

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 SIX

## The Font

“You can’t be serious,” Tom said, leaning back from Dominic. “That’s insane. She must have imagined it.”

“I don’t know, babe,” Dominic sighed, lying on his back on the bed.

That evening, Tom had come over for dinner just as he did every Saturday. Upon leaving their friends at the Burrow Beck and cycling home before curfew, they’d had dinner with his parents first. As usual, it had been a quiet affair. His dad made small talk while his mum sat in silence at the other end of the kitchen table, eyes down in her food as she pushed it about her plate. Not much food was eaten in the Johnson household these days. Toby’s death hung over them all, including Tom when he visited. What’s worse, his mother still hadn’t accepted their relationship.

She referred to Tom as Dominic’s ‘friend’ and nothing more. She didn’t allow them in the bedroom with the door closed and he was never, *ever* allowed to sleep over. His dad on the other hand, was much more relaxed. So much so, it was as if he hadn’t even realised his son was bisexual or that he had a boyfriend. Andrew and Julianne Johnson only cared about one of their sons now and he was dead.

Dead, cold and deep inside a coffin with just one arm.

Dominic much preferred when he had dinner around the Right household. Tom’s grandparents were larger than life; his grandfather merry and loud, his nan warm, friendly and like a large kind dog. Neither of the two, even for their generation, said a word about the boys. If Dominic’s parents allowed, he’d even be allowed to stay over. Angie, Tom’s nan, referred to Dom as his Tom’s ‘fella’ and Malcolm treated him like another grandson. Their house was a home.

Dominic’s was a tomb.

Breathing deeply, he stroked the hair from his eyes and stared up at the ceiling as Tom laid beside him on the bed. On the stereo, The Kinks were playing. It was one of his dad’s vinyl records and every couple of seconds, there was static or a scratch. Tom hated it; said it ruined the rhythm. Dominic loved it. It sounded real. Flawed. Like him.

Erika understood. They’d sat in this very room listening to records for hours. She loved the authentic noise of a vinyl. Just another way she and Tom were different. But he shouldn’t think that way. Not about his boyfriend and best friend. They were very different

people after all. One didn't believe in ghosts or things that go bump in the night, and the other was staring at him sceptically.

"Emily was there too," Dominic added.

"Emily? *Really?* But she's scared of her own shadow?" Tom said without any malice.

Dominic knew how much his boyfriend adored the latest member of their gang. Tom found her endearing and treated her like a newly discovered creature that he needed to protect and take care of. After hearing Erika's tale of Emily's bravery – if it was real and not just a bad trip from a drug Erika had taken (though she had denied being high) – he wondered if that was so true.

If Emily Fox needed to be protected at all.

Will acted like that too. Then again, they were all aware of how their friend felt about Emily. It was painfully obvious everytime she arrived at the Burrow Beck or appeared at the end of her road wheeling her bike. Will's face lit up with pure joy; a type of happiness Dominic had never seen on his friend before. It made Dominic's chest ache. Emily brought Will Bennet, this poor forgotten sod who was beaten regularly by his alcoholic father, so much joy it was as if nothing else existed.

Looking to Tom now, Dominic wished that was the same for them. But how could he forget?

*My brother was murdered.*

*In broad daylight.*

*Just yards from where he used to sleep.*

*From where I now lay.*

*And I wasn't there to protect him.*

*I wasn't there.*

"Who'd have thought it? But still, let's say this is real for one second – and are we definitely sure Erika didn't make this up?" Tom's face crinkled with his usual scepticism.

"Why would she make it up?"

"It's E," Tom said gently with a slight turn of his head.

Dominic sat up in bed, pressing his back to the wall and crossing his legs tightly with a stern look on his face. Tom gave a knowing sigh and also sat up; propping the pillows behind him and bringing his knees to his chest.

"I know she's your best friend –."

“Yeah. Yeah she is, Tom and I don’t like it when you say shit like that.”

“Like what?”

“Calling her a liar.”

