

JODI MAY'S



HSA vs IT

Copyright © 2020 Jodie May Mullen

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the author, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

*All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental*

## 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 FOUR

## The Legend of the Witch

“I dare you to...show me your tits,” Sam grinned.

“Fuck off,” Erika scoffed.

“Oh come on! It’s the rules!”

“Where in the bloody rules does it say I have to show you my tits?”

“It’s just the rules!” Sam spluttered, looking around at the rest of them for support.

Sam, as usual, was an idiot. If he thought Will or any of the others would encourage Erika to take her top off for them, he was an even bigger idiot than any of them had originally thought.

“Don’t be a dick,” Dominic said, chucking a balled up roll of tin foil at Sam who knocked it away with a skilful jab of his hand.

“Guys!” Will exclaimed, pointing to where the ball of tin foil from another one of Emily’s packed lunches sat in the long grass by their usual copse of trees down by the Burrow Beck stream. “Come on, don’t litter.”

“Alright, Willy, keep your knickers on,” Sam teased, the rest of their friends sniggering under their breaths. All except for Emily.

Although quiet Emily Fox had been hanging out with them for the past week, she still seemed to linger on the edges of their little gang. That was okay, Will thought;

*She doesn’t need to change a single thing about her.*

He smiled across at her, his eyes shining out from beneath his curly fringe. He tossed his head to the side to clear the hair from his face and turned back to the on-going conversation.

“You’re a sick, *sick*, boy, Sam Robinson,” Tom snorted.

Rolling back from where he’d picked up the tin foil, Sam smirked. “That I am. Now, Erika, your tits.”

“Again, fuck off,” Erika said around an exhale of smoke.

“*Ohh*, why not?”

“Alright,” she said, surprising them all. Even Emily looked up from the blades of grass she’d been tugging. It was another gloriously hot July day and the six were sprawled out on the grassy banks half in the shade. “If you show us yours,” she winked.

Will found himself laughing too as Sam frowned and looked down at his broad chest. He was larger than Will, Dominic and Tom; chubby even, but he would never let that stop him.

“Alright,” Sam grinned, “I’ll show you mine, you show me yours.”

“Please, for the love of God stop or get a fucking room,” Tom laughed, voicing all of their wishes for them.

Will glanced across at Erika wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. Erika Waterstone...she was an odd one. One Will wasn’t even sure he fully knew, not even after three years of being friends with the girl. She, like him, Dominic and Tom attended Ripley Secondary School on Ashton Road and ever since year 8 a rumour had been circulating about her; one Will was too afraid to ask whether was true. Some said she gave blow jobs for money around the back of the sports hall. Others said she had older boyfriends. Some even went as far to say she had sex for drugs. Will didn’t believe them, of course. Erika smoked weed but nothing more. He knew track marks and the hallmarks of a drug addict and Erika had none. Besides from her pale skin that verged on ill-looking, Erika looked like a normal fourteen year old girl and had never once propositioned him. The very thought made him queasy. Not because she wasn’t pretty; she was in fact, gorgeous. But she was his friend. A dear friend and the rumours had gradually grown to frustrate Will.

Erika didn’t deserve the torment she received at school from both the girls and the boys. She didn’t deserve whatever abuse she received at home either; another thing Will could sense from her sad eyes and the bruises that appeared across her body. She was good at hiding them; that and the self-harming scars. But he’d seen them. Last summer, when they’d skinny-dipped in the canal – though it had been freezing and the weeds had grabbed at their legs – he’d seen them. He hadn’t been able to forget. No, Erika Waterstone didn’t deserve the cruel things life seemed to keep throwing at her.

That included Sam.

“No, no, Tom. If we have a deal?” Sam said, getting to his knees and tugging up the bottom of his t-shirt.

While Tom and Dominic chuckled under their breaths, Will stayed passive, his focus slipping to Emily whose cheeks burned with embarrassment. He didn’t believe for a second it was because she fancied Sam. Only rare idiots fancied a guy like Sam. No, Will reckoned it was this brazen display of nakedness as Sam raised his t-shirt where already dark hair grew across his chest and flappy stomach. Will snorted a laugh at Sam’s smirk directed at Erika who simply rolled her eyes, but Will’s attention stayed on Emily. She looked uncomfortable. Shifting in her position on the grass and not knowing where to look, especially when Erika also rose to her knees and Sam whooped and cheered as she stuck the cigarette between her

lips and reached down to the bottom of her t-shirt. It was around this time that Will also began to feel that embarrassment creeping in and quickly averted his eyes as Erika went to raise her t-shirt.

Then she paused.

“Oh, *what?!?*” Sam whined.

“You’re not worth it, Robinson,” Erika grinned.

“Show the rest of Lancaster your tits, but not me?” Sam scoffed.

Will’s head snapped up to glower over at where Sam was receiving a similar look from Erika’s best friend, Dominic.

Dominic pushed Sam backwards, his t-shirt bunching up around his neck as Dominic launched on top of him. There was a small scuffle, the two boys throwing their weight around, before Will and Tom tugged them apart. Meanwhile, Erika paced away, taking her cigarette with her.

Once on their feet, Will’s hand on Sam’s hot tense shoulder, and Tom’s arms around his boyfriend, keeping Dominic still, Will finally had a moment to look around for Emily. He’d supposed she wouldn’t have moved. That she would have been too frightened to in the face of Sam and Dominic’s fury in a fight, which happened too often. But when he looked over, Emily was gone; hurrying after Erika who was a few yards away with her back to them all by their bikes. It didn’t surprise Will. Not totally. There was a reason why Emily had slipped so seamlessly into their little gang. Deep down, as much as he knew she would deny it, she was one of them.

“Erika?” Emily approached her cautiously.

Since meeting them last Friday, Emily hadn’t spoken to Erika alone, only Will and briefly, Tom when they’d met at the Spar shop. He’d walked back with her as far as Hastings Road, where he lived. He’d even given her a hug goodbye. Emily had been touched. But as for Erika and Dominic, they were still mysteries to her.

In a way, she was afraid of them. Dominic always looked so glum, which was understandable, and while Emily felt that the two could relate, having both lost siblings, she wasn’t sure how to speak to a boy like Dom. As for Erika, well, Erika Waterstone terrified her.

