



The copper watched my approach, his fingers all twitchy, and hovering close to his gun. He wasn't happy with me because I hadn't crossed at the lights. It was getting close to curfew and he wanted his street clear, all pedestrians heading home before the ten o'clock deadline. I stopped before him, clutching at my arms, the cold chilling my bones. He pulled at his peaked cap, a stream of water splashing onto his black boots. He widened his stance, small pig eyes staring, a deep snarl rumbling, and rotted teeth grinding.

'Is bad,' I said to Elliot.

Not good, Izzy.

'What do I do?'

It was late and I was kitty wet, lost scraggy dog miserable, and wanted to know why my brother had an old, sad, beat-up copper guarding his door.

You can't be arguing with a copper, not when his fingers are caressing the trigger of a gun.

I agreed with Elliot. The coppers in Ostere town had lost their manners and liked to shoot. I blamed the army. They stalked our town with rifles, shooting creatures not deserving

of a bullet. Coppers used to investigate and protect, but with soldiers shooting stuff, they were powerless to protect and serve, so armed up and joined the fray.

‘But there’s no harm in asking a question.’

Izzy, don’t be hot-headed, don’t be throwing a tantrum, and play nice. We’re not safe here.

I’m Izzy. I’m almost eighteen and, according to the state mental doctors, I’m certifiably crackers. There are a lot of words that describe my condition, but I like crackers. Up until an hour ago, I was an inmate at Arundel Asylum, but I’d managed to escape, to flee their drugs and abuse, expecting to be met by my big brother, Dougal. The irritating voice, the one that never ceases, is my other brother, my twin, and his name is Elliot. He’s well dead, but he haunts me day and night. He’s mostly good to have around, but he can get irritating, and when he’s irritating, he’s, like, so annoying.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ I said. And I smiled. I don’t do smiling, ever. And I found it remarkably difficult to hold. Smiling doesn’t seem natural. Not to me, but I asked my question. ‘Is Dougal receiving visitors.’

Classy

It brought no response from the old dog guarding Dougal’s door. He hitched at his utility belt, shuffling it high, but it flopped back beneath his fat gut.

‘Piss off. Get out of my patch, you parentless gutter goblin.’

Goblin, Elliot echoed.

I was shocked. The copper’s words hurt. ‘You can’t speak to me like that. I’ll have you know, some of my finest friends thrive without parental support.’

Tell him he’s a tub of lard and his heart is curing and pickling in fat and clogging hard with crap and is set to explode, Kaboom.

I was drawing a crowd. A mother, umbrella in hand, child under her wing, stopped before me, hoping I’d move. A large man appeared at her rear, his hands resting against mother and child. He guided them past me, the mother’s hand covering her child’s ears.

He’s going to shoot.

I watched the small family walk away, alarmed at the mother’s reaction to my presence. She was fearful as if I was a threat.

Izzy.

The copper flicked the catch holding his gun in place, and his hand palmed the gun. I backed off, bumping into a tall woman and her man cowering beneath an umbrella. The copper

sneered and rolled a toothpick in his mouth like he was tough. Hard. Dangerous even. It didn't impress me, and Elliot laughed.

He's a loser. Look at him. His jowls flap when he breathes and his tits jiggle each time his heart pumps.

'What happened?' I asked the copper.

Elliot answered. *He's standing guard because he's not trusted anymore. He's an old boy, Izzy girl, used up, and he betrayed his partner, right?*

'He asked you to watch his back,' I said. People pushed past, knocking me closer to the old boy. 'Didn't he? But you were watching your own back, right?'

The copper spat the toothpick at my chest. I fell backwards, clutching at my breast, pretending I'd taken a bullet to my heart. I performed an elegant pirouette, stumped back, then forward. 'I'm shot, Elliot,' I sobbed. 'I've taken lead to my chest. Help me, Elliot. Hold my hand.'

Elliot was laughing, but the copper wasn't.

'Piss off, or I'll shoot ya.'

I should be telling you something else about me, me and Elliot, and our ability to hear stuff. We're clever, Elliot and me. We knew what that copper's problem was from the moment we spied him standing guard. He was washed up, tired, his flat feet giving him grief. Our old boy in blue dreamt of the shekels worth of food awaiting obliteration in the oven, and inhaled before he fell asleep with a gut full of beer for a nightcap.

I retreated, stepping into the gutter lining Fitzroy Street, giving up on my charade. Folk strutted the gap, casting secretive glances at the copper and me, whispering behind hands, hurrying to get off the streets.

'Piss off yer tart,' he said. 'Why don't you go shoot your dope up your skinny runt arms, until your veins pop, your heart explodes, and your brain melts out your Goblin ears.'

As he touched his gun, my fingers traced the outline of my ears. Really, I thought, 'Goblin ears?'

They're not small, Izzy.

His hand fitted the gun, ready to draw and shoot, but a shout distracted him. A man approached from my left, calling to the copper, his hand held up in greeting. He was tall, with dark hair, and an umbrella hiding his face. I stepped further into the street, curious to see if the nasty cop would shake hands. The man's suit looked smart and dark. His polished shoes bore droplets on the toes and a trace of mud on his heels.

The copper shook his hand, muttered with a dirty frown, and glared at me. The man turned, and his eyes stared. Mean black eyes, the gap between too wide and broad and making him seem slightly alien.

He had a scar down his right cheek.

No scar, Elliot, not that I remembered, but he did have thin straight lips. A goatee, shaved and sculpted, which helped deflect from his hard lipless mouth.

Bloody vagrants. His thoughts rattled heavy in his head.

‘Arrest her,’ he said. ‘She’s a gutter goblin.’

I backed off, running across the road, skipping in front of a jeep, the soldier in the passenger seat holding a rifle across his chest.

Let’s get out of here, Izzy, or we’ll be going back to the Asylum before sunrise.

‘Write your crazy out of your system,’ my nut-nut doctor told me. ‘You need to get madness and insanity in black and white.’