“I didn’t –.”

“You implied it.”

“Okay!” Tom held up his hands.

The two glanced at the open door. The television was on downstairs but there was no talking. There never was anymore. No chatter, no laughter. Silence. Just the murmuring nonsense of the television.

“Okay,” Tom said again, quietly this time, “But still. I love Erika, you know I do but she’s got all the right reasons to go off the rails a little. Didn’t you say her mum kicked her out *again* last night? What if – I mean, what if she *needed* this? She needed a big story because she’s actually asking for help?”

“No.” Dominic shook his head firmly, eyes down on the duvet beneath them. “No, that’s not Erika. I know her, Tom. I’ve known her since we were little.”

“And hasn’t she always been a little crazy?” Tom said carefully.

Dominic’s eyes flicked up to meet his boyfriend’s. He opened his mouth to object when he stopped.

Erika Waterstone was utterly insane. But didn’t she deserve to be? After everything that had happened, didn’t someone with that much hurt, that much trauma and pain, deserve to be a little loopy?

The kids at school called him Dumb Dom. But it was nowhere near as bad as what they called Erika.

*Slut.*

*Whore.*

*Prozzy.*

*Slag.*

*Skank.*

On her bag. On her forehead. Pushing her face into the mud. Yanking her down the stairs. Throwing her into the walls. Boys groping her in classrooms. Girls pulling chunks of hair from her scalp. And no one ever said anything. Not even the teachers. Instead, Erika got

in trouble. Detention after detention for swearing, for fighting – for fighting back. She even got in trouble for the rumours her peers spread about her.

Dominic knew his best friend and she would never have given a Sixth Former a blow job behind the sports block for a few pounds.

Dominic knew Erika and she would never have had sex for drugs.

He knew her.

But the older boyfriends? The older man that she'd run to last October when her mother had kicked her out for the nth time. The place she'd disappeared to with him. This stranger. This figure in black Dominic imagined faceless and towering over them.

That was true.

He knew Erika Waterstone as well as he knew himself and he knew she wasn't lying. She and Emily had seen something in the forest last night. They'd fought it and been chased by it. Somehow, they'd survived and lived to tell the tale. Dominic had to believe them. As Erika's best friend, he had to. The terror in her eyes had been genuine. He'd never seen her scared; not even when her father was taken away in the back of a police car. Erika Waterstone wasn't frightened easily and last night, she'd been terrified.

Something had done this and as Dominic turned his gaze out the window which looked down upon the front garden obscured in shadows, a terrible thought occurred to him.

If Erika was telling the truth, that meant whatever had attacked them was still out there. Was it the same thing that had murdered Toby? Stolen all these children and mutilated them? If so, what then?

What did it mean for any of them?

“Dom?”

“Yeah?” He looked over to his boyfriend giving him a soft sympathetic smile.

“I know you love her but I just think we should take what she says with a pinch of salt, alright? Maybe we should talk to Emily first? I know it sounds bad cos we've only known her for like a week but she's got her head screwed on. She'll know what's up,” Tom said, squeezing Dominic's hand sitting between them on the bed.

Dominic didn't say anything. He simply smiled grimly and squeezed his boyfriend's hand in return. He didn't want to argue and he didn't want to spend what little time they had left this evening before Tom had to leave trying to make him listen.

With another nod, he tugged Tom towards him, their mouths grazing and their lips brushing as they kissed tenderly.

Running his fingers down the side of Tom's neck, Dominic hugged him closer, sinking deep into these precious kisses that made his bedroom fade away, reminding him all over again of Will's beaming smile whenever he saw Emily. Dominic had been wrong. When he was kissing Tom, the world did cease to exist. Everything felt okay again. At least for a little while.

"Thomas! Your nan just called, your granddad will meet you at the crossroads!" Julianne called up, breaking the boys out of their kiss.

Tom rubbed his nose to Dominic's with a small chuckle. "It's like your mum knows."

Dominic chuckled too and kissed the tip of Tom's small nose. "She has a sick sense for gay boys snogging."

