. The significance of this defamiliarization as an outcome of the digital backflow process is highlighted in *The Networked Wonderland of Us* when Taylor prints out the photos and screenshots of Kasha's memorial in the chapter entitled *Fixing It*. The process of embodying ephemeral digital 'marks' changes the subject-relation, from an *experience of data on a screen* to an *experience of words on a page*. It enables Taylor to connect with the material more fully and galvanizes her call to action, 'Now my wall is covered with photo printed, fuzzy blue shots of police tape, flowers, cute teddies with hand-

³⁹ For further reading see Ryan, 2005.

written dedications, Hallmark condolences, candles and crying faces. I'm looking forward to adding the string and pins for the full murder scene investigation effect.' (p. 118)

Technology, as we all know, quickly becomes outdated. One of the problems I've faced as drafts of this novel have been worked on over many years is over the continued relevance of the technology I am referencing in the text. However, the ideas of remediation (generally) and my formulation of the process digital backflow (specifically) have enabled me to embrace the fact of technology outdated. Old technologies are part of the landscape of new media both in the *materiality of old mediums* and in a *sense of nostalgia* for the times these old mediums represent. The decision to have Kasha/Riley's past presented as a blog even evokes a past era, if not too distant. The blog almost feels outmoded form of networked communication in its reliance on text-based, not image-based, communication. What images *are* there come from another time—another media, that of analogue photography. The image which heralds Riley's downfall is a digital image of a *printed* photograph, 'thumbed soft with time'—a unique image found by chance repurposed and shared. Seen by many (seen by Cyd). Repurposed. Taken from one person's story to another's. The image that kick starts a murder.

2.5 Conclusion

Through an engagement with multimodal literacy and a commitment to exploring multimodal forms of writing in communicating their stories, YAL is capable of offering formally innovative, well-crafted literary responses to the challenges and affordances of living so close with technology (RQ 4). *The Networked Wonderland of Us* not only continues this movement, providing safe, creative and narratively engaged spaces in which readers are invited to reflect, evaluate and resolve the real-life experience of digital culture (RQ 3), but

this novel also advances a creative multimodal writing methodology whereby stylistic innovation born of previous technologies are remediated into the next generation of YA fiction writing, realising *a digital aesthetic in book form*. (RQ 1).

Chapter Three

Fiction Screenwriting and Contemporary Realist YAL

‘When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I only had two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home.’

(Hinton, 2016, p. 1)

‘What one can see in the light of day is always less interesting than what happens behind a pane of glass.’ (Baudelaire, cited in Friedberg, 2009, p. 35)

3.1 Introduction

Cinema reframes life, like a window, and it is perhaps because of this characteristic of reframing that the language of cinema has so deeply embedded itself into our collective cultural consciousness, offering new perspectives on old stories and new ways of thinking about contemporary life. In this chapter, I argue that not only is this particularly true for young people seeped in (visual) digital culture but that the languages of cinema are an effective and powerful instrument for tapping into rich seams of filmic storytelling, constituting an essential methodological component in this study’s research toolkit. Film-going and cinema screen culture has been embedded in the stories of YAL from the very beginning. Indeed, the rise of the idea of a distinct period of adolescence in the sixties happened as teen culture—in the shape of literature, cinema, music—grew quickly, establishing itself as a formative part of the experience and identity of coming of age, as that experience was represented in literature and cinema featuring young adults and their issues

and concerns (Shary, 2002). For the authors of YAL, and their characters, cinema has always been more than simply entertainment.⁴⁰ Cinema transports young people away from their homes in which they often feel constrained. It transforms, defines, educates, opens new worlds, presents new possibilities. Cinema offers new ways of showing young people who they are and what they can be, it reflects their troubles, their hopes and their dreams. The first page of Hinton's *Outsiders* has Ponyboy leaving the cinema, his head full of the film world in which he has just been immersed. Even as he considers his immediate issue, of finding a way home avoiding arch enemies the Socs, the reality of the screen fiction he's just absorbed is real and present to him. The pull of the film world influences not only his mood, 'I was wishing I looked like Paul Newman he looks tough and I don't, but I guess my looks aren't so bad', but also the events which are about to unfurl in his own life, as he has gone to the cinema alone because 'I like to lone it...to watch a film undisturbed so I can get into them and live them with the actors.' (Hinton 2016, p.1) And this means he has to walk home, and risk being 'jumped' by the Socs. Pony sees the best version of himself in Paul Newman's swagger and relates to his (fictional) role as an outsider. Hinton builds a picture of Pony's inner world for the reader, providing insights into his character that others do not see, and, consequently, cannot respond to.

Similarly, when Taylor and Rhidian search for Hench in the library, Taylor is distracted by a nearby student watching a sequence from *American Beauty* (Mendes, UK, 1999). It's the scene where the boy-next-door shows the daughter of the film's protagonist a video he made of a white plastic bag blowing about in the wind. The boy interprets the bag's swirling movements and buffeted pirouettes as 'a strange kind of dance', one that reveals the

⁴⁰ In, *Understanding Media Enjoyment: The Role of Transportation into Narrative Worlds*, (2004) authors Green, Brock and Kaufman argue for understanding media transportation and enjoyment (or entertainment) as constituting 'an experience of cognitive, emotional, and imagery involvement in a narrative.' Thus interpreted, through the lens of transportation theory, media enjoyment becomes an essential part of the process of transportation that affords 'connections with characters and self-transformations.' Both important elements of any fiction but especially of YAL.

true nature of things. This moment sharpens Taylor's character for the reader, communicating her self-identification as an observer and outsider.⁴¹

Cinema puts life under a macro lens and the kind of cinema to which I am referring here are mostly, and specifically, *fiction* films developed by writers through the production of screenplays, drawing on particular screen storytelling techniques. The process of writing, composing, redrafting and analysis which precursor these filmed moments are often overlooked in discussion of film and YAL.⁴² But the interplay of moving images and sound that imprint our (the viewer's) mind with a unique intensity, lingering after the closing credits, do not appear from nowhere. They are first written, and the initium and processes of their creation are varied.⁴³ Not only do they operate through the mechanics of dramatic writing (or *dramaturgy*) (a point to which I will return shortly), they reflect the values and ideological agendas of their writers and the production mechanisms in which they operate.

In this chapter I reflect upon the specific role of fiction screenwriting within *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, addressing my next research question:

RQ 5 How is fiction screenwriting deployed as a narrative strategy within selected YAL and *The Networked Wonderland of Us*?

⁴¹ The implication being here that when we film, or look through a lens, or even a pane of glass, we look *on*, or *at*, or *in*. We are *at a distance from* that upon which we gaze. We are *apart*. An ontological separation that is often interpreted as affording particular epistemological vantages.

⁴² Most discussions relating to the subject of film and YAL are pedagogical in emphasis, for instance, how YAL can be taught through film adaptations of literary texts, or, examine concepts such as ideology, identity or race can be taught through YAL film adaptations. And not related to this creative-critical practice process discussion.

⁴³ For a good range of examples of fiction screenwriting practice within academia see Batty (2016), Baker (2016).

3.2 The Fiction Screenplay as a Narrative Strategy

Dramatic writing, of which screenwriting is one form, is often regarded as distinct from writing prose in its concern for *showing* a story as opposed to *telling* a story (prose). Traditionally the two forms have been taught separately—as in the case of the Creative Writing MA programme at the University of East Anglia, where I studied for my MA, and where I had to choose between scriptwriting *or* fiction. This separation within academia emphasizes differences over commonalities, but increasingly this is changing as more interdisciplinary approaches to writing practice are forwarded (Barnard 2019, Horne 2018, Brody, 2020), and evidenced by a growing body of popular and critically acclaimed realist YAL which deploy multimodal practices in their storytelling (for example, Dean Myers's *Monster* (1999) and *Shooter* (2005); Zoe Suggs, *Girl Online* (2014); Andrew's *Earl and Me* and *The Dying Girl* (2015); Oseman's *Radio Silence* (2016); Jackson's *The Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (2019) and *Good Girl, Bad Blood* (2020)).

My emphasis on the role of the *fiction* screenplay is intended to foreground *a link* between the processes of writing the prose and the screenplay passages of my novel. A link that can be found in the roots of dramatic writing as a form of *rhetoric* where the main function is the same as those for particular speech acts, that is to say, to *persuade*. In *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) Wayne C. Booth argues that all narrative is a form of rhetoric, as Aristotle did before him (*Poetics*, 335 BC, and *Rhetoric*, 4th century BC). Reacting to distinctions being made within fiction between certain forms of narrative address as showing or telling Booth emphasises how most authors deployed *a combination of showing and telling* in the execution of their craft, a fact again illustrated by the aforementioned recent works of contemporary realist YAL.

