

JODI MAY'S



HSA vs IT

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FOREWORD & DISCLAIMER

First and foremost, I do not own the characters of 'IT' nor the original concept. All rights remain with the original author, Stephen King. It's important to note that this is a homage to the original story, which happens to be my favourite book. I was inspired by every single page and read it once a year, every summer, to be whisked away to Derry all over again. It occurred to me, after the two recent films (I prefer the 1990's television series) that a lot of people love the story and adore 'Pennywise the Dancing Clown' but they never get the chance to read the book. Put off by its length, they miss out on the magic of the tale as King wrote it. With this crossover homage fan fiction I wanted to bring a piece of that magic (and horror) to life and it's my hope, above all, that I'll be able to encourage just one person to pick up the original book.

Secondly, the '*Hillside Academy*' characters featured in this fan fiction are all my own. The only character I took from King's story was 'Pennywise'. The rest are mine and all belong to me by law. I will also add that much of the main characters' backstories have been changed to fit this specific 'alternative universe' and several of the minor characters of the story have also been altered. To conclude, there are no spoilers to the main '*Hillside Academy*' series. Rather, it is a way for me to highlight the main eight (Erika, Dominic, Sam, Anna, Emily, Will, Elivia and Tom) in this horror fan fiction that is dedicated to not only Stephen King for inspiring me to keep writing all these years, but also to the people of Lancaster, Lancashire.

Thus bringing me to the penultimate point of this disclaimer. Throughout the book, Lancaster is referred to not always kindly and sometimes in a negative light. This is fiction. I wanted to set this gruesome fan fiction homage in this city because for one, it's truly beautiful and has a rich, fantastic history, and secondly, because I love it. I moved here just over two years ago and fell quickly in love with the history and architecture. My babies were born here and in a way, so was I. By leaving the place I grew up and all its ghosts, I was liberated. This city has quickly become not the place I was raised but the place I was born. And the people? The people of Lancaster are wonderful. They're community-orientated, kind and generous, and during a rather arduous period, the community of Greaves specifically aided us greatly. My partner and I are eternally grateful for their generosity and kindness during this time and this is my strange way of saying thank you; of bringing Lancaster to the forefront again and displaying it in all its glory. So whatever you may read, remember it is fiction and that Lancaster, UK is my favourite place in the world. So to the people of Lancaster, thank you.

And last but not least, a disclaimer to say that the content of this chapter and all the following contain strong language, violence against children, sexual references, scenes of gore and peril and is quite frankly inappropriate for young readers or anyone easily offended. But if this is all to your taste, go ahead and read.

I hope you enjoy reading this 'alternative universe' fan fiction homage as much as I enjoyed writing it. All comments are welcome (though don't be mean), shares are encouraged and remember –

Once you begin this story...*you'll float too.*

CHAPTER ONE

After the Flood (2008)

The terror, which would not end for another twenty-seven years – if it ever did end – began, so far as I know or can tell, with a remote control boat made from wood floating down a gutter swollen with rain.

The boat rose and fell, careening along on its right before righting itself again. It cruised through the perilous onrush of water surging down Ashton Road toward the slope at the junction at the end of Bridge Road. The streets were heavy with gloom this afternoon in the autumn of 2008, the houses shadowy too. There had been a steady stream of rain for a week and three days ago the winds had arrived. Several sections of Lancaster had lost their power then and most of the city sat in darkness still.

A small boy in a yellow waterproof jacket and red Wellington boots ran merrily alongside the remote control boat. The rain hadn't stopped but it was finally easing off. It tip-tapped on the hood of the boy's jacket; a comfortable, cosy sound like rain on a shed roof. The boy in the yellow waterproof was Toby Johnson. He was ten. His brother, Dominic, known to most kids at the Ripley St Thomas Church of England Secondary School (and even to some teachers, who would never have used the nickname to his face) as Dumb Dom, was at home, coughing up the end of a particularly brutal case of flu. In that autumn of 2008, eight months before the real horrors began and twenty-eight years before the final showdown, Dumb Dom was fourteen years old.

Dominic and Toby had made the boat together. They'd completed it that afternoon; Dominic sat up in bed propped against a pile of pillows, while their father played 'Just Like Heaven' on his old acoustic guitar in the living room and rain swept relentlessly against his bedroom window.

Halfway down the street heading toward the junction at the end of Bridge Road, Ashton Road was blocked by traffic cones and sawhorses. Written across each was LANCASTER CITY COUNCIL. Within this cordoned off area, lit up with burning embers lights to warn anyone insane enough to be out in this weather of the obstruction, the gutters had begun to regurgitate the rubbish and autumn leaves swept inside of them by the unyielding rain. Gradually, the water of the storm had begun to chew through the tar and concrete, causing it to crack and tear away in places, as if the very ground was yawning. It was around this time, when many of the roads of the city had become impassable, some like great waterfalls sweeping away wheelie bins and even that one car, many people in Lancaster had begun to make nervous jokes about arks. The council had managed to keep Ashton Road

open, but Bridge Road had become a river and was impassable from the sawhorses all the way to the abandoned asylum up the way, and to the hospital in the opposite direction.

But everyone agreed – the worst was over. The River Lune had risen to just below its banks and just inches below the concrete sides of the canal which wound through the middle of the ancient city, just above the centre. Right now, the business owners of Lancaster were removing the sandbags they'd thrown up the day before in such panicked haste, in fear of their properties. Yesterday, overspill and expensive flood damage had seemed inevitable. It had happened before; the flooding in 1954 had been a disaster which had cost millions of pounds and over two hundred lives. That was a long time ago but there were still enough people around who remembered it to frighten the rest. One of the flood victims had been found twenty-three miles south on the beach at Fleetwood. The fish had eaten this sorry man's eyes, three of his toes, his penis and most of his left foot. Clutched in what remained of his hand had been an Audi steering wheel.

Now the river was receding and when the new Lune Hydro dam went in upstream, the river would cease to be a threat. Or so said Andrew Johnson's friends who all worked for the Lancaster City Council. As for the rest, well future floods could take care of themselves. Most residents of Lancaster blamed the fool who'd thought that putting the city's main electricity substation by the Lune was a good idea – it was not. And every year, the citizens of this city must live with this one man's mistake. Definitely a *man's* mistake, or so said Julianne Johnson who thought very lowly of the male species in general. The thing about this storm was to get through it, to get the power back on and then forget. In Lancaster, such forgetting of tragedy and disaster was almost an art, as Dominic Johnson would come to discover with time.

Toby stopped just before the sawhorses at the edge of the deep ravine that had been cut through the tar surface of Bridge Road. This ravine ran almost exactly in a diagonal and ended on the far side of the street. But Toby paid it hardly any mind as he laughed loudly – that gleeful naivety that could only belong to a child who wasn't aware of his approaching death – and watched as the gushing water swept his remote control boat through miniature white rapids which had been formed by the breaks in the concrete. Sprinting to keep up with it, water sloshed out from underneath his Wellington boots. Their buckles made a jolly jingling as Toby Johnson ran toward his strange death. And the feeling which filled him at that moment was a pure and simple love for his brother, Dominic. Love and a touch of regret that Dominic couldn't be here to see their boat on its maiden voyage. He would try to describe it to his big brother when he got home but he would never be able to make Dominic see it the way Dominic would have been able to make Toby see it if their positions had been reversed. Contrary to popular belief from his notorious nickname, Toby's older brother was good at reading and writing. He always got all A's on his homework and his teachers adored his musical compositions. But this didn't stop the name-calling or the stigma Dominic carried with him from childhood into adolescence. Even at Toby's age, he was wise enough to know that one moment in someone's life could brand them for the rest of their days.

The boat sailed through the diagonal channel in the road, a few weeks ago just a kit in a box given to Dominic for his birthday in September. But even if it was just a few planks of wood, some glue and paint, and the remote Toby held limply in his hand – unnecessary today as the ferocious current of the water carried it along – he imagined it as a torpedo boat in a war movie, like the ones he sometimes at The Dukes Theatre with Dominic on Saturday afternoons. A war film with Tom Hanks or Matt Damon fighting Germans on the beaches. The prow of the boat dipped low into the water, sending out ripples of its own as it rushed along, before rising as it reached the gutter on the left side of Ashton Road. A recent crack in the concrete sucked the small wooden boat into a particularly lethal whirlpool making Toby fear its end on its very first voyage. With bated breath, Toby watched as it leaned and then righted itself again. Turning fast, it raced onwards toward Bridge Road. Toby sprinted after it, cheering with triumph. Over his head, a grim gust of October wind whistled through the trees, now almost completely bare of their golden brown leaves, stripped clean by the ravenous storm.

Sitting up in his bed, cheeks still flushed with heat – but his fever, like the River Lune, finally receding – Dominic had finished the boat. When Toby reached for it, Dominic held it out of reach.

“We need batteries.”

“What? Why?”

“For the remote, you git.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re in the cellar, on the shelf as you go down,” Dominic said.

Toby had gone obediently to get the batteries. He could hear his father playing the guitar, not ‘Just Like Heaven’ by the Cure, but something he didn’t like as much. He could hear the rain battering the kitchen windows. These were comforting sounds but the thought of the cellar was not a bit comfortable. He didn’t like the cellar and he didn’t like going down the cellar stairs. He always imagined there was something down there in the dark. It was silly, of course, his father said so and his mother said so, and more importantly, Dominic said so, but still.

He didn’t even like opening the door to pull the light string because he always had the thought – a thought he daren’t tell anybody in fear they’d laugh – that while he was reaching for the light string, a horrible clawed paw would settle over his wrist and then jerk him down into the darkness that smelt of dirt and wet and rotting vegetables.