I’d picked up a red pen, and she slapped my hand.

‘Not red.’

‘Why?’ I said. She didn’t like me asking.

‘Because we don’t use red, trust me.’

She had a Nordic accent that made her sound bossy. I’d always struggled with bossy, so trusting my doctor from the extreme white north was a big ask.

And her accent made me shiver. It caused my skin to bump and chill, and the little hairs to stand up straight. No amount of rubbing ever got the warmth back into me.

A pullover, or a coat maybe.

Elliot talked nonsense, not having any idea what clothing Arundel Asylum offered its inmates. There were no coats or jumpers or heaters for a shivering body to find warmth or nurture. That place was damp, dreary and dead cold.

‘You will print your crazy, stupid thoughts on paper, darling. Vent, vent, vent. It is the only way, darling.’

Not her exact words. I might’ve exaggerated, embroidered the truth a little. And what did I care? I was free of her, of that place, and across the road was my haven, my sanctuary,

but a line of yellow plastic tape blockaded my entry. It said *Crime Scene*. It meant *Piss Off*. *Stay Away*. *Butt Out*.

I sat on the wooden bench opposite my brother's office. Behind the tape was a glass door, black lettering advertising ExtraOrdinary Private Investigations, and its location was on the first floor. My brother's office was between a pizza restaurant and an all-night convenience store. His neighbours consisted of take-out shops, betting shops, charity concerns and behind me was The Prince of Wales pub. In between was Fitzroy Street, a tram stop and very little traffic. It was curfew and not a lot of people liked to break that law.

My pencil, a thick builder's stub, was poised over the paper. A single sheet, folded twice, grubby and creased. And blank. I wanted to write my brother a note, but I got to thinking about my doctor and her thoughts, thinking maybe I should vent, because a note through my brother's door at this late hour wasn't going to alert him to my arrival.

But no venting occurred. I became distracted by a man who sat next to me. He was a skinny looking bloke, who gave me a right glare when he noticed me staring. I gulped and apologised with a humble sorry, but I so wanted to stare again. His beak was huge like it had a bend cum hump that must've stored a tanks worth of snot. I didn't want to be around when he sneezed. Disaster to the world and its problem with airborne diseases, like, if that hooter ever contacted irksome pathogens and exploded with an ah-choo.

It is night time, I wrote. I was trying to give myself an activity, and stop me staring at the ginormous hooter, but the paper was damp. I am sitting across the road, I scrawled, from my brothers front door, hoping he'll come out to play. It is cold, mizzle wetting my hair—

Mizzle? That's not a word.

'It is so too a word. It's a combination of mist and drizzle,' I said.

The man with the beak was staring at me. Fair do's, like, I was talking out loud. I do that. Lots.

Mizzle, my arse. It was raining.

Through the glass door, I could see ghostly figures at work. I eased my pack off my back and fetched a bottle of Slotvak Wodka from inside. A mouthful allowed me to swallow a blue pill, and another glug ensured it settled comfortably in my stomach. An army patrol crossed the street, loud and bloody proud, looking stupid in their shiny wet ponchos. The purple lights from the A-Rab takeout cafe shone on their backs. A jeeps headlight dazzled, and I jumped to my feet, cowering in the shadow of an aged elm tree. I found a half-smoked butt of weed in my pocket and lit up in defiance, blowing the smoke forward, hoping the rich scent caused their noses to twitch. Two T-Birds tottered in high-heels, stopping at the door to stare

into the apartment, scurrying away when a peaked copper cap appeared at the door and barked at them.

‘Where is our brother?’ I asked Elliot.

A tall man wearing a wet fedora, a long pale leather coat and heavy-duty boots stopped by the door, and the old copper exited, giving him a nod.

‘He’s still here,’ I muttered.

The man with the thin lips and umbrella, joined them, his hand reaching forward to clasp the new man’s, the two men doing a bonhomie shoulder bump.

They didn’t bump. They hugged.

They didn’t. It was that bloke thing, sort of gay, but acceptable for hetero blokes to do if they respected each other. Rain dripped from the new arrivals hat when he turned to look in my direction. Beneath his coat, he wore a checked shirt and red braces. His beard was long, straggly and thin. The copper pointed at me. I cringed, easing closer to the tree, not sure if they were looking at me or the blank dark windows of the Prince of Wales. The bearded man turned, his head tilted like he was contemplating, thinking well hard about approaching. The umbrella man shook hands with the copper, *hugged* the bearded man, and left, walking toward the river. His departure gave me no respite as the bearded man, and the copper kept staring at me. I didn’t feel their intentions honourable.

It was creepy.

As they both took a step in my direction, a girl in a wheelchair rolled to a stop beside me. She wore a short school skirt with her white blouse unbuttoned and tied beneath her breasts. Her bare stomach was pale and frozen, slick and shiny. The tie was fat and well short, and the nipples solid beneath her blouse. The glasses sat low on her nose. Long blondish hair was tied in pigtails.

‘You want some,’ she called across the wide street. She cupped her hands about her breasts, ‘Feast your eyes, boys. Do you like these puppies? I’ve got special rates for the Law.’

The man tilted his hat to the copper, turned, and exited toward Grey Street and the hill beyond. The copper entered my brother’s office, and the man with the hooter stood from the seat, and almost ran into the dark.

‘You spare a puff?’ the girl in the chair said. She was looking at me, speaking with a posh educated accent.

Mmm, you should wear glasses, Izzy. Mmm. Talk, Izzy. Don’t let her leave.

‘You know how to clear an area,’ I said.

I passed her the cigarette and watched her inhale. She was pretty. The skirt was strange because her legs were well skinny and tucked beneath the chair. She needed a rug, I reckoned, because it wasn't warm, but then maybe she wasn't feeling the cold down there.

She took another drag and handed it back to me. 'What's going on over at Dougal's?'