The authors choice between the techniques of showing and telling they want to employ is based upon decisions about how to convey their various *commitments* along *lines of interest* (Booth, 1961), and my own *lines of interest* speak directly to this discussion around *how to* write as I've considered drawing on previous writing experience in screenwriting in the composition of this novel. One screenwriting technique deployed in the early development of my novel's story is the use of scene cards or index cards to block out the main story points. Once the cards are written the technique is to lay them out physically—a large table or floor is best—so the writer possesses an overview of the story. Once viewed like this it is much easier to see the gaps and where the story *architecture* needed strengthening. Writing about how the principles of dramatic storytelling can be applied to 'aspiring writers of fiction', Julia Horne says, 'If you think of writing as a body, words are the clothes, and dramatic techniques are the musculature. They're what gives the stories shape, tension and momentum.' (Horne, 2018, p. 17) Each index card constituted a *scene*, representing a key moment of action, change or dramatic catalyst and function as a *story pillar* providing the main architecture upon which everything else can be built. In dramatic writing, these *pillars* might be referred to as *beats*⁴⁴—the technique of writing *beat sheets* as pre-cursor to story outlining being also well established within the development process of screenwriting.⁴⁵

In terms of what went on the cards, initially, all I had for this story was a launching off point in the form of the real-life story of Anna Sverdisky⁴⁶; the thematically focussed question of how might the life of a young person be affected by the indelibility of their online

⁴⁴ It's worth noting not each index card carried a clear scene, with its requisite catalyst event and clear dramatic purpose within the story as a whole. Some of these were simply fragments of ideas: a snippet of conversation, notes from an inspirational news story, etc. Once I had stared at them long enough and allowed narrative inference and creative invention to work their magic, I rewrote the index cards with a focus on clarifying scene arcs.

⁴⁵ Beat sheets are commonly used to map out the pivotal plot and emotion points of your story and enable streamlined narrative structuring.

⁴⁶ For a more detailed account of this story's influence on the novel see, p. 381.

identity; four central characters; and a number of key scenes. Therefore, the task of plotting the story, filling the gaps between the *known* and *unknown* narrative elements, following logical cause-and-effect inferences based on genre conventions was substantial. Once established this became the plot structure, the backbone of the novel, remaining relatively unchanged through numerous revisions for style, tone and characterisation.

My instinct to begin the writing process by visualising scenes rather than writing out detailed descriptions of character or world-building or plot helped me overcome my next problem of how to organise chapter content. Conversations on writer websites often return to the problem of chapters, what they are and how they should best be constructed. Most of my chapter combine multiple scenes, at least two—partly for pacing and partly due to the complexities of moving back and forth in time. Where some scenes developed shorter or there evolved multiple scenes that took place over a single day, I combined them into a chapter to maintain narrative immersion. For example, in chapter 16—*Where is Pete?*—when Taylor search takes her from the park to the river to three cafés and finally to the art cinema where they used to visit together. The screenwriting development method whereby writers establish the dramatic beats of a story before scene outlining came into play here. Finding the beats of the story informed my understanding of what a scene is and I was able to adapt this by establishing a relationship of the scene to chapter; one that further illuminates commonalities of method between writing prose fiction or fiction screenwriting and is distinct from how an author might favour ordering non-fiction narrative.

The problems of fiction lays in its relation to reality and the author's work to make fiction (order) from life (chaos). Writing about the 'special place of fiction in creative practice' with a focus on screenwriting, Batty says, '...creative practice screen researchers can use the tools of fiction storytelling to present ideas and findings in imaginative, innovative – and sometimes fun ways that expand both our understanding of and encounters

with scholarly debates.’ (Batty, 2016, p.1) It will be clear from the previous discussion that the approach of deploying ‘the tools of fiction storytelling’ to engage YAL readers in debates and ideas around my own lines of scholarly interests, that of writing digital culture, demonstrates the commitment of the work to exploring the role fiction plays in creating spaces for deep reflection and intellectual engagement. ‘The real world does not readily reveal its patterns. Fiction, the shape of fiction, ... trains the mind to recognize Life’s invisible truths and thus lends form to the chaos of living.’ (Wynne-Jones, 1994) Wynne-Jones is writing about children’s literature here, but the ‘shape of fiction’ can also be found beyond the walls of literature, in filmed narratives, oral storytelling, and multimodal digitally composed texts. The idea that fiction possesses the power to reveal the hidden truths of life by restoring (or rather *enforcing*) a tangible order on the otherwise haphazard and disorganised experience of living, is highly compelling. Thirty-four years on from Wynne-Jones’ comment, and in a post-digital age, it could be argued that our experience of the ‘chaos of living’ is much amplified. Life feels not only chaotic but overwhelming and conflicted, as daily bombardments of information, much of it unsolicited, makes us anxious and prone to regular periods of self-doubt. Whether it is residual uncertainty about finding the best price for new trainers, or existential paralysis over whether I’m living my ‘best life’, the internet’s ability to render other lives visible means we are forever bouncing in echo chambers of *share and compare*. *The Networked Wonderland of Us* is a response to the question of how we can create fictional order from the chaotic augmented simulacra of contemporary life.

As ideas for the novel took shape, and I grew to understand the importance of film culture for the formation of my story. I wondered beyond the *what* and the *why* of my story, to the *how*.⁴⁷ I quickly realised that repurposing the screenplay was the perfect vehicle for

⁴⁷ Following the writers ‘5 key questions’ method, first encountered studying Scriptwriting under Val Taylor, which can be found in her book, *Stage Writing: A Practical Guide*. (Taylor, 2000).

expressing Taylor's *life ordering* endeavours. Writing about *Monster* (Dean Myers, 1999), Engles and Kory say the use of screenplay within the novel, '...invites readers to question each adjusted sense of identity formed, and *performed*, by its protagonist.' Within *Monster*'s two-pronged narrative structure of journal and screenplay, Myers articulates complex racial definitions through the problem of representation. Steve sees his trial playing out like a courtroom drama and feels distanced from the life-changing processes surrounding him. 'My father is no longer sure of who I am...That is why I take films of myself. I want to know who I am.' (Dean Myers, 1999, p. 168).

There are some similarities here, to the narrative mechanics in my novel. Taylor is similarly challenged in the way she sees herself and is seen by others and turns to the narrative ordering clarity of screenwriting to help her recount difficult past events, illustrated by the use of screenplay for memories. *Screen narration* also finds expression in Taylor's response to inaction to help her vulnerable friend Pete in the face of Cyd's aggression, causing Taylor to doubt herself. This self-doubt is compounded by strong, negative responses from the general public when she attempts to 'right her wrongs' by posting a video exposing behaviour which she ascribes to the *bystander effect*⁴⁸ asking people to stand up against bullying when she did not herself. As in chapter 7, when Taylor questions herself in the anti-bullying video saying, 'Sometimes it's the person in the mirror, the person you least expect, who's the most to blame.' (p. 41)

Taylor and Steve are engaged in clear acts of self-identity formation through their use of screenplay to tell their story. Both combatting the pressures of external modes of representation—how others see them—with how they see themselves through the use of

⁴⁸ Sometimes also referred to as *bystander apathy*, this social psychological term describes how individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when others are present. Contributing factors include, ambiguity, group cohesiveness and diffusion of responsibility that reinforces mutual denial of a situation's severity. First demonstrated and popularized by social psychologists John M. Darley and Bibb Latané in 1968. (Wikipedia, accessed March 12, 2020)

screenplay as a *re-ordering narrative strategy*. One which draws attention to the tension between the self as an agent and the self as residing ‘within dominant social and ideological paradigms, a pre-structured social order within which s/he is ultimately represented as disempowered and passive.’ (McCullum, 1999, p. 7).

The fiction screenplay, in combination with other multimodal writing styles, perform a distinct function within the literary mechanics of my novel, allowing the reader a dialogical relationship to the character and the novel-text as a whole. This approach enables the reader to, ‘both *experience* a textual world and to view it with distanced aesthetic awareness as a creation of the author’s imagination.’ (Alsup, emphasis in original, cited in Engles and Kory, 2014). In the case of *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, that author is Taylor herself as she recounts her experience for the reader. ‘I’m going to write this in screenplay format. Sorry. I know it’s unnecessary/annoying/pretentious/stupid—delete as appropriate—but it’s how I remember. It’s a film thing.’ (p. 12) And through this mode of storytelling Taylor can be viewed as striking ‘...a balance between two ideological identities—self as agent and self as formed by pre-existing orders through (these) overtly dialogical narrative strategies to structure the narrative and to represent subjectivity and intersubjectivity.’ (McCullum 1999, p.8)

In *Earl and Me* and *The Dying Girl*, Andrew’s protagonist Greg is also a filmmaker, like Taylor. He sees significant, emotionally intense, confusing or challenging moments of his life as filmed scenes in the style of his filmmaking heroes. He loves European art-house and independent films and his heroes read like a roll call of icons from these bodies of filmmaking practice (Herzog, Goddard, et al.). He literally sees his life through the lens of his filmmaking heroes. *Earl and Me* and *The Dying Girl* represents a very different film world to Myers’ *Monster*. Steve’s film world is *blockbuster true crime*, whereas Greg’s (and Earl’s) is *indie art house*. A Generation Z-er and film student Taylor’s taste straddles both camps and

can be regarded as fully simpatico with the metamodernistic times in which she has grown up and now studies. She's at home referencing British 90's rave films (*Human Traffic*, Kerrigan, UK, 1999), as dropping verbal pointers to Hollywood classics (*Vertigo*, Hitchcock, USA, 1958) or Netflix binge-watch favourites (*Stranger Things*, Netflix, USA, 2016-2019).