Ridiculous! There was no such things with claws, all hairy and full of killing rage. Every now and then someone went crazy and killed a lot of people – sometimes Fiona Bruce reported such things on the evening news – and there were terrorists, but there was no weirdo living in their cellar. Still, this thought lingered. In those minutes while he was groping for the light string with his left hand (his right arm curled around the door in a tight grip), that cellar smell seemed to intensify until it filled the world. Smells of dirt and wet and long-gone vegetables would merge into one unmistakable intoxicating smell, the smell of the monster, the epitome of all monsters. It was the scent of something for which he had no name; the smell of It, crouched and lurking and ready to pounce. A creature which would eat anything but which was especially hungry for boymeat.

He had opened the door that afternoon and had reached for the hanging light string, his eyes clamped shut, the tip of his tongue poking from the corner of his mouth. Funny? Har-dee-har-har! Look at the baby! Toby's scared of the dark. His brother would call him a pussy and Toby didn't want to be a scaredy-cat.

The sound of the guitar came from what his father called the living room and what his mother called the salon, which always sounded far better in her delicate French accent. It sounded like music from a whole other world... far away and not totally unlike the way talk and laughter must sound on a summer-crowded beach to an exhausted swimmer drowning in the current.

His fingers grasped the string. *Yes!* He yanked and nothing. No light.

Bugger, no power.

Toby yanked back his arm. He stepped away from the open cellar door, his heart galloping in his chest. There was a power cut – had been for days. How could he have forgotten?

Sod it. What do I do now?

He couldn't go back and tell Dom he couldn't get the batteries because of the power cut and that he was afraid something might get him as he stood at the top of the cellar stairs – something that wasn't a terrorist or a mass murderer but a creature far worse than either. That he feared it would slither up the ice-cold stone steps and wrap its clawed paws around his ankles. That would go over brilliantly, wouldn't it? Others might laugh but Dom wouldn't. He'd be mad. He would say, 'Grow up, Toby...do you want this boat or not?'

As if this thought were his cue, Dominic called from his bedroom: "Did you die out there, Toby?"

"No, I'm getting it, Dom," Toby called back. He rubbed at his arms, trying to make the guilty Goosebumps disappear. "I just stopped to get a Coke."

"Well hurry up!"

So Toby walked down the four steps to the cellar shelf, his heart a jackhammer in his throat, the hair on the back of his neck standing to attention, his eyes watery, his hands clammy, sure that at any moment the cellar door would slam shut on its own, closing off the grey light falling through the kitchen windows, and then he would see it. Something worse than all the terrorists and murderers in the world. Worse than the Nazis. Worse than Darth Vader. Worse than the monsters in a hundred horror movies. It, growling deeply. He would hear the growl in those lunatic seconds before it pounced upon him and tore out his innards.

The cellar-smell was worse today because of the storm. Their house was high on Bridge Road, near the junction to Heaton Road, and they'd narrowly escaped the worst of it, but there was still standing water down there that had seeped in through the bedrock. The smell was low and unpleasant, sticking in his throat and making him gulp rapidly and repeatedly.

Toby sifted through the rubbish on the shelf as fast as he could – old cans of shoe polish, rags, a box of Halloween decorations, two mostly empty bottles of Flash and an old circular tin of Cat wax. For some reason, this tin struck him and he spent nearly thirty seconds looking at the cat on the lid with a kind of hypnotic wonder. Then he tossed it back and here it was, at last, a box of Duracell batteries.

Toby snatched it and ran up the stairs as fast as he could, suddenly aware that his t-shirt tail was hanging out behind him and suddenly certain that this would be his undoing. That thing in the cellar would allow him to get almost out and then it would grab the tail of his t-shirt and snatch him back –

He reached the kitchen and slammed the door shut behind him. It closed with a bang, vibrating the walls of the kitchen. He leaned against it with his eyes shut, sweat coating his arms and forehead, the box of batteries gripped tightly in one hand.

The guitar had come to a stop and his father's voice floated to him: "Toby? Can't you slam that door a little harder next time, lad? Maybe you could break some of the plates in the cupboard if you really tried."

"Sorry, Dad," he called back.

"Toby, you git!" Dom yelled from his bedroom. He didn't bother to keep his voice low. With their mother out, there was no need for niceties which Julianne Johnson required in her home. Their father didn't care about a few cuss words.

Toby snickered a little, his fear already gone; it had slipped away from him as easily as a nightmare slips away from a man who awakes. All gone...until the next time, when, in the grip of the nightmare, all fears will be remembered.

That cat, Toby thought, going to the fridge to grab a can of Coke.

Where did I see a cat like that before?

But no answer came, and he dismissed the question.

Taking the coke, he headed back upstairs to Dom's room at the front of the house next to his.

"What a little prick you are, Toby," Dominic said, amiably enough. He reached for the remote control of the boat on the nightstand, sitting among an empty glass, a pitcher of water, a box of tissues, a bottle of sinus spray and a tub of Vicks. His phone was there too, playing Red Hot Chilli Peppers. Their mother loathed them but Toby, Dominic and their father loved them.

"I'm not a prick," Toby said, sitting on the edge of Dom's bed and handing over the box of AA batteries.

"Yes you are," Dom said, "Nothing but a little tiny cock, that's you."

Toby tried to imagine himself as a tiny penis with legs and began to giggle.

"You'd only have one eye. A little eye right at the top that you see and pee through," Dom said, beginning to laugh too.

"I'm a cock but you're just a big ole hairy arsehole," Toby replied. This broke both boys up for nearly two minutes.

There followed a whispered conversation, one that would mean very little to anyone except young boys; accusations of who was the arsehole and who was the penis. Finally, Dominic said one of the forbidden words and accused Toby of being a girl's fanny. This got them both laughing hard. Dominic's laughter soon turned into a coughing fit. As it began to taper off, Dominic's face an awful shade of purple that alarmed Toby, the guitar stopped again. They both looked in the direction of the landing beyond the door, listening for the sound of the acoustic guitar being put down and their father's footsteps on the stairs. Dom buried his mouth into a bundle of tissues, stifling the last of the coughs, pointing at the pitcher at the same time. Toby poured him a glass of water, which he drank hungrily.

The guitar began again, Better Days this time. Dumb Dom never forgot that song, and even many years later it never failed to bring Goosebumps to his arms and back; his heart would drop and he would remember; *my father was playing that the day Toby died.*

"You gonna cough anymore, Dom?"

"No."

Dominic pulled another tissue from the box, made a rumbling sound in his chest, spat phlegm into the tissue, screwed it up, and tossed it into the bin by his bed, which was filled with similar twists of tissue. Then he opened the box of batteries and tapped four into his palm.

Toby watched him closely but without speaking or asking questions. Dom didn't like Toby talking to him while he did stuff, and Toby had learned that if he just kept his mouth shut, Dom would usually explain what he was doing.

“You’ve got to make sure the negatives meet the pluses and the pluses meet the negatives,” Dominic explained. When he was with Toby, he didn’t second guess himself. In school, however, ever since the incident, Dominic tended to stay quiet. Talking in class, putting his hand up to answer a question was practically impossible. Every time he was called upon it was as if his peers all held their breaths ready to guffaw with laughter at the next mistake Dominic would make. His face would turn red, in stark comparison to his coal-black hair and he wouldn’t be able to speak. Ever since the incident, the one that had caused poor Dominic Johnson to wet his pants all those years ago at just eight years old had stayed with him into his teenage years. Everyone was just waiting for the next time Dumb Dom pissed himself again.

He popped the four batteries into the open back of the controller.

“Can I do anything?” Toby asked.

“Yeah – don’t get any Coke on the floor or Maman will have a shit.”

Toby held his can of Coke close to his chest as he watched Dominic use a screwdriver to replace the panel over the batteries on the back of the controller. Once he was done, he passed it to Toby and gestured to the finished boat. Toby held it, admiring the glossy finish to its hull and the little steering wheel which spun freely when he pushed it.

“This is awesome!” he said, “I’m gonna go out and sail it.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Dom said. He suddenly looked tired and still not very well.

“I wish you could come,” Toby said. He really did. Dom sometimes got bossy after a while but he always had the coolest ideas and he hardly ever hit. “It’s your boat, really.”

“She,” Dom said, “You call boats She.”

“She, then.”

“I wish I could come, too,” Dom said glumly.

“Well...,” Toby shifted from one foot to the other, the boat in his hands.

“You go and put your coat on,” Dom said “Or you’ll end up with the flu, like me. You’ve probably got it anyway.”

“Thanks, Dom. It’s an awesome boat.” And then he did something he hadn’t done for a long time, something Dominic never forgot; he leaned over and hugged him.

“You’ll catch it for sure now, you prick,” Dominic said, but he seemed cheered up all the same. He smiled at Toby. “Put the batteries back or Maman will go mental.”

“Sure.” Toby gathered up the boat, the controller and the box of batteries sitting precariously on top of them all.

“Toby?”

Toby turned back to look at his brother.

“Be careful.”

“Sure.” His brow creased a little. That was something your maman said, not your big brother. It was as strange as him giving Dom a hug. “Sure I will.”

Then he went out and Dominic never saw him again.

Now here he was, chasing his boat down the left-hand side of Ashton Road. He was running fast but the water was faster and his boat was rushing ahead. Toby heard a deep roar and saw, a few yards ahead at the incline down from Ashton Road into Bridge Road that the drain was still open and the water was gushing inside. It was a long dark rectangle cut into the grey curb and as Toby watched, a stripped branch, its bark as dark and glistening as sealskin, shot into the drain’s gaping mouth. It hung there for a moment before being devoured. That was where his boat was headed.

“Oh shit! Oh, shit on it!” Toby yelled with dismay.

