

BODY OF WORK



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NOA SNUGGLED FURTHER UNDER THE duvet. The honey and lemon throat sweet had furred up the inside of her cheek. She moved it around with her tongue, careful not to push it too far back; she'd made that mistake earlier. Coughing had made the pain in her throat unbearable and a tear slipped down her face at the memory. Her limp body ached, yet every time she was about to fall asleep, an unconscious swallow sent a shock wave through her weary body.

Her tonsils had become her mortal enemy over the last couple of years, along with her ears. No matter how much her mum insisted on wrapping her up in hats and scarfs, illness always found Noa a few times a year. The only silver lining was the amount of time she could have off sick from school. One or two weeks at a time, if she was lucky. She might not be so fortunate when she moved up to the secondary school next year.

She curled her small frame into a tight ball, thankful again that her mum had a way of arranging her duvet on the sofa like a sleeping bag encasing her in softness and warmth. Plates were being stacked in the kitchen; her mum always came home for lunch when Noa was ill. She was grateful for the company even if she couldn't show it.

They'd shared soup and buttered bread, most of which Noa had left, her appetite on a downward spiral. She'd only been on the banana medicine for two days, and it hadn't had much effect yet. The sound of muffled voices brought her out of her cocoon. Her mother moved to stand next to the sofa. Some kind of quiz show flashed on the grey TV screen in front of them. Television in the afternoon had become a ritual of her sick days. She

looked up at her mum hovering next to her, a look of concern on her face as she bent to kiss Noa on the forehead.

“Call me if you need me. The number’s next to the phone.”

Noa offered a weak nod before diving back under the covers.

A dull thud echoing outside made her pull back the duvet. She glanced at the clock on the wall. Nearly 2:30 p.m. She’d fallen asleep at some point—for a while anyway—but it was too early for Chris to be home. Her body went rigid and her breathing slowed as she waited for more noises. Nothing came except the low voices from the TV. She was just about to duck under the covers when it happened again. The thud was followed by the sound of something crashing to the ground.

A shy peek through the patio doors that led into the garden told her that a fence panel on one side had split from its frame, knocking over one of her mum’s plant pots, smashing it almost in half. Her mum had mentioned something about the wind over lunch; she hadn’t really been listening as she’d focused on pushing soup-soaked bread into her mouth. The small bush at the bottom of the garden was straining to keep upright, and the whistle of the wind against the glass made her shiver. Turning, she made her way back to her makeshift bed.

The slam of a door followed by a soft voice filtered through the duvet. There was no heavy rumble of footsteps. Chris must be alone. She heard. “Andy...” before he ran up the stairs towards his room at the back of the house. Andy was Chris’s best friend and lived a few streets away. They usually ended up around each other’s houses after school, Noa was just grateful it wasn’t this particular house today. The thought of listening to the two of them crashing about upstairs until her mum came home made her head hurt.

More rumbling as Chris launched himself down the stairs. She pictured him grabbing hold of the banister to propel himself, as he always did. A short spell of quiet ensued before the front door slammed again, restoring the silence.

* * *

Noa had slept through the storm that had been brewing outside. She watched in awe as the footage played on the news. Her dad stroked the back

of her head as she rested against his chest. Her mum appeared next to them, wiping her hands on the apron tied around her waist.

“Is Chris back yet?” Her mum asked.

Noa shook her head unable to take her eyes off the screen. A building filled the screen, its roof caved in by a tree. She’d never seen anything like it before.

“You’re sure he said Andy’s?”

“Yes.” Her voice was croaky, making her throat burn.

“I’d better call Andy’s mum, get her to send him home.” She disappeared into the hallway.

It wasn’t the first time Chis had been late for dinner, despite knowing they ate at six every night. He was crazy about Andy’s new football computer game; it was all he talked about. Noa swallowed hard at the thought of him getting another roasting, then immediately regretted it.

“He’s not there!”

Her dad’s frame stiffened at the worry in her mum’s voice.

“What?” Her father sat forward, checking his watch. Noa slumped back on the sofa.

Her mum’s hands were twisting in front of her, gripping at the material of her apron. “Andy says he hasn’t seen him since school.”

* * *

There was no family meal that night. Noa knelt on her bed, looking out of the window into the darkness, the net curtain draped around her shoulders quivering as the wind whistled against the glass. The orangey glow from the streetlights flickered as trees fought for survival against the fierce gusts that threatened them. Debris skittered along the street, pushed by an invisible force. A branch wedged itself under the tyre of the police car parked outside the front of the house.