Taylor's experience of film is the lens through which she makes sense of her life. '...everyone remembers significant moments from their life in moving images so why not screenplay?' (p. 11). As the character of Taylor developed through various drafts, alongside the story, this aspect of Taylor's character grew to hold a greater influence, to the extent that it became impossible to textually render her inner voice without films' direct presence *in the form of screenplay*. It wasn't enough just to name-check films she felt connected to Taylor's inner voice needed a psycho-spatial textual presence on the page, beyond that of conventional first-person prose narration; one that embodied a unique storytelling writing strategy that communicated the individuality of her character. The decision to deploy fiction screenwriting in the construction of a fictional world as a naturally occurring creative response to a problem of characterisation directly addresses my revised aesthetic aim of achieving *a digital aesthetic in book form via a multimodal writing practice*. And, besides, film has been borrowing from literature—notably the *interior monologue* technique in the form of voice-over narration—since the beginning of sound in film (1900-1920), so it seems only fair that literature should freely *borrow back* some formal filmic devices, adapting them to its own fiction-building ends.

3.3 Adapting the Fiction Screenplay

Previously I discussed how screenwriting is one of a range of multimodal forms of writing deployed in *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, and, as with a small selection of other

contemporary realist YAL, how it constructs my protagonists' way of seeing the world, their agency and emerging self-identity. In this section, I discuss how I have adapted screenwriting convention with a specific narrative purpose, one that is, I argue, unique to this novel.

Initially, I wanted to incorporate screenwriting to represent moving image or filmed content. My intention was for this to include video that the characters viewed online, or playback from recording using phones or specialist cameras, as well as video calls.⁴⁹ As can be seen in this extract from a manuscript draft (January 2018):

Rhidian hits play on a recently linked video to a post by Cyd entitled, *Justice for Kasha*.

'Take a look at this.'

INT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

Cyd sits on a large leather sofa in a smartly furnished room. She's sharp and poised dressed in a black silk bomber jacket, white drainpipes, high-heeled grey suede ankle boots. Her glossy chocolate-brown hair is cut into an asymmetrical blunt-edged bob, a white blonde streak blazes through a pointed heavy fringe falling over her right eye. She peers at the viewer with the other.

CYD

⁴⁹ I felt that this would provide sufficient intertextuality to achieve my stated aesthetic aim of *a digital aesthetic in book form*.

If you're watching this, chances are you've already heard about Kasha and the terrible way she died.

[Cyd pauses, looks away, takes a deep breath and returns to the viewer.]

I explored this technique in the first few drafts, and it worked fairly well, but it wasn't long before I felt dissatisfied with this literal use, finding it simplistic, illustrative and lacking. After discussions with my supervisors, as well as other authors, I realised I might adapt this literal use of screenplay to a *metaphorical* one with a richer, more strategic narrative role. By that time, I had settled on the first-person narrated address of my protagonist Taylor⁵⁰ and quickly became excited about the idea that screenwriting could represent a different side of Taylor's inner voice within the story. Specifically, as she recalls events from her past, imagines the future, or reflects on how things could have been.

See here, from the current draft (pp.29-30):

MONTAGE OF MY LIFE WITH CYD - THE GOOD (EARLY) YEARS:

2010: CYD MENDES (7 ½ years old) moves into the biggest, most expensive house on our street, four doors down from ours. She has a twin brother called JONTY who is, without exaggeration, the handsomest boy I have seen in real life. They both are. Handsome, that is, not boys. Ha, ha. They live with their ex-model Brazilian mother SINITA MENDEZ, their very serious banker father GEORGE MENDEZ

⁵⁰ I had moved back and forth between third and first in previous drafts.

[British, Brazilian grandfather], and two white Chihuahuas Crystal and Charlie who bark at anything and everything all the time.

The use of the unconventional first-person voice in the adapted form of the screenplay within *The Networked Wonderland of Us* transforms the function of the screenplay within the novel. Screenwriting now acts as a metaphor for the screen mind and represents a particular form of *embodied cognition*, what writers often refer to as *character voice*, and it became an important part of establishing Taylor's point of view. The metaphorical use of screenwriting within the novel embodied by its conversion from the third person to first represented the *interiority* of my protagonist in a vivid new way, rendering a deeper intimacy and connection with the reader and responding to Prose's insistence that the narrator point of view is only achieved, 'through the skilful deployment of language' through which in turn, the author can, '...establish the personality of that narrator' (Prose, 2006, p. 99). This was particularly desirable as this 'personality' had been deemed lacking by some readers of earlier (third-person) drafts.⁵¹

I am not alone in recognizing the narrative power of metaphor within fiction. Cohen argues that one reason why the use of metaphor is pervasive in literature is, '...the desire to communicate how one feels and why one feels that way. A solicitation of complicity in the person to whom [it] is directed.' (2004, p. 237) Cohen's explanation captures an important aspect of my metaphorical use of screenplay to communicate Taylor's interiority and increasing empathy between her and the reader. It is worth, I think, stating in full (my italics):

⁵¹ Again, for discussion of the novel's extensive revisions of narrative point of view see Chapter 4.

“The hearer (reader) is nudged into joining the speaker (author) in feeling. I want you to understand how I feel about A, and why. And to do this I must give you an experience in which you too sense *the natural rising of this feeling* about A. I choose B, something I know you have feelings about, and I assert A=B, which strikes me as an apt metaphor, hoping that you too will find it apt. even if you do not then have the relevant feeling, I hope that you will *understand* why I have the feeling, and your understanding will be based on your ability to imagine what it would be to be me, to be someone for whom A=B is compelling. I do not know how to describe this feat of imagination save to say that it is the ability to see A = B (whatever that may mean); but I do know that the successful use of metaphor is pervasive, and I think I have found one reason why.” (Cohen, 2004, pp. 231-238)

To deploy metaphor, therefore, is *to induce a complicit act of imagination*. By adapting the conventions of screenwriting style to the first person address I make an opportunity for the reader to join the author in a complicit act of imagination, that is to *inhabit* Taylor’s world. For example, when Taylor remembers the playground confrontation that spawned her and Cyd’s friendship (p. 30):

AGED 8: SCHOOL PLAYGROUND

A GIRL has pulled my brand new *Ponyo* backpack and I’m trying to get it back. She is throwing it around, messing up everything inside and I’m getting really, really angry.

For some reason, this is making everyone laugh.

Suddenly CYD [8] appears from nowhere and catches the bag. I launch at her. We fight, pulling hair and kicking hard. A teacher arrives, separates the two of us and we're marched off to the Head's office.

This not only *induces imagination* in the reader, through the word's ability to describe and evoke mental images of a playground moment which will be similar in feeling, if not exact detail. This adaptation allows for the reader and author to share in the pleasures of the recognition of that *shared experience*, further establishing Taylor's point of view and providing significant descriptive backstory.

Moreover, the way I have deployed the metaphorical interpretation of screenplay in my novel indicates a specific act of imagination; that of *recollection*, or memory. We understand memory to have some connection to reality but how much is uncertain, 'TBH I often find it hard to tell the difference between what's real and what's imaginary. Nothing huge. Nothing to put my sanity into question I don't think, but enough to make me think twice. Like a dropped film frame or skip of a turntable stylus. Tiny ellipses. Breaks in the continuum. Gaps in the life I think I know.' (p.37) This rendering of Taylor's memories in a screenplay as flashbacks, to deploy another filmic term for a familiar literary device, invite the reader to consider the truth of these events and Taylor's reliability as a narrator. Establishing her unreliability is itself a mechanism for connecting readers with Taylor's personality as we also recognise, we are also sometimes unreliable albeit innocently and without malicious intent; more an outcome of life becoming overwhelming and broader sense of existential instability.

As Cohen suggest, the author (myself in this instance) deploys metaphor when they need the reader to understand how a character feels. Whether what she recounts is true or not is of no great importance as we *suspend our disbelief* sitting down to read any work of fiction, but the *use of screenplay* helps render the fictional knowledge we have acquired more *convincing*, more *persuasive*, allowing the author to move away from the telling (or summation) address of the first-person prose style, and towards the *showing*, (*descriptive*) address of screenplay.

As may have been observed when reading the manuscript, the use of screenwriting occurs less frequently as the novel progresses. This is not some unevenness or irregularity of stylistic composition on my part but an intentional reduction to articulate Taylor's progression from reactive to proactive; from looking back and responding to past events to *acting now* and looking *forward*. The instability of her present at the start of the story expressed in the inclusion of more screenwriting, more flashback, more digital elements of form in language, with a more stable stylistically unified present by the end.⁵² The screenplay and presence of film as a cultural artefact through which Taylor frames her world articulates the role cinema plays as an emblem of modern culture's preoccupation with the reproduction of the present and reinforces its multiplied, branched and networked roles in digital culture today.

3.4 Conclusion

In answer to the question of how fiction screenwriting is deployed as a narrative strategy within selected YAL and *The Networked Wonderland of Us*, it is clear from this discussion

⁵² Before the discovery of the identity of her birth mother that it. An event designed to destabilise once again and propel the reader into the next part of Taylor's journey in a subsequent book.

that the juxtaposition of dramatic form of screenwriting with the descriptive form of prose emphasises important similarities and differences between the writerly process of showing and telling, or dramatization and summation. But ultimately the writing of fiction is predominantly about the art of showing experience which is exactly what the adapted form of the screenplay so successfully achieves. As Burroway points out, ‘...your job as a fiction writer is to focus attention, not on the words... but through these, to felt experience, where the vitality of understanding lies.’ (Burroway, 2019, p. 22) Deploying a distinct *adapted metaphorical form* of fiction screenwriting has allowed me to engage with questions of narrative design that examine the role moving image culture plays in the lives of young people and offers the reader a unique character-focused vantage point into the story. It affords the added benefit of consisting in a natural evolution of my practice, one that engages the principles of dramatic narrative building—characterisation, narrative spatialisation, plotting and theme—within the context of a fiction-writing practice. And when combined with the other forms of multimodal, digitally informed writing and they persuasively achieve a graspable sense of fictional order from the chaos of augmented contemporary experience.⁵³ In short, offer innovative ways to apply multimodal writing practice informed strategies to address the problems of writing digital culture into contemporary realist YAL.