"You're *gay* now are you?" Tom raised an eyebrow, pulling back from their embrace.

Dominic missed him instantly. He gave a shrug in reply and shot him a grin. "Maybe. All I know is I like you."

"*Like?* Just like, eh?" Tom smirked, "Do you like me when I'm kissing you?" He glanced at the open door way before giving Dominic a quick peck on the lips.

"Mhmm." Dominic nodded, his eyes closing as his body eased.

"Do you like it when I kiss you here?" Tom said, leaning down to plant a kiss on his neck.

Dominic hummed contently in reply.

"How about here?" Tom kissed the other side of his throat.

"Oh god," Dominic groaned, lolling back his head against the wall.

"How about when I'm sucking –."

"Thomas!" Julianne hollered again.

Dominic opened his eyes to see Tom smirking back at him.

"I'd better go," Tom sighed.

"I'll walk you to Heaton."

"It's after curfew," Tom said, getting up from the bed to put on his shoes.

"It's only past the allotment. That way I can make sure you get to your granddad," Dominic said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and watching as Tom slotted on his shoes.

"Dom?" He paused, his face suddenly grave. "Do you really believe what Erika told you?"



Dominic considered it. Tom was right. They needed to talk to Emily. Did he believe Erika? Totally. But he wouldn't be able to convince his boyfriend until they'd spoken to Emily.

He gave a shrug, unsure how to answer.

"Alright." Tom nodded with a long sigh. "I'll miss you." He draped his arms around Dominic's shoulders, standing between his parted legs.

"I'll miss you too," Dominic said, gazing up at his boyfriend. "Do you have to go on that summer course?"

"Yes, Dom, you know I do. It's an awesome opportunity. I'm so excited," Tom beamed.

It was contagious. His passion and enthusiasm for photography was almost overwhelming some days. Dominic smiled back at him, brushing the chocolate curls away from his eyes.

"I'll get to develop those photos we took today, too! In a real darkroom! Not my bathroom blacked out, but an actual darkroom!" Tom cheered as they stomped down the stairs, shoes on and ready to go.

Dominic wished Tom didn't have to leave. Once his boyfriend was gone he would be alone with his own thoughts and that was always a dangerous place to be. Poking his head around the living room doorway, he told his parents he was walking Tom to Heaton Road and would be back in a moment. They didn't even look up from the television still blaring out. Dominic didn't mind.

Leaving the door on the latch, he and Tom, hand in hand, took the short walk up the steep hill to where Heaton Road met Bridge Road. Past the houses and the block of flats to where Hastings Road cut across Heaton stood an older man with a torch and wearing his slippers. He waved to them. Tom waved back and turned to Dominic who hugged him tenderly.

"Get home safe," Tom winked.

"I will." Dominic gave him one final kiss. Standing back, he watched as Tom walked with the usual spring in his step down to where his granddad, Malcolm was waiting for him. Once he was with his grandfather, Dominic returned to his house, safe in the knowledge that at least one person he loved was safe.

Locking the front door behind him, he went straight upstairs, following the sound of the Kinks still playing. Just as he went to head into his bedroom, he stopped. He was outside Toby's door.

On the white painted wood his space stickers still sat; rockets, stars, planets and asteroids floating in the white abyss. Toby had adored space and everything to do with it. If

Dominic opened the door he would find the ceiling still covered in glow-in-the-dark stickers of a thousand stars. But he wasn't going to do that. No one went in there anymore. If he so much as touched the door handle, his mother would know. She would come screaming and yelling at him to go away. She didn't want anyone going in there, fearful that just by opening the door the smell of Toby would leave; as though it was his very essence. Never mind the fact Dominic only wanted to go inside to feel closer to his little brother.

It didn't matter what he wanted. What he *needed*. None of that mattered now.

