Praise for *HANDLE WITH CARE*

'A heartbreaking, visceral, and powerful novel . . . Ruby (and Ash's) story is beautiful and compelling, interwoven in prose and verse that will take your breath away – this novel packs an emotional and timely wallop that you won't soon forget. Everyone should read this book.' ***Kathleen Glasgow***

'In equal measures heartfelt and heartbreaking . . . Ruby's denial of motherhood is told with an astute emotional clarity that left me reeling. Prepare yourself, Reid has delivered another gut-punch of a novel.' ***Amy Beashel***

'Stunning. Powerful. Intense. *Handle With Care* is an intricate dance of individuals lost in their own needs, a heart wrenching story about the failure of fellowship and a deeply moving reminder of the importance of empathy. It left me ragged. Louisa Reid works magic with words.' ***Kathryn Evans***

'A storyteller of immense heart and skill.' ***Phil Earle***

'This book is magnificent in every way. Beautifully written, characters you feel like you know and a story so compelling it's impossible to put down. This will stay with me long after I turned the final page.' ***Natasha Devon***

'A visceral and emotive plea for empathy.' ***Tia Fisher***

'A powerful, emotive read that will leave you reeling . . . a story of teenage pregnancy and the waste of a young girl's potential in a world where young people can easily be abandoned.' ***Mel Darbon***

'Brutal in its truth, brilliant in its execution. These characters will haunt me for a long time.' ***Teri Terry***

'Utterly gripping, beautifully written, heartbreakingly emotional, raw and real. I couldn't stop reading this astonishing book. Warning: it will make you weep!' ***Liz Flanagan***

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Praise for GLOVES OFF

'*Gloves Off* is an intense, original and profoundly moving verse novel, filled with the fierce, hard joy of finding your power' *The Guardian*

'A skilful novel in blank verse . . . written with feeling, honesty and conviction, this is a story about body image and self-esteem that packs a knock-out punch' *Sunday Times Children's Book of the Week*

'A beautiful, lyrical read. Buy it for your daughters – and sons' *The Sun*

Praise for WRECKED

'Beautifully brutal and devastating' *Brian Conaghan*

'A profoundly moving story about truth and love' *Jenny Downham*

'After reading *Wrecked*, I am the title. Tragic, compelling, real, and beautifully written' *Teri Terry*

Praise for ACTIVIST

'A raw, unflinching novel . . . filled with white-hot, justified rage' *Guardian*

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'A timely and vital book that speaks to the concerns of many young people. Louisa Reid writes with a raw power that infuses her characters with energy and believability' *Ros Harding, SLA Librarian*

'Powerful and passionate, *Activist* embraces the fury of young women who refuse to be silenced. An anthem to raising your voice, to standing your ground and to the friends who help you find hope where none seemed possible. Exquisite.' *Amy Beashel, author*


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with
CARE

LOUISA REID

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“I bitterly feel the want of a friend.”

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

Part One

ASHLEY

It's 10.07 a.m. and Mr Batson has just taken the register at the start of second period when Ruby starts moaning.

"What's up?" I say, quiet so Batty doesn't start screaming at me in his *I used to be in the army, and don't you forget it* voice. I had to sneak past his beady eye on the way into class so he wouldn't clock my eye shadow or confiscate the new bracelet Jacques bought me for Valentine's – a cute silver charm hanging delicately at my wrist: a running shoe. If only it were magic, and could lead me out of the fog of school and into the fresh air, racing by my boyfriend's side to somewhere better.

I'm deep in the daydream when Ruby puts her head in her hands and moans again.

"I didn't know you hated history that much, Ruby," I say, still quiet, trying to make her laugh and leaning towards her. I can smell her shampoo. The same one she's used for years: coconut, vanilla, almond. It smells of being twelve and sleeping over, taking a shower in her ensuite, and using all her products. Organic. Expensive. Rich and buttery, like I imagine a trip to the Caribbean or the Maldives tastes. Her mum is proper loaded and so Ruby always smells good, has the shiniest lip gloss, the longest eyelashes, cheeks like roses. Hundred-quid haircuts and five-star resorts. I wait for an answer, but Ruby doesn't look at me, she's bent over the desk, head down. I poke her gently in the ribs.

