

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 – NINE

Aspiration

Erika perched against the sign post.

Private Parking. Rosebank Surgery.

But it wasn't the doctors' surgery she would be visiting today.

Through the smoke of her cigarette, Erika viewed the building across the road; the Ashton Sexual Health Clinic. She watched as several girls a few years older than her exited the automatic doors of the two storey nondescript building with brown paper bags, no doubt full of condoms. They were giggling mischievously with each other as if they'd just done something naughty. Erika gave a snort. If sex was still a laughing matter should they be having it all?

Erika felt old then, perched on that sign post considering the next few hours which lay ahead of her. She gave a shudder at the name *Ashton* as the memories of that night at Pathfinders House came rushing back to her. She couldn't think about that. She had something more important to do today. Something which Emily had wholeheartedly disagreed *and* agreed with.

It had been a very confusing conversation indeed.

*

Rupert, Lindsay and the kids had gone out. Like most adults, he assumed Emily would do as she was told, even after everything he'd learnt. Emily, however, was no longer the girl she'd been at the start of the summer; timid, shy and terrified of her guardian's wrath. She had faced it and survived and wasn't afraid to sneak out that Monday afternoon to meet Erika.

They met at the children's play park, which seemed like a wholly inappropriate location for this conversation but it was close to the garage and only a short walk from Ardengate for Emily with her injured arm. Erika thought she was dealing with the pain like a champ.

“Does it hurt?” Erika asked, swinging gently on the swing seat, tapping the ash from her cigarette. She ignored the disgusted stares she received from several mothers overseeing their children that afternoon. Lung cancer was the least of Erika’s worries.

“A bit. It’s getting better, I think. No infection,” Emily said almost cheerily. She bumped swings with Erika causing a small smile to break out onto her lips. Lips which had gradually begun to heal over the five or so weeks of being friends with Emily Fox and her little pot of Aloe Vera Vaseline she shared among them all; as unhygienic as that sounded.

Not to them. They were one.

Or they had been.

“That’s good, I’m glad,” Erika mumbled. She took another drag of her cigarette.

“What did you want to talk about, E?”

“I’m pregnant.” Erika couldn’t bring herself to look at Emily. She feared her reaction.

“How?” Emily stuttered.

Erika shot her look of amusement. “Did you never get the talk, Ems?”

Emily’s cheeks darkened to crimson. “Yes but I mean, *who*?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Erika muttered, eyes down on the grass beneath her boots. “What does matter is what I do.”

“Have you told anyone else? Like, you know, the *father*?” Emily questioned.

Erika gave a grim smile. It was why she had knocked for Emily; thrown stones at her bedroom window that morning to get her attention. Why it was Emily she had chosen to tell and not Tom, who persistently asked about her health. Why not Anna who seemed to have already worked it out.

And why not Dominic.

Dom...my oldest friend.

Emily was wise, mature and the smartest of them all. Erika needed her guidance; her comfort and strength. Her logic and realism. And above all, she needed a friend who wouldn’t judge her.

“No,” Erika said.

“Are you going to?”

“I wanna get rid of it.”

Seemingly out of her control, Emily gave a sharp hissed inhale. Erika met her gaze and noted her face etched with conflict. Emily was a devote Christian; she didn’t believe in abortion. Every life mattered. But didn’t Erika’s? She was fourteen, living in her friend’s garage and pissing in a bucket? She wasn’t a mother; she was still a child herself. And the father? Well, in this equation, it might as well have been an immaculate conception for all Erika cared. The father didn’t matter.

“Erika –.”

“I didn’t ask you to come here to persuade me out of it. I asked you here in the hope you would come with me,” Erika said steadily.

“I –,” Emily stuttered.

“I know you don’t agree. I know this is against everything you believe in but please, listen. I can’t have a kid. For one, that *thing* is still killing kids. If I can’t even protect myself, how can I protect a tiny thing?”

“A baby,” Emily corrected gently.

“I’m fourteen. My mum hates me. My dad’s in prison. My older sister’s dead and I’m on the path to ending up just like her.”

“No,” Emily said quickly, grasping Erika’s hand.

