

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 TWENTY-TWO

## The Party

“Do you think we should have bought more?” Elivia said around a mouthful of salt and vinegar crisps.

“Lil, you’re the only one I know who eats at parties,” Anna said, her back to her best friend as she arranged fizzy drinks bottles on the counter of her family’s kitchen.

Elivia swallowed her mouthful. “That’s not true.” She looked sorely offended by this comment.

Anna gave a weak giggle in a reply and patted Elivia’s head as she passed by in a waft of body spray and perfume.

“Right.” Anna clapped her hands together, satisfied with the set up for this party. It was her first since her fourteenth last December. Just a week before the news of her mother’s cancer had been announced. Since then, she’d sunk into the background at her school with only Elivia as her friend. The rest of the girls seemed to be able to smell the hurt on her, something which she’d been sure to cover up with heavy amounts of *Impulse* body spray and her mother’s Chanel perfume.

Her peers had stayed away. Until now.

Anna Clearwater was having a party and everyone they knew was invited. A group of older boys Anna was familiar with from the Boys’ school on Quernmore Road were charged with the responsibility of bringing alcohol but until then, there were snacks, fizzy drinks and a borrowed copy of Ministry of Sound; borrowed unbeknown from her older sister, who needn’t ever know as long as Anna replaced it in her bedroom once the party was over.

She was in mixed spirits that Saturday night. All week, she’d had a multitude of worries troubling her. So much so, she’d distanced herself from the group of misfits, who were also invited tonight. While Anna knew Elivia had still met up with Tom and the others at his grandparents’ garage – the only place the group could meet privately and safely these days – Anna had stayed away. She had plenty of things to concern herself with other than the imminent threat of a murderous clown.

Firstly, there was her mother. Her health was deteriorating by the day. There had been talk that Annabella wouldn’t be well enough to travel to London for her hospital appointment but Christopher Clearwater had been insistent and anything Anna or Jenny had to say on the matter was dismissed. Even Annabella couldn’t argue with her husband these days. She didn’t have the energy.

Gone was her golden blonde hair, so alike Anna’s, and in its place, silk bandannas wound skilfully and stylishly around her head. Even her eyelashes were gone, making her once bright, dazzling blue eyes, seem hollow somehow. She was a ghost and in a cruel way, Anna had been glad to say goodbye to her mother yesterday evening before she and Christopher flew down to London from Manchester airport. For as long as Annabella’s raspy breaths and the medical smell which clung

to her skin filled the air of their family home, Anna was imprisoned by the impending doom. The fate none of them could escape. Christopher could lie to himself all he liked but their mother was ill.

She was dying and there was absolutely nothing any of them could do. The sooner Anna's father realised this, the better for everyone. But as Anna poured herself a cup of Coke that Saturday evening, Elivia munching on crisps beside her as they waited for their guests, she doubted Christopher Clearwater would ever give up.

Another reason why Anna had stayed away from the misfits she'd met at the Burrow Beck and subsequently become close friends with – much to her confusion – was the looming mission. On Monday, she would join her father at the castle for the first time since that dreadful day in April when she'd narrowly escaped the clutches of the Executioner.

Of It.

She still wasn't sure how and didn't like to dwell on the 'what ifs'. She had sworn never to return to that place and her father had seemed to understand her choice. However now, she didn't have a choice. The weight of the mission hung heavy on her shoulders. They needed that dagger. The one that had belonged to the Pendle Witches; the one that had been imperative in their ritual to keep It at bay. If they stood any chance of defeating It, they needed that knife. And the only way they could do that was with Anna's help.

It was all planned. While her father was in session, she would let Erika and Sam in through the back door that she had access to with her father's security pass. From there, she would lead them down the very hallways she had been chased by It back in April; to the tower where the castle kept their most prized historical artefacts. Anna had been quick to point out that the dagger was under lock and key in a glass chest. Erika had dismissed this with a flick of her hand as though Anna had told her it was simply on a high shelf. Anna didn't ask what Erika had planned but comforted herself in the knowledge she wouldn't be alone. With the mysterious, sullen faced girl, Erika, and the impossibly arrogant Sam Robinson, Anna, though she would never admit it, felt somewhat braver at the prospect of returning to the castle.

Somewhat.

Gulping back her Coke, her ears pricked up at the sound of the doorbell. The first of their guests had arrived and Anna hoped, now her heart rate was soaring at the idea of her mission on Monday, that the first guests would have alcohol.

"You brought the cat," Anna said, her face falling at the sight of Will, Dominic, Tom, Emily, Erika and Sam on her doorstep. On Will's shoulder was Bruce; perched like pirate's parrot and giving her his usual expression of confusion and excitement.

"I couldn't leave him," Will grumbled, wiping his holey shoes on the doormat inside as Anna gestured them all inside. They were the first to arrive.

And Elivia, for one, was pleased to see them.