Not because Erika was mean. Far from it. She was the nicest girl Emily had met since her sister. She was kind, gently spoken and thoughtful. She was also smart; far smarter than Emily reckoned anyone gave her credit for. But there was something about her eyes. It was as

if she'd lived a thousand years. So wise, so old and so beyond what Emily could ever fathom. And the rumours? Tom had told her a couple and quickly informed her they were all lies. Nonetheless, they'd plagued Emily.

*Oral sex for money?*

*Sex for drugs?*

*Older boyfriends?*

It was something Emily could never understand. A world that frightened her. And while Tom insisted they were lies, a part of Emily wondered. When she looked into Erika's sad old eyes, she worried that not all of these stories were lies...

"Erika?" she asked again, placing a tentative hand on the girl's shoulder.

Erika flinched, turning around suddenly to stare back at Emily as if she were a stranger. Then, her face softened as if with recognition.

"Sorry," Erika breathed.

"No, no, it's erm, I'm sorry," Emily said quickly.

"Don't be, you're okay," Erika smiled gently. "Just *bloody* Sam."

"He's, erm, well," Emily stuttered for the right word for Sam.

From the moment he turned up last Saturday, to the few times they'd met up with him throughout the week, Emily hadn't known what to make of the boy. The group had mentioned a few times that Sam was rich and the name Robinson rang a bell, but she was still no closer to understanding him. He made crude jokes, he farted and burped constantly and Emily never felt quite comfortable around him; not the way she did with the other four. Not the way she did around Will.

At the thought of Will, a bout of shivers crossed her body. She shook them away and focused on Erika staring back at her.

"A dick?" Erika concluded for her.

Emily blushed, the insult so frank but also true. She nodded with a small giggle as Erika chuckled too, taking a draw of her cigarette and batting the smoke away from Emily's face. Not that Emily minded. She quite liked the smell of Erika's tobacco. But Rupert would *freak*. Every day, she sprayed herself with Tom's deodorant and while he questioned why she smelt like boy, she simply said she just smelt like the library. He didn't seem convinced but hadn't interrogated her since last Friday evening. As long as she was home by five and did all her homework, including working on her summer assignment, he didn't mind.

Not that she needed to be encouraged to do her summer project. Their history teacher had asked them to do a project on Lancaster, their great ancient city. To pick a period in its

history and do a project to present in the first week of autumn term. Emily had picked the Pendle Witches.

While Lancaster often tried to shrug off its darker heritage, such as the Witch Trials, they were also proud of it in some ways. From the pub on Penny Street named the Pendle Witch, to the tours and even one of the university's colleges named after Pendle. However, they didn't like to talk about it in school or even in their geography, even changing the name Gallow's Hill to Williamson Park. Lancaster had even once been called 'Hangman's Town' because everyone in the north had been tried in Lancaster, once one of the only main cities this far north. The 'unruly North West' was what Londoners had called it. They never thought they would be able to tame it and in some ways, they hadn't. It was still as wild and beautiful and free of the rest of the country as it had been hundreds of years ago.

There was plenty of history to choose from but Emily had always been fascinated with the witches. While Rupert would disapprove, what with witchcraft being a huge taboo from a religious standpoint, it only sought to intrigue Emily further. Were they truly witches? Had they been hung for their innate powers? How awful to have been executed at all. Emily spent her evenings, after returning from her wonderful days with her new friends, studying and researching the witches to gather as much information for her essay and project board. She couldn't wait to present it to her teacher. If only her classmates didn't have to be there. They would spoil it for her, just as they spoiled everything else in her life.

At that, Emily thought of Samantha Rose. She hadn't seen her smirking face for over a week but feared the next time she would bump into her. Especially if it was with Will, Erika and the other three. What would they say if they heard Samantha calling her piggy? Would Sam laugh along? Would Erika, Dominic and Tom make pig noises too? Would Will be repulsed by her? It wasn't worth thinking about. It only brought tears to her eyes.

"He's not very nice," Emily said carefully, glancing over to where Sam was pedalling away on his bike, his and Dominic's bust up clearly angering him enough to leave.

She'd been shocked by the outburst. She'd never seen a real brawl before. Girls didn't punch, they slapped, bit and clawed, and as much fun as it was to watch two popular girls at her school – whom she hated – pulling at each other's hair, this brawl hadn't been fun. It had frightened her. Dominic's fury was explosive, but then again, could she blame him? She wanted to scream and kick the world for taking her family away too. But she didn't. She stayed quiet. Always quiet and timid.

"No, he's not," Erika hummed with a small smile, "But we don't know his story."

"His story?" Emily frowned.

"Yeah everyone has one. Kinda like a makeup of who we are. I mean, you're not just what you look like are you?" Erika cocked her head to one side, viewing her up and down.

Emily touched her arms, suddenly self-conscious under Erika's scrutinizing gaze. Was she calling her fat? Just like everyone else?



“Timid, quiet, shy, *religious*.” Erika nodded to the golden cross which hung around Emily’s neck. It had belonged to her mother. She had given it to Emily a week or so before she died; as if she’d known they wouldn’t be together for much longer. “You’re *more*, aren’t you?”

Emily frowned as she considered this notion, for of course she was more. She was more than her chubby waist and fingers. She was more than her grades. She was more than the death of her entire family. She was more than that car accident. But who had ever taken the time to find that out? As she viewed Erika now, she wondered if this girl would. Or rather, if she already knew.

“What’s your story?” Emily questioned, and then stammered an apology. It was an invasive question to ask. They hardly knew one another.

“It’s okay,” Erika said gently, taking another drag of her cigarette. “My story? Well it ain’t that different from Will’s or Tom’s or maybe even Sam’s. Except Tom has his grandparents. They wanted him.”

“Did no one want you?” Emily’s frown deepened. She cursed herself for yet another probing question but Erika didn’t look offended. Simply surprised; as if no one had ever asked before.

“No, Emily.” Erika shook her head. “No one wants me.”

At that, she flicked away her cigarette, picked up her bike and after one last pat to Emily’s shoulder, Erika climbed on and pedalled away.

Emily watched her go, that long raven feather hair blowing up behind her in the summer breeze as she rode away across the bank, disappearing around the corner of a copse of trees and out of sight. Erika’s final words hung heavy in Emily’s chest.

When her family had died, Rupert had become her guardian. As her parents’ closest friend, in their will they had written that if anything should happen to them, Emily and or Mary would go to him. Her parents thought he would take care of her. And she guessed he had. But begrudgingly so. It wasn’t because he cared. It wasn’t because he *wanted* her. Who wanted a chubby grieving ten year old girl to look after when he had his own family?