Erika took another drag of her cigarette to stem her tears. If she met Emily’s kind gaze, she would lose all composure. And that couldn’t happen. She had to be strong.

Be strong, little Erika. Be strong while I’m gone.

Always so strong.

“I’m all alone, Emily. I can’t do it. I can take care of myself but no one else. I won’t subject this life, this innocent, naïve, *unwanted* life to a mirror of my own. I won’t do it. If I could go back, I would tell my parents to abort me. I would do it to save all the suffering that has ensued.”

“Erika,” Emily whispered, her horror evident in her wavering voice.

“I would. So I’m doing this baby a favour. It’s the right thing to do.” Finally, she turned to Emily who at least had the courage to face her; to hold her gaze and slowly nod. “Come with me?”

“I can’t,” Emily sniffled, tears welling in her eyes just as they filled Erika’s. “I can’t, E. I’m sorry, I can’t do that. I will support you, because I understand. Because in a way you’re right. But I can’t go. I can’t, I’m sorry.”

“Ems,” Erika squeaked, tugging on her hand as Emily rose to her feet. “I need you. I can’t do this alone.”

With a sigh, Emily raised her chin bravely to Erika’s wilting one. “If this is something I have to regret, I will, Erika. But know I love you. I do. And I support you in whatever you decide to do.”

“Even if it goes against everything you believe in?”

“Yes,” Emily said, squeezing Erika’s frail hand. “You’re smart, E. Maybe smarter than us all.”

Erika scoffed dubiously. “If I was, I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“As you said yourself, you’re a child. You can’t be held responsible for everything that’s been done to you.”

“Yet I’m responsible for *this*,” Erika said, pointing the burning end of her cigarette down at her bloated stomach.

“Yes. This is your choice. Your right.”

“But you won’t come with me?” Erika asked one last time; one last plead.

Emily shook her head.

Erika dropped her hand and got to her feet.

“Don’t hate me,” Emily said quickly as Erika paced away. “Erika?!”

“I don’t hate you,” Erika said, swinging around to face her, indifferent to the attention they were attracting with this heated dispute. “I respect you. You have your beliefs. Your faith. You stick to them. You don’t allow anyone else to tell you different. You won’t be manipulated.”

“Rupert doesn’t think so. He thinks I was *swayed* by you all. Thinks I was too stupid to know better than to hang out with, and I quote, ‘cretins such as those *kids*’,” Emily said with a small smirk. A proud smirk. One that told Erika that Emily didn’t agree with Rupert.

She didn’t regret a thing.

Erika wished she could be as confident in her actions. For her actions had led her here. Fourteen and pregnant. No one to turn to. All alone. Not even the father of this baby inside of her would stand beside her. He was but a figure in black in her mind. One she vowed to never to return to. No matter how bad things became.

She must carry on. Even if that meant being alone.

Had it ever been any different?

“We are cretins,” Erika grinned, a flicker of warmth burning through her. “We’re *losers*.”

“Yes,” Emily nodded, “and I’m a loser too.”

Erika chuckled weakly and returned to Emily; wrapping her arms around Emily’s warm, solid frame. She took great comfort in these moments as Emily held her back with a strength Erika could only ever hope for.

With a kiss to Emily’s cheek, Erika gave her one last look. “You’re the greatest loser I’ve ever met. Don’t let the fuckers get you down.”

“I won’t,” Emily giggled. “Will you be okay?” Her face became serious all over again.

“Yeah,” Erika nodded, though she wasn’t totally convinced. For some reason, this lie was necessary. For which one of the two girls, Erika wasn’t sure. She lied nonetheless. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. See you soon, yeah?”

“Yeah, soon,” Emily mumbled, watching as Erika trudged across the grass of the play park and climbed over the low metal fence instead of simply walking out the gate. It was this small act that told Emily that Erika would indeed be okay. Her defiance was an admirable quality. One Emily longed for. Erika Waterstone would survive.

But she didn't need to be alone.

*

Erika tossed aside her cigarette and headed into the building without looking back. Emily wasn't coming and she would have to do this alone. Just as she'd always done.