I sat on the seat and dropped my pack on the warped wooden slats. 'You know my brother?'

'Dougal, yeah, everyone knows Dougal.'

'The copper wasn't telling. He did a load of snarling, gnashing of canine's but not a lot else. He's got an itchy finger. I got the feeling he'd like to be shooting something sometime soon.'

'They've been there all day. I came past early this morning when the ambulance first arrived. The copper, a younger one, not the old grunt standing there now, told me trouble, loads of it, kicked off earlier this morning. Neighbours heard shots, shouting, and then quiet. I was coming down for a coffee when I saw the ambulance drive toward the esplanade. That was a few hours ago.'

Dead, right? Elliot said.

I shuddered at the thought, but I'd been thinking the worst.

'I'm guessing dead,' she said. 'The ambulance was in no damn hurry, and it kept the lights off. If there's a pulse, you get to hear the siren and see the reds flashing.'

That copper...

Elliot stopped talking. That happened sometimes. Like he was thinking of something clever but wasn't able to express it, like. 'What about him?' I asked. I was looking at the building, three stories tall, hoping the ambulance and the shooting wasn't associated with my brother. I needed to get inside, to get off the street, and get my ID papers sorted. I couldn't be dealing with another dead brother. It wouldn't be fair.

'Who?' the girl in the chair said.

'Who, what?' I said.

He said all queers should be dead.

That didn't surprise me. 'The copper,' I said to the girl. 'My brother thinks he's homophobic.'

'Who isn't. And that copper is an arse. If he could shoot straight, he'd be dangerous.'

She puffed some more before handing the butt to me. Across the road, folk in white suits exited the building. They carried shoulder bags, briefcases, and toolboxes. They pushed hoods off their heads and removed white booties before stepping onto the pavement.

‘Forensics? They wouldn’t be employing forensics for a Gay death, like.’

‘Why not. Since the curfew came into effect, there’s little else for forensics to do. The country is in lockdown, robbers, rascals, rapists, and murderers live in fear of their lives. You can get shot for crossing against the red man in Albion Minor these days. And the Generals need forensics for this case because they’ll be looking for a reason to put your brother’s name to shame. They don’t like different these days.’

I liked the girl and her talk. Nobody liked different in Albion Minor. I held out my hand. ‘My name’s Izzy.’

‘I’m Hannah, but my punters call me Roller Girl.’

She gave a quick shove on the wheels and flipped herself back so she could spin on the spot. All the time, she watched me, smiling at my reaction to her skill. Her movements were automatic.

‘Nice to meet you, Roller Girl. I have no talents, well ...’

‘Well, what? Give it to me. I don’t care if it’s not as impressive as balancing a wheelchair.’

‘My brother told me to shut it, like a thousand times. And my other brother, Elliot, doesn’t like me telling either, not if I’m to stay out of Arundel.’

I hesitated, conscious of the look she offered me when I mentioned Arundel Asylum. Was she going to run, flee the nutter stalking Dougal Izzard?

‘The Asylum likes girls like me, and they pump me full of drugs hourly to keep me in the land of nuff-nuff where nuffing matters, except breathing in and exhaling. Elliot hates that. And Dougal says I need to behave. Be good, Izzy, he says.’

‘Big brother’s do that. You can’t do anything without their say so.’

‘Yeah, but fair do’s, he’s found me and saved me, sort of.’

‘But your talent. It wasn’t escapism if you got locked up in the Arundel.’

‘No one gets out of the Arundel. That place is creepy. That place is sinister. Guards walk around in white suits armed with pepper spray, tasers, and hypodermic syringes full of nuff-nuff juice.’

My girl in the wheelchair was open-mouthed, her head shaking with slow movements. ‘It can’t be that bad. These are modern times, *they* say.’

I nodded, my eyes wide. ‘Doors are locked, key padded and chained, and the windows are barred and reinforced. And you’re right; escapism isn’t my talent. No one gets out of the Arundel. Not unless you pay for a pine box, like.’

The girl stared at me. I tried to stare back, but her gaze was unwavering. I smiled and turned back to my brother's apartment. It remained in darkness, the yellow crime tape all that was stopping me entering the building.

'I've shared my talent,' she said. 'You've got me curious about what your superpower could be. And your brother's not here to tell you to behave.' She smiled, flipping her chair onto its back wheel, spinning on the spot before bouncing back to the ground.

'What's your talent?' She rolled backwards, the chair dropping to the wet road. She bounced on the seat, and the chair jumped onto the footpath. She had a big smile, and it made her deep blue eyes sparkle. 'Go on, what's your superpower, Izzy.'

Elliot said no, but I liked the girl in the chair. We needed to make a friend otherwise we'd be sleeping on the rough street. The army didn't approve of vagrants with breath in their lungs. As I turned to Roller Girl, adopting a serious, even grave pout, I noticed a small girl, my age, kitten wet like me, a scarf covering her hair, watching Dougal's apartment. I hesitated, wondering, wanting to say hi, but she caught my eye, smiled, and walked into the dark wet night.

Curious, Elliot said.

And I agreed. The girl was gone, but her thoughts lingered, her confession noted by Elliot and me. She killed Dougal.

I gulped, my mouth agape, Elliot stunned into silence.

'So,' Roller Girl said. 'Is it a state secret?'

I returned my attention to Roller Girl, my mind numb. 'No, it's not, well it's not well known. Sometimes...' I struggled to string my thoughts together as Elliot hummed in my head, pretending not to listen.

But we had to share.

We needed an ally tonight.

Otherwise, as Elliot said, we'd be back in Arundel Asylum by the morning. I took a deep breath and spoke.

'I can read minds.'

