

Praise for **ONE YELLOW EYE**

**ONE OF NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY'S
TOP 10 BEST NEW HORROR BOOK OF 2025**

“Compulsively readable. A propulsive, page-turning descent into all that is lovely and grotesque about grief, obsession, and love.”

—Olivie Blake, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Atlas Six

“Zombie novels are as enduring as the undead themselves, and in *One Yellow Eye* Radford shapes the subgenre into something new and fresh. . . . This is a zombie novel with new ideas. . . . But what makes this novel shine is its emotional impact. . . . The interesting science passages and reanimated corpses are just icing on the rotting cake.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“‘Til death do us part takes on an obsessive new meaning in Leigh Radford’s transportive, compulsive novel.”

—Nick Cutter, national bestselling author of
The Troop and *The Queen*

“An equally charming and grim zombie novel about undying love. Every page simmers with exquisite dread. Original and smart and heartfelt, an unmissable debut that blends and transcends genre.”

—Rachel Harrison, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Play Nice and *So Thirsty*

“Haunting and human, Radford dives into both the scientific and emotional aftermath of this large-scale tragedy in ways not often discussed in horror literature.”

—*Variety*

“*The Last of Us* fans will love this unique heart-wrenching take on a zombie apocalypse that shows how far one scientist will go to protect her ‘infected’ husband.”

—*People*

“You wouldn’t expect a zombie novel to have so much to say about love. Radford’s suspenseful *One Yellow Eye* is driven by various fears—the fear of a virus that could return to rip the world apart, the fear of a terrible wrongdoing being discovered—but in the end zombies take a back seat to the greatest horror of all: losing the one closest to our heart.”

—Mason Coile, author of *William*

“A zombie apocalypse thriller with a fascinating twist . . . Leigh Radford has crafted a book that offers both chills and heartbreaking moments.”

—*Chicago Review of Books*

“A post-apocalyptic heartbreaker, dosed with high tension and threaded with the profound hope that love brings, *One Yellow Eye* is a new classic in the zombie pantheon.”

—Christina Henry, author of *Alice* and
The House That Horror Built

“Complex and utterly brilliant, *One Yellow Eye* had me in a choke hold from the first word to the last. Radford has created a genre all her own that is darkly comedic, gruesome, and compassionate—to say I absolutely loved this beautifully macabre story is an understatement.”

—Ashley Tate, bestselling author of *Twenty-Seven Minutes*

“Witty, propulsive, and heartbreaking. Radford’s dark, zombie love story is intelligent and refreshing.”

—Rebecca Netley, author of *The Whistling*

“Kesta’s single-minded focus and increasingly unhinged decisions create a mounting sense of dread and terror to rival any on-page bloodbath . . . [a] beautifully written, horror-tinged exploration of love and grief.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“If you’re in the mood to read a literary zombie novel . . . look no further than Leigh Radford’s new book, *One Yellow Eye*.”

—*Polygon*

“A gripping parable of the lengths to which people will go for love, even in the face of personal danger, the loss of friends, and persecution by a corrupt state.”

—*Science* magazine

“The story has a twist that zombie novel lovers don’t generally see. . . . You’ll be happily hooked by the sharpness and the tenderness of the tale. Zombie lovers will eat this book up, but it’s also a feast for science-minded fiction fans and romance readers, too.”

—*Wyoming News*

“If you like *28 Years Later*, read *One Yellow Eye* . . .”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Intimate and slow-burning . . . There’s a lot that makes *One Yellow Eye* special.”

—*The BiblioSanctum*

“Full of heartbreak, revulsion, and black humor . . . A deep exploration on love through grief, the devastating effects of loss, the inevitability of terminal illness, and what we do for those we love—and how much may be too much. Radford explores this sensitive area of discussion with subtlety, care, and aplomb . . . a pleasure to experience.”

—*FanFiAddict*

“A heartbreaking, confronting, deeply internal story about love, loss, and grief—with a zombie apocalypse setting just to keep things interesting! Her struggle with the science of the virus is skillfully explained, and the liminal kind of half-grief of living with her undead husband is entirely too approachable for anyone grappling with complicated loss.”

—*Grimdark Magazine*

“*One Yellow Eye* is a fascinating exploration of grief and the thin line between sacrifice and selfishness.”

—*Up to Date*

**ONE
YELLOW
EYE**

LEIGH RADFORD



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Dad.
There is nothing we wouldn't have done to keep you with us.
x

Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.

—Dylan Thomas

CHAPTER ONE

Kesta blinked. Once. Twice. The third time deliberately enough for the lashes to press into the hollows of her eyes, enjoying that disconcerting internal crunch, the guiding vibrations, like the involuntary overture of a yawn.

Kesta thought a lot about blinking now because *they* did not blink. She hadn't noticed it at first. In the midst of chaos, important details can be overlooked. Witnesses are unreliable. When all around you people are bolting in terror and you happen to find yourself running away from one of them at full tilt, there is no time to turn heel, head back inside the laboratory, and jog up to the fourth floor for a slit lamp to take a proper look. It occurred to her only much later on—three or perhaps four weeks into it—when she had seen several of them die right in front of her—most of them shot by the army, although that one guy guillotined by the galvanized roller doors at the dry cleaners was pretty unforgettable—that they didn't blink.