So after tracing his fingers across the Jupiter sticker – Toby's favourite plant – Dominic headed back to his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

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Tom usually hated going to church on Sundays. Never mind the fact it meant getting up early on a Sunday but he found church sermons incredibly dull. If they weren't insulting a minority, they were telling people how to live their life. Or at least, Tom's vicar did.

Rupert Matthews. Sleek short red hair, dark green shirts and thick white dog collars. He wore perfectly ironed black trousers and always had red rosy cheeks. But he didn't have a friendly face. Not like his grandparents who had smiles and kind words for everybody. No, Rupert was a sour faced man who would like to see Tom flogged through the streets. Thankfully, this was 2009 and such things were frowned upon. But that didn't stop Rupert Matthews from radiating his loathing for Tom every Sunday.

It brought Tom a small slice of happiness knowing how much his vicar despised him and it was the only thing that got Tom out of bed every Sunday morning. Just to attend to piss Rupert off a little bit more. Because the fact was, Tom was gay and he was religious – to a degree.

Did he believe God would smite him for being gay? No. He believed that God wanted his sons and daughters to love one another for whatever they were.

*To love thy neighbour as thyself and do to others as you'd have them do to you.*

It was just one biblical rule Tom lived his life by. God didn't hate him because he preferred cock to pussy. God loved him flaws and all and he would be forgiven for everything else because their God was a merciful, loving god. Isn't that what's important? Isn't that the truth?

The truth.

Another thing that had got Tom out of bed that Sunday morning. He needed to speak to Emily Fox and find out the truth about Friday night and Erika and the forest. Had it been real or just a terrible trip?

Or worse, a lie.

Dominic, his boyfriend, wouldn't have anything bad said against his best friend. He saw the best in Erika; thought she farted roses. Tom understood. They'd been best friends since they were in nappies and their dads had worked for the council together. Their mothers had loathed each other but that hadn't stopped their dads from being best friends and in turn, Erika and Dominic. Even now after everything. Even now she was going off the rails just like her mother. Though who could blame her? Most of the rumours about Erika and her family were lies, but a lot of them were true. Painfully. Tom loved that girl and would defend her to the end, but when it came to this – to a creature in the forest attacking her, and Dominic believing it was the same thing that had killed Toby (though Tom believed Toby died just as the police said – not that he would tell Dominic that) – Tom couldn't stand by and let this go on. He had to do something.

And so at just gone eleven once the service was over and the parishioners began filing out of St Paul's Church, Tom lingered in the church yard a few paces away from where Angie and Malcolm were chatting to their cluster of usual friends; all chattering quickly like hens, no doubt about the missing children. Just that morning, they'd found Katherine Dennings' body. A jogger had discovered her in the undergrowth near the hospital, a leg missing, her left eye gone, her tongue ripped out and the rest of her body scarred with bites marks. Tom wasn't supposed to have heard that bit but when Angie was whispering in the living room to his granddad, the sound always travelled up the stairs of their terrace home to his bedroom at the back of the house. He need only stand at his doorway to hear her clucking away.

How awful. How terrible. How dreadful! Her parents must be devastated. But they must have known. Katherine wasn't the first – the sixth in fact and the third since the curfew – and she wouldn't be the last. If they didn't catch this deranged killer, there would be more children found this way. More grief stricken parents. More terrified community members.

Tom withdrew his eyes from where Angie was tutting and shaking her head as she listened to something one of the women was saying, and spotted Emily emerging from the church. He waited until Rupert and his wife and children had stepped away to talk to parishioners to approach her. He didn't want to get Emily in trouble. He liked the quiet girl and had been pleased when she'd taken up their invitation two Fridays ago to hang out with them. She was an excellent new member of their gang.

Catching her eye, he beckoned her to follow; around the side of the church and out the front entrance and onto the main road. It was in no way private but it would look less peculiar if Rupert caught them. Tom could only imagine the trouble Emily would get into for talking to a gay boy like him.

Fortunately for him, Emily picked up on his cue to follow and soon met him on the pavement beyond the high bushes that bordered this side of the church.

“Tom?” she said cautiously with a frightened look as she approached him.