Her mum’s sobs rose above the bluster outside. Noa’s brow furrowed as she focused on the street below. She refused to give in to her tears so easily. The policeman had been gentle as he asked her about Chris, but what could she tell him? She hadn’t even seen him, just heard his mumbled words.

The roof to the wrecked garage in her neighbour’s garden opposite flapped open, its contents spilled for all to see. Was that where Chris was? Trapped under some wind-blown debris?

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Noa twisted her body. She scanned each end of the street as far as she could. The dipping trees hindered her view. He would appear at any minute now, she knew it. He had to.

He never did.

CHAPTER 1

THE SOUND OF GRINDING METAL woke Noa from her sleep. The light burning her squinting eyes forced her to turn over and bury her head in the blanket. The clear rumble of a passing train told her she'd failed to make it to her bed once again. A familiar stale smell filled her head, a mustiness from old oil paint and white spirit; the blanket had been impregnated with the odour after years in her studio. Burning was the only thing that could save it now.

A ringing phone in the distance made its way through the blanket. She waited patiently for the answerphone to kick in. Her handful of friends knew her well enough to be aware that if they wanted to talk to her, they had to talk to the machine first. It was her buffer, or her PA, as Kim used to call the anonymous voice. Noa strained her ears for the sound of the toneless voice, endlessly polite and patient as she took the message. She did a much better job than Noa could have done.

The confident tone of her agent, Marcus Greenly, came over the speaker, shouting as usual, aware that she would be in her studio at the top of the house.

"Noa! I'm calling to remind you that you agreed to meet a patron at the Ellis Gallery today. He wants to buy the last one of the series, which is great news. He's getting there about one o'clock. See you then."

She almost smiled at his words—*last one in the series*. Where once she'd been moderately prolific, her output was now scant. It was the *only* series of paintings she'd produced in the last four years. It wasn't for the lack of trying, but grief had made her feel differently—empty, tentative, even negative towards her creative talents. She painted, or at least tried, every day; the results just didn't survive her wrath.

Noa feared she was losing it. Painting had been her life, her focus, but it felt like the switch inside her was broken. The paintings she had produced were darker than usual. To the untrained eye, maybe it wasn't noticeable. No one had broached the subject, at least. To her it was glaringly obvious: they were full of anger, sombre, sharp, jagged shapes devoid of any kind of joy. And she felt powerless to do anything about it.

Noa's mobile phone vibrated along the floor next to her prostate figure. Seeing Marcus's name on the screen, she rolled her eyes, blowing out a breath as she accepted the call.

"Hi, I'm just making sure you got my message?"

"Hard not to, really." She bristled at his jolly tone.

"This could be good for you. He might be interested in more than one painting."

"Really." She made her voice was devoid of any kind of positivity.

"Come on, we need this!"

"Do we?" *Or do you need the commission.*

"You know it's been four years now, Noa. You need to get out more. Art can't be created in a vacuum!"

She couldn't reply. He'd managed to get in two good jabs in one sentence. Smarmy bastard.

"See you at one."

Noa kept silent as she ended the call and dropped her phone back onto the floor. As she stretched out, her body ached from the hard surface below. The natural padding of her body had worn away over the years, thinning like a cheap mattress. That, or the floor had become harder. She couldn't stand to be comfortable right now, doling out to herself a desperate form of punishment for her loss. The bed she'd shared with Kim felt cold and empty. Twelve years was a long time to get used to the presence of another warm body brushing against you at night, the faintest of touches letting you know you were not alone in the world. Not anymore.

Noa had lived in self-imposed quasi-isolation for the past three years since Kim had died. Oddly, it wasn't a difficult task in London.

The odour from the blanket forced her onto her side, her bones throbbing at the movement as she tucked her hands between her thighs in an effort to warm them up. Her eyes began to focus on the once-white wall in front of her. The smears of charcoal and drips of paint had created

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their own masterpiece. Dollops of paint littered the floor, their colours vaguely recognisable from previous pieces—dateable even, to with Kim and without Kim; Noa’s own form of BC and AD.

Turning on her back again, she looked up to the high ceiling. Noa loved this part of the house. They’d had it converted not long after moving in. The large, exposed timber trusses gave the room an airy feel.