It was when she had found one in the pathology lab, just wandering around as if he had worked there once as a porter. The missing arm had been a giveaway of course, not to mention the little it seemed to concern him, missing and bleeding profusely as it was, the humerus quite visible and not at all funny. It was when she had hit him, over and over again, at first with a chair that had been too awkward to wield successfully for a

woman of her size, and then with the old microtome on Dudley's desk, which she still used for paraffin sections. Even as she beat it down on the top of his head until there wasn't one to speak of, he hadn't blinked once. She had made assiduous notes afterward.

Patient does not blink. Patient cannot blink. Lagophthalmos, proptosis, or tumor should be considered.

Kesta sighed. She did, to her credit, have a fair amount to sigh about. But then so did everybody else. Today was Wednesday, and Wednesday meant she was compelled to listen to the litany of misfortunes suffered by the eleven others at group therapy. Her job as a biomedical scientist mandated her attendance, because of what had happened to her. And so, she went.

The other people at therapy would often look at her with eyes searching eagerly for friendship. When this happened, Kesta turned her blinking up a notch so that she appeared either to be deep in thought or napping. This had worked successfully for four weeks, but she knew it would only be a matter of time before she'd have to articulate this rejection. When Tina, the resident gobshite, had suggested they form a breakout group, a few seemed pleased by the prospect of taking their talking elsewhere, to a pub maybe, or heaven forbid, into each other's homes. All Kesta could think of was that the group was metastasizing, and in her experience that was never a good thing. Spread meant death.

These meetings of the Zombie Apocalypse Recovery Group were always the same; slow, repetitive, clumsy. The irony wasn't lost on Kesta. She wondered what Tim would make of it all, him being bitten at the very end of the outbreak and her condemned to a life in therapy because of it. She wasn't always sure whose fate was worse.

Where she mourned Tim, others grieved for children, partners, parents, each one lanced from their lives with prodigious cruelty. And violence. Where her fellow ZARGs were desperate to purge the horrors they had witnessed, Kesta needed only to work through her grief and toward

a cure. She had made a promise to Tim that she would do her utmost to find one.

And so, every Wednesday afternoon at four, Kesta joined the others in a forgotten room at the back of a steadily disintegrating London hospital, the one she worked at during the day, cluttered with the detritus thrown at people with problems—tissues, tea urns, plates of beige biscuits fingered by all and sundry. The room itself was a glazed annex, typical of the health service, in which you could expect only to feel much worse when you left than when you had arrived. Ossified green lino, a medley of chairs and side tables bought on the cheap but expected to last, utilitarian but somehow jazzy. It reeked of disinfectant, was scrubbed clean of hope, and was also used presumably for mother and toddler groups or to give the elderly advice on internet banking. Or bladder infections. It didn't matter; the room was suitably depressing to host a collection of the bereaved and the lost for an hour each week, with taxpayer-funded Dr. Walling. More than she resented the shrink, Kesta despaired at the inane posters that pockmarked the walls, instructing those in attendance to wash your hands and check your prostate. Even if Kesta had one, she doubted she'd supervise it.

As the ZARGs assembled, they began to leak with pleasantries. *How are you feeling? The nightmares have stopped, so that's something. That's nice, good for you.* Give it five minutes and their trickle of self-pity and bewilderment would explode into an unstoppable torrent of grief and fear. It had been three months since the last of the infected were rounded up and shot, but those in therapy were still stupefied by a cellular shock. All Kesta really felt was rage.

"Who wants to go first?" Dr. Walling asked the circle that had taken shape around her.

Talking helps, Dr. Walling had told the group repeatedly and in a soft baby voice. If there was one thing Kesta knew irrefutably, it was that talking absolutely did not help her. It changed nothing, did nothing, meant nothing. Talking was a pretense, an act of concealment, like gift wrapping a plastic turd. It was also the only thing they had.

“I’ll go,” blurted Carol, who seemed startled by her own urgency. Carol almost always went first. “Hi, everybody,” she said, waving balled-up tissues toward the group.

“Hi, Carol,” replied Dr. Walling and everyone else except Kesta.

“When Andy was bitten, I fell apart,” she sobbed, as if addressing daytime television. “There was nothing I could do to save him. And now I have to live with that.”

Dr. Walling removed her glasses and stuck one temple tip into her mouth—a sign she was on the cusp of a question—but Carol was in full flow.

“I’d seen the government warnings. They’d been on telly for weeks. The kind of symptoms an infected person would show. The groaning. The bleeding from the eyes. How to file the report with the 000 number, that bloody form you had to fill out online. It was just . . . surreal. Like a horror movie.”

Others in the group nodded and muttered in sympathy with Carol’s difficult experiences with the internet. They’d all heard this story before.