She looked pretty. Prettier than he’d ever seen her. He hadn’t particularly ever noticed her before now and he’d been attending the St Paul’s church since he came to live with his grandparents when he was four years old. He and Emily must have been going to the same church for years and yet it was only now he saw her. Did he really look at her; standing in a dark green floral knee length dress, black thick tights and a heavy brown cardigan that was far too thick for today’s weather which was already warm that morning. Usually, she wore the baggiest clothes imaginable but today, the dress hugged that growing womanly curve at her waist and rounded over her relatively large bust.

If only Will could see her...

Tom subdued a grin and turned his attention to the matter at hand.

“Friday, in the woods, with Erika –.”

“She told you?” Emily breathed a sigh of relief.

Tom was thunderstruck. He hadn’t even had to ask. He could see it in her eyes. Now, he didn’t know what to do.

Glancing over the bush into the churchyard, he could see his grandparents still chatting, and Rupert heading back inside. They had some time.

“She told Dom and he told me,” Tom explained.

“Oh,” Emily said, lowering her head.

“What happened, Emily?”

“I thought you said Dominic told you?” she asked with a hint of suspicion that only made Tom like her even more.

There was much more to this round faced girl than it appeared. Shy she may be, stupid she was not. Observant and critical, judgemental and intelligent. These were all traits he admired in people and especially in Emily Fox. His new friend.

How could he have missed her all these years?

“I wanna hear your version of the story,” Tom said with firm eyes.

Emily gave another frown. “My version? Do you not believe Erika?”

“Can you just tell me what happened?” She pursed her lips making him regret his brashness. He softened. “Please?”

Emily gave a long sigh and also glanced into the churchyard. No one was looking for them yet. To their side, the church noticeboard was a stark reminder of their reality. For one, there was a large banner stating the curfew. Underneath that there was six missing posters all bearing the faces of the now dead child. Today, there was a seventh. A little boy; Charlie Hope, just three and missing his front teeth.

Tom turned away and looked to Emily who began to tell the story.

It was just as Dominic had recounted. Not word for word but from Emily's point of view. The lights in the forest. The urge to go in. The feeling of warning, the need to go there. How she put on her shoes and snuck out the house in her nightie. How she wandered the woods and followed the sound of drumming and chanting. How she'd seen the fire. The crone. Erika. The knife. How she'd chucked the flaming branch and knocked it straight into the witch...the thing... *it*. And then she'd helped Erika to her feet and the two had run; being chased through the forest by whatever it was. How they'd clambered out onto Chatsworth Road and the thing had emerged after them but stopped.

“– and then I held up my cross. I just, I mean, I don't know what it was, a demon or a ghost or...I don't know,” Emily stuttered, eyes down as she picked at the sides of her nails. “But I had to do something, so I held it up and told it to go away. Then, it did.”

Tom stared back at her agape. “Just like that?”

“Yep.”

“What did it look like? Did it look like a person?”

“At first...” Emily's eyes drifted up and away as she recalled it from her memory. “...and then it changed.”

“It changed?”

“Yes – and I know how that sounds. Believe me, it's mad but it did. One minute it was like something from Hansel and Gretel and then...and then –,” she became breathless, eyes dropping and her arms pulling around herself.

Tom saw the terror in her eyes. He may not know this girl but he knew fear.

“It changed,” Emily said, finally raising her gaze to him. “You don't believe me.”

“No,” Tom said, “I do.” She blinked wordlessly back at him. “It's fucking mental but I believe you, I do,” he said, unable to believe the words from his own mouth.

He hadn't been willing to believe Erika – not mentally unstable Erika Waterstone – but Emily Fox? Sensible, straight-laced Emily who cringed when Sam farted, blushed when Will looked at her and lowered her gaze when Tom and Dominic kissed. He believed her. And that terrified him, for if this was true that meant –

“Emilia!”

Their heads snapped up to see Rupert standing at the gate to the front entrance. He was red in the face – more than usual – and looked furious.