"Brucey!" Elivia squealed at the sight of the cat who looked just as pleased to see her. Scooping him off of Will's shoulder, to which he bent down to the much shorter girl, Elivia cradled Bruce in her arms like a baby; rocking him back and forth as his tail curled up his belly contently, staring into Elivia's eyes adoringly.

“It’s a party, Will,” Anna tutted, closing the door behind the odd-looking group standing in her hallway, taking in the sight of her decadent house with varying expressions.

“And?” Will replied. “He didn’t wanna miss it,” he grinned.

The others tittered under their breaths as Anna rolled her eyes.

“Help yourself to drinks and crisps in the kitchen,” she sighed, “and no smoking indoors.”

“Alright, keep your panties on, princess,” Erika smirked with a wink before strolling off with Sam on her tail like an obedient puppy.

“Yeah, *Anna*,” Tom purred, sidling up to her and looping his arm through hers as she led the way for the others into the kitchen, “this big ole house and you make us meet in my granddad’s flooded garage?”

“It’s not normally this quiet,” Anna lied.

She hadn’t invited the group back to her house for *this* very reason. Other than Elivia and Sam, they didn’t come from wealth. She felt itchy and uncomfortable as Will whistled admirably at her grand curving staircase and almost fainted at the sight of her full fridge of food.

“Help yourself,” Anna said quietly to Will who smiled appreciatively and set about making a sandwich.

It was there, in her kitchen, Will making a cheese, ham and pickle sandwich, Emily watching him and giggling, Elivia and Tom playing with Bruce, Dominic standing grumpily in the corner, and Sam and Erika cosy up at the open patio doors where they were sharing a cigarette, Anna left them to answer the door the next time the doorbell rang. The next time she saw them all, they were scattered throughout the party which had, evidently, been advertised to far more people than she’d invited. The old Anna would have cared but tonight, she wanted to get drunk and forget it all.

Forget It and all.

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But Emily couldn’t forget it all as easily as the rest of her new friends. Sat beside Tom and Dominic on one of the sofas in the living room, she could perhaps put aside the anxiety in her chest that had consumed the moment she’d snuck out of Rupert’s house three hours ago. After dinner, she’d gone straight to her bedroom complaining of a headache. As soon as she was sure Rupert and Lindsay had left to tidy the church for tomorrow’s service, she’d done the impossible.

She’d snuck out of the house without looking back, with only a small fear for the consequences if she was caught.

It had been Erika who’d convinced her to come to this party in the end. Ever since the previous Sunday and that agonising kiss with Will, Emily had been adamant on not attending Anna’s party. But Erika Waterstone was a persuasive character and even though Emily and Will had shared barely a word all week, Emily had decided to come tonight. For what reason, she wasn’t sure. It was

perhaps only to see the proud smile on Erika's mouth again. The one that filled Emily with such joy and pleasure that sneaking out, possibly getting into serious trouble with Rupert and even risking her life – what with that old murderous clown still roaming the streets of Lancaster – seemed insignificant compared to Erika's praise.

However, as Emily sat nursing her cup of water on that sofa in that grand living room where the music was loud, the guests were familiar – girls Emily shrivelled away from everytime they passed too close – and Erika was nowhere to be seen, Emily wondered how much longer she needed to stay. How much longer did she need to endure the sight of Will – *gorgeous, kind Will Bennet* – being fawned over by half the girls in her year?

This was torture.

Death by murderous clown was looking particularly inviting right about now as Emily viewed Will in the corner of the living room, Bruce on his shoulder and a crowd of girls in short skirts and glittery tops circled around him; petting Bruce's head and giggling girlishly at everything Will said. It was enough to make Emily feel sick.

She'd worn her nicest dress; one she reserved for church. Paired with tights, a smart pair of shoes and her hair down for once, Emily wasn't sure why she'd bothered. She could never compare to these girls with their sweet smelling body spray, perfectly straightened styled hair, flash clothes, skinny thighs and dainty ways. She was fat; a lump. No more significant than this sofa she sat upon.

*Why did I do this to myself?*

"Cheer up, Emmsy-poo," Tom sang beside her, slinging a slim arm around her shoulders. "You want something to eat?"

"No," she muttered.

"A dance?"

"No."

"Come on, it's a party."

"Leave it, Tom," Emily groaned, shrugging off his arm and getting to her feet.

"Where're you going, babes?!" Tom called after her.

She wished he hadn't. She'd hoped to make a silent exit, if only to find the toilet before she conjured the bravery to walk home alone, but now, as she stood in the middle of the living room, she felt every set of eyes upon her, including Will's. Head low, she shuffled her way out of the lounge and disappeared into the shadowy hallway, her direction for the downstairs toilet where she could lock herself away from the sight of Will and the inevitable.

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Will watched her leave with a longing in his chest that had existed inside of him ever since Sunday evening. How could he have kissed her? Kissed her and left her without a word. He should have apologised; tried to explain himself. Since then, their friendship had become fraught. She never met his gaze and deliberately made sure they were never alone together. She had gone from being his one constant – asides from Bruce – to a distant entity he could only ever watch from afar.