He sped up and for a single second, he believed he would catch the boat in time. Then one of his feet slipped and he fell face-first onto the coarse pavement, shaving the skin off of one knee and both palms. He cried out in pain. From his new pavement-level perspective, Toby watched as his boat swung around twice and then disappeared inside the drain.

“Shit! Shit on it!” he bellowed again and slammed his sore fist down on the pavement. That hurt too and he began to cry a little. What a stupid way to lose the boat he and Dom had built together. Dominic will be furious.

Slowly, he got up and waded over to the drain. He dropped to his knees in the murky puddles and peered in. The water made a dank hollow sound as it fell into the darkness. It was a spooky sound. It reminded him of –

“Huh!” The sound was jerked out of him as if on a string, and he recoiled.

There were yellow eyes in the drain: the sort of eyes he’d always imagined but never actually seen down in the cellar. It’s an animal, he thought incoherently. That’s all it is, some animal, maybe a housecat that got stuck down in there –

Prepared to run once the shock of seeing those two glowing yellow eyes had released him from its grip, he felt the rough surface of the road under his fingers and the sheet of cold water flowing around him. He felt himself to get up and back away when a voice – a perfectly reasonable and pleasant voice – spoke to him from inside the drain.

“Hi, Toby!” it said.

Toby blinked and looked again. He could hardly understand what he was looking at. It was like something from a movie where the animals were CGI and while you knew they weren't real, they acted real and after a while, it was though you forgot what you were looking at was just code on a computer screen. If he had been fourteen years old, he wouldn't have stuck around to take in the sight before him. But he was not fourteen. He was ten and there was a clown in the drain.

The light was dim but not so dim that Toby Johnson wasn't sure what he was looking at. It was a clown, like the ones in the circus or on TV. In fact, it looked a bit like Ronald McDonald, the unnerving mascot for the fast-food chain. The face of the clown in the drain was white, there were fluffy tufts of red hair on either side of its bald head, and there was a big clown-smile painted over its mouth. The clown held a bunch of balloons, all colours, like gorgeous ripe fruit in one hand.

In the other, he held Toby's remote control boat.

“Want your boat, Toby?” The clown smiled.

Toby smiled back. He couldn't help it; it was the kind of smile you just had to answer. “Yes please.”

The clown laughed. “Yes, please! That's good! That's very good! And how about a balloon?”

“Er okay!” He reached forward and then drew his hand reluctantly back. “I shouldn't take stuff from strangers. My papa said so.”

“Very wise of your papa,” the clown in the drain said, smiling.

How, Toby wondered, could I have thought his eyes were yellow? They were bright, dancing green, the colour of his dad's eyes, and Dom's.

“Very wise indeed. Therefore I will introduce myself. I, Toby, am Mr Bob Grey, also known as Pennywise the Dancing Clown. Pennywise, meet Toby Johnson. Toby, meet Pennywise. And now we know each other. I'm not a stranger to you, and you're not a stranger to me. Corrrrr-ect?”

Toby laughed. “I guess so.” He reached forward again and drew his hand back again. “How did you get down there?”

“The storm just bleeew me away,” Pennywise the Dancing Clown said. “It blew the whole circus away. Can you smell the circus, Toby?”

Toby leaned forward. All at once, he could smell vinegar and chips. Hot salty chips and doughnuts! The sugary type that burned your fingers and seeped grease through the paper bag. He could smell candyfloss, bonfire smoke, cigarettes and perfumes and yet...

And yet, under it all was the smell of flood and decomposing leaves and dark drain shadows. That smell was wet and rotten. The cellar-smell.

But the other smells were stronger.

“Yeah, I can smell it!” Toby said.

“Want your boat back, Toby?” Pennywise asked, “I only repeat myself because you really do not seem that eager.” He held it up, smiling. He was wearing a baggy silk suit with great big red buttons. A bright green bowtie tight around his neck and on his hands were big white gloves, like the kind Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck always wore.

“Yeah, sure,” Toby said, looking into the drain.

“And a balloon? I’ve got red, and green and yellow and blue...”

“Do they float?”

“Float?” The clown’s grin widened. “Oh yes, indeed they do. They float. And there’s candyfloss...”

Toby reached.

The clown seized his arm.

And Toby saw the clown’s face change.

What he saw then was terrible enough to make his worst imaginings of the things in the cellar look like sweet dreams; what he saw destroyed his sanity in one clawing stroke.

“*They float,*” the thing in the drain crooned in a warbled, chuckling voice. It held Toby’s arm in its strong and wormy grip, it pulled Toby toward that terrible darkness where the water rushed and roared and bellowed as it bore its cargo of storm debris toward the sea. Toby craned his neck away from that final blackness and screamed into the rain; screamed mindlessly into the grey autumn sky which hung heavy above Lancaster on that day in the autumn of 2008. His screams were shrill and piercings, and all up and down Bridge Road and this end of Ashton Road, people came to their windows and front doors.

“They float,” it growled, “they float, Toby, and when you’re down here with me, you’ll float too –.”

Toby’s shoulder socked against the concrete of the curb and Isaac Hutchins, who’d stayed home from his job at the city dump that day because of the flood, saw only a small boy in a yellow raincoat, a small boy who was screaming and writhing in the gutter with muddy water surfing over his face and making his screams sound bubbly.

“Everything down here floats,” that chuckling, rotten voice whispered, and suddenly there was a ripping noise and a flaring sheet of agony, and Toby Johnson knew no more.

Isaac Hutchins was the first to get there, and although he arrived only forty-five seconds after the first scream, Toby Johnson was already dead. Hutchins grabbed him by the back of the raincoat, pulled him into the street... and began to scream himself as Toby's body turned over in his hands. The left side of Toby's waterproof was now bright red. Blood flowed into the drain from the tattered hole where the left arm had been. A knob of bone, horribly bright, peeked through the torn material.

The boy's green eyes stared up into the grey sky, and as Isaac staggered away toward the others already running down the street, they began to fill up with rain.

Somewhere below, in the drain that was already filled to near capacity with rotten autumn leaves, rubbish from the delayed bin collection that week and swelling water (there could have been no one down there, the Chief Inspector would later express to a Lancaster Guardian reporter with a frustrated fury so great it burst out of him; the Gypsy King himself would have been swept away in that driving current), Toby's remote control boat shot onward through the shadowy drains that roared and bellowed with water. For a while, it ran neck-and-neck with a discarded aromatic duck from a nearby takeaway, and then at some junction south of the town, the duck was swept off to the left while Toby's boat went straight.

An hour later, while Toby's mother was being sedated in the A&E Department at the Lancaster Royal Infirmary and while Dumb Dom sat shell-shocked and pale and silent in his bed, listening to his father sob hoarsely in the living room where he'd been playing Better Days by the Cure when Toby went out, the boat shot out the drain like an arrow leaving a bow and ran at speed into an unnamed stream. When it joined the boiling swollen River Lune estuary twenty-minutes later, the first rifts of blue had begun to show in the sky above. The storm was over.

The boat bobbed and took on water but it didn't sink; the two brothers had built it well. I do not know where it finally ended up, if ever did stop sailing – that very first voyage. Perhaps it reached the sea and sails there forever. All I know is that it was still afloat and running on the breast of the flood when it passed the town limits of Lancaster, Lancashire, and there it passes out of this tale forever.

CHAPTER TWO

The Reckless and the Brave

“Eh fatty boom boom! Have another cream cake! Eh, fatty boom boom!”

These girls were merciless, the ring leader of which was Samantha Rose. At fourteen, she was already the most beautiful girl Emily Fox had ever seen. It was unreal. With dazzling straight red hair, fair skin and piercing blue eyes that were always able to find Emily no matter where she was – even in her dreams – Samantha was the epitome of beauty. Emily, however, was not.

She was, as they sang, fat. And being fat, fourteen and with the best grades at Lancaster Girls’ Grammar school was a death sentence. Friendless, sweaty and out of breath from the long walk home from school that July afternoon in 2009, Emily hurried her pace to be away from Samantha and her gorgeous crew of sour mouthed bitches.

Her daily route, which she walked twice a day, from the prestigious school in the centre of the city to her home in one of the outer neighbourhoods, Greaves, was supposedly a half an hour stroll, or so her guardian, Rupert liked to proclaim every time she complained. It was, in fact, for Emily with her short chubby legs and heavy school bag, a nearly fifty-minute hike which led her down the old streets, passed the grand terrace houses of Regent Street, pass the delectable smelling fish and chip shop on the corner of Aldcliffe Road, across the canal, through the Royal Infirmary’s grounds, out onto Ashton Road and along the back streets of Greaves, where rundown houses inhabited until she made it to Bridge Road. From there, it was a steep climb along the streets, Dorrington, then Heaton, St Paul’s – past the church where her guardian was a vicar – and finally to Ardengate perched high above the rest of Greaves. Her house, 1 Ardengate, a two-storey modest sandstone home was set back from the gravel track and from the window of her bedroom she could just about make out the park below. She’d spent many hours gazing dreamily down at the children playing freely, running around after a ball or sitting in clusters in the summer days. But that life, one of friendship, freedom and fun did not belong to Emily.

Emily Fox.

The fattest girl at Lancaster Girls’ Grammar.

And to make things worse, she was an orphan.

Blowing the loose strands of dark hair from her eyes that had fallen from the tight ponytail Rupert’s wife, Lindsay insisted she wear every day, Emily started the long hike up Dorrington Road. However, any hopes that Samantha and her friends would leave her alone

this afternoon – the last day of term and the beginning of the long summer holidays – were fruitless. With every step Emily took, Samantha and her friends followed, singing that same old song merrily as if it were a Christmas jingle. To Emily, it was a war cry. It sent shudders down on her hot back. In this stifling heat, she felt as though she were suffocating in the tight collar of her blouse which made her neck bulge and her face redder than it already was.