I woke late morning in a messed-up bed with my gut knotted and twisted hungry. Clothing hung from string lines, ornate poles, and big black hooks. Floral fluffy pillows and too many cushions covered the top half of the bed. A grip bar hovered above my head, and a handrail was home to two black pairs of skimpy knickers. I sat up and greeted a massive portrait in multiple shades of blue staring at me. It was a girl, young with a sweep of hair hiding her right eye, her left eye large and dark and full of attitude. I got up, curious about the shirt I was wearing, and liking the splash of rainbow across my chest.

I grabbed my jeans and checked my pockets. The cash was squirrelled low in the front pocket, my pills and tobacco pouch, with weed, hidden in my inside jacket pockets. The girl in the picture wasn't impressed with my trust issues.

'What! You'd be checking too, trust me if you were the stranger crawling out of an unfamiliar bed. Look at me, without my clothes, and my memory well fuzzy about last night. I've been there, many times, and stuff goes missing, like.'

What? Who are you talking at? Elliot said.

'I don't like the girl up there in the sea of blue. She's got big cartoon eyes, and she's looking at me funny, like. And when did I change into this shirt?'

I moved to the right, then darted back left. 'Her eyes follow you, like, don't they?'

I pulled my jeans on and found my socks, dry and not so smelly, resting on the radiator. I tied my boots and counted the stash of cash Dougal had left for me at the Asylum. 'Yes,' I said to the picture. 'I know you gave me your key.'

Why are you talking to a picture?

'She looks like the girl in the chair, don't you think? And she's giving me grief about mistrust, but shit happens, and I'd like to know now, rather than later that a burglary has occurred. Then I'm able to say something, like.'

I tried to stare the picture out. 'Last night's a bit hazy.' I ran my fingers across the rainbow, still holding her gaze 'She got me stoned, spiked my drink probably, and had every opportunity to rob me blind. Or worse.'

How worse?

I pulled at the t-shirt. ‘This isn’t mine. It’s nice, like, but at some stage last night, I was running about in me knickers, and I don’t remember that event at all.’

I gave the picture a harsh look, waiting for it to nod in agreement.

It’s just a picture. And you came back here alone. She gave you her key.

‘Serious, that’s not good.’

I edged to the wall, using the handrail to navigate the assortment of clothing and shoes covering the floor. ‘I still don’t like the painting. It’s staring at me, and what’s with all the blue?’

Big Sister is watching you. Be careful Izzy, Big Sister might be filming you too.

I approached the picture, checking the back for wires and a camera. ‘Nah, she’s clean.’

I washed in the bathroom, splashing cold water over my face and combing it through my hair. The barbers at Arundel only did buzz-cut short. It was to prevent nits laying eggs they said, but there was a girl, a warden stroke Carer, the keeper of my cash, who allowed me to keep my right side and fringe long. She did the bleach job too, which was cheap and nasty, but I liked my hair blonde. The mirror didn’t like what it saw. I was only young, but I was pale, gaunt, and wearing some heavy-looking bags beneath both eyes.

I found a bottle of scotch and a glass in the kitchen.

Ooh good, let’s party.

My little brother liked to party. He—

One ounce lighter, one millimetre shorter, and one hour later than your arrival, still doesn’t make me your little brother.

‘Yeah, but it winds you up, like. Which is proof you’re the little one.’

I sat at the kitchen table and rolled myself a thin cigarette with a strand or two of my super strong weed. I needed to go easy on my stash, and my wad of cash. Dougal was too dead to be lending me more money. I was out of the Arundel, but I wasn’t safe. I had no permanent roof, couldn’t afford a hotel, and the future for a homeless lass without ID wasn’t good.

What do we do? You haven’t got a home, a job, or any future.

He was a worrier, was my Elliot. ‘Just chill, bruv, we’re good here. It’s a roof, and it’s watertight. She’s probably got food, and no one is looking for us. Maybe she’s a Carer type who’ll take us in and shelter us. I’m happy to hang out here, smoke some weed, drink her Scotch, and wait.’

Maybe we should tidy up, make ourselves useful. If she comes home to a clean house, she might offer us the gig. It’s kind of messy, like. You didn’t do anything silly last night, right?

‘No.’ I brushed at the crumbs of tobacco and dropped them in the packet. ‘What we going to do with the day, like?’

Did you make a pass at her. You’re wearing her shirt. Or piss the bed.

‘Christ, Elliot. You said we came home alone. And that’s an unfair attack. I wasn’t well, something bad was causing me to itch day and night, and he understood.’

You still pissed in his bed, and we were asked to leave soon after.

Elliot spoke of a time when I lived with Wendy and Spooky. Wendy was my mother’s lab assistant, and Spooky was her weird brother. My mum didn’t cope too well with Elliot’s death. She tried to set the house on fire one night forgetting to take a pan full of oil off the heat. Once the fire brigade moved out Wendy collected me for safe keeping. On my fifteenth birthday, to make up for her neglect, my mother gave me a cake with Elliot’s name on top. My mother cried when I pointed out her error and I ran.

With cake in hand.

‘With only the half that said Happy Birthday.’

Wendy and Spooky treated me well, but he kept wanting to cuddle and hold hands, and talk about Elliot. And he smelt rotten. It needs to be said again. Putrid, even, like he was rotting. It was like something had died inside him, with its decomposing nastiness leaking out of his pores. Maybe he just needed to wash or wear deodorant, but he didn’t. And he never cleaned his teeth. When he tried to kiss me, like, I thought I was going to vomit.

But Wendy was sweet. Her house was a laboratory with a long dormitory of old iron beds, waifs and strays in white smocks plugged into intravenous drips. Spooky was the jailor, making sure we kept to our beds, ate our meals and took the tablets. He liked me.

He liked you a lot.

I was given a room, a double bed, and Spooky read me bed tales, but the night I pissed the bed was the night Spooky lost interest in me.

You did get him wet.

What was I doing in his lap?

He gave you a yellow tablet.

Spooky swapped the trial blues for yellows, and I don’t know what was in them, but I flew high that night. Giggling replaced speech and all barriers fell apart as I tried to climb inside Spooky’s chest.