It was as it should be. Emily Fox was too good for him and tonight was proof.

She looked beautiful. Not like these other girls in their skimpy outfits and their body spray which was slowly suffocating Will as he stood caged in that corner, clinging to Bruce like a lifeline. These girls, they were all over him like a rash. Everytime he tried to make a polite excuse to leave, they stopped him; keeping him penned in like a cow. He'd never received this much female attention before in his life. He blamed it on Dominic's borrowed t-shirt and Tom's deodorant. They wouldn't want to know him if he was still wearing his four day old *Star Trek* t-shirt with the hole just below his left nipple and under his right armpit, stinking of cigarette smoke and body odour. With brushed cleaned hair after a shower at Tom's that afternoon and a borrowed pair of socks, he looked like a new man. But he felt like mutton dressed as lamb.

This wasn't him. This wasn't who he was. He was just Will and these girls with their glittery tops and expensive perfume didn't want to know the real boy or even his cat, Bruce, who was just as much a mongrel as he was.

But Emily did. And tonight, she had no time for him. No, since that forbidden kiss, Emily didn't even want to know him.

Who would save him from this oppressive social setting?

Looking around the party packed with unfamiliar faces, he picked out the ones he did know, seeking aid from his friends who, unfortunately for him, were all far too busy enjoying the party.

Firstly, he spotted Dominic and Tom. Since Emily had left, they'd spread out on the sofa, bodies curled around to meet one another as they kissed passionately and completely indifferent to the stares and mutters of disapproval and disgust they were receiving. Those two always had been good at forgetting.

Next, he saw Anna. She was stood in the doorway to the hall with a much older boy who Will had heard Sam call Ezra Monk upon the boy's arrival with a group of other guys, all carrying boxes of beer and bottles of spirits. Sam had informed them all that Ezra and his friends were Sixth Formers at his school. Will wasn't sure what a seventeen year old was doing cuddling up to Anna, his hands on her hips and mouth by her ear, but it wasn't his business and so he wouldn't pry.

Finally, his attention landed upon Erika and Sam. Standing just as they had been three hours ago when they'd first arrived at Anna's house, the two were at the open patio doors of the living room now, smoking on cigarettes and talking quietly to each other as though there wasn't a rowdy party going on around them. Upon catching sight of Sam's hand brushing a few loose raven feather strands away from Erika's face, Will looked away. Once again, it was none of his business and he would not pry.

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There were plenty of pretty girls at this party but none of them were Erika. None of them instilled in Sam such adoration simply standing there, smoking, gazing out the door up at the night's sky as Erika Waterstone. The party seemed insignificant; all the noise, the chatter, the alcohol and music was far away as Sam stood in Erika's presence.

Something had happened. Something had changed between them. He wasn't sure when it was. Perhaps the evening at Frontierland or the shared experience at Malkin Tower. Whenever or whatever it was, something had changed and now, Sam only saw Erika.

But did she see him?

He considered that black scrunchie in the back pocket of his brand new jeans. The one she didn't know he'd taken from her old bedroom. The one he never wanted her to know about. He recalled all the times he'd felt Erika's arms tightly wound around him as he cycled with her on the parcel carriage. All the times she'd opted to sit beside him on the battered old sofa in Tom's grandparents' garage. The times when they'd been the first to arrive this week, Tom gone off to knock for Dominic, leaving Erika smoking outside the garage; seeing her face light up ever so slightly as he cycled around the bend and up to the bank of garages at the end of Dorrington Road. These were all moments firmly rooted in Sam's mind and these minutes now, standing with just inches between them at those patio doors, they would stay with him too.

From the moment they'd arrived, he hadn't left her side. He'd felt this overpowering need to be with her, even if it did make him feel like an obedient dog at times. Sam didn't care. Since the boys from his school had turned up, Sam felt safer with Erika. More like himself and not the bullied fat kid he was at school to his peers. He could even go as far to say he felt superior to his peers; the boys in his year who kept jeering in his direction, and the older boys eyeing Erika up with hungry expressions. Sam was, after all, with the most attractive girl at the party. Not one of those prissy girls who flirted and swished their hips but wouldn't go any further. He was with Erika Waterstone and her infamy followed her.

Even so, underneath the peacocking of a young male, Sam also felt a need to protect Erika. Keep away the older boys who were glued to the sight of her thighs in denim shorts or her breasts which were large for her age. Keep her shielded from the boys in his class who fancied, after too many beers, their chance with a girl like Erika. It made Sam smug to know that these boys were invisible to girl like her. She only saw him tonight.