“*Eh fatty fatty fatty!*” Samantha cheered.

Glancing over her shoulder, Emily noticed that they were getting closer. She didn't like to think about what they would do if they caught up with her. Usually, the song was enough; making her hurry her pace so she wobbled, causing more laughter amongst the skinny girls. But today, it didn't seem to satisfy Samantha who looked hungry. And unlike Emily's own hunger – having skipped lunch as always to save the embarrassment of eating in the cafeteria amongst her peers – Samantha's wasn't for food. This was for Emily's tears. For her humiliation. Samantha fed on it like a leech. And today, she was ravenous.

Quickening her pace further, her breaths coming in short raspy pants from both the exertion of pacing up the steep hill and the creeping fear as Samantha's voice grew closer, Emily kept her focus ahead. Her calves burned and her thumbs hooked beneath the straps of her tatty old school bag ached and itched from the rubbing back and forth. Still, Emily didn't stop. Not even to catch her breath.

“Oh! You're going fast today, fatty! What is it? Dinner time already! Better hurry up, *piggy!*” Samantha jeered. What followed was snorting from all of her friends; great honks and snorts like a farmyard of swine chasing behind Emily.

“Better run, piggy! Piggy piggy piggy!” Samantha hollered.

Passing Franklin Street on her left, the last junction on Dorrington Road, Emily walked on to her usual route. However as she approached the alleyway, the quiet narrow alleyway which led down the back of the houses and past the playing field, Emily questioned her judgement. If she was cornered down there, there would be nowhere to run. And besides, would she even be able to outrun Samantha and her athletic legs?

Glancing back, she noted that Samantha and her crew were hardly paying her any mind as Emily continued up the pavement of Dorrington Road. They had never followed her this far. They didn't know where she lived or her route home. If she was quick enough, she could lose them. And so, forgetting her routine, Emily passed the alleyway entrance, Samantha and her pack falling back ever so slightly, their cockiness apparent in their loud jeers and swaggering gaits. Willing her calves to move faster, her thighs burning through her thick tights – too thick for this weather – as they rubbed together – hot enough to cause a fire to erupt between her legs – Emily spotted the next entrance to the alleyway which ran down the back of the terrace houses on the left-hand-side of Dorrington Road.

Without glancing back as not to give away her next move, Emily darted to the left and hurried along the short alleyway which led to the longer one. She made herself run – something she couldn't ever bring herself to do, not even in sports lessons – and took a right

at the end. She didn't slow down. Holding her backpack close, she ran as fast as her feet could carry her down the back alleyway which ran parallel with the playing field. Already kids were playing in the grass, kicking balls, older teenagers sunbathing, but Emily didn't see any of them as she raced down the alleyway. Already, Samantha and her friends were in hot pursuit and Emily's heart was about to burst out of her chest.

"Come back here, piggy!" Samantha sneered.

Running as fast as she could possibly achieve, Emily ran out of the alleyway and into the car park of the Scout's hut; a simple wooden shack that sat on the borders of the playing field, park and forest.

The forest!

Not many kids their age ventured into the forest which bordered the Greaves neighbourhood. Too often older teenagers hung out there, smoking drugs, drinking, having parties and getting up to all sorts. Even at half four in the afternoon, most kids her age wouldn't venture in. Only adults with small children walked the paths around the outskirts and no further. But if Emily planned on escaping Samantha and her crew, she would have to risk it. If she followed the path, it would lead her out the other side to Chatsworth Road, which was situated next to Ardengate. She would be home. She just had to be brave just this once.

And so, instead of turning right to head back to Dorrington Road, Emily ran past the Scout hut and through the fence to the small play area, Samantha right on her tail.

"Oi! Piggy!"

More laughter and hurried voices sounded behind her, Samantha yelling for her friends to catch Emily, but just this once, she was faster, sprinting across the play area and out the other side. And unlike most people, she didn't head up the steep steps cut into the earth which would lead to the outer path. Instead, she turned right and headed deep into the forest. Unfortunately for Emily, while her friends didn't follow, Samantha did. She was a brute on a mission. She was out for blood.

And blood was what Emily got as she slipped down off the path in her fear and exertion, stumbling at first, reaching out to grab a nearby tree to stop her fall, before tumbling forwards. Over and over again, smacking the ground and flying through the air, her backpack getting caught in the undergrowth and any bare skin being grazed by bark, nettles and finally the earth which cradled her as she came to a shuddering halt at the bottom.

Emily didn't move. She lay flat on her front, her heart throbbing in her ears and the sweat slithering from her neck, around her cheeks and to her parted panting lips. She kept still as she listened to Samantha moving along the path at the top. Would she see her? Would she stand and laugh and take photos? Call her friends so they can all guffaw at the injured fat girl?

Much to Emily's surprise – and relief – Samantha's footsteps stopped momentarily before turning around and stomping back down the path where she came, muttering –

“Fucking piggy.”

Slowly, Emily lifted her head. She tasted lead on her tongue. She was bleeding. Gradually, she rolled herself over and stared up at the luscious green canopy of the trees overhead. All she could hear was birds. No sound of the traffic or city all around her. No more taunts or jeers or singing. Just peaceful, natural silence. Or at least that was until a branch crunched underfoot.

Emily's snapped up into a sitting position, wincing as she did, touching her crank neck. Looking to the side, heart once again thundering in her chest with fear that Samantha had found her, she caught sight of the source of the noise.

It was a boy. His hair was like toffee. Eyes like cinnamon. He was pale, his skin a sickly yellow colour. And he was tall. Taller than any boy their age. Or at least, she assumed he was her age. He couldn't be much older than fifteen if he was. Lanky, shoulders hunched forwards as if ashamed of his stature, the boy tread carefully forward.

Emily flinched.

“No, it's okay,” he stuttered, hands up, “I saw you fall.”

She gulped back the lump in her throat. The one that had appeared at the sight of him. It wasn't just that someone had been witness to her fall or that he was a boy. It was that this boy was gorgeous. Even with the yellow tint to his skin, the fading bruise around his left eye and the slight swollenness of his large bottom lip, this boy was truly the most handsome boy Emily had ever laid eyes on. He was like something from one of her favourite books; a boy who she could fantasise about loving her in the solitude of bedroom but beyond, Emily was far too smart to believe that could ever truly happen. She was as Samantha and all the other girls said.

The fattest girl at school.

He edged closer, gradually getting lower and lower until he was at her side on his knees and reaching into the pocket of his tatty jeans. Emily watched silently, her eyes darting nervously from his face to where he removed a single plaster from his pocket. He held it up to her and pointed to her face. She touched it self-consciously. All at once, she remembered it all.

Eh, fatty boom boom! Have another cream cake!

Piggy! Fat pig!

Bowing her head away from him, she blinked quickly as the tears resurfaced. The ones she'd miraculously kept at bay for the last fifteen minutes. Here they were for this beautiful boy to see.

“Don’t cry, it’s okay, here,” the boy said, ripping off the tabs of the plaster and holding it out ready.

Tentatively, she turned back to face him. He gestured for her to tilt her chin, which she did and held perfectly still as he leant forward, their faces just inches from one another as he carefully attached the nude coloured plaster to her skin.

“There, good as new,” he smiled, a large broad smile. Even so, his lips curled around his top teeth. There was a shyness in his eyes that made Emily frown.

“Who are you?” she croaked.

“Oh,” he blushed, “Sorry, I’m Will. You?”

“Emily,” she replied, brushing the dirt from her tights to save looking into his gorgeous eyes that hadn’t left her.

“Who was that chasing you?” he asked, pointing up to the ridge and path where she’d fallen.

“Just this girl,” Emily muttered, not wishing to relive her bully’s hunt. Especially not for this beautiful boy.

“She wasn’t very nice,” he said, “In fact, she was horrible to you.”

Emily shrugged. “Everyone’s horrible to me.”

When he didn’t reply, she dared a glance in his direction to see his thick eyebrows knitted tightly together with thought and upset.

“Well, not you,” she corrected.

There was that smile again. One that lit his entire face as he sprung to his feet and held out his large hand. She looked from it to her position on the ground; skirt ridden up, blazer torn, backpack discarded and her tights ripped. She was in a sorry state and it was just her luck the cutest boy in Lancaster had borne witness to the entire thing. She looked to his hand again. If she took it and he tried to lift her, he would realise even more so how fat she was. She couldn’t let that happen. She would rather try to find her own way to her feet.

Forgetting his hand, she manoeuvred herself up onto her knees, grasped a low hanging branch and yanked herself upwards. As she did, the branch snapped under her weight, causing her to stumble backwards. She felt two arms shoot beneath her, catching her beneath her armpits, which were no doubt sopping wet with sweat. She wriggled away from Will, staggering again, one hand running over the back of her skirt which had tucked up into the back of her tights. She gave a groan of humiliation. When she looked up, Will had averted his eyes, staring off into the woods where Emily’s ears pricked up on more noise.

Momentarily, she thought it was Samantha and her friends coming back for more. It then she spotted three faces peering down at them from the ridge. They all wore broad grins similar to Will's.

“Ello! What ‘ave we got ‘ere then!” one of them, a boy, cheered, sliding adeptly down the slope in a pair of bright white Converse.