She'd had her consultation. She'd had her medical assessment too, which consisted of a general chat about her medical history, a physical examination, an ultrasound – one Erika had kept her head turned away from – a blood pressure and pulse rate check, several blood tests and, of course, the obligatory STI test. All of these things had come back clear and the doctor had given her the go-ahead to have the abortion.

Erika hadn't known the difference between an aspiration abortion and medical one before her consultation. Her doctor had informed her that that medical abortion would involve two pills; one taken at the clinic and another taken two days later to induce a miscarriage. She would shred the lining of her uterus and thus the foetus. It would be painful; cramping, bleeding great clots, possible vomiting and diarrhoea. Given her living conditions – though Erika had told her doctor she was sofa surfing and not the fact it was just one sofa in a garage – and her age, the doctor recommended an aspiration abortion.

Erika had found the name of such a procedure odd. Aspiration means ambition. A goal. Her only goal was to get this baby out of her. To end a life. Was that aspirational? It was depressing and morbid, or so Erika thought, and a macabre name for a procedure that in effect, ended something's aspiration. But what about her own aspiration?

What aspirations did Erika Waterstone have?

To not be pregnant.

To not live in a garage.

To not become a drug addict who has to earn money via sex.

To live. To grow old.

To not be killed by a murderous clown.

So not much.

The procedure was all explained to her. She would be knocked out, asleep throughout the entire fifteen minutes. Erika was glad. She didn't want to be awake. She wanted to go somewhere else and pretend as if this period in her life never existed at all. Then she could wake up afresh. Anew.

After the procedure, she would be given an hour to rest before being allowed home. Home being her draughty garage. No one waiting for her. No hot water bottle, only the painkillers given to her by the clinic. And her cigarettes. Her only friend.

“Sharp scratch,” the nurse said, pressing the needle into the back of her hand.

Erika didn't flinch. She'd felt worse. Lying flat on the bed, nestled cosily amongst blankets and pillows in that cool procedure room, Erika focused on the bright lights above as the nurse fixed an IV into the back of her left hand.

"That comfortable?" the nurse asked, smiling feebly down at Erika who nodded.

She didn't have the energy to speak.

"Okay, love, time for a wee nap," the nurse gave another sympathetic smile as she carefully placed the mask over Erika's mouth and nose. She gave Erika's head a gentle caress as she did, settling into a seat beside her out of view.

At once, a sweet smell engulfed Erika. She took long desperate breaths of the anaesthesia, wishing this to be over quickly. The doctor, and then again later the nurse, had explained that Erika wouldn't even realise she'd been asleep. That she would feel the mask, taste the anaesthesia and blink and it would all be over. Only worst case scenarios produced nightmares and rarely, *very rarely*, did the patient ever wake up half way through. That only happened in movies. Since Erika's entire life had been like a movie lately, she had her doubts but soon enough, her eyelids became heavy and it felt as though she was sinking into the very bed she lay upon.

It'll all be over soon...

It'll all be over soon...

Then I'll be free...

Then I'll be –

Erika?

Oohhhh, Erika?

Wake up.

Wake up!

Opening her eyes, Erika choked. Something was stuffed down her throat. She gagged and retched around the instrument deep in her gullet. Biting down, she quickly realised it was a breathing tube. But that didn't make sense. She was awake. The procedure should be over.

Unless...

Blinking quickly, her eyelids heavy like lead, Erika tried to stem her racing heartbeat as she looked around her. She was still in the procedure room, the lights above blinding. She couldn't move her fingers. Couldn't move her arms or even her head. She was paralysed, lying on that hospital bed, fighting with the breathing tube in her throat as the loud sound of machinery whirred in her ears. She gave a groan, a whimper, a muffled plea for help. She tried wriggling her toes. Nothing.

Peering down her body, the backs of her eyes stinging with pain, Erika saw her feet in stirrups, the skirt of her hospital gown spread-eagled. All around her strangers crowded, masked and robed. But none of them were looking at her.

Over the sound of the whirring, she listened to the clattering of instruments and as feeling returned to her fingers and toes, Erika felt it. The great draw between her legs; a sucking sensation as the machine whirred louder and louder. And it hurt.