He was a mix of emotions as he scanned the party once or twice to see that their band of losers had scattered. It was in social settings like this it was revealed to them all how odd a group they were. There was Elivia with her designer shoes and mousy personality being hounded by girls in her class, all wanting to brush against someone as rich as Elivia Spencer, heir to her parents' hotel empire. Then there was Anna being fondled by Ezra Monk; someone Sam couldn't stand and despised almost as much as his own father. But Ezra liked Anna and for some reason, Anna – beautiful golden haired Anna with a bite worse than her bark – liked Ezra.

With a tut, Sam cast his gaze to Dominic and Tom with a smirk. Still snogging on the sofa, oblivious to the party around them and the jeering from a group of boys who had evidently never seen two guys kiss before, Sam's two friends were far removed from the small cluster Sam hung around with at school. The quiet group of boys who Sam deemed to sit with during school hours to save from

being alone. Dominic and Tom weren't anything like them and Sam already knew they would grow to be men that would shake the way society viewed sexuality altogether.

While Emily was nowhere to be seen, Sam knew this rotund young girl with her books and her brains felt out of place here at this party teaming with the most popular people of their three schools combined. Sam was just wondering where she was hiding when he caught sight of Will pressed into a corner by a gang of girls who looked thirsty to taste him. Almost as thirsty as that ancient shape-shifter after their blood. No wonder Will looked positively terrified; clinging to Bruce as if his life depended on it.

And then there was Erika. A girl totally unlike anyone he'd ever met before. Alien to the private school girls circulating this party with bottles of blue WKDs. Foreign to even the girls of Erika's school and their cans of beer and cheap flashy clothes from Primark. Erika, out of all the losers Sam hung out with, stuck out like a sore thumb at this party in her heavy black boots, fishnet tights, battered leather jacket and black camisole. She was like an exotic creature that was both feared and revered. No one dared approach her. Girls kept their insults to a mutter. Boys kept their distance. Only Sam was allowed in her glowing presence. An honour he would never disrespect. An honour he feared losing every single day.

Turning his gaze back down to Erika, he noted the gap between them had all but disappeared. His stare caressed the side of her face as she observed the party with frustrated eyes. Before he could look for himself what had upset his friend, Erika was turning back to face him with a determined expression. One that both frightened and excited him as her slim cool fingers slipped into the side of his hair. With a tug, she pulled his face close to her own and for a few milliseconds Sam got the chance to stare into those emerald eyes – those sad, forlorn eyes – before her mouth was pressing to his.

It was like a punch to the face. Sam didn't get a chance to brace himself for the shock of sheer pleasure that penetrated him as Erika kissed him. As her lips, tasting like rum and cigarettes, grazed his forcefully at first, then slowed and became tender as he tentatively kissed her back. He didn't know what to do with his hands and so left them hanging at his side, grasping his can of beer in one and his almost dead cigarette in the other. But Erika knew what to do. She seemed skilled in this craft as her hand stayed on the back of his head and her other rested on his chest which rose and fell rapidly with each staggered inhale against her mouth.

All too soon, she was pulling back.

Sam fell ever so slightly forwards as if his body wasn't ready to stop. And he wasn't.

From the looks on Erika's face, neither was she.

Taking one last drag on her cigarette, she tossed it outside onto the patio. Without a word, she did the same to his and grasped his hand. Sam could only stumble along behind her as she led him through the bustling party, past his classmates all watching this moment in Sam's life – his first kiss and now? Soon, they were climbing the stairs and, while Sam couldn't be certain, he was pretty sure what was about to happen.

With Erika Waterstone, no less.

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It was only a matter of time, or so Elivia thought as she watched the two ascend the stairs. Her only other thought for the couple in that moment was that she hoped they put a towel down.

Stuffing another handful of cheesy crisps into her mouth, which left orange dust over her fingers, Elivia crunched merrily as she made her way across the hallway to the living room and to the main action of the party. With Dizzee Rascal playing out of the stereo, Anna's borrowed Ministry of Sound CD long gone, Elivia went to step into the living room when she was met by someone she hadn't expected to see tonight.

Someone she should have assumed would find her.

"Bart," Elivia gulped.

"Good to see you," Bart grinned, looming over her, one hand on either side of the entryway to the living room, blocking her path.

"You weren't invited," she replied stiffly, every hair on her body standing to attention in the presence of this snake. Her skin crawled at the memory of that night, bringing about a whole fury of images –

*Bart's hands all over me.*

*Frigid bitch!*

*Dad, come get me.*

*The mechanical whir of that machine...creeping closer...and closer.*

*That bristles of Its mouth ravenous to taste me.*

*It'll get me. It will taste me.*

*It will eat me whole.*

"No? Bit rude. But it hasn't stopped us though," Bart said, gesturing to the living room behind him where Elivia spotted the likes of Damien Ashcroft, Charles Freeman and Samantha Rose gate-crashing Anna's summer party.

The party intended to forget all the drama. All the fear. Anna, Elivia and all the rest of them had been naïve to think they could ever forget. For as long as *It* stalked the streets of their city, they could never forget. But tonight, it wasn't that predatory stature of an ancient all-powerful being Elivia must face, but Bart.