Behind him, the other two, a boy and a girl, slid down with him, all three coming to a skilled halt at the bottom beside Will. Emily looked from each of them. The first boy who'd spoken was short, with chocolate curls that hung in his sky eyes. Will towered over this boy who was skinny and seemed to bounce on his toes as he inspected her as though she were a wild animal. The next was a girl. Hair like coal, skin like snow, eyes like emeralds and lips – dry, cracked sore lips that made Emily lick her own – red like blood. Like the blood dribbling from Emily's own lips. And finally, there was a boy. Like Will, he was tall. But not as tall. He was skinny too, his face sullen and his eyes green, though not as bright as the girl's. He had jet black hair with a greasy shine to it. Unlike the shorter boy's face, this boy's expression was pensive and his eyes sad. He looked oddly familiar too. For those few seconds, as the five teenagers took each other in, Emily remembered where she'd seen this boy before.

On the news, last October. A ten-year-old had died during the flood; his arm swept into a drain and through the grates. The force of the water had torn it from his body. The boy, a Toby Johnson, had died, they said, from the shock and from drowning in the water and debris that had collected around him. Isaac Hutchins, a member of Rupert, her guardian's parish, had been the one to find Toby Johnson. On the news, Toby's parents had made a statement on the dangers of the flood and the importance of the Lune dam; standing beside them had been their son. The older Johnson boy.

Dominic.

“You're Dominic Johnson,” Emily said, her eyes firmly fixed upon him.

How strange it was to see a face that she had only ever seen on the television. He looked older, but only by a few months. Sadder but then that was obvious. His brother had died. Emily knew that pain all too well.

“And I'm Tom Right! Pleased to meet you!” the shorter boy leapt forward, hand outstretched and an odd type of grin on his lips. “And you are?”

“Emily,” Will spoke for her causing his three friends to look his way. “Her name's Emily. She fell. She was being chased.”

Emily cringed, feeling all four sets of eyes fall upon her. She didn't want to be stood here any longer. She wanted to go home and cry in peace.

“Who was chasing you?” the girl spoke this time.

Emily's eyes flicked up from her scuffed black school shoes to where the girl was lighting a cigarette. Smoke billowed around her pale face, her gaze unfaltering but not at all judgemental. She appeared curious even, one eyebrow slightly raised.

"Erm, just some girls," Emily coughed around her embarrassment.

"Oh so that's what that noise was," Tom said, hands on his hips, "It sounded like a pack of squealing hogs."

Emily flinched at the mention of pigs.

"Nasty little bitches," Tom said, his face becoming sympathetic then. Emily couldn't work out whether that was worse.

There were always two types of people she encountered; ones who bullied her and ones who felt sorry for her. Neither were her friends. No one wanted to be friends with an untouchable like Emily Fox.

"Fuck 'em," the girl said, tapping the ash from her cigarette before passing it to Dominic who took it. "I'm Erika."

"Biggest slag in Lancaster," Tom snorted under his breath making the other two boys laugh.

Erika elbowed Tom in the middle of his chest, winding him slightly, only making them all laugh harder. Emily cracked a smile but felt uncertain. Wasn't that an insult? Yet as she viewed Erika's soft expression, she felt confused.

"You go the Girls' Grammar?" Erika questioned, pointing to the crest on Emily's blazer.

"Erm, yes."

"We all go to Ripley. How come you don't go there?" Tom asked.

"My guardian, he – he doesn't, erm –."

"It's a shit school with shit people," Dominic grunted.

"Moody pants," Tom tutted.

"Fuck off," Dominic grumbled.

"He's right though," Will interjected, "It is a shit hole."

Emily gawped at them all; their swearing coming so freely as if these words weren't forbidden. In her household, if anyone so much as took the Lord's name in vain, it was a two-week grounding and no dessert. Not that Emily was allowed dessert. Lindsay had her on a strict diet. At that thought, her stomach rumbled. So loudly, in fact, the other four heard it too.

“What’s that belly? You hungry?” Tom chuckled “Come on, chick. We’ve got a stash.” At that, he took off up at the slope, beckoning her with a wave of his hand.

Emily watched with muted confusion as Erika and Dominic followed, and then finally Will, who stopped halfway up to give her a smile and another wave to follow. Emily considered it for a moment. Where would they take her? Was this a cruel joke? Would they steal her backpack? Make fun of her? Push her down from the top to see her tumble again? What was their intention? Yet even as Emily conjured all the worst thoughts, when she met Will’s kind gaze, she felt compelled to follow. No one had ever looked at her that way. Not since before the accident.

And so, after retrieving her backpack, she started a slow, staggered ascent up the slope, reaching the top a long time after the others. Nonetheless, they’d waited, Will even holding out his hand again to help her the last few steps. This time, she took it. What was the worst that could happen?

“Don’t be a dick!” Tom said, chucking a can of Coke in Dominic’s direction.

Emily stared around in awe. It was a den. Their very own den made of discarded tarpaulin, great logs they must have rolled here, and a canopy of leaves, branches and twigs. It was cosy, like a bear cave and in the middle sat a fire pit full of ash that afternoon. Around it was four battered-looking camp chairs; each a different colour, size and in varying degrees of decay. As Emily lingered on the outskirts, Will offered up the best.

“Oh no, it’s fine –,” she went to decline when Erika spoke up.

“Sit down, Ems. We don’t bite.”

Blushing, the heat in her grazed cheeks positively burning, Emily carefully sat down in the chair. The arms cut slightly into her large thighs but it was comfortable enough. She watched as Will took a seat on the dusty ground, long legs bent and his even longer arms wrapped around them. Across the other side of the fire pit, Tom, Erika and Dominic were sat in their own chairs. In between Dominic and Tom’s seats was what appeared to be a cool box. She viewed as Tom opened it again and rifled around inside.

“Alright, alright, children! We’ve got strawberry laces, *Fangastics*, a bag of *Jelly Babies* – oh Will, these pussy sweets must be yours,” Tom snorted, flinging the bag at Will who barely caught it, even with his long limbs. “Annd, two cans of Fanta and one bottled water – how did that get in there? So, Emily, what tickles your fancy?” He turned to face her, causing all of their eyes to once again fall on her.

“Erm,” she stuttered, licking her parched lips. She looked again to Erika, where a new cigarette sat puffing between her lips. “Just some water?”

“Erm, methinks you may want something else?” Tom eyed her curiously.

“No, honestly, I like water,” Emily said, glancing down to Will already smiling back at her.

“No one *likes* water, Ems,” Tom joked with an easy smile. “Wanna Fanta?”

“Isn’t that a fizzy drink?”

Silence fell upon them. She looked from Will who’d stopped mid-chew of his Jelly Babies. Then to Dominic frowning ever so slightly and Erika exhaling smoke slowly from her lips, a curious look in her dazzling eyes again. And finally, Emily met Tom’s gaze.

“Yes, my dear, it is. But it doesn’t have cocaine in,” Tom laughed with confusion and disbelief. “You never had a Fanta?”

“You never had a Fanta?” Dominic repeated.

“Never had a Fanta,” Erika grinned playfully.

It wasn’t the type of grin that usually made Emily want to shrivel up and hide. It had the opposite effect. It made her want to smile too.

“Leave it out, guys. Not everyone likes Fanta,” Will said.

“Blasphemy!” Tom gasped.

“Abhorred. I am abhorred!” Erika said, putting on a clipped voice that made Emily grin harder.

“Wash your mouth out, William!” Even Dominic joined in until all five of them were laughing loudly. It echoed throughout their small clearing in the forest, frightening birds overhead.

“Just saying,” Will shrugged, head hanging low with that same shyness that made Emily curious. What did a boy of his size and stature have to be shy about? And where on earth had he received that bruise and fat lip? Did he have bullies too? Emily wondered what type of giants would dare pick on a boy of Will’s size. He had to be almost six foot.

“Here.” Erika rose from her seat and passed Emily a cool can.

She viewed it in her palm, rolling it over to read the words FANTA ORANGE written across the side in a funky font. She’d never had a fizzy drink. They were banned in her household. Rupert loathed them;

They rot your teeth, your body and your mind.

But it was for that very reason that Emily cracked open the lid, listening with a distinct type of glee to the crack and hiss of the carbonation. This time when she felt all their eyes upon her, she didn’t mind so much as she placed the rim of the can to her lips and tipped

it forwards. The fizzy tangy liquid burned the tip of her tongue. She winced and lowered the can ever so slightly. She peered down into the small opening and listened to the fizzling of the bubbles. It was a tantalising sound that urged Emily to tip the can forwards again and take a small tentative mouthful of the tangy liquid. She gulped, the burning sensation crawling down her throat and making her eyes water. She shook her head, cringing to the taste and the sensation across her tongue. Laughter filled her ears, but this was not malicious, merely playful as Erika took the can back and sat down.

“There. You’re no longer a virgin now,” Erika winked, causing another blush to erupt onto Emily’s face.

“Long time since *you* were ever a virgin, E,” Tom teased, receiving another elbow to the middle of his chest.

This time when they laughed, Emily didn’t hold back. She laughed too and it felt good. Stupendously good. Like her first taste of a fizzy drink. Like Will’s smile upon her. It felt heavenly and liberating, laughing and laughing – laughing even when it wasn’t funny. Emily wanted to laugh forever. But all too soon, it was time to leave this place of sanctuary and return to reality. The horrible reality Emily called her life.

“Do you have a bike?” Will asked, wheeling his own out along the outer forest path.

Up ahead, the other three were laughing and joking, wheeling their tattered old bikes, chains clicking and pedals ticking around and around as they headed along the narrow track just wide enough to walk two by two. But with Will’s broad shoulders and Emily’s large frame, their arms brushed as they walked. With each graze, an electric shock ran throughout her body making it difficult to breathe or even reply.

“Erm, yes,” she choked eventually.

“Awesome! We usually hang out here but sometimes we bike up to the common off Wellington Road or down to the Burrow Beck in Hala. You know it?”