"Have you not done that essay? Don't worry about it. You know you're Batson's fave. Like teacher's actual pet. So gross." But Ruby doesn't smile or laugh; she twists her face instead and shifts about, like she can't get comfortable, like something's really bugging her.

Under her blusher she's dead white. A couple of the kids in the row in front of us turn to stare; I flick them the finger and look back at my mate.

She's pale. Paler than usual, for February that is. She experimented with fake tan in Year Ten, said she wanted a bit more of a glow, that her mum said she looked sickly – holding her arm beside mine and pulling a face at her pallor. I told her it's only my freckles that make me look tanned; she wasn't convinced. She seems to have settled for her English Rose peachy creams (she calls it washed out, seen better days, ghost girl chic) after she ended up all streaky and orange, but reckons she'll go for a proper spray tan before summer. Right now, though, there's a sheen of sweat on her forehead and I'm wondering whether or not she's got Ebola or Coronavirus or some new hideous superbug, and why the hell the teachers don't still make us wear masks. I'm on the verge of sticking my hand up and calling Batty over because I don't want Ruby's puke all over my school uniform, much as I love her, when she answers.

"I'm fine."

Her thin smile is fooling no one. She winces, pulls a deep breath, and picks up her pen. Whatever. Leave her to it, I think, and look back at the board – I'll quiz her later. Book open, I start copying down the lesson objectives, then the causes of the First World War, because we do things in order of importance here at Nobhead Academy. Beside me, Ruby is doing the same thing, quiet again, scribbling in fits and starts, and I try not to watch her and make her feel weird, gently kick her ankle with my foot, just so she knows I'm here. We share another smile which says more than words could: it's a mixture of promises, feelings – like: I've got your back, can't

wait to talk later, you look good, what'll we do today? Tomorrow? For the rest of our lives? Who are we going to be, and how will we know we've decided right? Ruby is the friend who I share that stuff with. Her breathing steadies and we work for another minute, but at 10.13 there she goes again. It's a bit louder this time, this funny *Nuunuuuuh* sound which she smothers with her sleeve, chomping down on her designer version of the regulation school cardi, and she shifts in her chair like it's burning her bum, twists her face again and drops her head on the desk.

"You sure you're OK?" Something is up here. Zara catches my eye from over the other side of my best friend.

"She was feeling crappy in PE," Zara mutters over Ruby's head, "she kept legging it to the toilet."

"I didn't, I'm fine," Ruby says, "really." But she's shaking her head too fast, like she does when she's bullshitting. "I think I ate something, my stomach." She's panting a bit, and the sheen of sweat on her forehead doesn't look remotely healthy. "I'll go to the toilet. I think I need to go." She moans again, clutching her stomach, her face tight, eyes glassy.

"Look, you should go to the nurse," I tell her, but Ruby doesn't answer, she's too busy gripping the edge of the desk and trying to hold back another moan. She can't. It leaks from her, something prehistoric, scary, and the kids in front turn to stare again. A couple of lads start to laugh, thinking she's mucking about, waiting for it to kick off, and because of all the noise, Batty fixes Ruby, maybe for the first time ever, with his searchlight stare.

"Ruby Howard? Is there a problem?"

"Can I be excused, sir?" she manages to say, straightening, making eye contact with him. Her skin has lost all its colour now;

she's a kind of greasy shade of dead. "I don't feel good, I need the toilet."

Someone yells, "She's gonna barf," and someone else shouts, "No, she's not, she's gonna shit herself." And the room erupts in a frenzy of puke and crap noises that even Batson struggles to silence. I remember in Year Seven when poor Tilly Hall wet her pants in drama, a river of piss running down three tiers of seats. She's been Pissy Tilly ever since. Batson sighs. Looks at his watch.