“But at the end? At the end, I led him outside into the garden and watched him get tasered into the back of a lorry. There were dozens of them in there, women, kids. And I never saw Andy again. Don’t know what happened to him. I mean, I know what they *say* happened to him. That he was shot. In the head. But I don’t know if he knew what was happening. If he was frightened. I was, I was fucking terrified. I only did it because of the children. He just wasn’t their dad anymore. I still feel like it was all my fault.”

Carol poked at her eyeballs with the remnants of her tissues, making little mewling sounds. Dr. Walling, her interest piqued by self-blame, returned her spectacles to their proper position.

“Why do you feel it was your fault, Carol?”

“Because he was my husband and I was meant to look after him,” Carol replied, “and I didn’t. I called the emergency hotline. I reported him as infected. I took Daisy and Joey and I closed the doors to our flat and locked us in. Locked him out, wobbling around in the road. On his own.”

The story wasn't new to them, but the searing pain that came with it took everyone by surprise, even Kesta. The image of a loved one left to die alone, abandoned to their fate. A survival of the fittest, except that no one had survived. Each person in the circle retreated back into their own private grief. Kesta stared intently down at her own lap as if a gateway into another dimension might open up, and she could disappear into it forever.

"Carol, thank you for talking to us about Andy," said Dr. Walling, who shuffled her papers and looked at no one in particular. "What I'm hearing from Carol is that we need to come to terms with *the end*"—Dr. Walling made theatrical quotation marks with her fingers—"the end of our loved one. Death is rarely chosen. What's clear is that the manner in which the virus claimed the lives of those we held dear—and the fact that this was out of our control—continues to distress us."

The group looked at Dr. Walling as though her level of consciousness had transcended into a higher state, far beyond her second-class degree in clinical psychology. Kesta looked everywhere other than at Dr. Walling. She wasn't ready to talk yet. As the doctor conjured Michael's name out of thin air and not her own, Kesta felt a hot sweat of relief soak through her shirt.

"Michael, did you want to talk about Eddie today? The final moments of Eddie's life? What do you think?"

"Goodness, well." Michael was fanning his face with his hands and looking apologetically at the group. "I'll try. Please bear with me." Therapy made Michael overheated.

"I had come home early, because of an outbreak near Aldgate where I used to work. And Eddie was in the kitchen." Michael winced as he said *Eddie* and Kesta felt her heart sink for him.

"I thought he was trying to make a cup of tea until I realized he wasn't. He was holding the kettle over a cup, but nothing was coming out of it because it was empty. He shook it about like a baby's rattle. Then he threw it on the ground and seemed puzzled by the noise it made. He stood there, watching it rolling around on the floor." Kesta and the

others held their breath, all wishing for a different ending for Michael's story. "I asked him what the matter was. I thought he'd had a stroke. When he turned to me, I saw the shirt I'd bought him for Christmas was covered in blood, and that something didn't look right with his mouth."

"Temporomandibular joint dislocation," Kesta blurted out loud. The others stared at her. She'd been thinking it, over and over, in her head, and somehow it had launched itself out of her mouth. "The majority of patients suffered from it. It made their faces look distended." She smiled awkwardly at Michael, who looked at her as if she'd just dropped her knickers at church. Dr. Walling shook her head, and Kesta realized too late that her bedside manner had betrayed her again.

"He still tried to speak through it," Michael continued, stoically. "He was conscious enough to know that he was changing. I think he recognized me. People have told me that would be impossible, that there wasn't anything I could have done to help him, and I have to pray that was true."

Shaking, he wiped the sweat from his hands down the legs of his jeans and took a deep breath.

"We'd had a stove fitted the winter before last. I used to love watching Eddie chopping logs out in our little garden. With an axe. Used to take the mick out of him about it, fulfilling all my lumberjack fantasies, you know." A fond memory coaxed a smile across Michael's lips before the usual resignation returned. "Six blows it took. I'll never forget it, the look on his face. But you don't let the ones you love suffer, do you? I have to live with what I did for the rest of my life. And I'd do it again. In a heartbeat."

"You put him out of his misery," said Tina, standing up and walking toward Michael with open arms.

"Had to keep his head in the sink until they came for him."

"I know, it's okay," said Tina, squeezing him tightly, muffling anything further Michael might have wanted to say about his husband's head circling the drain with her chest.

A gentle wave of applause rippled out across the group. Kesta did not clap. Dr. Walling rose from her seat and hugged Michael warmly, while

Tina stroked his back. Tina had killed her sister with a garden spade and their mother with a brick a week later. Kesta could hear whisperings of how brave Michael was, how much he must have loved his husband to do what he had done. Once Dr. Walling had restored order to the group and everyone had returned to their chairs, Kesta looked up to see that Tina's hand was in the air and that she was looking right at her.

"Oh, Tina." Dr. Walling seemed delighted to have a willing volunteer. "Do go ahead."

Tina raised an eyebrow deliberately. "I want to ask Kesta a question."

"Kesta, are you happy to take a question from the group, from Tina?"

Kesta wasn't happy about it at all. She nodded and Dr. Walling signaled to Tina that she had the floor.

"You work for the health service, don't you?"