A whole other monster in her life.

"Leave," Elivia murmured.

"What was that, *mouse*?" Bart said, leaning ever closer, his breath against her cheeks.

"I said leave." She dared a glance up at his face.

It had been a mistake.

His expression was the same as it had been that night a few weeks ago. Down a nondescript alleyway in the centre of the city, his hands rising beneath her top, his lips against her ear.

*Stop! Just stop!*

*Frigid bitch!*

Elivia trembled in his presence and hated herself for her feebleness every second she continued to stand paralysed under Bart's threatening gaze. She had faced It – more than once – and survived. It was her plan – *their* plan – to fight It, defeat It – kill It once and for all. But how did she even stand a chance against It – *Pennywise the Dancing Clown!* – if she couldn't even meet Bart's eye?

*Mouse.*

*Weak.*

*Birdy.*

*Weak.*

*Baby girl.*

*Nothing.*

"Move," Elivia hissed.

"Oh come on, come play with me," Bart purred, one arm snaking around her tiny waist. "I've been thinking about you."

"Get off!"

"Stop it now, Elivia," Bart said firmly as though he were scolding a child, his grip around her tightening; suffocating, imprisoning her to his chest. Even in the middle of that busy party, Elivia felt awfully alone and no more than a mouse in a trap as she stared up into Bart's smirking face.

"I said, stop!"

"Lil?"

Glancing over her shoulder, Elivia was flooded with relief at the sight of Tom.

"What do you want, faggot?" Bart spat. Even with a face of thunder, his grip around Elivia loosened enough for her to step free and across to Tom holding out his hand to her.

Tom ignored Bart completely, pushing his way past the older boy without even a shred of fear for the consequences, leading Elivia with him and into the thick of the party. Looking back once, Elivia spied Bart's hard face twisted into an ugly sneer of fury and revulsion. Somehow, it couldn't reach her. Not now her hand was in Tom's, and as the dancing partygoers enclosed around her, Bart's penetrating gaze seemed distant and insignificant. Even more so once Tom took her other hand and the two began to dance; shyly and awkwardly at first to a Black Eyed Peas classic, but soon enough, the two warmed up and any lingering worries dissipated from Elivia's mind now she was with Tom.

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Dominic hated it.

He hated the music – repetitive mainstream chart beats. He hated the cheap talk and hollow chatter. He hated the people; peers from his school and strangers from Anna and Sam’s schools, all of whom looked at Dominic as though he were a piece of dirt on the bottom of their shoes. The ones from his school, on the other hand, either still called him ‘Dumb Dom’ to his face, even here tonight, or steered clear. He was, after all, the brother of a dead boy.

And he wouldn’t be the last.

Unless they put an end to It, there would be more brothers to a dead boy or girl. More sisters without siblings, parents without a child. More tiny coffins carrying mutilated souls. More headstones where the birthdate and death date were separated by less than a decade. More pain. More tears. More loss.

Unless they stopped It.

But stopping It seemed to be the last thing on his friends’ minds tonight. What with Will flirting with a group of girls all fawning over his pussycat, Emily crying in a bathroom somewhere else in the house, Anna being groped by an older boy on the sofa, Erika and Sam upstairs doing God only knows on a bed that didn’t belong to them, and Tom, Dominic’s very own boyfriend, dancing with the rich priss Elivia Spencer as if Toby wasn’t dead. As if they didn’t narrowly escape a brutal death from a cannibalistic clown only a week ago. As if children weren’t still being killed beyond the high walls of Anna’s decadent mansion in her gated community where things like the murders of children didn’t matter.

It disgusted Dominic. It infuriated and revolted him as he leant against the wall nearest the patio doors in Anna’s living room watching Tom and Elivia dancing together; laughing and pretending, all in denial to the reality they existed in.

Dominic couldn’t live in denial. When he went home tonight, he wouldn’t be able to forget. It lived with him every day. It haunted him and no party could make him forget the murder of his own brother. No party could erase that agony. Anna was an idiot if she thought this could shine any light on the darkness that enveloped them all.

Dominic felt as though he was the only one living in reality. The only one willing to face It. He wouldn’t drown himself in trashy chart music and cheap beer. He had a mission and he wouldn’t stop until that mission was done.

*Revenge. Redemption.*

*It dead.*

Then Dominic would be happy. Until then, he resided to stand in the corner of that party watching his boyfriend dance the night away, completely oblivious, as always, to the likes of Charles

Freeman watching him with a vicious expression. One Dominic suddenly realised was a far more pressing matter than the shape-shifting beast killing children.

No matter how hard Anna had tried, this night, this party, it would all end badly.

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Erika wasn't sure whose bedroom this was and nor did she care. She knew for certain it wasn't Anna's parents'. With posters of JLS on the walls, Erika could only conclude it was either Anna's or her older sister's. Either way, it didn't particularly matter. It wasn't like this was her first time.