For a Victorian terrace, the rooms were quite generous. The loft had been incorporated into the top floor, creating a fantastic space. With the addition of skylights, the flood of natural light was perfect for a painting studio.

Kim had been keen for Noa to have what she wanted; what she needed to be happy. Yet without Kim in her life, that description didn’t fit anymore. It couldn’t.

Noa closed her eyes in frustration. She hated meeting buyers or dealers—wanting to look behind the magician’s curtain. It was going to be a disappointment. This was a broken, disjointed person with no interest in their approval or opinions.

Patron; he always used that word instead of *buyer*, as if Peggy Guggenheim herself was going to show up. They both knew it would be some form of collector who wanted to boast about meeting the artist who had produced the work they hung on the wall in their lounge, when all Noa wanted was to be anonymous, a shadow, a silhouette of the person she’d been, invisible in the background.

CHAPTER 2

AT THE END OF THE road, Noa turned left onto Wellington Street. The brightness of the day surprised her, forcing her to squint. An ache formed along her brow at the effort it took to keep the sun out, and she immediately regretted not bringing her sunglasses.

At the Tube station she noticed a *Big Issue* seller making a beeline for her. She glanced down at his shoes as he moved closer. *How is it that every Big Issue seller I come across always wears a better brand of trainers than I do?*

Noa attempted evasive action, moving wide to sidestep him, hoping to avoid him altogether. She was unsuccessful. *Big Issue* man was the persistent type.

“Hi there, sunny enough for you today?” He stepped into her line of vision. His wide smile exposed an untidy row of teeth. She made no reply averting her eyes.

“You have a good day.” His spiel continued ready to greet the next traveller.

She ferreted around in her pocket for her earphones as his parting words rattled through her brain. Earphones secured, she frantically jabbed at the screen of her iPod. It was flat, but it didn't matter. It was a deterrent; she didn't want to run the risk of any more small talk with strangers. That part of her brain had shrivelled up or been scooped out at some point, surgically removed like in a lobotomy.

She thought of the monotonous weather conversations she had with her parents on the rare occasions they talked. Why older people were so obsessed with the changing climate she'd never know.

The streets were busy, and she couldn't figure out why all these people weren't at work. She spent several moments sidestepping a man with most of a sandwich stuffed in his mouth before she realised it was lunchtime as

he pushed past her. She felt out of touch with conventional society—hell, with the world, if she was being honest with herself. Her art had given her the freedom to live outside of it. Of course, she'd assisted in separating herself off, hiding away in her studio. Kim had always been her link to the everyday events of London and, well, life in general, as shocking or mundane as they were. Noa had never been a good mixer, as her mother used to say. She was never one of those children that needed a best friend. Her brother had fulfilled that role—until he wasn't there anymore. Then she'd had to learn to survive on her own. It had hardened her a little. She missed having someone who understood what she was thinking before she had to say it, someone who knew exactly what she was going through without her having to explain.

As she descended the stairs to the buried, teeming underground world below, the gazes from passers-by made her feel uncomfortable. She always trained her eyes towards the ground, watching the flurry of legs as they passed by. The rush of hot air in the Tube made her claustrophobic and gasping for breath, the way stepping off the plane into a hot destination had you struggling to catch your breath in a wide-open space as you descended to the scorching tarmac below.

Approaching the Ellis Gallery, she stood on the opposite side of the road, waiting for a break in the traffic. They'd changed the painting in the window; it was no longer the four-foot square, dark grey and blue composition with sharp blood-red lines slashing across the length of the canvas. Too gloomy, she figured. The replacement wasn't much brighter, a deep purple and black canvas of the same size. With the sun in her eyes, she crossed the road, and could just make out her name and the obtuse title of the exhibition, *Dark Abstractions*, in the shimmering silver lettering above the painting. The gallery was popular, largely due to its location near Cork Street. She knew how lucky she was to have an exhibition here, considering her recent track record.

Inside it was uncompromisingly white, with hints of rough timber strategically located. The wide-open space allowed her to spot Marcus deep in discussion with a tall, slim man—the buyer, aka Peggy Guggenheim, she presumed as the gallery was empty except for a young woman sitting behind the desk on the right-hand side, her eyes fixed on the laptop screen in front of her. Noa glared at her until she looked up to briefly acknowledge

Noa's presence. The woman's face was familiar from her previous visit on the opening night, although not her name. Nodding at her, Noa quickly pulled out her phone to buy a few minutes as she tried to mentally prepare herself for the meeting.