⁵³ Evidence to support the claim here of my having *persuasively achieved* a convincing work of YAL can be found in the reader report provided by a senior editor who longlisted the manuscript for The Times Chicken House Children’s Fiction Prize 2020, who describes the manuscript as ‘accomplished’. Read more in Appendix 2.

Chapter Four

Remediation, Revision, Redrafting:

writing and editing practices within, *The Networked Wonderland of Us*

‘I write entirely to find out what I am thinking, what I am looking at, what I see and what it means.’

(Didion, 1976, p. 2)

4.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I discuss my writing methodology as it has evolved from a search to find writerly solutions to the problem of achieving my aesthetic aim—a *digital aesthetic in book form*—to one where a deep engagement with multimodal forms of writing have afforded productive opportunities for creative writing responses to narrative adaptation and invention. I discuss the process of reflective remediation with an emphasis on the role self-collaboration plays within my novel’s writing process particularly with regards to the writerly dual consciousness this self-collaboration requires. From this, it becomes clear that the importance of language play and invention are front and centre of this novel’s distinct fictional solution to the search for an authentic YA self. I examine my approach to revising genre, combining crime detection with coming of age, and revising gender, with regards to offering young female readers seeking fictional conversations about how to live proactively yet safely between on and offline worlds. Finally, I examine these approaches in the context of traditional editing and revision techniques drawing on Bell’s idea of macro and micro editing (Bell, 2007) and Calvino’s edits of literary style for the new millennium (Calvino, 1996). My final research question to be examined here is:

RQ 6 How do I creatively narrativize the flow of digital lives back into the analogue world of the novel?

One often-cited characteristic of our digital lives is that they are fragmented, distributed, impressionistic. The (false) implication being that somehow our ‘real’ lives are more connected, centralised (around our selves) and material (concrete), or that real-world events and people, and our responses to them (actions and feelings) somehow *naturally* flow into meaningful narratives. Far from it. Our so-called real lives are often fragmented and disorientating. And as anyone who has stopped to recount something that has recently happened will have experienced, both our real lives and our digital lives require a substantial effort of narrativisation to render them whole, graspable, tellable.

To narrativise is *to make a narrative of* something and this particular verbification has come to dominate a mode of cultural address from advertising products and services to reality TV, social media, news and politics.⁵⁴ The internet—social media in particular—is *designed* for enabling this as algorithms create ‘stories’ of our likes and dislikes, purchases and posts, records of our unique economic footprint, a DNA of online participation. However, these are not the kind of stories we mean when we think about novels, which turn the chaos of living into fictional order.

As you might expect, metaphors abound within the discipline of creative writing within the academy. In an influential paper by Nicola Boyd (2009), the conceptual movement of Hofstadter’s Strange Loop is deployed as a model for creative research and actionable creative methodology; Graham Mort locates the relationship between critical and creative practice as a ‘series of feedback loops’ ([Mort, 2012, p. 208]; Alyssa Ryan seeks to model this

⁵⁴ In some contexts, mostly social media marketing, the word ‘storification’ is used.

relationship following the image of a rhizome [2005], to name a few. This PhD thesis offers another. *Creative writing practice as nexus*, and, specifically, *the novel as a nexus of networked (connected)* ideas, as evidenced by the multimodality of this work's conception and development. What these different approaches reflect is also their author's particular interests and writing experience, experiences which are purposefully developed and problematized through the execution of particular research with a conceptual framework, an important consideration for any PhD (Leshem and Trafford, 2007). It is my view that they can all be thought to be participating, to some degree, in writing practice remediation.

4.2 Remediating Writing Practices

In her book, *The Multimodal Writer*, Barnard highlights the problem for the 21st-century writer competing in the 'fourth industrial revolution'⁵⁵ challenged 'to move between different types of writing.' (Barnard, 2019, p. 1) She articulates a way of approaching creative writing practice that moves away from the traditional model of lone-writer-in-a-garret to one where the writer works collaboratively and is confidently moving between a range of writing practices, a process Barnard refers to as *code-switching* (Barnard, 2019, p. 35). For Barnard, this consists of an openness and willingness to move between writing *knowns* and *unknowns*, expressed through her theory of remediation of writing practice.

Barnard's theory of remediation of writing practice consists of a method by which writers draw on previous writing experience to develop new skills to further different ways of writing and reaching audiences. As she states, it is a 'personalised model of creativity...(enabling) a systematic and ongoing transfer of skills that will ensure the development of a practice robust enough to effectively and productively negotiate challenges

⁵⁵ See Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (2016).

and embrace opportunities as they arise.’ (Barnard, 2019, p.7). In her 2019 book, *The Multimodal Writer*, Barnard offers a fascinating and timely practice-based handbook for writers wishing to expand their creative practice into the realm of digital multimodality, seeing this as the *modus operandi* of contemporary digitally informed storytelling. Barnard outlines several strategic and reflective pathways into that journey, including notions of *creative flexibility*, *collaborating with oneself* and *reflective remediation*, all key concepts within the evolution of my writing practice, having shaped this work considerably.

In Chapter 3 I discussed how I ‘mobilize(d) prior creative experience’ (Barnard, 2019, p.29) within my practice, transforming previous experience in screenwriting to my current fiction-writing endeavour, showing how influential this way of approaching new writing has been in shaping this work. Barnard’s notion of *collaborating with oneself* (Barnard, 2019, p. 29)⁵⁶ taps into thoughts often voiced by writers about writing that there are two minds or selves at work (Brande 1983, Atwood 2002, Foster Wallace 2005). And why not? ‘...there is no need to be confined within the limits of what society ordains you to be. One person? Two people? Who cares?’ says DusiBerre, writing about that most well-known doubles of children’s literature, Carroll and *Alice* (DusiBerre, 2018, p. 351).

The idea of *collaborating with oneself* can be seen at various points within my writing process and provides an illuminating perspective on the dynamics at play when a writer is both immersed *and* outside their practice, at different stages of the work. As a framing method for practice, it articulates the all-consuming pursuit of an answer to the question how should I write?⁵⁷ By drawing attention to the relationship between pre-existing writing

⁵⁶ Barnard invites the reader to consider this as a way of *collaborating with oneself* tapping into thoughts often voiced about writing by writers that there are two minds/selves at work when writing. This echoes Atwood’s thoughts on doubling (Atwood, 2002), and provides an interesting perspective within the dynamic process of reflective practice, where the writer is both immersed *and* outside their practice, at different stages of the work, or even sometimes at the same time. (Barnard, 2019, Chapter 2, pp. 22-42)

⁵⁷ I had just read Canadian author, Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* (2018) which uses script format (stage-play) as a way of exploring her protagonist’s journey of self-questioning and identity formation.

experience deployed in constructing new forms of practice and work, the idea of collaborating with oneself embodies the idea that ‘...the child in and through children’s literature always existed, in David Rudd’s elegant formulation, “between the constructed and the constructive”.’ (cited in Beauvais and Nikolajeva, 2018, p. 1) This is something Carroll seemed very much aware in writing that children’s work of fiction best known for its inventiveness and language play, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865), as Dusiñberre argues, ‘...the biggest revolution brought about by the *Alice* books was the focus on how to write instead of what one writes.’ (Dusiñberre, 2018, p. 351) It is no accident that the word ‘wonderland’ has found its way into the title of my novel and this idea of doubling is very much at its genesis. A long-time fan and admirer of this text’s wonderfully prescient use of language to explore, challenge and rewrite reality, *The Networked Wonderland of Us* occurred as a title just at the point I was looking to move away from the strict narrative expectations of the detective-thriller form and pay attention to the way I approached language in this novel—the language of cinema, of the internet, of particular social media platforms, of the contemporary young adults to which I directed my readership.⁵⁸

4.3 Revisions 1 (Genre): Crime Detection and Investigating the Authentic YA Self

In this section I will discuss how I have approached genre within my novel, starting with how the novel’s title changed to reflect a shift in genre emphasis and move on to consider how the work achieves its current form by drawing on two distinct genre forms: YA crime detective and coming of age.

⁵⁸ Relevant here too, is the way in which Carroll kept editing his own work into his own illustrated manuscript (published 1886), picturebook (1892), plays (1886), and revised his novels (see Jaques and Giddens, 2013).

An earlier version of the current manuscript was originally entitled *User*⁵⁹ and for quite some time. It was a much leaner, simpler proposition. The story started in the same way, with Taylor finding Kasha murdered (although presented in a very different style) and Taylor's desire to see herself as someone with agency and clear purpose, but as I wrote the importance of this *character need* driving the story grew, demanding more narrative space.