She wasn’t sure whether it comforted her to know that she wasn’t the only one who had been disregarded. That she wasn’t the only one in this world that no one wanted. In a way, it made her feel sadder. If no one wanted Erika – beautiful, elegant Erika – who would want fat Emily Fox?

\*\*\*

Erika didn't bother locking her bike. She simply removed the tires and carried them under her arm. After hiding her second-hand tatty bike in its usual bush by the block of flats she called her home, Erika took the tires and headed up the stairs.

Heaton House wasn't a tower block. Rather it was a three storey block with ugly grey brown walls and a graffiti covered stairwell that always smelt of piss. It stood on the edge of the Greaves neighbourhood looking out over the playing field and forest. Slap bang in the middle of rows and rows of beautiful Victorian-era terrace houses it was an eye sore and so were the people who lived there. Some lingered in the hallways smoking and dealing drugs. Others hung about with their dogs, or left their apartment doors open as if this entire block belonged to them and they to it. Erika loathed it. She hated the smell, she hated the people and most importantly, she hated living in this dump.

Five years ago, she'd moved from her family home to this squalor with her mum and younger sister. With her dad in prison for crimes Erika didn't like to discuss, and no longer able to afford their four bedroom family home across the river in the northern part of Lancaster, they'd moved to this council block. With her mother out of work – and had been for over six years – and spending what little money they got from the Job Centre on booze and drugs instead of food and clothes, this place wasn't a home. They weren't even a family. With her father gone, her older sister dead and her mother as good as, it was just Erika and her little sister, Vicky left.

Unlocking the door, Erika stepped inside to be hit by the usual smell of smoke and week old food rotting in the overflowing bins. She tossed her tires behind the door and closed it behind her. After pushing across the several bolt locks, she trudged down the narrow hallway to the living room at the end.

“Mum?” Erika said, coming to a halt in the entryway.

In their stark living room, there was the one armchair, the torn sofa and the television. In the armchair sat her mum, as usual. Still in her nightie, knees apart and a cigarette between her fingers. She was asleep, which was good for Erika; she couldn't handle Marianne when she was awake. Her eyes fell to the burning embers of the cigarette. When they fell, they would fall straight to the carpet instead of into the overflowing ashtray on Marianne's bony knee. It would start a fire.

Erika stepped forward and pinched the cigarette out of her mother's fingers. Marianne leapt awake and smacked Erika around the cheek, sending her stumbling to her knees.

“Stealing my fags now?” Marianne hissed.

Erika touched her cheek and shook her head. “The embers – they –.”

“*The embers*,” Marianne scoffed mockingly, “Who the fuck do you think you are? Where have you been anyway? Victoria's starving and needs a bath.”

“You could cook,” Erika muttered.

“What was that?” Marianne said, raising that hand again as a warning.

Erika flinched and shook her head. “Nothing, Mum. I’ll go cook it now.”

“Don’t bother. She’s asleep.”

Erika halted in the entryway, head low and chewing at the insides of her cheeks. She tasted blood instantly. If she chewed anymore, she would bite right through to the outside. At least she wouldn’t be so pretty anymore. Then perhaps things would be different.

“Where have you been?” Marianne asked again, tapping the ash into the glass ashtray and taking a drag.

“Out,” Erika replied.

“*Out*,” she snorted deridingly, “I know you’ve been out. You’ve been out all day. There’s kids going missing, you know.”

“And why would you care if I went missing?” Erika said, a little too loudly this time.

“What did you say?” Marianne asked, twisting around in her armchair; perhaps the first time she’d moved in hours. “Oi, come back here you little bitch and say it to my face.”

Erika gritted her teeth as she turned back to face her mum, two hands on the doorframe to steady herself. “Nothing, Mum.”

“No! You said something about me not caring if you went missing! You don’t think I’d care?!”

“Well come on,” Erika scoffed, “You only want me here to look after Vicky. I’m a glorified babysitter.”

“She’s your sister!”

“And you’re her fucking mum!”

“Don’t you dare, you little cunt!” Marianne said, jumping to her feet where she wobbled drunkenly. There was that usual intoxicated dazed look in her eyes. She didn’t know what she was doing as she marched toward Erika who didn’t move from her spot in the doorway. “I love that kid!”

“Yeah?” Erika sneered, “Well fucking act like it and step up! Be a fucking mum for once!”

“What do you know?!”

“I know that right now you’re pathetic!”

“At least I don’t spread my legs for every bloke in this block, you little slag!”

Erika halted, the air catching in her throat as she snarled back at her mum who always knew just what to say and do to push her buttons.

“Yeah but you will though, won’t you?” Erika hissed, inching closer until she could taste her mum’s foul breath on her tongue. “When the money dries up and the H gets more expensive, you’ll do whatever you can to get your next fix.”

“Good thing I’ve got you, then, ain’t it?” Marianne glowered, flashing her crooked rotten teeth and the black missing gaps in between. “You’ll do it for me, just like last time.”

Erika raised her fist to smack her when Marianne caught her. Erika wasn’t sure how or even what to do as Marianne pushed her out into the hallway and toward the door.

“Try to lay a hand on me, you little cunt! I’ll show you! Get out!” Marianne roared, manhandling Erika toward the door.

She fought her every step of the way. As much as she loathed her home and her mother, she would rather be here than out there. She’d tried that before and all she’d gained were memories. Torturous, horrifying memories that found her late at night when she huddled up on the mattress with Vicky and cried into her little sister’s hair. No, she wouldn’t leave. She couldn’t do that again.

Yet even as she tried, Marianne got her around the neck as she pulled off the bolts and chucked Erika out into the hallway, sending her slamming against the railings of the balcony. Erika coughed, winded from the force and slid down to the concrete watching as Marianne slammed the door shut behind her. Erika leapt to her feet with the last of her energy and threw herself against the apartment door, only to find it locked.

Marianne had kicked her out. After curfew and into the cold, frightening world.

Turning around, Erika stared out at her reality with a teary vision. She was exhausted; physically and mentally. Her chest was heavy, her mind ached and as her hands fell to her thighs, her nails dug deep into those precious cuts that always soothed her.

With a gasp of breath, Erika’s eyes flicked open. She started off down the hallway to the stairwell. There was no point staying here.

