

POPPET

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BANTAM PRESS

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

Invisible

MONSTER MOTHER IS sitting on the bed when the triangle of light under the door flickers. It moves, dancing sideways a little, then settles.

She stares at it, her heart thumping. Something is out there, waiting.

Silently Monster Mother pushes herself out of bed and creeps to the furthest corner of the room – as far away from the door as she can. She presses herself back into the triangle between the walls, trembling, eyes watering with fear. From the window behind her, electric security spots cast tree shadows across the floor. They shift and bend, fingers scratching across the room, finding and touching the shadow under the door. She scans the place – the walls and the bed and the wardrobe. Checks every corner, every crack in the plaster. Anywhere at all that The Maude can crawl in. Monster Mother knows more about The Maude than anyone here does. She'll never tell what she knows, though. She's too scared.

It's still out there. Not moving a lot – but enough to make the patch of light sway. Monster Mother can hear breathing now. She wants to cry but she can't. Carefully and silently she pushes her shaky hand up under the red negligee and moves her fingers along the skin between her breasts – groping for the thing she needs. When she finds it she tugs. The pain is greater than anything she can remember. It hurts more than cutting off her own arm – or giving birth (something she has done several times). But she

continues, pulling the zip down, from sternum to pubis. There is a wet smacking sound as her stomach muscles spring free from her skin.

She grips the edge of the opening and, writhing and weeping, wrenches it outwards. The skin unsticks from her ribs and her breasts and peels down over her shoulders. It tears, it bleeds, but she continues until it hangs from her hips like dripping wax. She takes a few deep breaths and rips it away from her legs.

It gathers in a pool at her feet. A deflated rubber mould.

Monster Mother gathers herself. She straightens – solid and brave – her stripped muscles glinting in the security lights. She turns to face the door, proud and defiant.

The Maude will never find her now.

Browns Brasserie, The Triangle, Bristol

THE RESTAURANT WAS once the university refectory – and it still has a noisy, peopled buzz to it. High ceilings and bouncy acoustics. Except now the students aren't sitting and eating, they're wearing black aprons – slaloming round tables carrying plates, muttering to themselves orders and table numbers. Working off their loans. A 'skinny cocktails' neon blinks above the polished concrete bar, chords from a Gotye song drift out of the speakers latched high in the ceiling girders.

The customers are mostly people who've chosen this place as a venue – it's a high enough price tag to be above drop-in scale. The only lone diners are self-conscious – some cradling Kindles over their borscht soup – some sipping wine and casually checking watches, expecting dates or friends. Out of British politeness nobody stares at them, or even acknowledges them.

Only one diner appears to have any effect on his neighbours. Nearby tables have remarked on him and adjusted their seating accordingly – as if he's a threat or an excitement. A dark-haired man in his early forties breaking myriad unspoken rules. Not just by his attire – a black weatherproof worn over a business suit – the tie removed, the shirt collar slightly open – but by his attitude.

He's eating like someone who wants to eat for no other reason than that he is hungry – not because he wants to be seen here. He doesn't adopt an air or scan the room, he eats steadily, his gaze focused on the mid-distance. It is gross misconduct in a place like

this, and there's a kind of satisfaction amongst the others when it all goes wrong for him. Privately they think it's just what *would* happen to someone like him.

It's eight thirty and a table of twenty has come in. They've booked in advance and the tables have been arranged at the rear of the space so they won't disturb the other customers. An engagement party maybe – some of the girls are in cocktail dresses and one or two of the men are in suits. The woman at the back of the group – a blonde in her late fifties, suntanned, dressed in overstitched jeans and a Hollister hoodie – seems, at first glance, to be with the crowd. It's only when they sit, and she doesn't, that it's clear she's tagged along and has no connection with them.

She moves unsteadily. Under the hoodie her breasts are on display in a low-cut T-shirt. She knocks one of the waiters in her transit through the restaurant – stops to apologize, slurring her 'sorry's – resting her hands on his chest as she speaks, smiling confidentially. He shoots a helpless glance at the bar staff, not sure what to do – but before he can object she's gone, bouncing past the tables like a pinball – her eyes locked on her target.

The man in the North Face weatherproof.

He looks up from the half-eaten hamburger. Registers her. And, as if he knows she means trouble, slowly puts down his knife and fork. Conversation at all the adjacent tables falters and dies. The man picks up his napkin and wipes his mouth.

'Hello, Jacqui.' He sets the napkin down neatly. 'So nice to see you.'