The two genres complement each other, as Routledge observes, 'The process of detection is (for the YAL protagonist) an exploration of their own identities...' (Routledge, 2010) but the narrative space given over for this varies considerably between traditional crime detection novels, effecting pace, plotting, narrative structure and genre identification. At 18 and at the cusp of new adulthood, older than most of the YA protagonists she is still finding herself and her way in the world. And what better way to find yourself than finding someone else's killer?⁶⁰ There are many crossover skills between working out how to live, what moves to make next in life and crime detection—especially perhaps for a young woman, after all, 'the art of living was to be like a girl detective...' (Mason, 1975, p. 4).⁶¹

I knew from the start that my novel would follow a detective plotting structure, it began with murder after all. Early drafts of the novel as *User* focused entirely on realising this form for the story, not least because the linear narrative mechanisms of an investigative story trajectory proved useful in helping me write the first draft.⁶² Finding out why a crime

⁵⁹ The tonally bare, monosyllabic title intentionally affords a double meaning as, understood one way, the word often employed to describe a relationship (false or inauthentic friendship) between two or more people that is based on what one party can gain from the other. Often at the provider's expense. Understood the other, 'user' is the simplest referent of a person who operates any kind of digital technology often with on the most basic understanding how it works.

⁶⁰ For a thorough and fascinating account of how violent events shape young adult identity formation see Detora, *Combining of Age in Suburbia: Sexual Violence, Consumer Goods and Identity Formation in Recent Young Adult Novels* (2006)

⁶¹ The popularity and endurance of the crime detective form within children's and young adult literature is well documented (Mason, 1977, Routledge, 2010, Rudd 2010).

⁶² With regards to the use of index cards to map the key plot points of the story. The plotting mechanisms of crime detection are relatively simple, one story line (usually) moving from A to B to C in a logical progression of cause and effect. But if the novel's crime genre affiliation is what gives the story its pace and momentum, it is the coming of age with its emphasis on growth and personal development that provides the heart.

happened is a complex business.⁶³ ‘For many child detectives ...the pursuit of criminals also involves the exploration of their relationships with adults, with their understanding of the world, and with their own identities.’ (Routledge, 2010). This exploration and representation of the world around the ‘child detective’ can present problems for narrative exposition, particularly for stories told in the first person. In Jackson’s *A Good Girl’s Guide to Murder* (2019)⁶⁴ as with my novel, the use of text messages, video calls, audio recordings, transcripts and production logs provide YA technology as devices for sharing different points of view, providing narrative information the protagonist would not otherwise be able to know and for establishing contemporary realist world-building.⁶⁵

Two more British examples from this genre, *13 minutes* (Pinborough, 2016) and *Follow Me Back* (Clope, 2016), both suspense-filled detective stories prompted by a death or near-death experience, are encased within familiar teen relationship politics, which, if not as heavily reliant on multimodal forms of storytelling as Jackson’s or my novel, deploy the languages of social media communication as essential to their detective plotting structure, providing elements of their detective storytelling. Carefully crafted, traditionally plot-driven stories, these works of YAL deliver a satisfying read, skilfully pulling the reader through to their character’s journey, yet their narratives leave the reader with few opportunities for deeper engagement with the characters or reflection on relevant issues.⁶⁶

As the story developed, I found the work of achieving the genre expectations for crime detection in its pure form, reductive. I lacked motivation for the genre-appropriate revisions with regard to achieving the desired pace and plotting, finding them leaving me too

⁶³ The crime may not always be a murder, of course. In Christopher’s *Stolen* (2009), the crime is the protagonist herself being abducted, In Alexander’s *Hacked* (2014) it’s fraudulently acquired items and access.

⁶⁴ See also Jackson’s *Good Girl, Bad Blood*, (2020).

⁶⁶ Creating space for reflection or broader conversations about contemporary issues may well not have been on any of either Jackson, Pinborough or Clope’s particular *lines of interest* but they were on mine.

little time to explore the other increasingly important concerns for Taylor's journey to adulthood. As I edited for pace, I was forced to lose descriptive passages important for this other purpose.⁶⁷ The crime genre wasn't allowing a full realisation of the works' narrative potential or meet its *initium*⁶⁸. I needed to expand my understanding of this genre's structure to find more space within the manuscript to address themes of personal growth and development, not simply solve the crime.

I've already discussed the influence of the 17th-century bildungsroman on contemporary realist YAL in chapter 1 (p. 341), focused as it was on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. The novels of Green, Lange, Rowell, Dean Myers, Guy, Hinton combine character complexity with story and pace and were not afraid of addressing existential and ontological concerns through their characters.⁶⁹ These author's works combine stylistic invention and speak to wider cultural conversations about what it is to live like a young person *today*, which in the case of Taylor, means finding a way to stand up for what you believe even if that means losing old friendships (Cyd) and risk your own life.

My concerns as an author mirror my protagonist's in that we are, neither of us, satisfied with simply solving the crime from a legal or policing perspective, or even with the important work of better understanding and resolving relationships. We want answers to a broader set of questions about identity and place within contemporary (digital) culture, through an exploration into the way women narrate themselves online. By expanding the

⁶⁷ In fact, many of these passages deserved to remain heavily cut as many lingered too long, displaying the guilty charge of first novelist's slightly self-indulgent purple prose, and not in keeping with the YA stylistic characteristics of accessibility and pace cited in Chapter 1.

⁶⁸ McCormack (1988) describes the *initium* as, 'what the author had in mind when he began his novel.' p.190.

⁶⁹ Other contemporary realist crime novels, ones which do not deploy multimodal forms of presentation in the text, also manage successfully to achieve some meaningful character development but secondary to plot—Rai's *Web of Darkness* (2014), McKenzie's *Girl Missing* (2006), McManus *One of Us is Lying* (2017), Flanagan's *Eden Summer* (2016).

crime investigation drama and Taylor's role as detective into a story motivated by personal growth and change, this hybrid genre novel de-familiarises the familiar, revising form and subject.

4.4 Revisions 2 (Gender): Lost Girls and Liminal Adolescent Female Heroes

‘If you were a girl, and you were imagining your life through literature, you would go from innocence in childhood to sadness in adolescence to bitterness in adulthood—at which point, if you hadn't killed yourself already, you would simply disappear.’

(Tolentino, 2019, p. 95)

The importance of *seeing yourself* in cultural narratives and the implications for identity formation if a reader is *unseen* is a particularly significant concern for contemporary realist YAL. It is what brings YAL readers to particular texts over others; it's where the potential to generate strong emotional associations and affiliations (often expressed through book groups and fan art) can be found; it forms group 'book bonds' and helps readers form a strong sense of their own identity.

Like many works of fiction by women writers concerned with representing the dynamics of societal power structures to which woman and girls are subjected, *The Networked Wonderland of Us* asks readers to consider how young women navigate the digital realm and see ways forward. The three female leads of my novel—Taylor, Kasha/Riley and Cyd—despite being confident participators in online and offline contexts, good communicators and savvy with regards to their awareness of the different roles as friend, daughter, employee and privacy and their rights as women within the mediated public spheres of a digitally networked society, despite all this, they still suffer at the hands of their online

lives.⁷⁰ Taylor makes a wrong judgement call when she posts the antibullying video, receiving hundreds of negative messages which have a crushing impact on her self-esteem and sense of self (integrity); Kasha/Riley undoes the good work of reinventing herself by posting a photograph that enables her true identity to be discovered, her location traced and herself murdered in a criminal underworld revenge execution; and Cyd leveraging the power of social media to elevate her status in the ‘real world’ beyond her school/6th form Queen Bee position, ends up a puppet of the criminals who want Kasha/Riley dead, and who then dispose of her as easily as they do their intended target.

In the opening passages of an article examining the representation of lost girls in the work of Carol Joyce Oates, Horeck states, ‘Stories of lost girls abound in popular culture.’ (Horeck, 2010, p. 1) and in many ways, Kasha/Riley falls squarely into the stereotype lost girl image—young, beautiful, vulnerable, unfortunate. The lost girl trope can be seen as emblematic of a cultural fascination with true crime stories within true crime representations of audio-visual culture and is a formative part of my characterisation process. Kasha/Riley’s vulnerability is not visible at first but revealed as we learn more about her true identity. Born to an addict mother and drug-dealing father her life circumstance drastically impacts the choices available to her later on. As Taylor comments when she reads through Riley’s biographical story on the archived blog, ‘No wonder she wanted to reinvent herself. How do you get on with your future when you’re tied to all that?’ (p. 274). As someone growing up in care Riley already feels lost and her reinvention as Kasha, a popular talented young woman in charge of her life and going places, is part of Riley’s commitment to putting this victim identity behind her.

⁷⁰ The situation for girls and young women online is different than it is for males, as Bailey and Steeves 2015 study, *The eGirls Project* shows, and the experiences and reaction to female online activity – do the scripts constrain them or liberate? (eGirls, eCitizens, 2015, p. 2)

Dissecting Oates's commitment to exploring the lost girl trope, Horeck also notes that, 'Oates's fiction provides us with what Seltzer calls an "aesthetics of the aftermath"' (Horeck, 2010, p. 3) This phrase 'aesthetics of the aftermath' is an apt description of my writing process for *The Networked Wonderland of Us* and has informed the way I approached the storytelling by rendering the audio-visual representation of true crime stories as they appear in countless feature film documentaries, TV singles and serials—the police-taped crime scene, the detective's chaotic yet purposed wall of investigation, grainy photographic images of people and places associated with the crime and the victim, intercepted digital communications, deductive leaps, slow realisations of culpability or guilt. Trying to bring this audio-visual 'aesthetics of aftermath' into a work of literary fiction required a distinct creative writing response method, a deliberate *translation* or *transportation*, from one mode (audio-visual) to the other (textual), or what I referred to previously as *digital backflow*.