Kesta sensed that whatever she said would be the wrong answer.

"You're a doctor or something, right?"

Kesta shrugged. It depended on who she was talking to. Sometimes she said doctor because it was easier for people to understand. When she said scientist, they tended to query whether the preface should be *mad*.

"Well, I want to know exactly what your lot are doing with our money," said Tina, leaning forward in her chair, confident she was speaking for everyone. "And why you haven't found a cure yet? It's been three months. What's taking so long?"

It had been one thing to live through a zombie apocalypse and another to be held responsible for ensuring it never happened again. Irrational though it was, Kesta did feel responsible. For everything, really. All the time. She worried she would stumble over her words if she spoke, say something that made her seem guilty or complicit in matters the group could never hope to understand. Tim had been the diplomat in their relationship, so much more proficient at managing other people than she ever was. He instinctively knew what people wanted to hear and so he said it, whether he meant it or not. He had always known what to say to make Kesta feel better about life, better about herself. She would have given anything to hear his voice at that moment, to see him wink

at her the way he always did, to reassure her that things would be okay. But she could hear only her own condescending voice, creaking out of her dry mouth.

“I work in oncology,” she said, as if it should matter to them, “cancer care. Also in pathology and histology, these disciplines are critical when you’re looking at disease but then, this is, well . . . so . . .”

She heard herself tripping over the words, struggling to explain herself and what she knew, and they didn’t. She should just have said she was a doctor.

“I have training in virology, obviously, but this is different. We don’t have a baseline, the antigenic shift hasn’t been established, if indeed there is one. We, well, they—”

“Who’s they?” asked Tina.

“Um, well, the team working on the virus research. Project Dawn—”

“So, not you then?”

“Not me, no.”

“What’s the point of you, then?”

“Well, oncology as I said, but, well, the team assigned to isolating and treating the virus, the Project Dawn team, they’re learning about it as quickly as they can—”

“Not quickly enough,” Carol chimed in, irritably crossing her legs and folding her arms. Others grumbled in agreement. Kesta felt the circle closing in around her.

“What is the government going to do about it?” Tina demanded, jabbing a cattle prod finger toward her.

“We’re stretched to breaking point,” Kesta mumbled.

“Well, it’s not bloody good enough! It’s too late for my sister, too late for my mum!”

“Tina, I’m sensing a lot of misdirected blame here—” said Dr. Walling, trying to intervene.

“How can we trust that it won’t happen again?” Tina raved. “Where is the cure? Is there a vaccine? How many more people will die, Kesta?”

“—and anger, Tina. And possibly also boundary issues. We might

want to breathe and consider how triggering your tone could be for other people—”

“Guys, please,” Kesta said, standing up. She was trembling. “I don’t work at Project Dawn, okay? I work at a regular hospital. This hospital. We’re all just doing the best we can. We were making great strides in extending life expectancy with many of the cancers affecting our blood cells—”

“What use is a cure for cancer if we’re all fucking zombies?” said Tina.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Kesta reached the bar, it was a little after six. She felt bruised by what had happened at group, more resolved than ever that therapy wasn't therapeutic in her case. She wanted to go straight home, but tonight was a special occasion. With any luck, they'd be the only ones in there. The bar was over in Farringdon, and before the outbreak, it had been artisanal, and gin-focused, and called Pour Decisions. Now, as one of the few bars to have gamely reopened since the curfew had been lifted—albeit with its neon signage disconnected and much of its curved glass bay windows still boarded up—it served anyone anything they wanted. Kesta had taken to drinking there because drinking there somehow seemed less ghoulish than drinking at home. She'd resolved to continue doing both in order to fully test her hypothesis.

A giant in a waxy raincoat stood before her, most of his face obscured by a mask covering his mouth and nose. A milky acrylic shield framed his face. He scanned Kesta's forehead with an electronic thermometer—not to check if her temperature was elevated but rather to discern if she was alive enough to register one—and asked her to raise both her arms high into the air, then to touch her toes, to prove she had full command of her motor skills. The doorman seemed almost disappointed when she passed, and he had to let her in.

Once inside, Kesta was relieved to see only a handful of isolated drinkers, festering around the edges of the room. Jess of course was sitting at the very center of the bar, her heeled feet extended out toward the neighboring stool she'd marked out for Kesta despite the obvious lack of competition for it. Jess spread herself about thickly. There was always so much of her to go around. She was the human embodiment of treacle.

Jess was in a black shift dress and stilettos, even though she must have come straight from the surgery. The smug expression she wore by default changed the moment she saw Kesta wavering by the entrance. It was one of those funny things about death. Some people cried because what had happened to you hadn't yet happened to them.

"God, I'm fucking useless!" Jess sniffed, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. She prized herself upward against the mirrored bar and was illuminated by dozens of little flames, votives across the countertop, refracting against the glass, and pillar candles on the shelves where the spirit bottles had yet to be replenished. Jess was glowing. She reminded Kesta of the Dia de los Muertos dolls she and Tim had seen in Mexico on their honeymoon. Arms outstretched, teeth gleaming in the candlelight, Jess lunged toward Kesta and began to squeeze the life out of her. In her arms, Jess felt about the same height as Tim had been. For a second, Kesta gave in to it and pretended she was holding her husband again.