Without her tires, her bike was pointless. With nowhere to go, Erika crunched down the overgrown track that ran parallel to the playing field, and made her way toward the forest. To her left, the windows of the houses along St Paul’s Road shined brightly down at her, high above on the ridge, their gardens set along three different descending levels. She’d lived in the shadow of these grander, more expensive houses throughout her life, even before she moved here. The ‘other half’ her mother called them. Erika looked to them now; peering up at an older couple eating their dinner al fresco on their terrace; dogs at their feet and laughter on their lips.

*How idyllic.*

No one would ever assume from this scene that there were children being murdered in Lancaster. Erika had followed it closely, terrified for her little sister, who'd turned just six last month. The most recent child to go missing was Katherine Dennings; a six year old from Bowerham. They hadn't found her body yet but they would. Just as they had found Toby's body stuffed into that drain on Bridge Road – the drain Dominic avoided at all costs. And just as they'd found all the other decomposed, mutilated bodies of all the missing children before, they would find Katherine. Her parents will weep. There will be an aching hole in their hearts. The community will pray silent for another life. The police will scratch their heads and keep trying to search for this killer. But they wouldn't find him, or at least Erika doubted it. These people were never caught. Not the true killers. They had to want to be found.

And yet, history was littered with people who'd been executed without any proven crime. Had a noose tied around their necks or a blade to their throats and their life extinguished. And for what? As she walked, Erika considered all those witches who'd been hanged for their apparent crimes. When in reality, most had been set up or even murdered for being different.

Erika knew that type of prejudice. If the death penalty was still in power, she was certain her classmates would demand her head. They loathed her. Despised her. The girls were dead set on making sure she understood that. They hated her; the way she looked, the fact boys always seemed more interested in her. They loved calling her names; shouting these derogatory slurs at her everywhere she went. And the boys? The boys were even worse. If they weren't trying to pull her skirt down or cornering her in the changing rooms, groping at her breasts and pinning her down, they were saying she was frigid, ripping her bag from her back, tripping her up and calling her a whore.

And why?

*Because that's exactly what I am.*

Sniffing back her traitorous tears, Erika headed into the forest; dissolving into its impenetrable darkness that cradled her tonight and welcomed her like an old friend. Unlike her friends and most people her age – and some adults – she wasn't scared of the woods. She didn't fear the stories of the drug addicts or the occult. She didn't even fear the Legend of the Witch. These things weren't real or if they were, they couldn't truly hurt her. Besides, this was the only safe space left.

Following the inner path, one she knew well enough to tread even in the pitch black, Erika ran her fingers along the bark and branches of the trees. Leaves and twigs caressed her face like comforting fingers, stroking away her tears which fell faster now she was within the safety of the woods. The world beyond was gone and she was safe. From her mother, from her peers...from the grown men who liked to take advantage of vulnerable little girls like her...

Squeezing her eyes tight, Erika used the ends of the sleeves on her ratty hoodie to dry her tears. This hoodie didn't belong to her though. It had once been her sister's and it hugged

her now, the way Enid had once. While the scent of her skin had been long lost, Erika still found comfort in it on that night as an unseasonably cool chill blew through the trees. It made Erika halt. She opened her eyes.

There was something wrong.

Usually when she visited the woods, it was alive with sound; bats squeaking above, owls hooting, foxes screaming and small rodents scuttling through the undergrowth. She'd come to enjoy these sounds. They were comforting. They made her feel as though she wasn't so alone. Some nights she even slept out here, hidden deep in the back of the den she and her friends had made last summer. She kept a blanket out here just in case and always slept the best under the canopy of the forest where it felt as though nothing could hurt her. But something was different tonight.

There was no sound at all.

For a terrifying second, she thought she'd gone deaf. She clicked her fingers by each ear, the sound penetrating the silence like the shot of a gun. She wasn't deaf, but the woods were mute. Not a twitter or tweet. Not a bush shaking or the sound of little padded animal feet across the twigs. Nothing. No bird, no bat, nothing.

Nothing.

Stepping back, Erika was overcome with a sudden sense of dread.

This wasn't the forest she knew. This place, it felt alien to her as she took another step back. One hand reaching for the tree at her side, she tried to steady to her breathing. She couldn't panic. There was nothing to panic about. She simply had to turn around and leave. How hard could it be?

Turning on the heel of her boot, Erika came face to face with a tree. She stuttered in confusion. Looking down, peering through the darkness, she found herself stood in the nettles and undergrowth, which made no sense. She never strayed from the path. There were too many ridges and steep dips in the forest; it was dangerous. But here she was, standing in amongst the bushes, stinging herself and catching her clothes on the brambles that clawed at her like hands.

Smacking them aside, indifferent to the stings and cuts, Erika clambered back onto the path, using the dim moonlight seeping through the trees above to guide her. It didn't make any sense but she wouldn't linger. Something was telling her, *screaming* at her to leave and yet even as she started along the path up out of the forest, she felt herself walking down hill, which was wrong. This would only take her deeper into the woods. Turning back around, she started again, quicker this time, practically jogging as sweat curled around her ears and her breath came in raspy pants which filled the still, silent air.

It was hot. Increasingly so. That cool breeze had gone and Erika felt as though she couldn't breathe as once again she started heading down an incline. Coming to a halt, she

took a moment to gather herself. She was disorientated. It was just the dark. She couldn't lose her mind. She had to focus otherwise she would end up running around in here for hours.

*And I don't want to be here any longer.*

She assured herself that once she'd calmed down, she would be fine but even so, there was a small part of her that wasn't convinced. A part of her that began to panic.

*I'm not getting out of here.*

*I'm not getting out of here alive.*

Raising her chin, Erika's ears pricked up at a sound. A very distant sound but it seemed to be getting louder. Or rather *closer*. Firstly, there came the drumming. Slow, hypnotic drumming; pounding beats that didn't seem to follow any pattern or sense. It made her guts churn as the dread inside of her grew. Secondly, there was a crackling like fire on logs. Peering through the darkness of the woods, leaving the path once again behind, Erika could start to see the flickering of fire; of embers lifting up into the sky with smoke. And as she moved closer, the third noise became much more apparent.

Chanting. Over and over again.

The rumours in their community were that the woods were sometimes used for occult rituals. Erika had never found evidence of this and thought it was scaremongering by parents to stop their children from going into the woods at night. Yet, as she listened, these stories began to come alive. And as she felt herself being drawn towards it, she wondered –

Was the Legend of the Witch true too?