One of the problems with the traditional focalisation of crime stories is that they tend to emphasise the person and predicament of the victim and for a long time, I wrestled with telling *The Networked Wonderland of Us* as a dual narrative (Taylor and Kasha's story) but I struggled with how to depict the voice of a narrator who was dead by page 1. I experimented with presenting as some form of *ghost in the machine* (Ryle, 1949), hearing Kasha/Riley's voice through technology, via texts, SMS, posted updates, photographs etc., but the technology, *the mediated voice*, took over and I couldn't find her human (real-world) one.⁷¹ Taylor on the other hand felt vivid and real, perhaps because I knew her world more intimately.

Taylor is born into a white professional, middle-class world, with all the privilege that brings, but she is also lost. When we meet her, she is still feeling the effects of the bullying incident, the response to her video and the relationship breakdown with Cyd. She quite

⁷¹ The resulting tone presented with a certain ghostly whimsy which I didn't like.

literally doesn't know who she is anymore and the person she imagined herself to be—someone with integrity, courage to stand up for others, selfless even—is not evidenced by any of her recent actions. 'I'm completely freaked out by this response. Perhaps I am a bad person after all? I pull my website and YouTube channel offline, and vow never to go online again.' (p. 41) Taylor thought she was a better person, but that person is now lost. Taylor's need to see herself acting positively in her own life drives her into the investigation and to right the wrongs of her past.

Cyd is also born into a professional, middle-class world, one with more money and more material privilege but she is also lost. She is an amalgam of two inspirations: an old school friend (with South American heritage) and a character from a contemporary independent film noir set around in an American suburban high school: privileged young women who find themselves material rich but relationship poor. Cyd's parents are too high flying, too busy, too self-absorbed to give her much time. The emotional neglect she suffers at home drives her need to be top and centre of every other part of her life, notably her social networks. Her Brazilian heritage—to her UK classmates at least—indicates an advanced physical/sexual maturity affording Cyd a mix of admiration and envy from female peers and sexual appeal to males, securing her an uncontested Queen Bee status: a position she works hard to maintain, as Taylor well knows, illustrated by her response to Cyd saying she became friends with Pete, 'You've come to take an interest in him. There's a difference.' (p. 241)

All three female characters are in some way lost but perhaps it is this *lostness* that is required for change. A characteristic of adolescent liminality and a new script to inhabit where the young shero, in the very moment of becoming-woman, is simultaneously lost and found (Phillips, 2017). Occupying a becoming space is something at which YAL excels, as Proukou states, 'For YA literature presents the world of imagination as real not hallucinatory, feelings as reliable not deceitful, nature as essential not expendable, danger as challenging

not demoralizing, enemies as teachers as well as adversaries, and life as a surprising process neither exactly fair nor completely capricious.’ (Proukou, 2005, p. 68)

In addition to the lost and liminal roles performed by the young female leads of *The Networked Wonderland of Us* the older female characters of Helen, Vivienne and Deedee provide opportunities for readers to think about how they might *see themselves* as adult women. What choices are available, how society treats them, what expectations society has. Helen, happy to settle with a husband and teaching job which allowed her time to raise her child she has taken good care of Taylor and the result is they have a strong relationship built on love and trust. Taylor however rather admires her Aunt’s life, travelling the world making real change, living a meaningful life full of drama and conflict, which seems more exciting and socially valued than her mother’s mothering one. But when Taylor finds out that she is adopted and her real birth mother is Vivienne, her first reaction is shock and betrayal, Deedee on the other hand has experienced trauma and betrayal throughout her life and has devised a world philosophy that captures a stoicism in her response to Taylor’s sympathy for her situation, ‘life is consequences’ (p. 285). This phrase from her dialogue becomes the chapter title. It is a strategy that enables Deedee to move forward. Her strength and fairness of character prized highly in a world where reputations are everything.

4.5 Revision 3: Redrafting and Editing

‘A writer’s work has to take account of many rhythms, Vulcan’s and Mercury’s, a message of urgency obtained by dint of patient and meticulous adjustments and an intuition so instantaneous that, when formulated it acquires the finality of something that could never have been otherwise.’ (Calvino, 1996, p. 54)

The work of redrafting and editing *The Networked of Wonderland of Us* has had to take account of ‘many rhythms’, perhaps, even, a few more than most novels. Not only have I had to accommodate the authorial creative and temperamental fluctuations of which Calvino speaks above, but I have also had to orchestrate the interplay of multimodal forms of writing toward the realisation of a cogent story-driven narrative for its intended YAL readership. At times it has felt like spinning many plates. If one plate is allowed off-kilter, to even the smallest degree, the chances of the whole becoming destabilised are high, and a mess of broken crockery ensues.

Neil Gaiman describes writing as ‘driving in the dark with one headlight.’ (Gaiman, 2020), it is a metaphor to which I can fully relate, as I have often had to feel my way in the dark with regards to synthesising previous screenwriting experience with the new practice of writing prose fiction in this novel. As a consequence, the first draft looked ungainly and ill-formed. It is the process of redrafting through editing that cast this sketch into something more lasting, when it, ‘...acquires the finality of something that could never have been otherwise.’ (Calvino, *ibid.*), which I understand to mean convincing, persuasive, accomplished, even⁷². Gaiman agrees, further stating, ‘The process of doing your second draft is the process of making it look like you knew what you were doing all along.’ But in my experience the stage of editing to which Gaiman refers more resembles the activity of micro editing, described by Susan Bell as, ‘the once-over you give your text much more than once.’ (Bell, 2007, p. 96) Before this there is another stage of editing—what bell calls macro editing—which for this novel consisted in structural and stylistic experimentation and much rewriting. These earlier macro stages of rewriting and redrafting are closer to what Margaret

⁷² A Senior Editor at children’s publisher Chicken House described this current manuscript as ‘accomplished’ in recent e-mail correspondence. (see Appendix 3.)

Atwood refers as *revisioning* (Atwood, 2019), emphasising the *re*. Speaking in a Masterclass video course, Atwood sounds the word out deliberately, in three constitutive parts. *Re-vision-ing*. The purpose being to emphasise the process of *looking again* at the thing you have written and allowing yourself to see what it *could* be, implying a moment of blue-sky thinking clear-headedness to which I can also relate. These revisioning moments during the redrafting of this novel happened four times. One I have already discussed—the decision to use screenplay as a metaphor for Taylor’s thoughts (the adaptation to the first person) occurred—and at each of *three* changes in narrative address (first person to third and back to first), which I discuss now.⁷³

The mechanics of the redrafting process which Bell refers to as macro and micro editing provides a useful model and hint at a critique of this process with regards to the successful narrative orchestration of the fragmented digital lives of my characters into the analogue world of my novel (RQ 6). Bell defines macro editing as the *draft edit*, where ‘...you stop writing, gather a number of pages together, read them, make notes on what works and doesn’t, then rewrite.’ (Bell, 2007, p. 45) I have already discussed some of the macro processes such as the adaptation of screenplay convention for the metaphorical exposition of my protagonist’s POV or exploring a different way of organising the mise-en-page with regards to the inclusion of text messages, social media posts. The shifts in narrative perspective achieved through a process of drafting my novel’s narrative address from the first person to the third person, and back once more to first.

I wrote the first draft of this novel in the first person, seeming the obvious choice given everything I knew about YAL. At first, I wasn’t comfortable with the performance of slipping into the shoes of someone much younger without the filter of the omniscient author

⁷³ All of these revisioning moments involved bringing the work in line with the original image I had in mind—a process McCormack refers to as *prelibation*, ‘the desire for a certain effect on the reader.’ (McCormack, 1988, p. 185)

as a disguise. As I wrote and understood Taylor better, finding her, perhaps unsurprisingly, in a merging of my own memories of youth and combining those with the experiences of young people I came into contact within my teaching and through friends, I realised that it wasn't Taylor's character that alluded me but skill in prose writing, particularly with regards to communicating character voice.

Extract from the original first-person draft (*User*, February 2015):

Prologue

A snapshot.

This is where it begins.

I'm standing in front of a burger van staring at a dead girl: A girl who was definitely alive thirty minutes ago because she sold me a chilli cheeseburger and chips. I can't move from looking. My eyes are full of her. Unnatural. Broken and twisted. Surrounded by red. My head, an empty cave with no light. No exit. Eventually, a word starts to take shape. That word is *stayed*.

I should have stayed with her like she asked me to.

Another word.

Guilt.

This feeling is not new.

My background in screenwriting afforded me certain skills for constructing story structure, dialogue, character building and development and thematic exposition but not with regards to the language required for prose fiction. I had had one short story published in 2014 won an audience prize (Gibson Yates, 2014) and another piece of short flash fiction found a place in ARU's 2018 student writing anthology, so my experience of publishing fiction was slight. I found the language style employed in this first, first-person draft truncated, blunt

summary and ineffective at drawing the reader into my character's world, a fact borne out by 2 early readers. I was aware Taylor's voice sounded inauthentic and I felt inauthentic as an author trying to emulate the language of my young protagonist's thinking and feeling.