'Fuck you.' She puts her hands on the table and leers at him. 'Just fuck you into next week, you shithead.'

He nods, as if acknowledging the fact he is indeed a shithead. However, he says nothing and that infuriates the woman even further. She slams her hands on the table again, making everything jump. A fork and a napkin fall to the floor.

'Look at you – sitting here just eating. Eating and enjoying yourself. You don't have a fucking clue, do you?'

'Hello?' The waiter touches her on the arm. 'Madam? Shall we try to keep this conversation private? And then we can—'

‘Piss off.’ She bats his hand away. ‘Piss right off. You don’t know what you’re talking about.’ She lurches sideways and grabs the first glass she can see. It’s from a neighbouring table and is full of red wine. Its owner makes a futile grab for it, but the woman glides it away and slings the wine at the man in the weatherproof. The wine has a life of its own; it seems able to go everywhere. It lands on his face, on his shirt, in his plate and on the table. Other diners jump to their feet in shock, but the man remains sitting. Completely cool.

‘Where the fuck is she?’ the woman screams. ‘Where is she? You will fucking tell me what you’re doing about it or I will kill you – I will fucking kill y—’

Two security staff appear. A huge black guy in a green T-shirt and a headset is in charge. He puts a hand on her arm. ‘Babes,’ he says, ‘this isn’t helping you. Now let’s go somewhere and have a chat about it.’

‘You think I can chat?’ She pushes his arm away. ‘I’ll chat. I’ll chat until you fall over. I’ll shagging chat until you puke.’

The big guy makes a near-invisible nod, and his staff grab her arms, pin them to her sides as she struggles. She continues squealing at the top of her voice as she is forced back through the restaurant towards the doors: ‘He *knows* where she is.’ She addresses her fury at the security boss, as if he’s going to give a shit. ‘He doesn’t care. He doesn’t CARE. That’s what the problem is. He doesn’t fucking c—’

The men push her out of the front doors. They lock them and stand, facing outwards, their arms folded, while she squirms on the pavement. The man in the windcheater doesn’t get up or look at the door. If anyone asked him how he keeps his cool he’d shrug. Maybe it’s his nature, maybe it’s from his training. He is police, after all, and that helps. A plain-clothed member of Bristol’s Major Crime Investigation Team. Detective Inspector Jack Caffery, age forty-two. He’s seen and endured worse than this. Much worse.

Silently he shakes out a napkin and begins blotting the red wine from his face and neck.

Coordinator's Office, Beechway High Secure Unit, Bristol

IT'S ABOUT ELEVEN o'clock when AJ LeGrande, the senior nursing coordinator at Beechway psychiatric unit, wakes from a nightmare with a jolt. His heart is thudding, and it takes a long time for him to reorientate himself and realize he is fully dressed and sitting in his office chair, feet on his desk. The reports he was reading are scattered on the floor.

He rubs his chest uneasily. Blinks and sits up. The room is dark, just a small amount of light coming from under the door. Dancing on his retina is the blurred after-image of a little figure crouched over him. Straddling his chest, its smooth face close to his. Its foreshortened arms resting delicately on his collarbone. He runs his tongue around his mouth, glancing around the office. He imagines the thing escaping through the closed door. Sliding under and out into the corridor, where it will run further and further into the hospital.

His throat is tight. He's not used to wearing a collar – he's only been coordinator for a month and he can't get used to the suit. And the clip-on ties he has to wear for his own safety? He can't seem to get the knack of them. They never hang right or feel right. He drops his feet to the floor and unclips the tie. The tightness in his lungs eases slightly. He gets up and goes to the door. Fingers on the handle, he hesitates. If he opens the door he's going to see a little gowned figure pitter-pattering away down the empty corridor.

Three deep breaths. He opens the door. Looks one way up the corridor, and the other. There is nothing. Just the usual things he's got used to over the years: the green tiled floor, the fire muster point with its diagram of the unit, the padded handrails. No wispy fleeing hem of a gown rounding the corner and disappearing out of sight.

He leans against the doorpost for a moment, trying to clear his head. Dwarfs on his chest? Little figures in nightgowns? The whisper of small feet? And two words he doesn't want to think: *The. Maude.*

Jeeez. He knocks a knuckle against his head. This is what comes from doing double shifts and falling asleep in a tie that's too tight. Really, it's crazy. He's supposed to be a supervisor, so how has it worked out this is the second night shift he's covered for one of the nursing staff? Completely ridiculous, because the night shift used to be the coveted shift – a chance to catch up on TV or sleep. Everything has changed since what happened on Dandelion Ward last week; suddenly anyone rostered in overnight has been jumping ship like rats, calling in sick with every excuse under the sun. No one wants to spend the night in the unit – as if something unearthly has come into the place.