That the soul of Elizabeth Southern, sometimes referred to as Old Lady Demdike, the matriarch of her family and the oldest of the accused Pendle Witches, had come to this place. Elizabeth wasn't executed with the rest, having died in the appalling conditions at the castle awaiting trial. Her frustrated, furious spirit had fled that place and found sanctuary here in this forest that must have, at one time, been far larger. They said that here Elizabeth Southern waited for unfortunate souls to wander into her domain so that she may make them feel the pain her children and grandchildren felt at the gallows. That they would know her suffering.

Erika touched her neck, a tightness in her throat she hadn't noticed before. She took deep breaths to fill her lungs. As much as she wanted to turn back, to run away from this place, from the smell of sulphur and the sound of the drumming and chanting, Erika couldn't seem to make her feet work. Or at least, not in the direction she needed them to. Instead, she carried on walking closer and closer, nettles and brambles seemingly parting to allow her through as she finally entered the clearing.

The fire was so great she felt its heat even there in the undergrowth. In the empty clearing a bonfire soared, green and black flames sprouting from the logs. Erika blinked as she panted, the sulphur stinging her eyes and throat. She coughed, hacking on the pain in her

gullet. It was there, staring through her blurred vision, choking and doubling over that Erika got her first look at the Witch.

Elizabeth...Old Lady Demdike...the Crone. Hunched, crooked, her spindly hands reaching out to Erika as she hobbled towards her. But this limp was in no way with frailty. Now, she seemed hunched and weighted not by age or illness but by boils and a large hunchback that pressed her down toward the ground. All except her neck. Her neck curved upwards in an utterly inhuman angle as the Crone cocked her head to one side, parting her lips to reveal rotten teeth. Teeth just like Erika's mother's.

This thing was like something from a fairy tale. The classic depiction of an ugly, old witch with a long pointed nose and a great black cloak. But there was nothing comical or endearing about this thing. Its eyes yellow, its stringy red hair hanging from its scalp across its face were far from funny and set Erika's worst nightmares alight.

The legends were true. The stories didn't lie. There was something in these woods and it was coming straight for Erika.

Hands outstretched, its fingers long and sharp like claws, the witch let out a shriek of pleasure as it got a hold of Erika. She tried to pull away, figuring she could overpower this crooked crone but as she did, the witch pulled her towards the fire and away from the undergrowth with such strength it almost pulled Erika's arm from its socket. Falling backwards, yelping and begging, the heels of her boots scuffing into the dirt, yanking and kicking desperately, Erika tried to fight. One hand over the witch's wrist, she tried to pry away its claws that dug deep into her forearm. She wouldn't give up. She had fought far worse...or at least, so she thought.

At the fire, the Crone chucked her forwards. For a second, Erika thought she was heading for the burning logs when she came to a skidding halt to its side, landing on her shoulder. She gave a wince from the pain that shot through her. She could hardly breathe from the exertion and the pain, but willed herself to roll over and face the witch who bore a knife.

It was sharp; it glittered in the fire. And it was long. Longer than Erika's forearm and curving viciously at its tip. Perfect for ripping out guts.

Scrambling to her knees in a blind panic, unable to believe what was happening, Erika tried to get away from the Crone and that deadly knife when a foot came down on the middle of her back, sending her to the ground. Rolled over onto her back, Erika could only hold up her hands and beg for mercy from the yellow-eyed thing...this Crone... as It snarled down at her, knife still raised.

*"I'm gonna pluck that foetus from your little belly and eat it whole,"* the witch growled, its yellow eyes glowing and its face twitching and shifting as if it wasn't this thing's face at all. As if it were a mask it couldn't quite cling to.



But Erika didn't have time think about what It was or why It had chosen her, all she could do was reach back and try to search for a weapon – a fallen branch, anything – in a poor attempt to save her sorry life.

*Mum won't miss you.*

*Vicky won't either.*

*What's the point?*

And so as Erika stared up at that Crone bearing over her, that knife coming down to meet her gut, Erika dropped her arm and gave up. For what was the point? No one would care. No one wanted her.

And just as she felt the tip of the knife touch the skin of her stomach, the Crone having pulled up her t-shirt as though she were fruit that needed its skin removed before being devoured, Erika heard a loud cry.

She viewed through her blurred vision as the Crone shrieked and recoiled as a flaming branch smacked into It. Erika gasped with horror and shock, scuttling up into a sitting position, her heels digging deep into the earth as she watched the Crone flailing and crying – such an inhuman, animalistic cry it made her ears ring. Covering them, Erika hiccupped on her tears, on her pure terror, as the Crone flung Itself deep into the woods, still howling away.

“Erika!”

Snapping her head up, Erika saw the round face of someone familiar. Someone she hadn't ever expected.

“*Emily?*” Erika stuttered.

“Come on!” Emily said, yanking her to her feet with incredible strength and tugging her out of the clearing. “Come on! It might come back!”

“Emily!” Erika panted “What was it!?”

“I don't know! Come on!”

Emily didn't say anymore as she half-carried, half ran with Erika through the undergrowth, tripping and stumbling as they went, barrelling through the woods and to the outer path. They went to stop for a breather when that howling, that all out shudder of agony from that thing drew closer. Emily hadn't killed It. She had merely angered It. They couldn't stay there.

“Come on!” Emily grasped Erika's hand and tugged her down the outer path, heading toward the Chatsworth Road steps.

From the sounds of it, that thing, with Its yellow eyes and that brutal knife, was right on their tail; screeching and wailing not with pain now, but with fury. It was angrier than ever and It would get them. Erika was sure of it.

The two girls burst out the top of the steep steps and onto Chatsworth Road. A streetlight stood near the end by one of the houses, flooding them with warm light. Falling to the coarse tar of the pavement, wheezing and choking for breath, the two girls stayed gripping each other's hands as they stared down into the fathomless blackness of the forest.

At once, those yellow eyes appeared; Its mouth wide open like a snake, Its jaw snapping as great sharp teeth appeared; rows upon rows of razor sharp teeth, and a hissing great stench of death and rotting flesh washed across them. Emily coughed as Erika gagged; covering her lips and touching her stomach as she tried to force the vomit back down. They watched, tears streaming down their faces as It crawled up the steps, Its claws first and Its cloak hanging from Its hunched shoulders.

"Erika!" Emily yelped, tugging her from behind and into the pool of warm illumination from the streetlight.