"Wait for break. You should have gone at change over, shouldn't you?"

I'm fairly certain that the ability to go for a shit when you need one is a fundamental human right, and I'm about to tell Batson that very thing, when all at once Ruby is grabbing at the desk and moaning again and then her face looks surprised and I follow her stare and see that there's stuff, liquid, running down her legs, over my boots, puddling on the scuffed classroom floor. At first, I think she's actually gone and done a Tilly, but the noise coming from her snatches that thought away and replaces it with another far worse.

I stand up, grab her arm, hold her, because she's doubling over and it's only 10.18, which means that if what I think is happening is happening, then it's happening fast.

RUBY

Pain
drops

bowling
down

my thighs
and spine

c t n
r s w a d p
a p i t g i
m s r

I'm on a rack
wrung out, a rag

I need to get OUT
OUT of this room
this skin
this body
this pain

before I
SCREAM

but the door's too far
and I'm stuck here

GRIPPING the desk
I want to BITE
sink
my TEETH
into the wood

Ash stares.
    Her face, a question,
    eyes fixed,
    mouth open,
    asking for answers that I don't have.

Pretend I'm fine.
Pretend I'm not standing here
something running down my legs.

They all think I've wet myself.

All night I lay in bed
my belly tight.
Not a second's sleep.
Period, I thought,
thank God,
maybe
my period is coming at last,
and I swallowed pills,
paracetamol, ibuprofen,
and tried to dream.

But now,
    now my body
    is an enemy
                that takes my breath,
                and holds me in a relentless fist.

I pant, try to stand up straight,
gasp,
don't want to make a noise,
don't want them to look,

but it **HURTS.**

I bite my lip, my cheeks.
Head spins.

I want to be sick.

Ash's mouth opens
    shuts
    something comes out,
    can't hear a word
    can only feel the terrible **crush**.

"Ash," I groan,

    "am I dying? What the hell?"

        And I'm leaning against her

fisting my hands in her hair
trying so hard not to swear and yell

because over Ash's shoulder Kitchener is wagging his finger
and there's a big poster shouting *Dig for Victory!*
and pinned up underneath it, my essay on the Suffragettes
and in my head the two merit marks,
small proof that I should be going somewhere.

My brain is dark,
my body a space that thoughts can't fill,
a black hole,
an exploding, flaming hell,
iron claws grip,
hard teeth grind –

then let go.

"Ash," I pant, "I'm going home."

I reach for my bag, my blazer,
try to pretend
that whatever is happening
is not happening to me.
I am not this girl.

But I don't get far,
I lean on the desk,
head on my arms

because here it comes,
again,
I can't.
I can't.
I turn back to Ash, grab for her, pull away,
shaking my head, I moan and stare at the
blur of Batson
the rest of the class the **question** marks the ***agony***
every
where.

ASHLEY

"Mr Batson," I yell over the racket of Ruby, who's gasping and grabbing me, lowing like a cow, and the other kids shouting and swearing and making sick noises, climbing on the desks and holding their bags aloft, because they still think my mate's wet her knickers and that's what's spreading onto their stuff.

"Can you get the nurse, sir?" I shout above the hoo-ha. Do I shout that I think maybe she's having a baby? Do I yell that I reckon her waters have broken? No way.

"What in the name of God is going on back there? Sit down, you lot," Batson barks as he makes his way towards us, dodging desks and chairs and Year Elevens who thought they'd come in here for a history lesson and are getting a bit more biology than they bargained for. Ruby straightens, her eyes are huge and frightened and flooding with tears.

"Ash?" she says. "What's going on? I'm scared. I want my mum," she whispers, and I know then that she really doesn't know what's happening, because if she did then her mother is the last person she'd be asking for. Ruby groaning and grunting and swearing and about to give birth would not be Mrs Howard's idea of classy. Would not impress.