These feelings of dissatisfaction prompted the move to rewrite the manuscript in third person over a year later and instantly I felt more at home not 'pretending' to be my eighteen-year-old protagonist but simply and authentically an (older) author writing empathetically about her.

Extract from the third-person draft (*User*, December 2016):

Riley sits looking at a photograph she has brought with Mandy, an artist and facilitator of the life story blog project Riley signed up for three weeks ago.

'It smells of another time.' Riley, muses. 'I don't know how else to describe it. People used to hold photographs like this all the time didn't they, miss? I mean, *really* hold them: People saw other people not just with their eyes but with touch and smell and love.' She put the photograph of a black man, a blonde, white woman and a baby on a blasted East coast beach on the table. They are smiling and happy and look like that moment will go on forever.

'Your parents?' Mandy leans over.

Riley nods, taking a photograph of it with her phone.

'Still alive?'

'Dad is. Mum died when I was 7. Overdose.'

They both take it in for a moment. Wondering about the time between that time and now.

This version of the manuscript also incorporated the original literal form of screenwriting within the text to represent audio-visual information (YouTube videos, Taylor's films, live video feeds and feature film extracts):

'She's started a campaign.' Rhidian announces.

'For what?!'

'To find Kasha's killer.'

'I thought that's the police's job,' Taylor scorns. Rhidian hits play on a recently linked video to a post by Cyd entitled, *Justice for Kasha*.

'Take a look at this.'

INT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

Cyd sits on a large leather sofa in a smartly furnished room. She's sharp, poised in a black silk bomber jacket, white drainpipes, high-heeled grey suede ankle boots. Glossy, chocolate-brown hair cut into an asymmetrical blunt-edged bob, a white-blond streak blazes through a pointed heavy fringe falling over her right eye. She peers at the viewer with the other.

CYD

If you're watching this, chances are you've already heard about Kasha and the terrible way she died. [Cyd pauses, looks away, takes a deep breath and returns to the viewer.] Kasha brought light and laughter to everyone who knew her. She brought song where there was silence. [She pauses again - a moment of silence to illustrate her point.] She was a beautiful person... and my dearest friend.

(April 2017, *The Networked Wonderland of Us*. p. 1 and p. 64)

Writing in the third person shifted the tone considerably and the manuscript now lacked the pace and accessibility of language characteristic demanded by YAL, distancing the reader from the protagonist and action, with its reflective tone and perspective. The decision to move back to the first person came not too long after sending it out to an agent who commented that it ‘hadn’t drawn her in’. Not *drawing a reading in* was a serious problem. Burroway explains its cause thus, ‘When point of view fails, it is always because the perception we are using for the course of the story is different from that of the character who is moved or changed by the action.’ (Burroway, 2019, p. 161) This was the problem my third person conversion had resulted, a problem I may well not have detected had I not sent it out. Proving, as Bell says, sending your work out offers an opportunity to see your work as others will, through their eyes.

The move to (back) to the first person presented as the best solution. Not only had my writing skills improved since the first attempts and finding Taylor’s voice came more readily, but the *translation* back to first enabled me to see the material afresh.

The new first-person version.

Taylor’s preface:

This book was written at the time events happened. I didn’t mean for anyone to read it like you’re reading it now. It was more just a way to put it all down, to sort it out in my head. The whole book thing is a bit of a surprise if I’m honest. Anyway, what you’re about to read is a true story. And if me saying that doesn’t immediately set off alarm bells then it should...

(December 2018, p. 1)

I rewrote the beginning several times as evident from these extracts. I wanted a running start, or as is common in screenwriting advice ‘to get into the scene late and leave early’. But fell victim to what Bell refers to as ... I had, however, made progress with Taylor’s voice. I’d found a sassier, direct voice for Taylor that would enable me to present her characters complexity, her moods, contradictions, hidden guilt and ability for strong feeling and loyalty in an authentically drawn way.

Having established the narrative address, form and function of screenwriting and made decisions about how to present text, video calls I could now turn to the business of micro editing the work, or ‘making it look like you know what you were doing all along.’ (Gaiman, 2020). Much of the way I approached this can be found in Calvino’s edicts for literary form (Calvino, 1996); *lightness* in the use of direct and accessible language, *visibility* in the way narrative information is provided clearly and straightforwardly, *multiplicity* in the polyphonic use of multimodal writing to represent different voices and perspectives on events, *quickness* in terms of pacing and plotting, reducing long descriptive passages and keeping the story whether action or inner character change moving; and, finally, *exactitude* where similar to Bell’s notion of micro editing, ‘Language reigns over every micro-narrative element.’ because, ‘Language is, in a word, voice.’ (Bell, 2007, p. 98)

4.6 Conclusion

‘...in a very real sense, we don’t ‘compose’ or ‘make up’ stories, we discover them, and we rarely know what they mean until we’ve completed them, and not always then.’ (Crago, 2014 p, 1)

Ozick talks of the essentiality of writing as ‘wrestling with its own body’ (Ozick, 1996, p. 136) and it is precisely this work of wrestling that has sustained me through an extended writing and redrafting process, and I have learned much about writing and myself as a writer allowing me to draw this body of work to a close with the optimistic view that the next novel won’t take nearly as half as many drafts to find its form again. The multidisciplinary nature of this research has oftentimes worked against me in that it has afforded a large net of materials, ideas, sources and routes to explore. Unlike Alice’s monodirectional downward journey mine has been back and forth, rhizome-shaped, more like the White Rabbit’s multi-passaged subterranean burrows than anything resembling a clear routed tunnel with one end coming up fast. Reflecting on recent feedback on *The Networked Wonderland of Us* (Appendix 2), I understand that making space for character development has forced the work to compromise its adherence to detective genre pacing, which despite realising my creative aims and objectives for this work, render it a potentially problematic commercial proposition. This is perhaps also cause for satisfaction and why the execution of this novel here, in the course of this creative writing investigation is well placed.

Summary

From the perspective of author-practitioner-researcher the idea of remediating past writing practice, through my formulation *digital backflow*, is not only useful as a way of understanding the direction my practice has taken but confirms and iterates the importance of nurturing experimentation, play and openness within individual writing practice that is missing from some accounts. It also suggests an explanation as to why someone who had spent most of their adult life thinking about, writing and making films, wanted to write a novel at all. What could, *writing a novel* about the impact of social media and digital technology offer my understanding of the subject that *making a film*, deploying skills I had already, could not?

Having now completed this work, it is clear to me that the answer lays in the differences in effect that different modes of narrative address afford. If fiction affords particular kinds of knowledge, (Currie, 2006) then particular forms of fiction afford differently, and significantly here, *unique*, knowledge. With this in mind, *The Networked Wonderland of Us* is a particular form of fiction forged from the pursuit of a specific aesthetic aim: *towards a digital aesthetic in book form via a multimodal writing practice*.

My research questions have been answered in ways both anticipated and unexpected. Investigation into RQ 2 has shown that *The Networked Wonderland of Us* has interrogated and deployed a number of the characteristics of contemporary realist young adult literature (YAL) including young adult age character centred story, accessibility of language and pace, which situate my novel within contemporary realist YALs creative landscape. *The Networked Wonderland of Us* addresses key discourses within digital culture directly through the story action and the concerns and circumstances of the characters. They are also

embodied in stylistic devices that represent the multimodal languages and practices of digital culture and their relationship to analogue mediums and their textual representation (RQ 3).

RQ 4, how contemporary realist YAL deploy the languages and practices of digital technologies as a narrative strategy, can be seen through all this novel's stages of revision and drafting and constitute the main advance of knowledge this writing investigation can claim, that of achieving *a digital aesthetic in book form via a multimodal writing practice* (RQ 1). Fiction screenwriting is deployed as a specific application of this narrative strategy with the deliberate effect of drawing attention to the impact of cinema, specifically, and audio-visual culture, more broadly, within selected YAL and *The Networked Wonderland of Us* (RQ 5). Finally, revising the idea of retrograde remediation as a process whereby old media is appropriated, adapted and represented as part of the contemporary experience of technology, the writing of technology back into the analogue world of this research novel, through a specific approach to composition and editing can be considered a discovery of that *creative narrativization* the novel explicitly sought to investigate in RQ 6.

Although it's not always possible, as author-researcher, to detail in advance what are the unique effects of particular narrative modes of address, they nevertheless *exist*, in the process and the resulting text, with the differences only become evident *in the doing*.⁷⁴ It is the writing *practice* itself that affords knowledge unique to that practice, and in the case of creative working across multiple modes of writing, switching codes, as this creative writing investigation has done, thus renders the possibility for new YAL fiction and new ways of communicating that fiction.

In the abstract, I made a claim for contemporary realist YAL as thriving at an exciting nexus of possibilities, including literary experimentation, storytelling, identity formation, and

⁷⁴ This form of knowledge draws on multiple senses and multiple forms of cognition and can perhaps only be grasped through *the experience of the work itself*. Not through a re-conceptualisation or re-iteration of the process according to conventional academic discourse.

culture shaping. As such, certain YAL represents a valuable discourse around urgent post-digital literary and cultural ideas that evidence new ways of thinking about, and responding creatively to, the subject of digital technologies within the lives of young people and within literature.