"I started to worry you weren't coming again, and then I remembered you had group today," Jess said. At this, she beamed, her tears already dry. "So, I went ahead and ordered a bottle." She slithered back onto her seat to take a proper look at Kesta, who, feeling that she was under the microscope, smoothed out her denim shirt and fluffed her untrimmed fringe. She smiled politely at the barman, who ignored her completely.

"You do want wine?" Jess asked.

"Actually, I've given up drinking till Christmas," Kesta replied with faux cheer. Jess looked appalled. "Sorry, no, wrong grammar. I've given up. Drinking till Christmas." The joke fell flat. She must try harder to look the part in public, she thought. To be normal, sociable. Tim would have winked and told her to relax.

“You look slightly less shitty than last time I saw you,” said Jess, narrowing her eyes at Kesta as she poured generously. “Have you put a bit of weight back on?”

“Yes, I think so,” Kesta lied.

“Cheers, babe.”

“Cheers, yes.”

Kesta needed two hands to hold the glass, and her first sip made her cough. Jess summoned the barman with the flick of a wrist, and a glass of water materialized before her. She slid it over to Kesta. Jess drummed her inky nails against the countertop.

“Should I ask you about therapy or is that a taboo topic for tonight?”

“Same as every week,” Kesta said, shrugging, “everybody’s dead. Everybody’s sad about that. Blunt knives make decapitation more challenging than it should be.”

“Bloody government should just give them all free booze,” Jess snorted. “I’ve actually thought about prescribing spirits at the surgery. Most of my patients just need to drink enough to forget about what happened.”

“And what’s the mortality rate of those registered at your surgery?”

“Fuck off. I’m an excellent doctor!” cackled Jess.

It remained a mystery to all who knew her why Jess had become a GP. She loathed children and old people, a doctor’s bread and butter. She was squeamish and haughty and incapable of taking anything seriously. What had happened to Tim had been the exception. That had sobered her up.

She was complaining about staff at the surgery being off sick. About her own workload and about life not returning to normal quickly enough after the outbreak for her liking. The barman kept grinning at her, toweling off tumblers that were already dry. It was hard not to be spell-bound by Jess. She was infectious. Kesta wasn’t really listening. She was thinking about how nice it must be, easing through life wearing Jess’s skin. All those easy qualities she herself didn’t possess stitched together seamlessly. Jess radiated an innate confidence. Kesta radiated something,

but her glow probably contained potassium and had a fallout zone. The barman's mobile buzzed inside the leg of his trousers, and he disappeared into a back room to answer it.

Now that the coast was clear, Jess leaned forward in her seat. "Any news," she whispered, "on you-know-what?"

Kesta shook her head.

"No, nothing," she said, deflated.

"You must be on the shortlist though? With your skill set?"

"Maybe there were a thousand other applicants. Maybe I'm not qualified enough. I don't know. Either way I'm just waiting for something to happen."

"You've always been shit at waiting," said Jess, "but you promise you'll let me know if you hear anything, won't you? I don't want you harboring a dirty little secret from me."

"I promise I'll let you know."

"I mean, I think you should give yourself a break, babe," Jess said, in between gulps of wine. "Because you've had enough to deal with as it is without feeling like you should be running Project Dawn," she whispered it elaborately again, the whites of her eyes sparkling in the low light, "single-handedly. And it's not your job to save the world. Right?"

Kesta didn't really have an answer for that.

She dreamed of working at Project Dawn. No, that wasn't entirely true. Kesta's dreams involved her running, falling, hunting, chasing, being chased, being hunted, and sometimes gouging out the eyes of strangers with her own fingers, that one time with a teaspoon. Kesta's dreams were bleak and bloodthirsty and horribly unsettling, and it wouldn't take a Dr. Walling figure long to unpick their hidden meaning because the meaning wasn't hidden. Project Dawn would find the cure. That's what they had all been promised. And then the nightmare would finally be over.

Kesta fantasized about working at Project Dawn when she was staring wide-eyed into the abyss at three in the morning, which was most nights. She thought about it as she trudged to work each day, the

image of herself at the microscope, staring down the lens into revelation, to her eureka moment. She would cogitate over it in the middle of the day, and sometimes her excitable, wandering thoughts would stumble their way out into the open, somewhere between pathology and the vending machine down in reception. She would gabble on about her hypothesis to a woman who worked in hospital administration and who shared her craving for a midafternoon Twix to overcome the sugar slump. Kesta would share her own theories on the nature of the zombie virus—sometimes it was an abnormality in the spleen, sometimes it was a retrovirus possibly spread by rats—and the woman would nod politely and tell Kesta what she'd told her every time this had happened, which was that she worked in human resources, and she really didn't have a clinical opinion.

But I'm human and my resources aren't being put to good use, Kesta would think as the woman backed away from her with a glazed expression, hiding the Twix behind her back as though it would be the first thing Kesta would go for.