The agony shot through her pelvis and across her body like fire. She tried to speak again, moaning around the breathing tube stuffed deep in her throat. She needed to tell them! She was awake! She was awake and it hurt! She felt everything. The physician's cold gloved hands across her abdomen; pushing and thumbing the scars of cigarette burns and lacerations from that stolen knife. She felt her thighs being pushed apart and a pain deep inside of her – an excruciating pain as though she was being ripped in two.

“Please,” she whimpered. It was no use; no one could hear her over the sound of that machine as it sucked and gobbled up her insides.

The doctor had explained every step of the procedure and while Erika hadn't listened before, it came rushing back to her as she lay squirming and writhing on that hospital bed, begging that someone would hear her. Someone would put her out of her misery. Hadn't she suffered enough?

We will insert a speculum so we can reach the cervix.

We will insert smaller tools of different sizes to open the cervix.

We will insert a long thin tool through the cervix to the uterus.

We will use a hand-held device to suction out the inner lining of your uterus.

The uterus and the embryo.

Then it'll all be over.

All over.

Won't feel a thing.

But Erika did feel it. She was wide awake now, her feet strapped into those stirrups as she writhed and pleaded to be free. As she screamed around that breathing tube and begged for someone to hear her.

The suction device whirred on drowning out her pleads. The pain brought tears to her eyes and her mind threatened to collapse; to form a deep fathomless crevice to protect her from this. To shut it away. To keep her safe.

But she wasn't that lucky.

“Please,” she moaned again, catching the attention of one of the masked and robed figures.

They turned and Erika, for a split second, believed that this torture would end. That she would return to darkness and her mind would wrap this moment up and toss it away so she need never revisit it.

Once again, Erika Waterstone wasn't that lucky.

She never had been.

“What’s the matter, Erika?” the person asked, leaning in close, blocking out the light from above.

She stared up into their eyes. Those yellow eyes. And before she could scream, they pulled down their mask to reveal the face of the Clown.

Of It.

It grinned, the face of the Clown wholly amused by her agony; by her tears of terror and pain that poured down her cheeks. She tried to fight it. She tried to move. Legs strapped down, she tried to move her arms when It pressed them down onto the bed.

Leaning over her, pressing Its almighty weight down on her chest, It gleamed. “Does it *hurt*?” It cheered. “Does it make you wanna just *dieeee*?”

“Please,” she mumbled, choking and hiccupping on the breathing tube. “Please!” she shrieked.

“*Oh now Erikaaaa, with a K,*” It winked and squeezed Its bright red nose with a honk. “You know better than to *beeegg*. It’ll get you *noowhere!*” With another honk, It laughed a great, chuckling laugh that was almost as painful to listen to as the machine’s whir between her legs. Then, with a snap, the laughter stopped and It bore down on her once again; rows and rows of razor sharp teeth on display as Its face distorted to cater for Its great gaping mouth. Its tongue flapped out of the gaping pit at the back of Its mouth where three lights danced like fireflies. Barbed like a cat’s, It stroked Its tongue up across Erika’s flushed sweating, tear-stained cheek and gave a long delighted shiver. “*Ohhhh you taste goooood. You taste reaaaaal goooood! You taste the best – I always knew I would enjoy yooooou the most. Scared. Frightened. Defeated. You tried so hard but you never could quite win, could you? Pooooor ickle Erika... Erika with a K,*” It winked once more.

“*Pleaaase!*” she cried one last time.

“*Pleaaase! Pleaaaase! Pleaaaase!*” It laughed over her screams.

And It laughed. And It laughed and laughed.

Echoing throughout her head forever as Erika collapsed into the darkness and wished to never wake. Wished for the end. Let death claim her. She was done.

No more. Please.

Please.

No more.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Home

Sam did as Emily suggested.