“Yeah I know it,” Emily nodded. She’d lived in Lancaster her entire life but had never ventured down into Hala by herself. It was a mixture of class. At the bottom of Hala Hill, in the valley, was the poorest area. Ten storey tower blocks and rundown terrace houses which followed along the Burrow Beck stream. However, that all changed at the top of Hala Hill where some of the richest of Lancaster inhabited; as if sitting upon thrones to peer down at all the rest of them. From the top of Hala Hill, one could see across the entire city and farther. All the way out to Overton across the estuary mouth of the Lune and the wind turbine farm. And on a particularly good day, one could see as far as Barrow-in-Furness across Morecambe Bay. It was one of Emily’s favourite views in the city but very rarely did she get to see it. Rupert only drove to the supermarket, believing that biking or walking was far healthier for the body and environment, so if Emily wanted to see that wondrous view, she would have to hike it. And Hala Hill was one of the steepest hills in Lancaster. A long, steep incline that cars and buses groaned up. Emily – fat Emily Fox – would never be able to walk it; huffing and chuffing to a sweaty death.

But that's not what Will was asking. He was asking if she wanted to hang out with him and the other three. As friends.

Friends.

Emily hadn't had friends since primary school before the accident which claimed her parents and older sister's lives. Before the weight had piled on and she'd turned to food for comfort. Before her old friends had stopped knowing how to speak to her. Before 'sorry for your loss' was a common phrase Emily heard at least once a week. It never got any easier and with no friends to bury her grief in, she had only food and her academics. Neither of which gained her any real companionship.

But here was Will, the boy with the bruised eye and the plaster from his pocket, asking if she wanted to hang out with him and his friends. His cool friends. The ones who drank fizzy drinks, smoked cigarettes and had a den in the forest. Emily wondered if she'd smacked her head on the tumble down the ridge and was, in fact, dead, or at the very least, unconscious and in a very beautiful dream which she would wake up from anytime soon. Yet even as she pinched her wrist to be sure, she stayed awake and breathing as she looked up to see Will's hopeful expression.

"Well? Would do you think? See you tomorrow?"

She hadn't even realised she'd come to a halt by the steps leading out of the forest and onto Chatsworth Road. A few paces away, Erika, Dominic and Tom had stopped to wait for Will, talking and smoking still. When she looked over, she caught Erika's eye; she smiled warmly and gave her another one of those encouraging winks.

"Yes," Emily said suddenly. She dared a glance up at Will who smiled bashfully down at her.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. What time?"

"Noon?"

"I'll be there," Emily beamed.

"See you then," Will said, slowly walking away, wheeling his bike with him.

Emily didn't move from her spot, watching him and his friends as they waved. Tom even blew kisses before they headed off down the outer track which led out of the woods. At the back walked Will and before the forest swallowed him, he glanced back with another one of his dazzling smiles that made Emily's insides turn to jelly. Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

Riding down Hala Road was thrilling. Feet off the pedals, grazed hands grasping the handles bars, Emily released a great shrill scream that had been building in her throat. Out of the five, only she wore a helmet and stuck to the pavement, just as Rupert always instructed. But the other four, these crazy, wild teenagers didn't care for helmets, or cars for that matter as they sped down Hala Road, swerving in and out of honking motorists, hooting with laughter and pedalling faster to build momentum as they came to the bottom of the slight incline, that was in no way a match for Hala Hill which towered over them now they were at the bottom of the valley.

Up ahead, Dominic was in the lead on a great silver bike, doing wheelies and whooping as he swerved to the left at the bottom and came to a screeching halt outside the bank of shops on the corner of Lentworth Drive and Hala Road. Just behind, Tom and Erika followed on smaller, more precarious-looking bikes that looked older than they were. Each stood with one foot to the ground, turning back to wait for Will and Emily tailing behind.

“Come on, slow coaches!” Tom beckoned, pedalling off across the road, without checking for traffic, and down onto the grassy bank which swept alongside the Burrow Beck stream.

Without pausing, Emily and Will followed the others, though they looked both ways before following, soon catching up with the others who led the way across the grass, past dog walkers and up to the footpath that weaved through the thick copse of trees and out onto the great playing field.

Emily stayed pedalling at the back. Even after being invited, she still didn't feel totally a part of this group. For, she already knew, they weren't like her. No, she doubted that when they'd arrived home yesterday evening that they'd received the hiding from their parent or guardian that Emily had.

It had started the moment she'd walked in the front door, out of breath with glee.

“Where have you been?!” Rupert roared, emerging from the kitchen at the back of the house and pacing along the hallway toward her like a ferocious bull.

“I – I –,” she stuttered.

“What is my one rule, Emilia?” He loomed over her, his dark red hair falling into his equally red face, dishcloth in hand and his dog collar still tight around his neck.

She didn't know how to answer that for Rupert had so many rules. Gathering herself, she conjured the one she supposed he was looking for.

“Come straight home?”

“Yes. Go straight to school and come straight home. Is that so difficult?”

“No.” She hung her head low. She couldn’t possibly blame her lateness on being chased by her school bullies, or on the fact she’d met four friendly misfits in the woods who liked to smoke cigarettes and drink fizzy drinks. At the memory of that tangy liquid on her tongue, she closed her mouth, in fear he would smell it on her breath.

Too late.

“What is that?” he said, leaning in closer, sniffing like a hungry dog. “Is that a *fizzy drink* on your breath?” He said it as if it were alcohol, another thing Rupert didn’t allow in the house.

The devil’s juice.

“Have you been drinking *fizzy drinks*, Emilia? Answer me!”

“My friend –,” her breath hitched.

“Your friend? What friend?”

The way he said *friend* made Emily flinch. As if it was a ridiculous notion that *she* would have friends. Which it was. Emily wasn’t even sure if they were friends. They’d invited her to come ‘hang out’ with them but did that make them friends?

Who would want to be friends with you?

“Is that cigarette smoke?” Rupert gasped, “Have you been smoking?” He tugged at her blazer, sniffing again and again. “You have! You’ve been smoking!”

“No! No, I haven’t! I swear it!”

“So why does your blazer smell of smoke? Does that belong to your *friend* too?”

“I –,” Emily paused. How could she possibly explain the afternoon she’d had? He wouldn’t understand. He wouldn’t believe that the four people she’d met in the woods had actually been her saviours. For the first time in her life, she didn’t feel so inadequate. Around them, she felt like more than fat Emilia Fox. But Rupert wouldn’t understand that. He never understood.

“Get those clothes off and go straight to your room!” Rupert ordered, ripping the blazer from her back. “I cannot believe you would be so careless! You know the curfew, Emilia! Five more minutes and I would have called the police! You’re a sensible girl! At least, I thought you were and yet here you are, *out*, with these *friends*, and almost breaking curfew! What do you think happened to all those children, Emilia?” he roared as she started up the stairs, her backpack close to her chest as if it could protect her from his thunderous words. “Do you think they left on their own accord? No! There’s a killer out there! Don’t you understand that?! Stupid girl!”

By the time he’d finished, Emily had already made it to her room. His voice was soon muffled by her bedroom door which she closed on the world and found a moment or two for

herself. And even though her stomach grumbled, she daredn't leave this sanctuary. The safe space of her bedroom with all its books, a cosy bed and the view over the park and forest. That forest. The one that had always been a place of sin and danger was now bursting with life. With possibility. However, after Rupert stomped in an hour later to announce she would only be able to leave the house to go to the library and church for the next two weeks, all that possibility was stamped away.

Almost.

The next morning, Emily did something she had never done in her life. She lied. Over the breakfast table, eating her bowl of porridge, she had beseeched with Lindsay to let her go to the library that day. Rupert had already left for meetings and while the library was on the list of places she could go, it had still been a torturous beg. Lindsay did nothing without her husband's permission but eventually, Emily had talked her around. She had lied.

Once Lindsay left with her two children, Luke and Lorraine, Emily put her plan into action, firstly by making a packed lunch; not just for her, but for all five of them. It was the least she could do. They couldn't live on strawberry laces and fizzy Fanta all day. Five cheese and ham sandwiches, five bags of crisps and an apple each; she packed it all into her school bag which she'd emptied onto her desk the night before, and recovered her bike from the garage. Hopeful for the day ahead but sodden with guilt from her lie, Emily pedalled off down Ardengate to Chatsworth Road, all whilst wondering if they would really be there, or if that had been a lie. Had Will only invited her out of politeness? Was all of this worthless?

Yet just as the doubt was sinking in, as Emily peered down the steps at the end of Chatsworth Road, into the dark forest, there they were. All four of them, bikes at their sides and those usual grins on their faces.

"You came!" Will beamed.

And she was glad she had.

They crossed the narrow stream of the Burrow Beck over a natural bridge and were soon chucking their bikes down in the shade of a nearby copse of trees. Slumping back on the grass, the five cooled off from the summer heat.

"Fuck me, my balls are swimming," Dominic groaned, lying flat on his back and sticking a hand into the front of his jean shorts to rearrange himself.

Emily averted her eyes, unable to believe he was doing such a thing in public and in front of her and Erika no less. Yet when she looked to Erika, she was too busy lighting a cigarette to notice Dominic or Tom for that matter who proceeded to roll on top of Dominic. Emily viewed agape as the two boys tossed and turned in the long grass, chuckling and grappling playfully with one another before kissing each other deeply on the mouth. She almost choked.

“You alright, Ems?” Will asked from beside her.

He was sat closest in their semi-circle, Erika on his other side, shooting her a curious look. Emily composed herself. It wasn't if she had any problem with two boys kissing, it was just startling. She'd never seen it, not in real life. All of Rupert's teachings of the sin of homosexuality came rushing back to her then as she nodded and forced a bright smile, averting her eyes from where Tom and Dominic were still kissing, lying in the grass in each other's arms. In the end, the sight brought a sort of warmth to her chest. Their passion, their care for each other, it made her feel both breathless and strange.