"I mean, what happened during the outbreak was horrific," Jess continued. "My niece's cat sitter got shot in the arse. Bullet was meant for the zombie behind her, but it rebounded off a car wing mirror, clipped her in the keister. Our postman died on my front lawn. Which was ghastly. Every day there were more infections, more deaths to contend with. How are we supposed to just get over it? But not everyone lost a husband!"

It was clear that Jess regretted the words as soon as they'd drunkenly left her mouth. She set her wine down on the countertop.

"You know, Kesta, I'm so proud of you," she said, starting to cry again. "You're the only person I know who lost the love of their life. And you're going gangbusters."

The barman placed a square of paper napkins on the counter between them. Jess took them all.

"I'm so sorry," she wept, delicately dabbing at her lash line, "I just miss him so much."

"I know. Me too."

“Thing is, Kesta,” Jess sniffed, “he’d definitely want you to be happy. Can you ever be happy again?”

Kesta said nothing. She just nodded and smiled. People didn’t have a clue what Tim had wanted, and yet these days, they seemed intent on telling her that he’d want her to move on.

“You had twenty great years together.”

It was meant to be forever.

“You were so, so lucky to have found him in the first place.”

Kesta didn’t feel lucky. She felt the polar opposite of lucky.

“I hope you know that I’m here for you, always,” said Jess earnestly, adding, “that I know what you’re going through,” with absolutely no idea what Kesta was going through.

“Thanks, Jess.”

“Shall we do a toast then?” she asked, hoisting up her glass. Kesta felt her stomach churn. She didn’t want to do a fucking toast. Such ceremony felt ostentatious. But she ought to go along with it.

“To Timothy Shelley,” Jess said, her voice faltering. “Our beloved Tim. Our darling, bonkers, gorgeous, daft, witty, marvelous old Timbo. On what would have been your thirty-ninth birthday. We love you loads, we salute you, and we miss you like hell.”

“I love you, Tim,” said Kesta, and drank what remained in her glass.

The light was fading when Jess disappeared toward the verdant hills of Hampstead, via the Metropolitan line, and Kesta resumed her long walk to Wapping. Outside Pour Decisions, a handful of mourners had converged over a collection of photographs, candles, and flowers wilting behind the iron gates of Smithfield Market. Kesta stopped to watch their quiet vigil, for bodies that must have fallen there but would be denied the dignity of burial. The mourners were matted together, crying, throbbing like ganglion cells under her microscope. No one really seemed human anymore, least of all Kesta. Grief does that. It hacks great chunks out of you and what remains regenerates into a poor imitation of what existed before.

The air in London felt colder now, as though there weren’t enough

people left to keep the city warm. In the distance, Kesta could see two police vans parking up, blue lights pulsing without sound. Six officers leapt from the vehicles like urban foxes, hungry guns worn at the hip, patrolling the area, just in case. No one had been bitten in three months. All of the infected had been rounded up—by the army, the police, by their own loved ones—and exterminated. There had been no other option to contain the spread. It was kill or be killed. The officers surveilled the mourners from afar, muttering into radios that crackled in reply. Kesta stared blankly ahead as she walked past them. The front line was a brutal place to be. Everyone else had the luxury of obscurity.

London lay prone before her, a cadaver dredged from a riverbed, under a sheet of cloud, resigned and exposed. It was no longer the city Kesta had grown up in. This city was terminal, its life draining away through mile after mile of ancient sewers, out into the Thames Estuary and the North Sea. As she walked toward the Barbican, past its deserted tube station, heading east, she could slice through the lane dividers all the way down Aldersgate Street without a single car to bother her. The red Z signs spray-painted onto doors and windows of buildings where the virus had struck demarcated her journey. Government posters clung to their walls shredded and defaced. Huge billboards lit up the roundabout warning people to stay indoors. Leaflets and cards, printed and handwritten, clogged up the gutters along the pavements. Churches offering sanctuary. Instructions from the army on self-defense. Homemade posters for those who were missing, their expectant faces now dirtied by other people's footprints, staring up at Kesta from the ground, still hoping to be found. Evangelical flyers proclaiming the end of times and all the answers you needed at the end of a hotline for £6.99 a minute. The streets were littered with relics of the crisis that lay where they had fallen, in the doorways of shuttered shops and cafes where once the homeless might have slept. Kesta passed by an old pub, still boarded up, a single light on in the back somewhere, shining for no one. There were no homeless people living in London now. They had been amongst the first to die.

Coming home to no one was the hardest part of all. Before she turned the key in the lock, there was a split second of hope, that he'd still be there as she remembered him. The flat was so lonely without his endless chatter, always delivered in his outdoor, college bar baritone. Indoor voice, for God's sake, she used to say to him, the neighbors will hear you. Tim would give her that smile, her only weakness, and carry on as loudly as before. She had the indoor voice. And without him it was barely a whisper. What she wouldn't give to be embarrassed by the sheer volume of him now.

The blinds in the living room remained closed, had been for five months. Light would attract them, they were told at first, so everyone had drawn their curtains and waited obediently for it to be over. She had grown accustomed to shutting out the world because performing for it like a monkey—at work, at therapy, as people tried to engage her at the supermarket or the park—exhausted her.