No, that had been years ago.

Looking over her shoulder, Erika spied Sam behind her, buttoning up his jeans. He shot her a breathless grin which she didn't return. She couldn't form any expression on her face as she got to her feet, fully dressed, having only removed her boots, fishnets, shorts and knickers for the brief encounter on this single bed in Anna's house, a party in full swing downstairs. Instinctively, she went to tie up her hair when she was once again faced with the lack of it. With another pang of pain in her gut, one of many in the last ten minutes, Erika pulled on her leather jacket and headed for the door.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Sam asked, sitting up on the bed and swinging his legs over the side.

Viewing him now, Erika saw the change in his eyes. The one that happened everytime she gave into what she believed was the natural next step in any relationship. Gone was the look of respect and admiration and in its place, a face of pride; the face of a conqueror. Erika was just land mass to men waiting to be trampled upon for the bragging rights. For a single moment, somewhere in her deluded mind, she'd thought Sam would be different.

She'd been wrong. Sam Robinson, like his father and all the rest of the male species, saw her only as a piece of meat to be pounded and devoured. There was no changing that and Erika was an idiot for thinking she could.

With a firm nod, she yanked open the door and stepped into the hallway. The music and noise of the party below floated up the stairs. There was a couple further up, wound around each other like two pieces of rope, kissing feverishly. Erika passed them without a word and stomped down the stairs. She considered leaving but she had no desire to return to Tom's house anytime soon. After overhearing Angie and Mal's conversation last Sunday, Erika had done everything in her power to stay out of their way; even persuading Tom to let her take up occupancy of his grandparents' garage. It had a sofa, an electric heater supplied by oil and a lock from the inside. She would be perfectly safe and out from under Angie's feet.

Alone. That was what Erika wanted to be. A burden on nobody. No one's responsibility.

Tom had said he would talk to his grandparents. Erika doubted anything would change and so instead of heading out the front door, she made her way through the crowds to the kitchen to get another drink. Having pouring herself another cup of rum and coke, she found a spot by the open

patio doors of the kitchen to smoke. No one paid her any attention and she paid them none. It was a lot busier than it had been when she and Sam had gone upstairs. From the looks on their snobby faces and the deriding nature in which they treated Anna's home, Erika could bet that half of these people weren't invited.

Gate-crashers. People with nothing else better to do on a Saturday night than crash someone's party which they weren't invited to. Leeches. Losers. Or at least in Erika's eyes.

But it was these very leeches that Sam appeared to be talking to. Dressed, though still dishevelled, Erika spotted him with a cluster of boys she didn't recognise. She assumed they attended his school, a private boys' school in Quernmore Road on the Eastern side of the city. From the few times Sam had mentioned his peers, Erika had come to understand he didn't like them, and yet here he was, acting pally with them, jeering and laughing proudly. She only needed one guess to know what they were all talking about. One glance in her direction, the hungry expressions on their faces and the smug one Sam's, told Erika all she needed to know.

"Arsehole," Erika cursed beneath her breath. With a shake of her head, she took a long draw of her cigarette and turned her back to them all.

Yes, something had changed between her and Sam and it was, as always, her fault.

Downing the last of her drink and biting the filter of her cigarette between her teeth, Erika stormed away from the patio doors and over to the counter where she grabbed the first bottle of spirit her fingers found. Unscrewing the red cap of a bottle of vodka, Erika removed her cigarette just long enough to pour half of its contents down her throat. That was, until, it was being manhandled from her grip.

Swinging around to face the perpetrator – the person trying to stop her from killing herself tonight – Erika glowered up into Dominic's moss green eyes.

"Stop it," he hissed, holding that bottle close to his chest.

"Don't tell me what to do." Erika went to snatch it back when Dominic placed a firm, strong hand on her shoulder, his thumb pressing into her clavicle, keeping her at bay.

"What are you doing, E? What is this?" he said through bared teeth, trying to keep his voice down. She had no doubt caused a scene but she didn't care for the people at this party or what they thought of her. She already had a terrible reputation; she was simply living up to it.

Fulfilling her destiny.

"I'm having a drink, Dom. This *is* a party after all," Erika sneered.

"And you and Sam?" Dominic said, a twitch in his eye that brought a delicious cruel joy to Erika's chest.

"What about it?"

"Did you have sex with him?"

“Yes,” Erika grinned but it was in no means a happy or even proud grin. It was the sick, humourless grin of a girl on the very edge of a precipice. One not even Dominic could pull her back from now.

“Fucking serious?” Dominic said, dropping his hand from her shoulder as though she positively revolted him.

*Good.*

“Yes.” Edging closer, chin raised and her mouth an ugly sneer, she purred, “Why? You jealous?”

“Fuck off, E.”

“No, I mean it. You jealous?” Erika hissed, hand on his chest, licking her bottom lip. Lips that had been against Sam’s just minutes before.