"I need to go home," Ruby says, holding herself, her body, as if it's dirty laundry – a bundle she'd like to gather up and hide.

"Are you ill?" the dickhead teacher asks, staring, one eye on Ruby, one eye on Kyle who's marching along the desks making robot noises, just because he can.

"Mr Batson," I warn, "you need to get the nurse and the head of year in here now, and get the rest of the class out, OK?" His mouth falls open and he stares at me, a bollocking on his lips, and then here we go again, Ruby drops her bag and scrabbles at me, clutching and grabbing and moaning.

"Oh my God, I'm dying," she screams into my neck, "make it stop." And I know we're in serious trouble. This is happening way too fast.

"Hold on, babe, breathe, right, just breathe, and don't panic, you'll be OK. You'll be all right. Just try to keep calm. I'm here. You'll be all right." I'm saying all this stuff and not meaning a word of it, my own heart racing like I'm running the one hundred against Tara Gray and knowing she's going to beat me.

"Uuuuurghhhh," is the noise Ruby makes over and over and I just stand there and let her grip the shit out of my shoulders, her head buried into my chest, her hips and bum swaying. "Urrrghhhhhhh," she bellows, and finally Batson gets it and springs into action. But I reckon he's too late.

RUBY

It's getting worse.
This pain that I can't put into words.
Worse
    than the time I fell when I was a kid,
    when Ashley's big brother dared me to jump
    from the highest rung on the climbing frame,

        said I could fly like a bird,
                I just needed to believe.

I smiled into his smile,
    launched myself up and into the soft blue air
    and for a second it was true, I flew
    before I fell
    and snapped a bone in my leg.

It hurts worse than throwing up,
    worse than hurling my insides
    behind the school hall
    back in September when I should have been performing
    at our GCSE music show.

It hurts worse than being on my own too much.
    It hurts worse than silence
    and my texts left unread.

Worse than no one noticing when I feel like shit.

Worse than hanging around outside the front door
of the one who doesn't want to know me any more
(in the dark and the rain
skulking like a thief, or a ghost –
I wouldn't be invisible
if only he'd look).

"How many minutes?"
    The words come from a distance,
    from another universe,
    where time and space still work like the equations
    I know so well I recite them in my sleep.
    Next period is physics.
    We have a test.

"Three," Ash says, and then, as if to prove her right,
                the pain erupts, tripled, quadrupling
    as I gasp
    and
Ash checks her watch,
    counting down
like she does before she starts to run,
    chasing Jacques
across the park,
    fastest of all.
On your marks, get set: GO!

                ("Two, they're two minutes now.
Has someone called the ambulance yet?")

“What’s wrong with me?”

I can’t help myself,
    can’t stop
    the eruption
    spewing fire
    and swearing, shouting into Ash’s face,
“Please, stop this, stop it.
    It’s so bad, Ash,
    help me.
    Please?”

She soothes, holding my hand,
    “You’re OK,
    keep breathing, keep calm,
    you’re going to be fine.”

But I’m not.
I’m not.

She smooths my hair,
    but her hand is hot,
    I pull back.
    Fighting against forces
    I can’t even see.
    An enemy inside of me.

“Babe, you do get it?” she says,
staring, gazing at me, holding me tighter

"You do understand?
Shit,
right, well,
Ruby, I think –
you must know this, right?
Ruby –
I reckon,
I think, you're giving
birth.

Ruby, you're having a **BABY**."

ASHLEY

By 10.33 I know it's going to be the sort of day I'll never forget. My best mate is on her hands and knees on the floor in Batson's history classroom, saying she's going to poo herself, and the school nurse is getting Ruby's knickers off her and telling her to go if she needs to. There's loads of blood and I really don't want to look at what's happening down there, and I really wish that Ruby wasn't about to a) shit herself and b) give birth. But if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride, as Mum says, so I stay next to Ruby's head, try not to look, and start to pray. Prayer being the only thing I think that will help us now.

Dear God, make this quick.

Dear God, make it not hurt.