This research investigation into multimodal writing practices advances understanding of these specific writing processes, furthermore, it is possible to imagine how they might be deployed in other contexts, for instance for collaborative working, or multiplatform, multimodal storytelling, and for pedagogy.

What the future holds for this novel is unclear. I was pleased to have the manuscript make the longlist of a significant national children's fiction competition (The Times Chicken House Children's Fictions Competition 2020), making it into the final 18 from nearly 1000 entries category. To date I have had a few expressions of interest from literary agents in the form of full manuscript requests, and positive email responses but no firm offers with comments referring to the age of the novel's characters being too old for mainstream YA market, or suggestions that I clarify the detective-thriller credentials to shape the work as an easy fit within that marketing category (see Appendix 2). These things I may consider going forwards. I've always known this novel-text proposition might be a difficult fit for the UK book market. I have been advised that the US market's taste for edgier YA might be a productive route to explore, and that is also an option I am considering. If, after some more months of submission, I still finding no interest I will take the route of independent publishing and with that in mind have collaborated with a recent graduate illustration student from The Cambridge School of Art on a book cover (appendix 3). I have also considered the possibility of compressing this story into a work of interactive fiction, expanding the multimodal writing practices into multimodal *production* – a possible post-doctorate project

perhaps. The ideas and story territories of *The Networked Wonderland of Us* remain pertinent and could certainly reward further exploration.

Overall, the experience of the writing-practice investigation over many years has enabled me to develop skills and confidence with regards to the deliberate and focused application of specific writing strategies, and in the field of writing as practice-based research. I remain hopeful that *The Networked Wonderland of Us* will find its wider readership one day, and the conversations around identity formation and privacy for young people, women in particular, may ensue in a reflective and supportive space.

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Appendix 1

Author Alice Oseman - Email interview (June 2019)

Hi Sarah,

Sorry for my slow response, and sorry if my answers are a little short! I've been incredibly busy. Best of luck with your dissertation!

1. Each of your books seems to focus on a slightly different technology or online digital practice. Could you say a few words about how you approached representing these technologies in each book.

I try to include technology and social media in my works in a way that feels natural and real for not only my characters, but myself too. I grew up on the internet, and it's a big part of my life and always has been, so it feels important to include that when writing about characters who are close to my own age. In *Solitaire* Tori uses Tumblr to blog about her feelings, which is something that I and many of my peers were doing at the time. In *Radio Silence* Frances and Aled use the internet as a creative outlet. And in *IWBFT* Angel uses social media to cling to her favourite boyband.

2. Why do you think it's important to explore the interconnectivity of identity, technology and story today?

Technology is everywhere and it's not going away. I can't imagine trying to write a realistic contemporary story without it.

3. Do you think there are enough novels that do this, and why?

No, and I think that is in part because most authors are still of a slightly older generation (over 30) who have not grown up online in the same way that people under 25 have.

4. Which other authors do you admire, that explore similar themes in their work?

/ 5. What do you admire specifically about their work?

Lauren James uses a great deal of technology and social media in her works in really interesting ways. She's one of the few authors I know that really takes advantage of all the things you can do online.

6. Your work embraces multi-modal forms of storytelling not only in the novels themselves but in the way you communicate them to readers through social media. With this in mind, which would you say is the most effective platform for you as an author? (and why?)

My favourite space as an author online is Tumblr. I feel I have a lot of control over what I post but I'm still able to have a close dialogue with my readers.

7. What do social media of interaction offer you that traditional forms of author-reader contact cannot?

The immediacy of social media helps readers feel like they can get to know their favourite authors and chat to them almost as friends.

8. I've been thinking about stories are fragmented, retold, adapted through different media online as a form of *expanded story*. Would you say this idea describes your work fairly faithfully, and a few words on why? Do you like the term?

That sounds like a good way to describe it! But I always say that anything that happens outside the canon of the text is simply my own interpretation, and readers don't need to take my word for fact. The only canon material is in the text itself.

9. Thinking about the dominant themes of technology, creativity and identity in your work, what would you say they are connected? How does how and what we make shapes who we are?

Yes, because these are all fundamental aspects of my own life, and thus I always end up writing about them. That probably isn't true for everyone, but my books stem from my own experiences.

10. Do you think young adult is still a meaningful category for authors or valuable only as a marketing tool for publishers and booksellers?

I do think it's meaningful. Age-group/target audience aside, YA has a whole literary style of its own that simply is not replicated in any other category of fiction.

11. I've had conversations with literary agents who seem to suggest that young adult fiction is on the way out, as a marketing category? Do you agree? Why? I'm particularly interested to hear your views as a *young, young adult author*.

I think any literary agent who has said that clearly doesn't know much about YA. It's far more than a marketing category. See my above answer!

12. Does being described as a young adult author help you connect with readers? Or do you think it restricts your audience? For instance, is there a point at which you stop writing YA novels and insists on being categorized as simply adult?

Yes, definitely. Teen readers - the people my books are mostly for - are able to find my books. I wouldn't describe my books as 'adult'.

Reader's Report

The Networked Wonderland of Us

Dear Sarah,

Thanks so much for submitting to the 2020 Times/Chicken House Competition and congratulations once again for reaching the final eighteen out of nearly one thousand submissions. I was delighted to find *The Networked Wonderland of Us* on my reading pile (which numbered nearly 400!) and I hope the following report helps outline both why it rose to the top of the heap and what you could do to further improve the manuscript. The editorial guidance I've offered below is very much 'headline' advice – a sense of the big things you could do to take *The Networked Wonderland of Us* to the next level. I really hope you find it helpful.

Comparison titles

- *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* – Holly Jackson
- *The Truth About Telling Secrets* – Savannah Brown
- *The Burning* – Laura Bates

Why I picked your manuscript for the longlist

- *The Networked Wonderland of Us* is a contemporary YA thriller and murder mystery that

engages with important themes of social media – I felt the overall concept was bang up-to-

date and had great commercial potential.

- As someone intimately engaging with the digital lives of young people, you seem especially

well-placed to write this book.

- Taylor is a relatable main character and her quest for truth – as well as her sense of

involvement in the victim's life – feels real and engaging. As a reader I felt really involved in

her emotional life and invested in her well-being.

- Your writing, particularly your dialogue, is well-observed and perfectly pitched for a YA

readership. The screenplay interludes are intriguing, too.

- I loved your portrayal of the friendships in the novel, the closeness between Rhid and Taylor particularly.

Things to think about

- Ultimately, the novel doesn't yet read like a thriller. The pace is relatively slow and the

build-up of clues, while intriguing, doesn't yet feel perilous or fast enough for a YA readership. The investigation progresses at a pace which despite allowing plenty of time for thoughts, feelings and the relationships you write so well (I really liked the scene between Taylor and her Mum, in her workshop), doesn't feel gripping enough as it stands, in contrast to what's promised by the pitch.

- I was unconvinced by some elements of the mystery, e.g. the way the police conveniently confessed details of the investigation to Taylor. The police's obviously active involvement, too, left me feeling confused as to why Taylor was so involved herself, even from the very beginning. I'm particularly referring to when we discover that she had not only forgotten to

mention her phone (which felt understandable) but she actually hid some stolen evidence from the crime scene. Her motives felt confused and although I understood her on an emotional level, I didn't always feel that I had been shown her line of reasoning.

- I wondered whether it would be stronger if the police in fact considered it an open-and-shut case, arresting Pete and not investigating further? It would help explain why Taylor then feels she has to take the lead and prove Pete's innocence.


- Overall, I think it's telling that in the synopsis you've very much focussed on the emotional journey and the relationships (Will Pete forgive her? Will she face up to Cyd? Will she forgive her mum/aunt for the lie she's lived her whole life?) rather than the mechanics of the mystery. If you were to return to work on the novel, I'd consider how to ramp up the stakes much quicker – and to work in the relationships as complements to the mystery rather than placing them centre stage.

- Once you're in your stride, in the second half of the novel, things feel much more exciting! Cyd's implication in the murder and the threats to Taylor's own life are brilliant. Can you bring them forward?

I hope you find this useful should you end up returning to the novel to edit it further – and of course, we do accept re-submission to the competition should you wish to be reconsidered next time! Once again, I'd like to underline how much I enjoyed *The Networked Wonderland of Us*. I think if you can nail down the thriller plot, it'll be absolutely fantastic.

All the best,

Kesia Lupo Senior Editor Chicken House




Sarah Gibson Yates <sgyates72@gmail.com>
to Kesia ▾

27 Oct 2020, 10:59 ☆

Thanks so very much for this detailed and encouraging report, Kesia.
I take on board your comments regarding the pacing and will possibly think about redrafting. I've had a bit of an inner creative battle between wanting space for character development while at the time time realising the thriller plotting and pace. You've hit the nail on the head there.

Thanks once again.

Best wishes



Lupo, Kesia
to me ▾

27 Oct 2020, 11:02 ☆

You're very welcome – it's already such an accomplished novel, but I'm really glad you found the feedback chimed with your own thoughts. Always a good sign!

Best wishes,

Kesia

From: Sarah Gibson Yates [<mailto:sgyates72@gmail.com>]
Sent: 27 October 2020 11:00
To: Lupo, Kesia <kesia@chickenhousebooks.com>
Subject: Re: Longlist report

Appendix 3

Prospective book cover for independent publication, designed by Libby Scott.
www.libbymariescott.co.uk