He couldn't believe it when he'd picked up his phone this morning to hear Emily Fox's voice down the other end of it. He couldn't even recall when they'd exchanged numbers, though knew they must have. He had all their numbers, except for, of course, Erika and Will – since they didn't have phones – but had spoken to no one since that night at Pathfinder's House. He hadn't even left his house. Hearing Emily's voice had been like an alarm ringing him awake. He had snapped out of his daze of playing Xbox and eating anything he could find to fill the emptiness inside of him, and jumped into action. Finally, he had a purpose again.

And this purpose was Erika.

At Emily's instruction, he cycled down to the Ashton Sexual Health Clinic on Ashton Road that Friday afternoon and made sure he was fifteen minutes early. Three o'clock. He smoked cigarette after cigarette as he waited, bike against the lamp post propping him up. He couldn't stand without it. Now he knew the truth, he wondered if he would have preferred ignorance.

If he could go back in time, would he do anything differently? Wear a condom for starters. Emily had sounded incredibly disgusted with him; seemed to even blame him. He thought he'd heard tears in her voice but hadn't asked. After the scolding he received, he wouldn't dare.

Treat Erika better. That was what he would change. A condom was one thing but Erika, herself, she deserved better. She hadn't deserved him boasting about their sexual encounter to his school friends. He hadn't planned on doing that. They'd cornered him at Anna's party and the male in him – his father's genes – had fallen back on the fact he and Erika had just had sex like a self-defence mechanism. Instead of punching them, which he knew was what he should have done – shut them up once and for all – he had used Erika.

Sweet Erika Waterstone.

She had been used too many times in her life and while Sam didn't know the details, he saw it in her eyes; etched onto her face as though each piece of suffering was a new line, a new wrinkle, a physical mark on her skin. Everytime someone hurt her, she gained more marks. Scars of their deceit. Sam must now live with the fact that he had placed at least one of those marks by betraying her. By not respecting and treating her the way she deserved. He would live with that for the rest of his life.

But there *was* something he could do. Emily had been keen to point this out and demand he do something. Sam didn't need to be told more than once. It hadn't been a question. He would be there for Erika.

He would do anything for her.

With the scrunchie still tight around his wrist, Sam sucked on his cigarette as he waited. However, he wasn't left alone with his thoughts too long as soon, the automatic doors to the sexual health clinic were opening to reveal someone familiar. Sam straightened his weak body as well as he could and tossed his cigarette aside. He viewed as Erika walked towards him.

Staggered towards him.

She looked frail; her short hair pulled back from her drawn face and her small frame drowning in an overgrown hoodie. It was *his* hoodie. The one he'd given her to keep her warm in the garage a couple of weeks ago. There were dark circles around her eyes where the colour had almost disappeared from those emerald irises. The sight of her made Sam's chest ache with an emotion he had been trying so desperately to crush all this time. But now, as she approached slowly, arms tucked around her and her eyelids heavy with each long blink, Sam didn't try to shut out this feeling.

He wouldn't. He wasn't his father.

And he never would be.

"What are you doing here?" Erika asked wearily, rubbing a hand across her forehead as she glanced up and down the street.

Cars were parked illegally on either side and the car park for the surgery was chock full of SUVs owned by the middle class who frequented this surgery. There was a woman arguing with her child, haphazardly steering a two seater pram in one hand as she smoked with the other. Across the road, a male nurse was walking home from a long day at the hospital. None of this seemed important to Sam or Erika as they stared at one another.

"Emily told me you would be here," he replied, wishing he hadn't chucked his cigarette. He needed to do something to occupy his hands. He picked a fresh one from the packet and offered it to Erika. She shook her head, a grim smile on her lips and clammy sheen to her skin. "You okay?"

"I need to get back to the garage," she sighed. "Tom's waiting."

"Why didn't he come with you? Or Dom?"

"They don't know."

Sam frowned. "You didn't tell Dom?"

Erika shot him a fierce glower which would have turned him to stone any other time. But not this afternoon. This emotion, that expression, it let him know she was still in there.

"I only told Ems. But she – she wouldn't come with me."

"Why not?"

"Against her faith, ain't it?" Erika scoffed though it was in no way malicious.

“You came alone? You could have told me, E –.”

“Why?”

“Well –,” he hesitated.

“Why, Sam?” Erika said, peering up into his blinking eyes. “Why would I tell you?”