She went to the fridge and removed a bottle of white wine from the night before, along with a cardboard box from the middle shelf. Aside from a pint of milk and a bag of ground coffee, the fridge was as deserted as the flat. Kesta did not cook; that had been Tim's pleasure. She struggled to eat at home now.

Anyway, the fridge was mostly occupied by blood bags. O+. Kesta's own. And a regiment of tiny glass vials where the eggs should have been. She poured herself a glass of wine, lifted a circular lemon sponge from the cardboard box and deposited it on a dinner plate, and rummaged in the kitchen's junk drawer for something she wasn't sure she still had. But there they were, the little pink candles, stuffed at the very back, in between a torch, a plug adaptor, and some crayons. Kesta slid the nicest tea tray she owned out from underneath the drinks trolley in the living room. She arranged her sorry celebration across it.

Kesta laid the tray to rest on the table in the hallway and began the arduous process of opening the four black dead bolts on the spare bedroom door.

The room was in total darkness save for the primary colors of the vitals monitor casting an eerie rainbow across the bed like a nursery light. Sporadic bleeps and whirs from the machine reassured Kesta that some life remained. She recorded these readings in the notebook she kept on the nightstand: heart rate, oxygen levels, body temperature. All abnormal but at least unchanged. Kesta returned to the hallway for the tray, sliding it across the nightstand.

One yellow eye watched her. It saw but didn't see, and it never, ever blinked. A graying arm upheaved into the restraints before falling with a defeated puff. Violence had fought its way out of that body, and now it was a scene of great suffering. It was unnaturally positioned, a marionette with its strings cut. A spider's web of ruptured vessels, scaly skin stretched taut and livid. Every inch of it was screaming. But there was no pain, no sound, no progress in the patient that Kesta could determine.

She lit the candles on the cake, and she showed the cake to Tim.

"Happy birthday, darling."

CHAPTER THREE

The cake was a mistake. Kesta had fantasized that by singing to Tim and striving to celebrate his clinging on long enough to have turned thirty-nine, something might stir inside him, a familiar tradition stimulating some response. Kesta the scientist knew that such spontaneous recoveries were incompatible with Tim's condition, but Kesta the wife still sang badly and ferried naked flames into her husband's room, only to be surprised to see him bare his teeth, convinced that she was going to set him on fire. Unsurprisingly, he hadn't been able to blow the candles out either. She had felt silly and guilty as she'd huffed out the candles and eaten half the cake, sitting on the floor. She'd gone to bed shortly afterward and cried into her pillow, praying that if he could hear her through the walls, he was incapable now of understanding that he was the very heart of her distress. Kesta did not sleep that night because she rarely slept. Instead, she listened out for Tim and played through moments from their once-happy marriage in her head.

Now that it was morning, Kesta watched her husband from the doorway. It was impossible to tell when he was asleep because his eyes were always open, always staring back at her. Never blinking. Eerily yellow. Their emotion and expressiveness all but faded away.

“Good morning, my darling.”

She kissed his forehead and tried to remember what he used to smell like before the cocktail of drugs had altered his scent. The air in the room was thick and metallic because of it, as though burned sugar oozed from his every pore. Kesta opened a window to let a little air in, although she kept the blinds drawn. They rose and fell with a soft pat against the frame, caught by the breeze outside like a child's kite.

"Urgggggh," said Tim, which was presently the best she could hope for. For three months, their marriage had been reduced to the mechanical basics of human communication. She consoled herself that it wasn't then so different than everyone else's.

"You could do with some fresh air," she said, checking the skin on his arm underneath the restraints she had used to chain him to the radiator. It was ulcerated. She wondered if he could stand for her to debride it, and if she did it, could she stop it from becoming infected.

"Is it hurting you?" she asked him. Tim stared back at her blankly. He tried to lift the damaged arm, wincing when the flesh touched the metal. "It's okay, we'll figure something out." Kesta took her clipboard and pen from the nightstand and began to write the date and time.

*Ulceration of the dermis due to friction contact with restraints.
Consider debridement. Will need scalpel.*

"Oh, and I must remember to ask Albert about borrowing that fan."

Every few hours Kesta would scour every inch of Tim's body looking for clues and transcribe her observations onto A4 paper. She had bought a ring binder. A highlighter pen. One of those upside-down watches nurses pin to their chests, though she'd used it only the once because Tim had tried to grope and then eat it. She assessed and recorded the signs of his alertness, pain, delirium, muscle strength, and mobility. She knew that evidence of change in these things was not necessarily evidence of improvement, but she tried not to let any decline in her patient cause her undue concern. Change meant that Tim was still alive, sort of, and that was all she really cared about. She knew she couldn't cure Tim on

her own. She wasn't completely delusional. Her plan, if you could call it that, was to preserve her husband in the best kind of undead state possible, until Project Dawn called to accept her, until someone there found a cure. She'd obviously have to figure out how to break the news to her new colleagues about the zombie she had withheld from the authorities for months, itself a criminal act, but this was a problem for a future version of Kesta. She could worry about only so much at once.