With her strong arm across Erika's shoulders, the two girls hugged one another close and watched, breathless and terrified as It clambered towards them; all the while hanging to the shadows. Then, Emily did something even more startling.

Keeping her arm around Erika, she reached into the front of her nightie and pulled out a golden cross. Pinching it between her fingers, she held it up. Erika focused on it; its golden light, its goodness radiating out of it as Emily screamed –

"Be gone! Go back to whatever hell you came!"

Erika watched with quivering lips, vomit burning in her throat as It halted, Its eyes upon the cross hanging in Emily's gripped. Neither girl knew what would happen. What It would decide to do. But Erika had hope.

For the first time ever, she had hope as It snarled at them and slowly retreated back into the darkness.

Then, all was silent.

Almost. Those nightly sounds, the bats in the trees, the owls overhead, the twitching and snuffling of friendly earthly creatures returned, and all at once, Erika felt sick. Heaving herself up onto her hands and knees, she vomited onto the pavement.

Emily patted her back tentatively, pulling her hair away from her face as it dangled into the line of vomit. It was mostly liquid. She didn't eat enough to produce chunks; only the lunch Emily had made her earlier that day. She was left feeling empty and exhausted; even more so than before.

Sitting back on her haunches, she wiped the end of her hoodie sleeve across her lips and looked to Emily sat beside her.

“What –,” Erika panted, “How?”

“I saw the lights from my window,” Emily started, quietly and her wide eyes darting to the dark hole leading into the forest.

Both girls were eager to be away from this place but neither moved. Neither had the energy to.

“I just...I just knew something was wrong.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” Emily said, eyes down on her hands in her lap. “I just knew something was wrong so I got up, I put my shoes on and just started running. I never run...”

“You saved me.”

Emily looked up and met Erika’s teary gaze. “No, I –.”

“It had me, Ems. You saw. It was gonna kill me.” Erika hiccupped again, touching her stomach as another bout of sickness came over her.

Its words...what had It meant?

*I’m gonna pluck that foetus from your little belly and eat it whole.*

Erika swallowed tightly, wondering if Emily had heard that too. She viewed the girl, tucking her loose dark brown hair behind her ears. Erika had never seen Emily with her hair out of its tight ponytail. It framed her round face pleasantly, making her less severe looking and softer.

*Pretty...no wonder Will’s in love with her...*

Erika smiled weakly, taking Emily’s hand within both of her own. “You saved me, Ems.”

“No, I just, threw a bit of wood at it,” she shrugged humbly.

“You threw a fucking flaming torch at it! You’re like *Aragorn!*” Erika laughed, a type of hysteria coming over both girls then as they laughed uncontrollably.

“I don’t think anyone has ever said anything so kind to me before,” Emily stammered, her nervous eyes finally meeting Erika’s.

“Comparing you to *Aragorn* is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to you?” Erika frowned.

Emily nodded, all the laughter fading.

“How about this –.” Erika shuffled closer. “You’re a badass, Emily Fox. You just saved my life. I am forever in your debt.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Emily said tightly.

“Yes I do. But I guess, you know, that’s what friends are for.”

“Friends?” Emily looked taken aback. It confused Erika momentarily before she realised. If being compared to a fictional character was the nicest thing anyone has ever said to Emily, she couldn’t have had a very nice experience with people...with friends. If any.

“We’re friends, aren’t we, Ems?”

“Erm, I guess, I just, well I haven’t had a friend in so long,” Emily said, keeping her head bowed.

“We now you do. I’ll be your friend. It’s the least I can do when you just saved my life,” Erika snorted, causing a small smile to break out onto Emily’s face. “Come on, let’s get out of here before It decides to come back.”

Getting to their feet, the two girls hobbled up the steep incline of Chatsworth Road and turned left onto Ardengate. They came to a halt outside Emily’s house.

“Rupert would kill me if he knew I’d snuck out,” Emily said in a hushed whisper looking to the house.

“Be lucky you have someone who cares,” Erika said quietly, staring off down the track thinking of home. Now, she had nowhere to go. She couldn’t go back to the flats and definitely couldn’t go to the woods. What on earth was she supposed to do?

“Erika?”

“Yes?”

“What do you think that was?” Emily said, looking down the other direction of the track towards the forest.

Erika thought for a moment. She’d been so caught up trying to fight and then run, she hadn’t stopped for a minute to consider what It had been. A witch? A spirit or ghost? A gruesome manifestation of her mind? But Emily had seen It too and at the end, as It had crawled out of the woods, It hadn’t look like the witch at all. It had changed...It had another face. Perhaps many. This was the stuff of fiction, of horror movies and tales told around camp fires. If Emily hadn’t seen it too, Erika might have thought she was going mad. But as she looked into her new friend’s terrified eyes, she knew it wasn’t insanity. Not even hysteria.

Something had attacked her in the forest; chased them and attempted to kill them both. But what? What could It possibly be if not an animal or a person? What was It?

“I don’t know, Ems,” Erika breathed, terror returning to her as she hugged her arms close. “I don’t know. But we need to tell the others.”

“The others?” Emily said hesitantly, “Won’t they laugh? Think we’re crazy?”

“Maybe, but if there’s one thing I know about fear is that it’s much harder to fight when you’re alone. But together? The six of us, we’re safer.”

Emily smiled at this; a warm, grateful smile, hopeful even. Erika squeezed her hand still in hers.

“See you tomorrow?” Emily asked as she went to head up the paved pathway to the modest, safe looking house.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow,” Erika said with a hitch to her voice.

She viewed as Emily gave her one last look before sneaking in through the front door. Meanwhile, Erika stayed standing on the track, the darkness creeping in. Looking back down the gravel drive, she thought she saw something move.

She wouldn’t wait around to find out what.

Erika didn’t have a mobile like some of her friends. Neither did Will. Instead, she collected up a handful of small stones from Dominic’s front garden and tossed them up to his bedroom window. The rest of his house was dark. After a few more stones to the glass of his window, a lamp switched on behind his curtains. They parted to reveal his sleepy face. Erika raised a weak hand. The curtains closed again. The lamp switched off.

While she waited outside his house on Bridge Road, her eyes swept back and forth behind her, a watching presence boring into her back. The sweat had cooled on her skin leaving her cold and weak. Her stomach rumbled loudly, echoing down along the shadowy street, just the silver streetlights illuminating the roofs of cars and the occasional cat. Just when Erika started to feel that dread creeping in again, the front door opened to reveal Dominic.