Spooky put me out on the street the next morning, with a small bag of blues, and a big bag of yellows to be sold. He dropped me by the Tamesis river, close to the poisonous section of the Southern Sector of Old London Town.

‘Sell the yellows. Keep taking the blues.’

Tough times. But did you piss the bed. We’re not going to be able to explain away a wet bed here.

‘That was an itch. I’m not incontinent. And that Spooky was a lecherous animal and I’m glad I wet his bed. Twice he busted into the bathroom while I was washing, and once while I was on the bloody toilet. He never knocked, stared for a bit, scratched at his dick, before apologising and leaving with the damn door open.

Wendy reckons it was the pills making me itch and loosening my bladder. An unfortunate side effect, she said, that needed tweaking.

It needed more than a tweak. You flooded the damn house.

‘Piss off Elliot. Like you didn’t wet the bed ever.’

As a child, maybe.

‘Nine, I remember. Thunder, lighting, and you in my bed and mum and dad away, again. Oooh, so frightening.’

That was the first time we met Wendy’s brother. I’m surprised I didn’t piss the bed that night. He wanted me to cuddle up to him on the sofa. Ew, no way. He had black nails and smelt funny.

You know what we need to do.

I shook my head, swilled Scotch in my mouth, and took a tug on my weed.

We need to call Wendy. You and me, we need to start selling again.

It was an option, but not a clever play, I thought. ‘It’s a bit early for me to be back on the streets,’ I said. ‘We need to wait, let them stop looking for me. They might guess I’ve come to Ostere. I don’t want to go back to Arundel Asylum, like.’

Me neither.

I was close on finishing my cigarette when Roller Girl arrived home and dumped a load of notes, doubloons, and shekels on the table.

‘Good night?’ I asked.

She rolled to the kettle, clicked it on, and headed for the bathroom. She gargled and spat before answering. ‘Slow at first,’ she shouted, ‘but it picked up. I met a very interesting soldier who knew all about your brother. I asked him to come and talk to you, but he said it was classified.’

‘You chat with these people?’

‘Oh yeah, it’s not just blow-jobs. Some of them are really interesting.’

Elliot stuck his fingers down his throat and mimed vomiting. I giggled at his pantomime, turning to stare at the bathroom so I could concentrate on our host.

‘You haven’t got a phone I could use, right?’

She rolled into the room and slid her phone across the table. ‘Go for it.’

It was battered, scratched, and felt sticky. ‘Does it come with a rubber glove app?’

Her answer involved a finger and a tongue but was friendly enough. Nicoletas number was referenced from my memory bank. I stood, looking out the window above the sink, watching Fitzroy Parade’s traffic crawling forward.

‘Am I wanted?’

‘The dogs still out hunting,’ she said.

Nicoleta was a chunky bird, from somewhere east on the continent. Slotvakian, I was guessing. She patrolled my ward and kept the peace. When my brother didn’t turn up, she gave me money and told me to run. ‘Money is from your brother,’ she said. ‘He was worried about not making it tonight. Keep to the roads and don’t go bush. The dogs will find you if you go bush.’

I ran, keeping to the edge of the road, knee-deep in wet weeds, gorse-like grasses, ducking the litter ditched by drivers as they sped past.

‘Beware the van, but,’ Nicoleta said.

I only hailed the semi’s, the trucks with their lights up high. This old boy stopped not more than a mile out from the Asylum. He didn’t want to know my story but needed an audience for an info dump detailing his life of grief, hardship, and sorrow. Boohoo, not. Tears not supplied, but like I had a choice but to listen and give a shit. He was headed west, heading out to the Sad Lands, and the borough of Ostere was one of his stops.

‘My brother’s dead,’ I told Nicoleta. ‘That’s why he didn’t pick me up.’

‘No, not possible.’

‘Yeah, rust red, he is.’

‘But what you do?’

The big question; It needed a great big answer. In truth, I should be mourning my big brother, but I was too worried about me, my future, to feel any sorrow for his demise. ‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Dougal was my guardian, and without him, Arundel Asylum has the right to claim my body and soul. I need papers, a new identity, Otherwise, you’ll be seeing me again, like soon.’

She told me about a man she knew who could set me up with papers. ‘You need money. Lots of it.’

‘Money,’ I laughed at that. Where did the girl think I’d be getting the money? They didn’t pay you to stay at the Arundel. ‘Money, I don’t have,’ I told her.

I threw the phone to Roller Girl and smiled.

‘Not good news?’

‘Roller Girl, it isn’t. They’ll be coming for me. The Social, the Doctors, soldiers will probably join in, and last night I pissed off the local constabulary. No, not good news. Well spotted.’

I leant over her sink, looking into the dirty water watching a bug swimming between an upturned mug and murky glass. I didn’t want to leave Roller Girl’s flat. Grey skies ruled, and it looked cold outside. Roller Girl’s apartment was warm. A Jeep parked on the riverside of Fitzroy Parade and two soldiers began a patrol, walking side by side toward the river.

‘Robert can get your ID papers sorted.’

I smiled at the dull day, giggling at the tram trundling into the passenger side of a car trying to perform a U-turn on Fitzroy Parade. ‘Who’s Robert?’

I turned to face the girl. She looked beaten, her face pale, large dark patches beneath her eyes. ‘You need to introduce me to Robert.’

She laughed and reached for the bottle. She didn’t realise my impatience.

‘Call him.’

Roller Girl and the bottle retreated from the room, she opened the front door as she passed, and slammed her bedroom door shut behind her.

That be a No.

I spent the late morning sitting on the seat opposite my brother's apartment watching people, the police, and the army go about their day. There was little chatter, folk scurrying from shop to shop, keeping clear of the boys in green brandishing rifles across their chests.

Why are you sitting here in the open?

'Because I've got nowhere to go.'

You can't sit here all day.

'I'm not going to sit here all day.'