To counteract it, she opened her backpack.

“What you got, Ems?” Erika asked, stubbing out another cigarette in the grass, stomping on it with the heel of her scuffed black boots.

“I, erm –.” She looked around at them all; Dominic and Tom had finally stopped kissing and were now sitting up, hand in hand. “I made us lunch.”

“You did what?” Dominic frowned.

“I made us –,” she faltered.

In her ears, all she heard was Samantha and her friends –

Hey, fatty fatty!

Pig!

Piggy pig pig!

Their squeals and snorts chasing her.

She blinked and found herself sat back with these four new faces staring back at her.

“Lunch,” she breathed, holding up a tin foil package as evidence. “I hope you like cheese and ham.”

“You made us lunch?” Erika said, holding her package that had been passed along the line. She held it at arm's length as if it would hurt her.

Emily frowned. Had Erika never had someone make her lunch before?

“If you're not hungry, I can – I mean, I'm sorry, that was rude of me –,” Emily stuttered.

“Emily, no,” Erika stopped her, “Just, surprised.”

“Oh.” Emily looked to Will beside her carefully opening his packet and holding up one half of the brown bread sandwich.

“Wow,” he breathed in awe, “It's enormous.”

“It’s fresh from the bakery. I cut it myself,” Emily said, drawing in her lips as she watched the four viewing their sandwiches.

Tom took a large hungry bite, his eyes rolling into the back of his head with pleasure. “This. Is. A. Mazing,” he groaned around his mouthful. “Better than Nan’s.”

“Don’t let her hear you say that,” Dominic chuckled, taking a bite of his own.

“Thank you,” Will said, ignoring the others scoffing their food hungrily as if they hadn’t eaten in days. “For the food. We usually just wait till dinner.”

“You don’t bring a packed lunch?” Emily questioned. How did they last all day without food? Then again, didn’t she? During school, she never ate. By the time she got home she usually felt faint.

“No,” Will chuckled lightly, “Never any food in my house anyway,” he said, quieter this time, a shadow passing across his face that made Emily sit up straighter with intrigue.

But before she got a chance to ask any further, the tick ticking of a bike approaching alerted them all.

Looking up from her own package on her lap, she viewed, blinking through the blinding sunlight, as someone pedalled toward them. Their bike was flash; a brilliant red with all the stripes, gears and product placement. The rider was just as flash; dirty-blond hair and a grin that could burn a city down. Emily gulped back the sudden fear she felt at this lone boy riding toward them and before she could look to the others, he came to a screeching halt beside them. Tossing his expensive bike to one side as if it were no more than one of Erika’s dead cigarettes, the tall boy with blond hair stood before them, hands on his broad hips and that unfaltering grin bearing down on them all.

“Alright tossers,” he beamed.

“Shoulda known you’d turn up sooner or later,” Dominic grunted, though it was in no way unpleasant.

Emily watched as Dominic held out his fist to the boy who bumped it with his own before plonking down beside him, lying back like a Greek God on his elbows in the long grass. He wore sunglasses; flash expensive ones that Emily had seen some of the boys from the private Boys’ school on Quernmore Road wearing. As he turned his head to take in their motley crew, he seemed to linger on Erika. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to even notice Emily at the end, for which she was thankful. This boy was like the sun; almost painful to look at and she prayed she was far too lowly to even appear on his radar.

“Alright, E,” the boy said.

“Fuck off, Sam,” Erika said, still chewing on her sandwich.

“Rude.”

“Got any weed?” Dominic asked, cutting into this tense exchange.

“Always, my lad. You got any money?”

“Nope,” Dominic smirked.

“Cheapskate,” Sam scoffed, removing something from his pocket and sitting up. As he did, he finally noticed Emily. “Who’s this?”

“Emily,” Will said, “We met her yesterday. She made us lunch.” He held up the last of his sandwich.

Sam peered over at them, pulling down his sunglasses as he met Emily’s frightened gaze. Behind those lenses was a pair of striking ocean eyes that almost pierced her straight through. He gave another grin. “Got any more?”

“You hungry, rich boy?” Erika scoffed.

“Very,” he growled, making Tom and Will titter.

“I, erm, you can have half of mine?” Emily said, holding up the other half. She didn’t have much of an appetite since Sam had arrived. He wasn’t like the other four. He was cocky, his grin almost sneering as he reached over and took the half from her grasp.

“Cheers, *Emily*,” he said her name as if it were the oddest thing he’d heard. “You go to Ripley like these losers?”

“No, erm, the Girl’s Grammar.”

“Do you really?” Sam’s grin broadened.

Emily wasn’t sure how. It was about to burst out of his handsome face.

“Yes?” she stuttered.

“Leave her alone, Sam, you wanker,” Erika said, tossing a handful of grass in his direction.

Like holy water on a demon, he recoiled and stuffed the half of the sandwich into his mouth.

“Thanks,” he mumbled around his mouthful. “Do you know –,” whatever he said next was indistinguishable as he chewed.

“Swallow, darling or you’ll choke and die,” Tom rolled his eyes.

“With any luck,” Erika snorted, causing them all to laugh, even Emily.

“That funny, Emily?” Sam said after his swallow.

Emily closed her mouth, shrinking away from his larger than life frame.

“Yeah, it’s fucking hilarious,” Dominic cut in with a fierceness that Emily both feared and admired. “Now, we gonna get high or not?”

“High?” Emily stammered, all five turning to look at her with varying expressions. She focused on Will who gave her a reassuring smile.

“Will you get in trouble if you go home smelling like weed?” he asked.

“Erm, yes,” she half laughed, half choked. Who wouldn’t get in trouble going home smelling of drugs? However, as she viewed that fading bruise around Will’s left eye, Erika’s blistered lips, Dominic’s sullen expression, Tom’s wide eyes and finally Sam’s arrogant posture, she wondered if any of them had people at home that cared at all.

“It’s cool, Ems. I’ve got my deodorant with me. We’ll spray you before you go home,” Tom said, removing a can from his own backpack and tossing it over to her.

She caught it and viewed the boyish item so different from her own body spray. Even without spraying it, she knew how it would smell.

Boys...

Minty, musty and moist.

The boy smell that wafted after the crowds of them in town. That boy smell that lingered in their group now. But not from Will. From Will, she tasted only the scent of earth and slight body odour. But it wasn’t an unpleasant smell. It was quite the opposite. It was intoxicating. Emily wanted to take deep breaths of it all day so tonight when she lay in bed she would be able to smell it on her skin...in her hair.

Snapping back from her daydreams, she smiled with thanks to Tom and sat back, curiously watching as Sam and Dominic set about grinding up the weed and making a long, thick joint. Once lit, it smelt like any herb burning; a kind of natural, fragrant smell that didn’t conjure up images of vagrants or sin the way Rupert had always said. But nature itself. The grass, the trees, the wind in the trees. It smelt beautiful. But when the joint reached Will, being shared among the group, and he offered it to her, she declined. She may be lying about her whereabouts and hanging about with people that would make her guardian faint, but she wasn’t about to do drugs.

She still had her morals.

“So what do you think about all these kids going missing?” Sam asked a little while later, rolling another joint on a hardback book which had come from Dominic’s backpack.

“It’s hysteria,” Erika mused, lying on her back with her legs across Tom’s lap and her arm over her eyes. “One kid goes missing, people panic. Second kid goes missing, people freak out. The third? Total hysteria.”

“What’s hysteria?” Tom questioned.

“Exaggerated emotion,” Emily spoke up, startling them all. She hadn’t said much since Sam arrived and perhaps they’d even forgotten she was there. She blushed under all their gazes. “But I think Erika means the psychological disorder where people go into a frenzy and start seeing coincidences and patterns everywhere. It’s quite common,” she finished, lowering her chin. As she did, she caught Will’s eye and that usual bright smile that made her breathless.

“Exactly that, Ems,” Erika said, sitting up on her elbows, legs still dangling across Tom’s lap. In this position, her jean shorts rose ever so slightly and from this angle, Emily couldn’t help but notice severe-looking lacerations on the inside of her thigh. Upon noticing Erika catch her eye, Emily looked away. She knew what they were. What they meant but the thought terrified her.

Self-harm.

Mental health.

It wasn’t something spoken about or recognised in Rupert’s household and it wasn’t a concept Emily was comfortable with. Still, she smiled the best she could at Erika who turned her head to one side and blew a large exhale of smoke from the latest joint.

“People are going crazy,” Erika started slowly.

“Yeah well after your brother, people are starting to ask questions,” Sam said.

All at once, the group fell silent. Even the birds seemed to stop singing at the mention of Dominic’s deceased little brother. The events surrounding Toby Johnson’s death were strange, there was no doubt about it. Ever since last October, there had been plenty of rumours and theories speculating the peculiar death. They never did find his left arm and he was apparently buried without it. The image of a small boy tucked into a coffin missing one of his arms made Emily feel suddenly sick and as she looked up from the grass, she spotted Dominic’s equally sickly looking face.

“Sam,” Erika hissed.

“Oh man, look, dude, I’m sorry –,” Sam began, the first sign of anything other than arrogance in his voice since he’d arrived. He went to pat Dominic’s shoulder when Dominic brushed him away and quickly got to his feet and paced away.

“Now you’ve gone and done it, you tit,” Erika snapped, also getting to her feet and hurrying after Dominic.

Emily found it strange that Tom didn’t leave his spot. That it was Erika who chased after Dominic and not Tom. Weren’t they boyfriends? But she daren’t ask. From the palpable tension, she knew better than to speak now.