She practically ran from Ardengate, down St Paul’s Drive, and along Heaton all the way to the end to Bridge Road. Dominic lived in the house at the end with the blue door and the bay window. It was a nice house; one Erika had always envied and always loved visiting. Not that she came here much these days. Ever since Dominic and Tom had started going out, they saw less and less of each other; *alone* that was. Dominic didn’t want to be alone with her anymore. Even more so since Toby. But they didn’t talk about Toby. Not then and not now as Erika slipped under his arm and into the hallway.

Quietly, he led her along to the kitchen. Already, his parents were asleep. The television off and the house quiet. Peaceful. It smelt of a home cooked meal and love. While

Erika knew Dominic's parents hadn't been the same since Toby's death, it was at least a home. She envied it.

"Do you want something to eat?" Dominic asked, standing on the other side of the kitchen table as if keeping his distance. It was always this way now. Since Tom.

"Erm, no it's okay," Erika said, blinking back at him weakly.

"E?" he said, stepping closer. "What happened?"

"I –," she paused, "I had a row with Mum."

His closed lips became a thin line. This wasn't the first time she'd run to Dominic after an argument with her mum but it was the first time she'd done so since he'd started dating Tom. It was as if the start of their relationship had signalled something between the two friends. A space. A distance. An unwritten rule. Things were different now. And Erika hated that.

Her hand went to her stomach again but not out of hunger this time. However, Dominic took it as that and crossed wordlessly to the fridge to retrieve butter and a packet of ham from inside. He pointed to a chair. Erika sat down and watched as he made her a sandwich. Just as he used to do. Soon, there was a plate in front of her but Erika couldn't bring herself to eat it. She still felt sick. Even so, she tried. For Dominic.

She took a small bite and replaced the half to its plate.

"Do you want something else? An apple or a –?"

"I was attacked, Dom."

This silenced him.

She raised her eyes from the plate to view his pale face in the darkness of the kitchen. He hadn't turned on the lights. His mother would have a fit if she found Erika here. Andrew Johnson would take pity on her, but not Julianne. She hated Erika and everything she was; everything she came from. She thought Erika was a bad influence. Trouble. And perhaps she was. It seemed to follow her everywhere she went. Tonight, she had put quiet Emily Fox in danger. What more proof did she need?

"Where?"

"In the woods."

"Why were you in the woods?"

"I – it's – it's where I go."

"At night? Are you crazy?" Dominic stuttered, taking a seat across from her. "It's dangerous at night."

“No, it isn’t,” she said quickly without thinking. Remembering the old Crone and Its yellow eyes and that blade, she lowered her chin and licked her dry lips. “It *wasn’t*. But tonight, there was something there.”

“Who?”

“I didn’t say *who*.” She slowly met his confused eyes.

“Erika, you’re not making any sense.”

“No, I’m not. None of it makes sense. But Emily saw it too.”

“Emily?” he exclaimed, then stopped.

Their eyes flicked up to the ceiling where they waited. No sound came.

“*Emily?*” he said again, “What was she doing there?”

“She...she saw the lights in the forest. She came...she knew something was wrong.”

“How could she know that?”

“I don’t know, Dom. I don’t know, okay? All I know is –,” she halted, viewing his sceptical expression. A year ago, he would have believed her. He wouldn’t have questioned her, but since Tom, he had changed. Since Toby, Dominic had changed. “Something attacked me in the woods. It had a knife and –.”

“It was just some crazy person, E. That’s why we don’t go into the woods at night! How do you know it wasn’t the same person who’s been murdering all those kids?!” he hissed in his anger, unable to shout. “How do you know it wasn’t the person who –?” He came to an abrupt halt.

*Who murdered Toby.*

For Dominic didn’t believe his little brother had died in a flooding accident. He believed he’d been murdered. That he’d been the first child to be killed by this lunatic. Some people suspected it was one of the lunatics that had been released from the asylum ten years ago upon its closure. Deemed unfit by the government, it had been shut down and with no money to transfer or help its patients, they’d been released. Erika had seen them; wandering in the alleys of the city, hunched over in doorways or by bins. Some said they lived in the forest too, for the asylum was only a stone’s throw away across the train tracks. Graves backed onto its grounds. But never had she seen one in their neighbourhood. And she doubted what had attacked her in the woods, with Its changing face and inhuman eyes, had been just a mentally unstable person. This was more. This was...

*It. This was it.*

She didn’t know what It was but it was something she feared. More than the men who lingered in the stairwell of the flats with their groping hands and hungry eyes. This was real

fear. A carnal type that animals depended on in the wild. And one thing was for certain, she wouldn't be returning to those woods.

"You could've been killed," Dominic said with that haughty tone that reminded Erika all too much of Tom.

"Emily saved me."

"*Emily?*"

"Don't." Erika shook her head. "She's a good person. She's like us."

"She's not. She's the vicar's kid. She comes from a life of privilege. She doesn't know pain. Not like us."

"Her parents died. Her sister, too," Erika snapped, viewing as Dominic flinched. "You judge people so quickly now."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Dominic replied with a sneer on his mouth. That mouth. One that had once only smiled at her.

"She's lost people too, Dom. She knows pain. She's one of us whether you like it or not and tonight, she saved me."

"You wouldn't have needed saving if you hadn't been in those woods."

"Where the fuck was I supposed to go?"

"I dunno, how about back to that bloke's house? That's where you holed up last time, wasn't it?"

"Don't!" Erika said, keeping her voice low only out of respect for his parents. Not for him.

"You just disappeared! I needed you, E!"

"I know!"

"I fucking needed you and you weren't there!"

"Well now we're even!" she said, louder this time, silencing him.

Sitting back, she pushed the plate away. She was hungry but she had no appetite whatsoever. Touching her stomach, she thought again of that blade. She'd been so close to death she could smell it on her skin, in her hair. It curdled like out of date milk making her nauseous all over again.

"My brother was murdered, Erika," Dominic said slowly, pointing the tip of his forefinger to the wooden surface of the table. He wouldn't meet her gaze. "– and tonight, you could have been too."



“But I wasn’t. We escaped it.”

“It?”

“*It*,” Erika whispered.

Dominic shook his head and lolled it back with a deep sigh. “Okay, let’s pretend for just a second, it wasn’t some lunatic and was some kinda –.”

“Thing.”

“Yes, *that*. What the hell was it?”