A jeep raced a tram the length of Fitzroy Street, both vehicles ignoring the red light. Cars hooted, brakes squealed, but the expected scraping of metal didn't occur.

Call Wendy. She can get you into a safe house and get you the money. Then you can get papers.

'Which involves selling. Wendy isn't about to drop a bundle of money in my lap, like, and you know that to be a truth.'

Dougal's front door stood empty; the yellow tape flapped and fluttered at passing pedestrians. The day was grey, heavy, and damp. My feet had turned from freezing to numb, the slightest movement painful. Roller Girl's rainbow t-shirt was thicker than my top, but it wasn't getting me close to cosy. I kept sniffing and wiping dribbles on my black jacket, hoping for a let-up, but my nose wasn't playing the game. I was getting right nauseous from swallowing the thick gunk.

'Wendy has a brother who doesn't floss, wash, or spray.'

When did you last floss?

Wash?

Or spray?

'He has hands like shovels that dig and delve, filthy fingers that squeeze and stroke. The man makes me ill, like.'

I could see figures through the windows of the apartment block. Balconies overhung the footpath on floors two, three, and four, with blinds covering the glass doors. I didn't know

what floor my brother occupied, but he told me his apartment adjoined his office when he visited me at Arundel.

‘Izzy,’ he said. ‘There’s plenty of room for a mentally deficient little sister.’

He smiled his goofy grin and pulled me into a ginormous hug. I relaxed into his chest, and breathed the intoxicating scent of seasoned wood deep into my lungs. I sighed, not wanting him to ever let me out of his woolly embrace.

He left you there to rot, Izzy

‘But he came back.’

Elliot was right. Dougal did abandon me for nine months. But maybe, maybe things weren’t right with him. My parents died in a car crash. He was everything to them and maybe that hit him hard. I’d always thought of my brother as perfect, and me, I was the rat in the wheel, never running hard enough, never getting anywhere.

‘Maybe he couldn’t offer me the life the Law demanded. Maybe he thought I needed help, medical help, and he couldn’t provide adequate support.’

My parents were small people, fuzzy hair, thick glasses, scientists with scatterbrains. They had no idea what to do when Elliot and I arrived. And even less idea when Elliot died. My mother read me research notes to help me sleep. What mother does that?

You don’t need to go inside.

I did need to go inside. ‘Maybe they can help me. We know there’s a spare bed. For all I know Dougal left the apartment to me in his will. As the only family I think it’s mine by law.

Good luck telling the Law who you are. Cuffs, cell, key lost.

A man, tip truck big, tight suit pants too short and a canary bright yellow jacket fitted a key into Dougal’s door. He wore massive boots, big heels, metal toes, and with rainbow laces. On his head, sitting well jaunty, was a cute porkpie type hat.

He isn’t going to fit, no way.

It was close, the hat touching the lintel, and the arms brushing the door frame.

The next arrival was a small childlike girl. She was blonde, with hunched shoulders and struggled with the key, the door, and tripped on entry.

Strong man, clown, now we need a lion tamer, or girl on trapeze.

A girl entered, struggling with her bags, phone, and keys to gain entry. She had a full head of curly hair, worn jeans, and a spangly shirt. It was hard to get a good look, but she was black. You didn’t see a lot of black people in Ostere.

Not a lion tamer.

I liked her hair. I touched at my locks, running my fingers through the long blonde strands on my right side, stopping at a tight tangled knot.

It's nothing like yours, Izzy. Her hair shines and is thick and bounces. Yours is more rat tails, and what you've done to the left side a butcher could've achieved with a meat cleaver.

At midday, the office emptied. The big chap exited right, lumbering with a heavy step toward the river. The two girls travelled left, and set off toward the Grey Street hill.

Now what?

I didn't know. I'd procrastinated all morning, and now my chance was gone.

We are sitting here waiting for the army to pick us up, charge us and send us back to the Asylum. You've got to call Wendy.

I took a tug on my Wodka, watching an army jeep bounce across the tram tracks and accelerate loudly toward Grey Street Hill. At the office door, a small girl pulled at the handle and entered the building. To my right, I saw a man in a long coat, and fedora, sitting at a table outside the cafe. His hat was pulled low, his attention directed at the door to Dougal's.

That's him from last night.

Beneath an old elm tree, a gnarled limb offering cover against the random drops of rain, was another man, in a flat cap, coat and a concentrated gaze on the door. I'd not have noticed him, but he had a cough, persistent and grating. It started as a throat-clearing exercise, with a rattle and a vocal exclamation. Again, and again, until finally, he'd cough, and cough and you could feel the sputum building in his throat and mouth. Each time he coughed, I turned to watch, and each time I turned, I noticed his attention was on Dougal's door. When he spat, I thought I might vomit. I was a sickly child and watching him retch caused my throat to constrict and my guts to roil.

It's just spitting, Izzy. It's a thing we do to get rid of something we don't want to swallow. And he was here last night too. You can't forget the nose. It's bigger than his forehead.

'Well, I just wish he'd take his hooter somewhere else. Spitting is gross. With all the incurable illnesses in the world, with resistance to pathogens at Defcon 1, and this idiot is spitting more germs into the air. Sorry Elliot, but it's just gross. Swallow it like a good citizen, like.

We are talking about spit, right?

I shook my head and grimaced. 'Ew, you're gross too, Elliot.'

The girl exited the building and sat on the seat at the intersection, watching the door. The man with the fedora was sipping on his coffee. And my man beneath the tree was kicking at a tree root.

‘They’re circling,’ a voice stated behind me.

He was a white-headed black man, in a tired suit, a brown battered Stetson style hat and wire-rimmed glasses. I moved across the bench to give him space.

My man beneath the tree kept touching his cap, twitching it up, down, a little right, then back left. After the cap ritual, he’d attend the sleeve of his manky cream coat, tugging it over his wrists, pat at his hips, and roll his shoulders. You couldn’t see his eyes, just the big old phlegm filled hooter, but he was keen on the door, not wavering in his concentration.