“Stop it!” Dominic snapped.

Erika ripped the bottle of vodka from his grip and shoved him away from her. “Leave me alone!”

“Don’t be an idiot! Don’t be –.”

“What?!” She swung around to face him, indifferent to the silence of the kitchen as all eyes stayed trained upon them. “Don’t be *what*?”

“Like your mum,” Dominic replied with a deep swallow as though his bitter words were even too much for him.

Erika scoffed a laugh. And as her hand gripping the bottle fell with defeat, the cool glass creeping through her thin t-shirt to her scarred bloating stomach beneath, Erika was reminded all over again of the other thing she was running from.

Not the Clown. Not the Crone. Not the strange, brutal death that they all feared, but the imminent dread that lived inside of her, growing every day. The one she needed to put an end to. One she feared would devour her long before the shape-shifting demon ever did.

“Too late,” Erika sniffed and after pushing her way past a few spectators whom she knew from school, she disappeared into the party, vodka bottle, pregnant belly and all.

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Tom saw the whole thing. Fortunately for him, he hadn’t heard a single word of the exchange between his boyfriend and the drunken Erika. But he’d seen it and it was what distracted him then, standing in the other room peering through the passage at Dominic collapsing back against the counter as Erika took off into the crowds, while Tom danced hand in hand with Elivia. What occupied his mind and drew his attention away from Charles Freeman heading straight for him. If not for this altercation between Dominic and Erika, Tom might have been able to move out of the way or at least



prepare himself for the vicious shove from Charles, sending both him and Elivia flying to the floor of the party. But no, Tom was left defenceless and confused as he tried to right himself and Elivia. All the while, Charles loomed over them like a ravenous predator.

“What are you doing here, you faggot,” Charles spat.

“Leave him alone!” Elivia said, climbing to her feet with Tom’s help.

“It’s fine, Lil, let’s just go somewhere else,” Tom mumbled, taking her hand once again in an attempt to get away from Charles. He had no intention of getting into a fight with Charles. He’d been in plenty of scraps at school ever since he and Dominic had started dating. He’d heard all the derogatory terms and slurs and felt every punch for being gay. Tonight, he didn’t need to hear any more. Tonight, he would walk away.

“Come back here!” Charles said.

Tom’s hand ripped from Elivia’s as Charles grabbed him by the back of his t-shirt and heaved him backwards. Tom almost lost his footing and would have done if it hadn’t been for Elivia diving in to stop him.

Brave. Elivia Spencer didn’t think she had any courage but here, and in the maintenance tunnels beneath the university, and again in Frontierland, she had displayed great bravery. Tom only wished she would see it herself one day...

In a blink of an eye, Tom found himself once again on his backside on the floor of Anna’s living room, Elivia practically in his lap as Charles was propelled away from him by one fierce fist to his jaw. Looking up through the haze of adrenaline and confusion, Tom only got a glimpse of his boyfriend before Dominic was being devoured by the wild commotion.

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Dominic didn’t even get a second punch in before he was faced with someone else entirely.

With Charles whimpering and clutching his bleeding mouth, surrounded by his other gate-crashing friends, Dominic could taste a small slice of triumph. It wouldn’t last. Now faced with Damien Ashcroft – someone he only knew through Sam’s stories and since that epic rock battle across the train tracks – Dominic realised he was a long way from winning this battle.

“Dominic Johnson, right?” Damien said with a cock of his jaw.

Dominic didn’t reply. Simply squared up to this rich boy in the middle of this party where suddenly the only thing that mattered was Dominic’s looming height over Damien, a pale, ash blond boy who looked as though he could snap like a matchstick. But Dominic wasn’t an idiot and as much as he disliked Sam most of the time, he had listened. He knew all about Damien and how he made Anna squirm with disgust.

Yes, he knew all about him.

“Right, well, I think you should apologise to my friend,” Damien said, gesturing to Charles being nursed by a couple of girls and some bloody tissues.

“No,” Dominic replied. He’d faced far worse than a pretty rich boy –

*The Clown.*

*The Crab.*

*The Monkey.*

*Toby’s Monkey.*

*Toby’s death.*

No, Damien was a mere annoyance and a fool if he thought that Dominic would bow to him.

“No?” Damien blinked.

“He got what he deserved.”

“For what? Knocking into your – erm,” Damien smirked. It was unkind, mocking, his eyes full of revulsion for Tom stood beside Elivia a few paces away. “*Friend.*”

“*Boyfriend.* That’s right, my boyfriend, you homophobic douche bag. Now, you weren’t invited so you need to leave.”

“And are you going to make me?” Damien raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“If I have to.”

Damien’s thin top lip twitched with amusement as his friends sniggered behind him. Dominic ignored them all. His focus fixated upon Damien as he took a step closer. There was a unison of hissed inhales throughout the room as Damien and Dominic came face to face, almost chest to chest for this final hammer fall.