It wasn't the same after. When Erika brought Dominic back to the group, the tension stayed and it felt as though the sun had already gone down on their day, even though it was only four. Even with curfew not for hours, it was decided they would all head home.

Sam said goodbye, lingering with Erika on the outskirts of their group, talking under his breath so it was impossible to listen in as Emily lifted her bike back up and attached her helmet. Once Erika returned, Sam rode away with just a middle finger as a goodbye to the rest of them and soon, they were all on their way back to Greaves.

Unlike earlier when they'd ridden together as a group, Dominic pedalled off ahead, soon disappearing up one of the side roads off Barton Road, leaving Erika and Tom pedalling off on their own and Emily and Will at the back. They didn't ride their bikes but walked instead, taking a leisurely stroll back up to the main road which they would cross, leading them back into Greaves. Emily was grateful but feared Will was only doing it out of pity. He seemed like that type of boy; quiet, shy and polite. Was it only his manners keeping him from riding off with his friends? However, when she looked across at him walking along beside her, a shadow in his eyes and his smile long gone, she wondered.

"It's awful about Dominic's brother," Emily said, her voice like a hammer to ice cutting through their comfortable silence.

"Yeah, he was a mess straight after. Blamed himself," Will replied.

"Why?"

"He was supposed to be with Toby that day. They'd been building this remote control boat that Dom got for his birthday and they'd finally finished it when Dom got flu. He was out of school for like a week."

"He was ill when his brother was killed?"

"When Toby *died*," Will corrected, shooting her an odd expression.

She shook her head, suddenly flustered. "Sorry, yes, *died*."

"And yeah. He's not over it. I'm not sure he'll ever be. We try and cheer him up and stuff but I dunno, it's not the same, is it?"

"No," Emily whispered, the memories of the great change after the accident flooding back to her. The packing up of her childhood home. The move to Rupert's house in Ardengate. No more friends. Pitiful expressions from everybody she met. The shell that encased her. The one she still lived within. Like that of a snail, she dragged it around with her every day. She felt exhausted. To lose her parents and her older sister in one car crash, to have them snatched away from her in an instant, it had been too much to bear. Even now, it was too much.

Stopping, Emily pressed the heel of her palms to her eyes to stem the onrush of tears.

“Emily? Emily? What’s the matter? What’s wrong?” Will asked.

She felt him close, his fingertips stroking at her wrists and as she lowered her hands, she stared back into his cinnamon eyes. Unlike any eyes she’d ever seen before. They were warm and yet full of such pain. Pain she wondered if she would ever know.

“My parents...my sister, Mary,” Emily stuttered, “They died.”

“Oh,” Will replied and in those seconds that followed, Emily waited for those words that everyone always said after she told them of her family tragedy.

I’m so sorry for your loss.

I’m really sorry.

But instead, he said something different.

“How?”

Emily looked up from her shoes to view his face. He hadn’t moved. He still stood close; close enough for her to smell his intoxicating scent once again. It made her momentarily dumb; as if her mind had gone totally blank and all was forgotten. The only thing that existed was them now, standing under the shade of an ancient tree sprouting out of the concrete of the pavement, their bikes just hanging at their sides, also obsolete.

She stuttered for her words. “In a car accident. I was ten, I was ...I was in it.”

She listened to his small intake of breath but he didn’t speak still.

“I was the only one who survived. The car it, it, I still see it. At night, in my dreams, we were driving along the Greyhound Bridge – and we just, we swerved. All I remember is the noise and this feeling of weightlessness as it drove through the barrier and into the air...like we were flying.” She was no longer looking at Will but past him, out to the playing field and beyond as her memories filled her vision and she was back there, sitting in the backseat of her father’s car beside her sister, Mary, clinging to the upholstery, tears streaming down her face, her seat becoming warm with urine and finally, the great crash of the impact of the underbelly of the car hitting the surface of the river.

They’d sunk quickly into the dark water. It seeped in every orifice until the only thing separating her from the water outside was just steel. And then, darkness. Her lungs had burned as she tried to hold her breath. Her fists had slammed against the window of the car and then, the door had been pulled open as if by some kind of inhuman force. Her mother’s clutches had dragged her from the car but caught in her safety belt, it had been a struggle. Bubbles of air had escaped her panicked lips. Eyes wide open, the only illumination had come from the lights of the console of the car which began to flicker and fade as they dropped deeper and deeper into the tidal river. The currents had pushed and ebbed, the car creaking and the rush of the waves filling her ears along with heartbeat.

Eventually, her mother had freed her from the car's clutches and ripped her into the open water, pushing Emily upwards. The feel of her mother's hands grasping her ankles and pushing her toward the surface had been the last thing she'd felt of her mother. Of a parent. Of someone who loved her truly and wholly. The last thing before Emily had been left to swim for her life. But with no training, she'd flailed and lost her bearings. Which way was up, why way was down? She'd almost lost all breath when she'd seen it.

Not her mother. Not her father. Not her sister. Not even the top of their family car sinking deeper into the abyss. This...this thing...it was covered in scales. Larger than any fish and moving with poised grace and precision from side to side like a shark. It had shimmered past her, its fins caressing her cheeks swollen with the last of her air. Bursting with fear, Emily had tried to kick away, to find the surface, to make her escape when she'd seen it.

Those yellow eyes. Like streetlamps. Like car headlights. Like giant glowing orbs. They'd been watching her. Huge round eyes watching her in the murky darkness of the river and dazzling red strands of hair. Then a hand had reached for her, or what Emily believed could be a hand, but with its webbed fingers and long sharp nails, she couldn't be totally sure. But one thing was for certain. She wouldn't forget the sensation on her face as it caressed her cheek. As it grasped her hair and tugged, almost ripping the thick lock from her scalp. But before it, whatever it was, could drag her down, she felt something tugging from above and in an instant, she'd been above the surface, the waves lapping at her face and spluttering for breath; pulled to safety by an onlooker of the accident.

Within mere inches of death, she'd been saved. But her family? They were gone. Only the car recovered and their bodies? Well, police reckoned they'd been dragged out to sea. There had been a funeral but it had been merely ceremonial with no bodies. Emily hadn't even been able to say goodbye and all the time, she had asked herself –

Why me?

Why her indeed.

“But you survived,” Will said, breaking her out of her thoughts.

“Yes,” she breathed, “Only me.”

“You're so lucky, Emily.”

“Am I?” she choked, bravely meeting his sad gaze. “I lost everyone who mattered to me that night. I lost it all, Will.”

“No,” he shook his head “You were saved.”

“So?” Emily spluttered, taking a step back. “What does that matter when I've lost everything?” The tears were thick in her throat as she searched his face desperately. “And there was something, something there –.”

“What do you mean?” His thick brows knitted together. He stepped closer. “What do you mean, Emily? What was there?”

She swallowed tightly. This was something she’d never told anyone, not that she’d ever had someone to tell. Her older sister Mary had been her confidante; her best friend. She would have told her but then again, if Mary was alive, perhaps she wouldn’t have seen it at all.

“Will?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you... ever see things that aren’t there?” she said slowly, carefully, fearful of his reply. Of his reaction. The one she’d known she would receive if she ever said this aloud. If she ever told anyone of what she’d seen down there in the depths of the River Lune.

She viewed his face as he paused, his thick overgrown brows tight together with thought. She held her breath, terrified she’d spoil everything. He would think she was a freak just like all the others. He would tell his friends and they would turn their backs on her too. For a moment, she’d forgotten who she was. The loser she was.

“Yes,” Will replied.

It startled Emily. “What?”

“Yes, I see things...I see things that I don’t think are there.”

“What things?” Emily pressed, moving closer to him, her grip around her handlebars tight with anticipation and fear. Was he toying with her? Was this all one big game? As she stared up into his suddenly dark eyes, she knew that wasn’t true. She knew, when she peered up into those cinnamon eyes as a new shadow passed across his handsome face, that he was telling the truth. That he believed her.

“Just things, okay,” Will said briskly, turning away from her.

Emily recoiled, returning her other hand to the handlebars of her bike. Her body felt stiff with her fear, the silence hanging heavily between them.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, “It didn’t mean to be a dick.”

“You weren’t a –,” she couldn’t repeat that word. She couldn’t swear as flippantly as them. Even before she came to Rupert’s care, her parents had been strictly religious and held many similar rules. Swearing was not allowed under any circumstances. “No, it was me. I was being silly.”

“No, Emily. You weren’t.” Will turned to face her with an urgency in his eyes. “I see things too. Weird things.” He gulped. “I don’t know what they are but... you know what my mum used to say?”

“What?”

“She said that these *things*, they can’t hurt us. And when we see them, we just close our eyes and count to ten and when we open them, whatever it is will be gone,” Will said with a gentle breath of relief. “Whatever it is can’t hurt us.”

Emily nodded slowly.

Whatever it is can’t hurt us.

She smiled with that same relief. He was right and it sounded similar to something her own mother would have said. Perhaps their mothers would have been friends in another world...

Before she could think any further, Will took her hands from the handlebars of her bike. With their bikes propped up against a garden wall, he placed her hands gently over her eyes. She held her breath, unsure as to what was happening. However, in his careful grasp, his calloused fingers against her own soft ones, Emily felt suddenly calm as she took deep breaths of his scent, her palms over her eyes, his over the backs of her hands. Then, slowly, he moved them aside to reveal his smiling face.

“Just like that. Then it’s gone,” he said.

“Gone,” Emily whispered.

If only it was that simple. If only all monsters were just figments of a child’s imagination and could be wished away. But this wasn’t that type of story and little did Emily know, the night her family had drowned and been washed out to sea to be eaten by little fish, she had been saved for a reason. For a purpose she didn’t understand yet. One she wouldn’t. Not until they’d all seen something that wasn’t really there...something that had in fact always been there.