‘Like buzzards,’ my black man said.

Across the road, the man in the fedora lit a hooker pipe with a match, puffing large clouds of smoke, before shaking the match and throwing it into the gutter. He wasn’t looking at the door anymore. I followed his line of sight and stopped on the girl.

‘Ah,’ I said.

Ah, what?

But my thoughts became distracted as the man beneath the tree snivelled and tissue was produced to wipe tears from his eyes.

‘Are they the bereaved?’

He hadn’t clock my presence, nor my interest in Dougal’s doorway. His thoughts bounced from aggressive to depressive. He was angry and sad, but mostly he muttered a confused stream of nonsense.

Ignore him. He’s not essential to us, and you’re becoming obsessed with him, and not Dougal. Concentrate on what we’re going to do, not what he’s doing.

‘But he’s crying.’

I tried to shut Elliot and the man out of my mind, but twice my brother’s name entered his thoughts.

‘Did you get that,’ I said to Elliot? ‘He’s here about Dougal, and he’s dead angry. “Shit banger,” he keeps saying. And he coughs, swishes, and spits.’

My black companion stared at me. He removed his hat, scratched at his tight white curls, and offered me a sip from his flask.

‘Are you all right, young lass?’

‘Yeah, I’m good. Just keeping to myself, like.’

I crossed my legs from the man, looking toward the river, the hoot of a tug boat sounding amid the bustle of the wharf and the traffic. The man with the pipe had removed his fedora, a nest of red hair released, and he looked in my direction. I turned to see the girl up out of her seat, trying the door again, and disappearing upstairs.

My man on the seat tapped me on the shoulder. 'Did you know the deceased?' He's holding a small recording device to my mouth.

'What the hell.' I eased back and shook my head. 'Turn it off.'

I waited while he pocketed the old tape recorder. He turned to face me. This time he had a pen poised over a scrap of paper. 'What's your interest?'

'In what? Who are you?'

'Ted Gaye, investigative journalist. Famous for my report on the Street Boy's trial.'

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I shook his dry coarse hand.

'What's your interest in my brother's apartment?'

'He had a sister. Good, oh, so good. A human angle. Who do you think killed your brother?'

I looked at the flat cap man. He was still upset, angry even, his thoughts aggressive, his boot kicking hard at the tree root. Across the road the man in the fedora had pocketed his pipe and was walking toward the door. 'I've no idea.'

'Did you know he was investigating the deaths of his mother and father.'

'No. What's to investigate, like, when they died in a car accident. And what you want to know for anyway? What you want to know what I know. If you knew anything, you'd know I'm not bothered.' I was getting angry and my voice was rising. I took a breath, and dropped the volume.

'I'm not bothered. Not about Dougal, my bloody parents and their lack of compassion or understanding of me, or nothing like that boring crap. It's gossip isn't it, like, and badly news. So, take your pissy pencil and scrap of paper elsewhere. Okay.'

Grrr, you go girl. Withdraw the nails, but before you draw blood.

'Shut up.'

My turn, again. And why didn't you go to the funeral?

'Like you care, Elliot.'

Just wondered.

'The white suits didn't let me go. They chained me to a bed and pumped a gallon of sedative into my veins, thinking that would cure any grief I might suffer.'

Ted Gay, the investigative journalist, was looking at me like I was crackers.

‘I was told they died in a car accident.’ I didn’t want to continue the conversation, but he wasn’t going anywhere, and I was feeling stupid knowing I was talking aloud to my brother.

‘Of course, that was your mother and father. I’m sorry, very sorry for your loss.’

I shrugged. ‘We weren’t close. My mother and father were obsessed about curing the world, not bringing up slow-witted twins. I lost contact years ago.’

‘Twins,’ he wrote and underlined slow-witted. ‘My sources tell me your brother was dubious about the accident, and the deeper he delved, the more grief his business received. Some pretty dark forces were threatening him.’

He looked to the man beneath the tree, to pipe smoking fedora man, and back to me. ‘As I said earlier, dark forces are circling like vultures over carrion.’

‘What’s a dark force?’

Ted took a slug from his flask before answering. ‘There are many dark forces. When I was investigating the Street Boy, I found him hidden in a Black Spot detention centre. Our army was torturing him.

‘But the particular dark forces your brother investigated before his death appear truly sinister—Pelbrite Pharmaceuticals. You heard of that company?’

As he paused, thinking I might be interested and want to digest his bullshit, my man with the flat cap’s thoughts rattled at my brain loud and clear. I peered behind this Ted bloke, wanting to get a better focus.

Elliot was in my ear. *You hear that. He said, ‘later.’*

‘What later,’ I said.

Flat cap man kicked at the tree and cursed.

‘Later tonight,’ he said. ‘When the traffic is dead, and bodies have left.’ Everyone’s interested in our brother, but nothing’s changed, as he’s still dead.

‘But what about later, Elliot. What’s he going to do?’

The newspaperman was staring at me. I smiled and nodded and looked away.

I’ve got to stop talking aloud, I noted, wishing I had my pencil and piece of paper to get in written in black and white.

Quick, Izzy, he’s leaving. We should follow him.

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re talking to a journalist, and you don’t need to be. He’s written your name down. He’s got you on record which he’ll be happy to share with the world. Just get up and go. Follow that man coz that’s got to be safer than sitting on this seat talking to a man from the press.

‘Got to go, I do,’ I said. ‘Can’t be sitting around here all day when there’s some serious mourning to be done.’

‘Wait.’ He handed me a dog-eared business card. ‘Just in case you want to talk.’

I took his card and fell into step a good hundred paces behind my man with the flat cap on his head.

Look, look by the tram stop.

The girl with the scarf over her head was sat at the tram stop watching Dougal’s doorway. She wore a long dark skirt and a white blouse. ‘Same girl? She’s just been in the building. Twice.’