And now it's even getting to him – even he is hallucinating. The last thing he wants to do is go back into his office, revisit that dream. Instead he closes the door and heads off towards the wards, swiping through an airlock. Maybe he'll get a coffee, speak to a few of the nurses, get some normality back. The fluorescent lights flicker as he walks. Outside the big windows of the 'stem' corridor a gale is howling – lately autumns have been so odd, so hot early on and so ferociously windy mid-October. The trees in the courtyard are bucking and bending – leaves and sticks fly off through the air, but oddly the sky is clear, the moon huge and unblinking.

The admin block beyond is in darkness and the two wards he can see from this vantage point are minimally lit – just the nurses' station and the nightlights in the corridors. Beechway High Secure Unit was originally built as a Victorian workhouse.

It evolved over the years – into a municipal hospital, then an orphanage and then an asylum. Years later, after all the ‘care in the community’ upheaval in the eighties, it was designated a ‘High Secure Psychiatric Hospital’, housing patients who are an extreme danger to themselves and others. Killers and rapists and the determinedly suicidal – they’re all here. AJ has been in this business years – and it never gets any easier or any less tense. Especially when a patient dies on the unit. Suddenly and in an untimely fashion, like Zelda Lornton did last week.

As he walks, with every turn in the corridor he expects to catch a glimpse of the tiny figure, tottering crookedly away ahead of him in the shadows. But he sees no one. Dandelion Ward is hushed, the lights low. He makes coffee in the nurses’ kitchen and carries it through into the station where one or two nurses sit sleepily in front of the TV. ‘Hey, AJ,’ they say lazily, raising a hand or two. ‘Sup? You OK?’

He considers starting a conversation – maybe asking them why their colleagues keep calling in sick when all they have to do is sit and watch movies like this – but they’re so intent on the TV he doesn’t bother. Instead he stands at the back of the room and sips his coffee, while on TV the Men in Black shoot aliens. Will Smith is mega-good-looking and Tommy Lee Jones is mega-grumpy. The villain has one arm missing, and there’s a half-crab/half-scorpion living in his good hand. Ace. Just what you need in a place like this.

The coffee’s done its job. AJ is awake now. He should go back to his office, see if he can finish reading the world’s most boring report. But the nightmare is still lingering and he needs a distraction.

‘I’ll do the midnight round,’ he tells the nurses. ‘Don’t let me interrupt your beauty sleep.’

Lazy, derisory comments follow him. He rinses his cup in the kitchen, pulls out his bunch of keys and goes silently down the corridor, swiping his way into the night quarters. Into the silence.

Now he’s been promoted to coordinator he’s expected to attend management meetings, do presentations and staff training. All

afternoon he's been at a Criminal Justice Forum, a meeting with local community leaders and the police – and this, he is starting to see, is his lot in life. Meetings and paperwork. A daily shoehorning into a suit. He never thought for a minute he'd miss anything about nursing, but now he sees he misses this – the nightly round. There was a kind of satisfaction knowing everyone was asleep. Sorted for the day. You can't get that from a bunch of reports.

The lower corridor is silent, just muffled snoring coming from some of the rooms. He opens one or two of the viewing panes into the rooms, but the only movement is the bend and rush of the trees shadowed on the thin curtains, moonlight moving across the sleeping forms of patients. The next floor up is different. He can sense it the moment he rounds the top of the staircase. Someone is uncomfortable. It's little more than a feeling – an unease he gets from years of experience. Like a vibration in the walls.

This is the place Zelda died last week. Her room is the first on the right and the door stands open, a maintenance warning sign in the opening. The bed has been stripped and the curtains are open. Moonlight streams blue and vivid into the room. A paint roller in a tray is propped up against the wall. At morning and night, as the patients are led to and from the day area, they have to be encouraged to walk past the room without peering in – crying and shaking. Even AJ finds it hard to think about what's happened here this month.

It started about three weeks ago. It was at ten p.m., and AJ had stayed on late to check through some staff returns records. He was in the office when the lights died from a power cut. He and the duty maintenance man rummaged for torches and soon found the source of the problem – a short-circuited dryer in the laundry room. Most of the patients knew nothing about it; many were asleep and those who were still awake barely noticed. Within forty minutes the lights were back on – all was normal. Except Zelda. She was in her room on the upstairs corridor in Dandelion Ward, and the yells she let off when the lights came on were so high-pitched at first AJ thought it was an alarm, jolted into action by the electricity.