“I don’t know, Dom. But – I don’t think this is the last we’ll see of It.”

“What do you mean?” he frowned deeply, finally meeting her gaze.

“I dunno, there was just something about It...” she trailed off, not sure she wanted to finish that thought.

She felt suddenly incredibly tired as though she would pass out if she didn’t find somewhere to sleep soon. She managed to raise her eyes to Dominic’s where he was leaning his elbows on the table and shaking his head; fingers tented just like Tom when he was thinking. It angered Erika but she didn’t say anything. It would only start another argument.

“Where are you staying tonight?” he asked.

She gave a shrug.

“You’re not going back out there.”

“I don’t have a choice. Mum kicked me out.”

“My mum will know if you sleep in Toby’s room,” Dominic mumbled.

Erika had no desire to sleep in that tomb. Since Toby died last October, nothing had changed. His bed was still neatly made, every toy in its place and his homework waiting for him. It was a shrine. But Toby was never coming back. Something had killed him and Erika was beginning to wonder whether Dominic was right and whatever had attacked her tonight was the same culprit. Whatever *It* was.

“Just put me in the shed. I’ll be gone by morning.”

“And go where?”

She gave another shrug. She didn’t have anywhere to go. No one wanted her. It had been a long time since anyone had.

Dominic led her out to the shed in the back garden at the bottom near the fence. It wasn't big but there was a sleeping bag in there and enough room to lie down. He didn't like the idea of leaving her out there but it wouldn't be the first time Erika had slept in his shed and at least it was summer this time.

Opening the door, he left the light off and stepped aside to allow Erika past. She slipped inside as though returning to her own home, going straight to the sleeping bag on the shelf that she always rolled up and put away in the exact same spot each morning. After she was gone, it was as if she'd never been there at all.

Dominic stayed watching at the door as Erika made a space on the floor by his large silver bike that had once belonged to his dad, and rolled out the thick army issue sleeping bag. Taking off her hoodie and her boots, she shuffled inside and screwed up her hoodie for a pillow. As he viewed her, his eyes scanned the rest of the shed.

It was full of the usual junk that his parents had removed from the cellar during the flood last year; a lawn mower and strimmer, shelves of old boxes from their childhood, a Christmas box, a Halloween one and finally his father's work bench which was cluttered with rusting tools and planks of wood. He'd been building a den for Toby and Dominic to put up in the allotment next door. Andrew had never finished; as if with Toby's death the world had stopped turning. There was no need to continue. Not for anyone and especially not for Dominic.

His parents had been on pause since that day in October when Toby's arm had been ripped from its socket and he'd almost been swallowed by the drain. Since the flood water suffocated him and the debris crushed him. Since Dominic had been too ill to go out on the maiden voyage of their remote control boat. The boat Dominic had been given to build on his birthday a month beforehand. They had all been on pause but Dominic had kept growing. Kept moving. Not by choice. If he could stop and linger, he would. But time forced them all to keep going. If only his parents understood that. If only they talked again. Laughed. Smiled. If only they were family again. But that had been shattered the second Toby took his last breath. Dominic hadn't only lost his brother that day but his entire family. His entire life. Nothing could make that better. Nothing could change that and as he looked down at his oldest friend getting comfortable on the hard ground, he hated again how things had changed not only his life, but in hers. In theirs.

"Comfy?" Dominic asked.

"Yes, thank you." Erika smiled up at him. "Will you close the door?"

"You don't want me to leave it open?" he questioned. Usually she requested it left ajar so she could hear the bats and owls. So the cool night breeze could caress her skin. She truly was a creature of the night his best friend.

"No," Erika said with a small shudder. "I'd ask you to lock it but –."

"E, whatever that was, it can't hurt you here."

“Can’t it?” Erika asked with a genuine look of fear that struck Dominic.

He hadn’t believed a word of it. The creature, the old crone in the woods which Erika had tried to explain to him. It sounded too farfetched, as if she was on drugs. She insisted Emily saw it too but what was Emily Fox even doing in the woods? Had Erika imagined that too? Had, as Dominic always feared, his best friend gone off the deep end? Drugs? Or worse. Had she lost her mind? It made him uncomfortable; confused and helpless as he viewed Erika’s terrified eyes.

“No, E.”

She nodded though she didn’t look certain.

As he went to open his mouth to reassure her again, his eyes drifted up to the shelves behind her. Shelves holding boxes of his and Toby’s childhood possessions; toys and drawings and notepads. Childhood paraphernalia that Dominic and his brother had felt they were too old for. It was there on one of those shelves his eyes lingered on something familiar. Something he hadn’t even known his mother had kept.

For his third birthday, a distant American relative had given Toby a small monkey toy which sat on its backside with cymbals for hands. Once turned on, it clapped its hands and did great leaping back flips into the air, all whilst giggling. Toby had loved it; he’d sat playing with it for hours and hours, clapping everytime the monkey flipped, and giggling along with it. Dominic had hated. It had made his skin crawl; every hair standing on end each time the monkey giggled, that shrill laughter that almost mocking. But try as he might, he hadn’t been able to get Toby to play with anything else. For two years, it had been by Toby’s side all day and all night; even cuddled up in bed with him. Eventually, on his fifth birthday, this same relative sent him a remote control car; something brand new, with sparkling wheels and a long aerial and flash controls. He’d lost interest in the clapping monkey and Dominic had figured that his mum had tossed it or given it away.

And yet here it was.

Not in a box but sitting on the shelf on its own, its beady wide eyes staring straight back at him. Dominic had never noticed it before. In all the times he’d been in to get his bike or let Erika sleep here, he had never seen it sat there. How had he missed that? How had it got there?

“Dom?”

“Yes?” he snapped back from his thoughts.

“It’s okay, I’m fine, alright?”

He gave a small gulp, looking from her face to the monkey sitting on a shelf above her head, its cymbals apart and ready to clap. He expected to hear that crashing any instant, followed by that shrill spine-tingling giggle. But nothing happened.

All was silent as he looked back down into Erika's pale face.

"Just as long as you're sure," Dominic replied, flinching at the sight of the monkey again. Turning his back without another look in Erika's direction, he stepped out of the shed and closed the door firmly behind him.

He was letting Erika's story get to him. None of this was a mystery. Everything could be explained, or so Tom always said. Things didn't really go bump in the night. There was no such thing as the Boogie Monster and toy monkeys couldn't come to life. It just wasn't possible.