Maintaining a drug regimen was an ongoing practical challenge. There were drugs to reduce pain, others to help Tim relax. Drugs to prevent his blood from becoming too thick, drugs to stop his blood from thinning, drugs to stop his body from rejecting her blood when she transfused him with it once a week. Drugs to stop him from becoming dehydrated, meal replacements that were essentially drugs pretending to be food. Three months of trial and error and fear and perseverance had played out inside this room, together with an abundance of watching and waiting and praying. The sum total of it was that Tim was still here, or at least, a form of him. For Kesta that was enough. His experience of it all might differ considerably.

"I'll try to get home at lunch if I can," she said, blowing him a kiss before locking up the dead bolts and heading off to the hospital.

London is an obstinate city. Pestilence and plague, pea soup fog, years of being bombed to smithereens and razed to the ground by great fires hadn't dimmed her shine. But even a city as indomitable as she had a limit to what she could put up with. London needed to be seen crawling with people again to foster the illusion she was in recovery. To prove that everything was normal.

It was much the same for Kesta. While she wanted to hide away at home under the 10-tog duvet of her grief, she didn't have that luxury. For her to keep Tim's existence a secret, and to successfully maintain his undeadness, she had to carry on giving the best impression of her old self that she could muster. And that meant going to work.

The hospital building Kesta worked in was a throwback from the sixties. Four floors of dark brickwork, a copper roof burnished green

with age. Metal windows that were difficult to open and that fogged with condensation come rain or shine. Metal banisters painted black in hypnotic swirling shapes leading up to linear, sensible, regular corridors, off which the laboratories lay, the smell of latex, of formaldehyde, of butanol, all in competition with each other to burn the back of your eyeballs away. To Kesta, it smelled like home, albeit a little too literally these days.

By the time she arrived it was just after seven and the laboratory was as dead as a mortuary. The mortuary itself was in the basement. There was no one to keep her company other than the angry cells on the slide in front of her and the bodies on ice three floors below. Kesta preferred to work early, before there were colleagues to distract her, people filling up the space she needed to think and work in. She slipped on her starched white lab coat to examine the cellular profiles under her electron microscope.

The microscope always held the answers. It foretold the future. It sealed your fate. It bore hope and death together, clutching them in the same impartial hand. The microscope never lied at 350 times magnification. At a distance, Kesta had a fish-eye view over the ocular lens, globular and unfocused, but she could see a blossom of hematoxylin blues far too beautiful to be cancerous, throbbing and fluorescent, but there it was, nature at her most deadly.

Tell me what you see.

Carcinoma arising from the epithelial tissue of the kidney. Poorly defined. Stage four, yet to be graded.

Kesta sighed. This patient would not survive.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the light of her mobile glaring. A text message from Jess. How lovely it had been to see her. Was she getting enough sleep? When could they next have drinks? Kesta rubbed her eyes. She couldn't focus on Jess in between patients, she didn't have the bandwidth to conjure a reply, to write things she didn't mean, little white emoji lies to cover up the human-sized black one. Kesta positioned a second slide with the stage clip and squinted at it.

They were doodles in a supernatural hand, stained fluorescent by her own, and expertly. Interphase. Prophase. Metaphase. Duplication, thickening, and coil. The nuclear membrane in decline, beginning to fall apart. Suddenly it dawned on her. She was in the grip of mitosis, collapsing in on herself and splitting into two. A new version of Kesta had separated from the first, taking all the hallmarks of the original, but something other, something different. The two Kestas must exist as one: the grieving widow at work and the scientist nursing a zombie in her flat.

Kesta surveyed the remnants of her old life, which lay as tributes across her workstation. A diary Tim had bought her for her last birthday and in which she'd never had a chance to write. A stack of bleached paperwork, administration and its accompanying army of pens, pencils, elastic bands, and a stapler. A couple of scrunchies twisted together, strands of her hair stolen inside them. A fine silver-framed photograph of Tim in black tie, taken at their wedding, and all the better to look at because she wasn't in it.

Being separated from Tim during the day was agonizing. It had taken a while for her to relearn how to concentrate, to stop her brain from spiraling into negative speculation where clinical calm should exist. She had installed a webcam in the spare room and an app on her phone that allowed her to monitor him while she was at work. She opened it and waited for the swirling colored circle to resolve and the live feed to connect. But for the monitor and the handcuffs and the empty eyes, it looked like Tim was sleeping. She could expect the sedation to keep him quiet and still most of the day. It was a grim inevitability that he would develop a tolerance to the drugs she gave him. Each time she opened up the app, she felt her innards were on a spin cycle while it loaded.

Kesta spent an hour wading through the screening backlog. Just after eight, her colleague Claire bundled through the swing doors, mummified by her winter coat and scarf, even though it was July—Claire said it was always freezing in Hainault when she caught the train in the morning, and as Kesta had never been to Hainault, she didn't like to argue with her—the music from her headphones loud enough for Kesta to hear.