The night staff were so used to Zelda screaming and complaining that they were slow about going up to her. They'd learned if she was given time to get it out of her system she was easier to deal with. The decision backfired on them. When AJ and one of the other nursing staff finally went up to check on her they found they weren't the first. The door was open and the clinical director, Melanie Arrow, was sitting on the bed, cupping Zelda's hands as if they were fragile eggs. Zelda was wearing a nightdress and had a towel draped around her shoulders. Her arms were covered in blood and she was weeping. Shaking and trembling.

AJ's heart fell. They'd have been a lot quicker off the mark if they'd known this was happening. Especially if they'd known the director was in the building to witness it. From her face it was one hundred per cent clear she wasn't happy about the situation. Not happy at all.

'Where were you?' Her voice was contained. 'Why wasn't anyone on the ward? Isn't it in the protocol? Someone on every ward?'

The on-call junior consultant was summoned and Zelda was taken to the GP's room next to AJ's office to be checked over. AJ had never seen her so subdued. So genuinely shaken. She was bleeding from the insides of both arms and when the wounds were examined it was found they'd been gouged with a roller-ball pen. Every inch of her inner arms was covered in writing. Melanie Arrow and the consultant went into a conspiratorial huddle under the blinding fluorescent lights while AJ stood, arms folded, back against the wall, shifting uneasily from foot to foot. The consultant had been asleep twenty minutes ago and kept yawning. He'd brought the wrong glasses, and had to hold them about a foot in front of his eyes in order to scrutinize her arms.

'Zelda?' Melanie said. 'You've hurt yourself?'

'No. I didn't hurt myself.'

'Someone did. Didn't they?' Melanie let the sentence hang in the air, waiting for an answer. 'Zelda?'

She shifted uncomfortably and rubbed her chest as if there was a tightness there. 'Someone hurt me. Or *something*.'

'I'm sorry? *Something?*'

Zelda licked her lips and glanced around at all the concerned faces peering at her. Her colour was high – spidery veins stood out on her cheeks – but her usual fight was gone. Completely gone. She was bewildered.

'One hundred grams Acuphase,' the doctor muttered. 'And level-one obs until the morning – two to one please. Maybe bring her down to level two in the morning.'

Now, AJ puts his head into the room and glances around, wondering what actually happened in here. What did Zelda really see that night? Something sitting on her chest? Something small and determined – something that skittered away under the door?

A noise. He lifts his chin. It's coming from the last room on the right – Monster Mother's room. He crosses to it, knocks quietly on her door, and listens.

Monster Mother – or rather, to give her her legal name, Gabriella Jackson – is one of the patients AJ likes best. She's a gentle soul most of the time. But when she's not gentle it's usually herself she takes it out on. She has slashes to her ankles and thighs that will never go away and her left arm is missing from the elbow down. She cut it off one night with an electric carving knife – standing in the kitchen of her million-pound home and calmly using the vegetable chopping board to rest the limb on. She was trying to prove to her dimwit husband how serious, how very serious, she was about not wanting him to have another affair.

This missing limb is the chief reason Monster Mother is in Beechway, that and a few other 'kinks' in her understanding of reality. For example, her belief she has given birth to all the other patients – they are all monsters and have committed vile deeds because they sprung from her poisoned womb. 'Monster Mother' is the name she has given herself, and if you spend long enough talking to her you will hear a detailed account of the birth of every patient in the unit – how long and troublesome the labour was, and how she could see from the first moment that the baby was evil.

The other kink in her reality is a belief that her skin is detachable. That if she removes it she is invisible.

AJ knocks again. ‘Gabriella?’

The protocol is always to use the patient’s real name, no matter what fantasy they’ve developed about their identity.

‘Gabriella?’

Nothing.

Quietly he opens the door and glances around the room. She is lying in her bed, the sheets up to her chin, her eyes like saucers, staring at him. AJ knows this means she is ‘hiding’ and that her ‘skin’ is elsewhere in the room – placed somewhere to draw attention away from herself. He doesn’t play into the delusion – though he’s permitted to express gentle doubt, he must avoid challenging it directly. (More protocol.)

Without making eye contact he comes in and sits and waits. Silence. Not a murmur. But AJ knows Monster Mother, she can’t keep quiet for ever.