Another quick glance in the buyer's direction informed her that his nose was far too big for his face; his surrounding features needed a growth spurt to catch up.

Finally giving up filibustering with the pretence that she was on the phone, Noa slipped it back into her pocket as she approached the two huddled figures. Marcus was dressed in his usual sharp suit. The buyer wore garish red jeans that seemed to hover above his brown loafers, his white shirt casually untucked and loose around his neck.

"Ah! Dominic, this is Noa Stevens."

Noa reluctantly offered her hand in greeting. The buyer responded with gusto, shaking it. It took her a moment to realise they were standing in front of the painting that had been in the window. Was that why they had changed it? It was the one Noa liked most out of the collection, which was probably why Marcus had put a ten per cent higher price on it.

"I have to have this one; the blue colour matches my new sofa perfectly... It's a bit *Outsider*, but I love it."

Noa looked at him, unable to form acceptable words. A quote someone once said to her came to mind: *Never trust a person whose only contribution to art is their opinion*. Never more apt than for the person in front of her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Marcus begin to twitch, no doubt concerned for her reaction, or lack of it, so far. She hated the fact that she was too shocked to formulate a scathing attack, instead choosing to cover her mouth with her hand in a thoughtful manner while she plotted her rebuttal. She wondered if he actually knew how insulting he was being. *Outsider Art*, or *Art Brut*, was originally termed to describe art created outside the boundaries of official culture, or work created by psychiatric patients. Every artist was self-taught to a certain extent. That was how individual styles developed and manifested themselves. The fact that she had studied for many years at art college, honed her skills, and developed her talent meant something to Noa. And she wasn't about to let this moron dismiss it right in front of her.

“That’s purely your opinion, of course, but I find it quite offensive.” She didn’t care how much he was willing to pay; she didn’t need his money that badly.

He looked flustered by her reply. Artists had claws—sharp ones. He grinned a little as a reply slipped out of his smarmy mouth. “I meant raw.”

Noa looked at him with a slight squint, letting him know she knew full well what he meant. “That has the same meaning, of which I’m sure you are fully aware. *Art Brut* translates from the French meaning *raw art*. There are of course numerous formally untrained fantastic artists like Santoro, Willis, or Vojislav Jakic. Please don’t mistake me for an amateur in the rawest sense of the word.” She took a breath to add the final words. “Your search for a painting to match the colour of your sofa continues, as this painting will not be appearing in your sitting room anytime soon.”

He looked a little shocked that she would refuse a sale, but the thought of this prick owning something she had worked on made her blood boil. She could imagine him in his stark designer home, a spread of coffee table art books stacked up for thumbing through with his equally vacuous, annoying friends, quaffing £500 bottles of wine.

Noa left the gallery without waiting for a reply. Turning up the collar of her jacket against the falling rain, she marched back along the street towards the Tube station.

She slowed down halfway along the street. As her temper dissipated, she was quickly surrounded by a blur of people trying to dodge the falling rain. Noa was forced against the side of the nearest building. She just managed to avoid a small bundle of fur poking out from under a sleeping bag.

A young man sitting cross-legged next to the bundle glanced in her direction, offering a brief nod as she crouched down on her haunches to avoid the bustle around them.

The bundle of fur started to move, a small chocolate brown head poking out to look at her. Noa wasn’t sure of the breed; it was difficult to say in such a young puppy.

She held out her hand to it, letting it sniff her. Confident it wasn’t about to take her hand off, she stroked its head. Noticing the dirty pink collar, she figured it was a girl. “Are you hungry, puppy?”

“She’s always hungry.” The young man offered in a brisk northern accent, confirming her theory.

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“She’s beautiful.” She stroked the small patch of unruly hair on her head. “What’s her name?”

“Flossy,” he replied.

“Hello, Flossy.” She looked so small and helpless; she didn’t need to be hungry too. She spotted *Burger King* on the corner. “Let’s get you some lunch then, shall we?”

Noa got to her feet without waiting for a reply. She skirted around the constant flow of the people. Entering the restaurant, she ordered the young man a couple of burgers, making sure she got something appropriate for Flossy too.

She hopped she hadn’t overstepped as she returned, bags in hand. “I hope you’re not vegetarian,” she said, offering the young man the large, brown bag.

“Not likely,” he said with a grin as he took the offering.