“Well...isn't it mine?” He raised his cautious gaze to her frowning face as she shook her head and took a step back.

“That's why you're here? You think it was yours?”

“Well, no, it's not the only reason.”

“But it is, isn't it? You men are all the fucking same. No, it ain't fucking yours! It ain't anybody's!” Erika snapped then suddenly deflated as if she'd used the last of her energy.

Sam reached for her. She slapped away his hands, pulling the hoodie around her tighter. It was then she seemed to realise it didn't belong to her and attempted to take it off.

“Will you stop it?!” Sam said, grasping her wrists. His eyes fell to the paper band around her wrist; the hospital band. He released her arms and took a step back, the bike pressing into his back. “I came here because I didn't want you to be alone.”

“You didn't have to do that,” Erika murmured.

“Yes I did. 'Cause I'm not my dad. I don't wanna be him.”

“You're not,” she whispered, eyes down low, her hand falling to her lower stomach. His gaze followed her hand down and the realisation of what had just happened finally hit him.

“Just so you know, I would have taken care of you,” he said.

Erika laughed humourlessly with a shake of her head. “I would never have done anything stupid like keep it, Sam.”

“Why?”

“I'm fourteen. My mum was fourteen when she got pregnant with my sister and look how well that turned out.”

“She didn't have me. You would.”

“Sam!” Erika said, colour rushing to her cheeks only for her to fall pale all over again. “Please, just stop.” She held a trembling hand to him, eyes away down the street. There were tears there.

Tears in Erika Waterstone's eyes.

Carefully, Sam took that hand and placed it upon his chest, over his heart which always beat faster when he was with her. Her arm slackened, her fingers grasping his t-shirt as he moved closer, nuzzling his face into the side of her head. He listened to her sweet, content sighs as he took long inhales of her scent. She smelt of sweat and somewhat clinical but underneath all that, there was the

scent of *her*. The one Sam had come to rely on. The one he savoured and kept with him throughout the time they were apart.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his arm slowly encircling her frail body. This time she didn’t resist and even pressed against him. “I should have been with you.”

“No, Sam. I was okay on my own.”

“But you don’t have to be alone.”

Gradually, Erika tilted her head up to view him. “I only know how to be alone. “

“Has this summer taught you nothing? You’ll never be alone again, E.”

She gave a weak smile as she rested her head down in the crook of his neck, her body easing into his arms. “I need to sleep.”

“Come home with me.”

“What about your dad?” Her body became stiff all over again.

“He’s away. Won’t be back for a week. Come back with me, E, please. I’ll take care of you.”

She ripped out of his arms, stumbling ever so slightly. “I don’t need you to take care of me!” She swung around to face him with a fierce expression that ignited frustration inside of him.

The longer he viewed her defensive stance and frightened eyes, he knew she wasn’t being stubborn. She’d never had someone take care of her. Giving up control – it wasn’t something Erika did. Not for anyone. But just this once, with him, she would be safe. He would make sure of it.

Holding out his hand, Sam was patient as she looked from it to his face.

“It’s a long walk,” she mumbled.

“We’ll ride.” He pointed to his bike behind him.

She gave a small breathy laugh. “You’ll make me tea?”

“I’ll make you tea. I’ll run you baths. I’ll keep you safe, E.”

She closed her eyes tightly as if fighting an inner battle between what she wanted and what she believed was right. For so long, she’d been taking care of herself. Her whole life had been a fight. Sam wanted to give her a break. Shelter her from the storm.

“Okay,” she said around a deep shuddered exhale. “But when I want to leave –.”

“I won’t stop you.” Keeping his hand outstretched, he held his breath as Erika moved toward him. Her fingers grazed his as she took his hand, squeezing with as much strength she could muster. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

“Home,” Erika hummed as he straightened the bike and swung his leg over. Carefully, she climbed on behind him, taking the seat while he would pedal standing all the way home. But he would do it.

“I’d like that, Sam. I’d like that very much.”

“Home it is,” he smiled over his shoulder to see her nuzzling her face to his back. And then, he pedalled.

For Erika, he would do anything.