She was here last night, right. Same scarf, same sad intense look in her eye. We’re gathering a motley collection of misfits, Izzy, and they’re all interested in our brother.

Our eyes met. Fear etched her face, her brow creased, her deep dark eyes large. Her thoughts so loud in my head. She didn’t mean him any harm. She didn’t know it would come to this.

He’s getting away, Izzy.

‘Hello,’ I said to the girl.

She took a step toward me, her hands held out, palms upward as if showing me she meant no harm. A tear welled in her right eye and fell before she turned and hurried away.

‘Jesus Elliot,’ I said. ‘Flat Cap Man or the waif in the scarf?’

Or bloody neither. At least you’ve left the reporter.

A hand touched my shoulder, and I jumped a mile. ‘Shit,’ I said, turning to face Ted. ‘What?’

‘You need a drink.’ He produced a flask, and I drank like a camel at a desert oasis. ‘Slow down, girl. That’s old, ancient Badlands whisky.’

‘Sorry, just thirsty.’

He wrestled his flask back, bemoaning the dent I’d made in its contents. ‘Call me. You’re in a mess, and I might be able to help you.’

‘Sure, sure. Got your card.’

The girl was gone, and Flat Cap man was heading fast toward the river. A voice called out. The man in the fedora was crossing the road. He walked with his fists clenched. He wasn’t coming at me to talk but to share his hate. I ran, leaving the high street and heading toward the docks on the river Ost. I was quick, awkward but I could get some big strides going in a short time. When I looked behind me, the man in the fedora had given up pursuit. I wasn’t a fit lass, but the man wore big old boots, with tractor tread, and they didn’t do running so well. By the

time I reached the river, I was labouring and panting and feeling poorly. The cough I'd tried to suppress was racking at my throat, and I didn't want to swallow what was building. What with my sniffing and now a cough I was feeling beyond nauseous? I'd got a right sweat on, and my heart was bouncing off walls. The man I was following was gone, and I was tempted to give up, go back to the bench, but the reporter was there, and I didn't want to be answering any questions about my crazy family.

Oily currents sparkled and swirled with the movement of the river Ost. An empty oil drum floated toward the sea, the rotting carcass of a half-eaten dog in pursuit. My flat cap man was nowhere close. I was sure he'd turned left, but the street was industrial, flat tops, caged windows, and concrete gardens with trucks and jeeps parked on concrete yards. I stopped by an old bus stop and sat on the broken seat. The glass walls to the shelter littered the muddied ground, the shattered shards sparkling. Two men entered from the end of the road. A door slammed shut, number twenty-three stood alone, surrounded by derelict houses. The two men walked together, their bulk crowding the cracked footpath.

I'd have ignored them, but they wore similar coats to the flat cap's ensemble. And their thoughts centred on my presence in the street. 'Dust the dyke up and give her a slap.' His voice ground on stubby teeth.

'I'll give the dyke more than a slap.' He clutched at his groin and chewed hard on his cigar, brown juices covering his chin. 'I'll give 'er a bit of this. That's all they need, right? Just a proper cock, thick and hard. Not a bloody rainbow, eh?'

'But why not kill the shit. Works just as well.'

'After a bit of this.' Again, he clutched at his cock.

Are they talking about you?

'I think so.' I stood, looking left and right. The docks and civilisation were a good sharp sprint, but my legs felt beat. The dirty factory windows lacked faces to witness my dilemma. The cars on closer inspection had bled into the concrete; the wheels welded to the cracked bitumen. And the road was long. My hesitation left me no options, and for big men, they moved dead quick. As I decided to run, they'd grabbed me. The collar of my jacket was held by a steady hand as the second man turned me to face him.

He held my shirt and spat at the rainbow adorning my shirt. 'Easy, right.'

The first punch landed deep squishing intestines and stomach through my kidneys and bouncing them hard against my spine. It hurt, but I was in shock, suffering, snivelling and unable to tell them they'd hit eleven on my pain threshold scale.

'You girl,' I said. My words lacked authority. 'My dead mother hits harder.'

Shut up, Izzy. We don't want them any angrier. Just tell them you're no dike, you just got shitty hair, and that shirts, not yours. Tell them you'll blow them if they want.

Elliot could be a right arse.

'My hair's not shitty,' I muttered through clenched teeth.

Just tell them. And yes, your hair is shitty.

'Like I want his fat cock in my mouth.'

'What she say about my cock?'

I stamped on his shin, my boots scraping and grinding into the top of his foot. He released his hold. The man with the cigar and the big fat cock grabbed me on the arse, his cigar burning at my ear as he told me what horror awaited my fresh arse. I leaned forward and rammed my head backwards, catching the disgusting prick full on his nose. He went down, but his colleague had recovered and grabbed me by my shirt and slammed his fist into my stomach. I was struggling and screaming, but his grip bit hard. My head-butted man was spitting blood, but he slapped me hard across the cheek. I fell against his friend. Big arms enclosed me. Another strike dropped me, and they took turns kicking me from the gutter to the drain. They emptied my pockets, scattered my weed into the wind, and tossed my shekels toward the river. They took my brother's letter from my pocket.

I was lying in a ball, whimpering, hoping they'd finished.

'Who is she?'

Both men read the letter. 'Leave her; she's scrawny as. No tits, no arse. She's a bloody kid.'

He, with the stubby cigar, picked me up, by the lapels of my coat. His nose was pissing blood. 'What you doing here?'

'I'm lost all right.'

'No, you not lost. How you know Dougal, the queer?'

The man behind me cursed. 'Leave her.'

But he wasn't interested in leaving me. He slapped me twice. The contact cracked loudly in the quiet street.

'Serious.'

A voice called out. I heard feet running. Towards me, I hoped.

'Let me go, right. I'm not doing you any harm.'

He dropped me, my head striking the bus shelter and I collapsed in the street.

'Keep away,' was spat at my prostrate figure.