“And this one’s for you, Flossy.” Noa crouched down placing the smaller bag in front of the puppy, opening the bag slightly for her to poke her head inside. “Enjoy.”

Getting to her feet, she took one last look at Flossy tucking into her French fries. “Have a good day,” she said before finally walking away. She felt lighter, a small smile creeping along her lips at the irony of her words.

CHAPTER 3

HE HUDDLED UNDER HIS UMBRELLA, grateful for the rain. Sometimes he hated going outside. He tried to be invisible, but it was never enough. They never liked him, saw something different in him and made him pay for it, scarred him. She had indulged him, protected him at first, until she saw it too. Then, she began to detest visitors, so he began to hate visitors, aware of the effect they had on her. Now, there were no visitors in case they took her away from him. He couldn't let that happen. She was the only one that loved him; she told him so every day.

"The hammer needs her nail." He heard his mother's firm words in his head; they were always harsh. He'd gotten used to it over the years—he didn't have a choice. He barely left the house now; his once-a-week visit to the therapist was his only indulgence. With the arrival of online shopping, there was no need to be put through the wringer, getting worked up just to satisfy his twisted stomach. He frowned when he thought of the times he'd gone hungry over the years because he couldn't face leaving his house. At least with the downpour he wouldn't have to suffer the confused glares from onlookers.

He lifted his umbrella slightly as he came to a crossing. For a moment, he didn't recognise her. Then his eyes briefly met hers. Not that she was looking directly at him. She looked as happy as he did to be out in the wider world. He'd recognise her in an instant. His mother always considered *him* to be an artistic type, as if it explained his alternative lifestyle. She'd spoilt him as a child, subscribing to arts magazines he still received every month.

He'd seen her name advertised outside the Ellis Gallery on his journey to the therapist two months ago. He'd considered going to the opening, but it was probably invitation only anyway. Instead, he used his time wisely, researching this woman who'd figured in his early life. The image of her as

a young girl holding her mother's hand as they walked to their car filled his head. Mother never held his hand like that.

He'd learnt many things about her. Despite her difficult childhood, she'd achieved great success in the art world. He was envious of her drive, her ability to move past life's obstacles, something he continued to struggle with. He'd often thought about the Stevens family over the years. Maybe this was his chance to make amends.

The traffic stopped. Standing to one side, he let her pass him, suffering the jostling of surrounding people, frustrated as he blocked off the crossing. He waited for her shoes to appear in the surrounding area, then turned to follow them. He wasn't sure of his intentions as he continued to tail her along the street towards the Tube station; he felt a shiver of uncertainty as she trotted down the steps. He'd have no protection down there, exposed for all to see. He usually avoided being in confined spaces with other people, fearful of them. He preferred to walk everywhere when he did venture out, to avoid these very situations.

Bumped and shoved, he walked down the first few steps, if only to avoid further contact. He wavered for a moment before pulling up the hood of his coat as he descended further into the Underground. Closing his umbrella, he scanned the area ahead of him. She was heading towards the westerly platforms. Pulling some coins from his pocket, he walked to the ticket machine, fumbling in his haste to purchase a ticket. He spent more than he needed to cover a number of possible journeys; he didn't care as he grabbed the ticket. Turning, he stretched his long legs in an effort to catch her before she vanished.

He found her on the second platform he checked. From the shadows, keeping his head down, his hood acted as a shield to those around him. He wanted to look menacing for a change, deter the onlookers. Glancing up, he noticed for the first time that she wore earphones as she stared at the ground in front of her. He saw the sense in it, even considered using them on his next trip. If nothing else, it would drown out any negative calls he got in the street.

He had no plan for this; he didn't even know where to start. Still, he couldn't let the opportunity slip between his fingers. He needed to find the courage to approach her. It was the only way he was ever going to be able to put this to rest. It was the resolution he needed. It was his chance to move

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on...to go forward. To be the man he could be, to be strong. Like her. It was his chance to live and not just exist, to stop being the disappointment he'd been his whole life.

The train arrived. He boarded, discreetly watching her, keeping his distance. He felt eyes on him, and he tried to make every limb look casual as he waited for her to exit. As more people piled on, blocking his line of sight, he held his breath and stepped around a gaggle of teenagers to get off.

Struggling to catch her up, he snatched sight of her as she turned the corner of a residential street ahead of him. He rounded the corner and stood there, helpless to stop her as she disappeared down a short path towards a wooden front door. He watched as she pulled a key from her pocket and let herself in.

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