Sure enough, eventually she sits up in bed and whispers, ‘AJ. I’m here.’

He nods slowly. Still doesn’t look directly at her. ‘Are you OK?’

‘No, I’m not. Will you close the door?’

He wouldn’t close the door behind him for most of the patients in this place, but he’s known Monster Mother for years and he’s a coordinator now, responsible, so he gets up and pushes the door shut. She shuffles herself up in the bed. She is fifty-seven but her skin is as unwrinkled and pale as an eggshell, her hair a red explosion. Her eyes are extraordinary – the brightest blue with dark lashes, as if she takes hours putting mascara on. She spends all her allowance on her clothes, which would look more at home on a six-year-old at a fairy party. Everything is floaty tulle in a rainbow of colours, tutu skirts and roses in her hair.

Whichever colour she chooses to wear is a reflection of how she sees the world on that particular day. At good times it’s pastels: pinks, baby blues, primrose yellows, lilacs. At bad times it’s the darker primary colours: dense reds, dark blue or black. Today a red lace negligee is draped at the foot of the bed, and that

gives AJ an idea of her mood. Red is for danger. It also tells him that her skin is hanging on the end of the bed too. He directs his attention halfway between the negligee and her face. Somewhere on the wall above the bed. Neutral.

'What's happening, Gabriella? What's on your mind?'

'I had to take it off. It's not safe.'

AJ resists the urge to roll his eyes. Monster Mother is sweet and she's gentle and yes, crazy, but mostly kind of funny crazy, not aggressive crazy. He takes his time answering – again neither denying nor confirming her delusion. 'Gabriella – have you had your meds tonight? You did take them, didn't you? You know I'll ask the dispensary if they saw you take them. And if they *didn't* see you . . . well, I don't need to search the room, do I?'

'I took them, AJ. I did. I just can't sleep.'

'When's your depot up again? I haven't checked, but I think it's got a long way to run.'

'Ten days. I'm not mad, Mr AJ. I'm not.'

'Of course you're not.'

'It's back, though, AJ – it's in the corridor. It's been running around all night.'

AJ closes his eyes and breathes slowly. What did he expect coming up here? Did he really think it was going to dispel his nightmare? Did he imagine laughter and gaiety and people telling jokes to take his mind off things?

'Look, Gabriella. We've talked about this before. Remember all those chats we had in Acute?'

'Yes. I locked those chats in a box up in my head like the doctors told me I was supposed to.'

'We agreed you weren't going to talk about it again? Do you remember?'

'But, AJ, it's back. It's come back. It got Zelda.'

'Don't you remember what you said, in High Dependency? I remember you saying: "it doesn't exist. It's just a made-up thing – like in the movies." Remember?'

She nods, but the glint of fear in her eyes doesn't go.

‘That’s good, Gabriella. And you haven’t been talking to the others about this, have you?’

‘No.’

‘Great – that’s great. You did the right thing. You keep it to yourself – I know you can. I know you can do that. Now we’ve got your care-planning meeting in the morning – I’ll mention this to the consultant – see what he says. And I’m going to put you on level four obs – just for tonight – OK? I’ll look in on you myself. But, Gabriella . . .?’

‘What?’

‘You gotta put that . . . that *thing* out of your head, my sweetheart. You really have.’

Safe

IT'S FUNNY, TO the Monster Mother, how AJ can't see what's happening. He can't even say the words, 'The. Maude.' AJ is kind and he's smart but he hasn't got the extra eye – he can't see the real things that are going on in this unit. He doesn't believe her – that The Maude is out there. Scouting for someone else to hurt.

AJ can't see the lengths Monster Mother has gone to, just to be safe. Maybe if he could he'd understand how serious it is. But he can't see her stripped muscle and tendon. He cannot see the white of her skull or the glinting twin orb eyes without their lids. He is so blind to what is happening. 'Good night,' he says. 'I'll check on you – I promise.'

She slides the sheets back up over her. They rasp at her exposed nerves and skinless muscles. She lays her raw skull on the pillow and tries to smile – using just her cheek muscles. 'AJ?'

'Yes?'

'Please be careful.'

'I will.'

He waits for a few moments, as if he's thinking, then he steps outside and shuts the door. The hospital is silent. She can't close her eyes, she has no eyelids. But at least she is safe from The Maude. If it comes in it'll go straight to her skin on the bedpost.

No one is going to sit on Monster Mother's chest tonight.