“You wouldn’t dare touch me, Johnson, you dirty little homo,” Damien seethed, his calm exterior gone and replaced with a far nastier, uglier, foul expression; the face of the boy beneath. The boy Dominic always knew he was. “It is *you* who needs to leave. You don’t belong here. Not you, not your filthy faggot friend or that tall gimp in the corner with the cat, or the fat one crying in the toilet or that whore Erika Waterstone. You’re not one of us and that’s a lesson best learnt early, Johnson. You should have realised that the moment your brother died – people like you, you aren’t deserving. Now, kindly leave, before it is *I* who removes *you*.”

It was exactly what Dominic needed to hear.

All at once, everyone started moving. From the moment Dominic wrapped his strong arm around Damien’s neck, the crowd swelled; screams of horror, gasps of excitement and cries and yells for the fighting to halt. Anna bellowed commands from a safe distance as Sam, Will and Tom chucked themselves into the brawl in an attempt to untangle Dominic from Damien, who was being equally helped by own his friends, including Charles, who were all out for blood. All the while, Elivia

stayed pressed to the wall, tears streaming down her face as she hugged the black and white cat close to her chest for comfort. She didn't see the fight then, only Emily Fox across the room standing with a similar look of horror and disbelief on her face.

It was chaos.

There was no stopping this fight now it had started. No pulling Dominic back from chucking Damien to the carpet of Anna's one million pound home in its quiet gated community and making him feel pain. Making him pay for his cruel words with blood. Sam nor Will could stop him. Rather, this fight would end rather abruptly because of somebody else.

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Erika watched the whole thing with disinterest. It didn't matter to her that one of her oldest friends was being beaten to a pulp just metres from where she was stood. Elivia's tears, Anna's pleads, Tom's cries, Sam's shouts, Will's roar, none of it mattered to Erika. So cold and detached she had become, not even the sight of Emily sobbing across the room could make her feel.

She almost left too. Almost.

Just when Erika thought that she would never feel again, something caught her eye. Something broke her out of her daze.

Emily was no longer stood crying alone. She was surrounded, in fact, like a fox at the end of a hunt was cornered by barking dogs. And the top dog of this hunt was Samantha Rose. The same girl that had chased Emily into the woods at the end of Dorrington Road all those weeks ago; chased Emily straight into Erika's life. The same girl who had sent a rock straight into Erika's eyebrow during their epic rock battle. The same girl who would ignite something inside of Erika that she feared she would never feel again.

She cared. Or at least, right then, she cared for Emily. And that was all that mattered.

Slamming the bottle of vodka down on the sideboard and tossing aside her dead cigarette, Erika shoved her way through the crowds still busy watching the commotion between Dominic and Damien, her eyes fixated upon Emily slowly being worn down to her bones by Samantha's cruel words. It wasn't until Erika was within earshot did she hear Samantha and it only sought to drive her on.

"– fat little fuck, think you can come here? You're deluded if you think you will ever belong here! Look at you! Fucking look at the state of you!" Samantha bellowed, her face pressed to Emily's red sobbing one, spitting her cruel words with a type of rage Erika had only ever seen once. And never again. And definitely not directed at Emily.

Not Emily Fox. Sweet, smart, caring Emily who made them a packed lunch every day. Those ham and cheese sandwiches were often, for Erika and Will, the only thing that stood between them and scavenging bins for food. Intelligent Emily Fox and her library card who had taken it upon herself to learn, to use knowledge against the Clown who wanted to eat their organs, drink their blood and crunch on their bones.

*I'm gonna pluck that foetus from your little belly and eat it whole!*

Shy Emily Fox who'd never had a friend. Who'd run into that dark forest and saved Erika from a fate worse than death.

Brave Emily Fox who'd taken up her position in their band of losers and chosen to face the beast and fight It.

Erika owed Emily her life. It was a debt that needed to be repaid.

"Fucking look at you! You disgust me! You fat fucking –," Samantha didn't get a chance to finish.

For in the next instant, Erika had headbutted her.

Samantha's pitiful cries of pain pierced through the roar of the boys fighting. They silenced the crowds cheering and echoed throughout the entire house. They were shrill and pathetic but did nothing to quell Erika's almighty rage as she leaned down to where Samantha had fallen on her backside. Her friends didn't stop Erika. No one dared.

No one moved, even Damien and Dominic had stopped fighting to watch as Erika sneered down at Samantha. Still clutching her head, tears swimming in her eyes, Samantha stared up at Erika fearfully.

*Good. Fucking fear me.*

"Fuck with one of us," Erika thundered, "*fuck with us all.*"

As the police sirens sounded in the distance, growing gradually closer with each droning whir, Erika straightened up and took Emily's hand. With one last look at Samantha sobbing on the floor, Erika led her friend out of that room, content in the knowledge she had not only repaid her debt, she had finally earned a real friend.

One she deserved.

And like that, Anna Clearwater's party was officially over.