“Here! This instant!” He clicked his fingers and pointed to the ground as though Emily was a naughty dog.

“I’m sorry,” Emily cringed, “I’ve got to go.”

“It’s okay,” Tom replied, giving her a small wave as she hurried back to Rupert’s side. Tom met Rupert’s eye and gave him a big friendly smile and a jolly wave.

He wouldn’t let this homophobe get to him. This had nothing to do with religion. Someone like Rupert Matthews hid behind the ancient texts of the bible. His homophobia was all his own. And nothing to do with Tom.

But the thing in the forest? It could potentially be about *all* of them. He didn’t know what it was but hoped to never find out. He had no desire to stare into death’s eyes.

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“Why were you talking to that *boy*?” Rupert questioned, hands on his hips as he practically shook with his anger.

Emily looked over her shoulder to see Tom walking past, heading off home no doubt. They all had plans to meet up at the Burrow Beck in a few hours but as she viewed her guardian’s face, she knew that wouldn’t be happening.

“I want you to stay away from that boy, do you hear?”

The way he said *that boy* made it sound as though Tom was a demon, or perhaps Lucifer himself. But he was just a boy. A boy who liked other boys. Why was that so wrong?

Nonetheless, she didn’t argue. It did no good to argue.

“Emilia? That’s not good enough.” She opened her mouth to object when he pointed a trembling finger into her face. “He is trouble and he is no friend of yours, do you hear? What does the Bible say about men lying with men?” Rupert asked, though it wasn’t a question. This was a lecture. “*Exactly*, it is forbidden. It is a sin and I do not want you fraternizing with his type, do you hear?”

“Okay.”

“No library today. I want you home and this evening, I need you to do a couple of bits at the church.”

Emily opened her mouth again to object more strongly this time –

*No, please, no. Not the church...not at the night...*

Rupert held up the palm of his hand for silence. She closed her mouth tightly and gave another nod. Bowing her head she kept her eyes down as Rupert marched back into the churchyard. When she looked up again, she saw Tom a few paces up the pavement shooting her an apologetic smile. She shrugged her shoulders and followed her guardian. There was no point arguing. She never won.

And so at eight o'clock that evening, Rupert walked her to the church, following the curfew guidelines. Unlocking the door, he said he would lock her in – to be safe – and meet her in two hours. Emily felt sick at the prospect of being locked in this gloomy, draughty place for two whole hours – alone. She hated the church at night.

This fear was recent. This fear stemmed from earlier that year, around February time when the nights had drawn in at four o'clock in the afternoon and the winds had blown bitterly off the sea seven miles away. Lancaster had harsh, brutal winters; the winds battered the western coast and the few stretches inland. It was bitter cold; the storms knocked down trees, fences and even the odd telephone pole. But the winds didn't frighten her as much as the floods. They came in the autumn and that late winter day, she didn't believe she had anything to fear. Not here in St Paul's Church high up on the hill in Greaves and far away from the terrible sight of Toby Johnson's death just four months ago. His death haunted her.

But here, she had nothing to fear. This was Rupert's church. The church she'd been attending her whole life. The church her parents had always sought solace in; had married in. Where she and Mary had been baptised. This was safe. The house of God. Nothing could touch her here.

Or so she'd thought.

Her task that night had been to Hoover the long carpet which ran down the aisle and to wipe down every pew. She found cleaning a monotonous and soothing task. With rubber gloves on to protect her eczema, humming her favourite songs, she enjoyed the chores. By the end, the church smelt fresh and looked dazzlingly clean. Plus, Rupert always gave her some extra pocket money for her work. And extra pocket money meant books. Even if she did loan them from the library, buying her own – that fresh book smell – cracking open the spine – that feeling, there was nothing else quite like it.

But that night, something had been different. Unlike the usual calmness and comfortable, peaceful atmosphere that enveloped her whenever she was in the church, even on her own, something was different. Even alone, she felt like someone was watching her. Out the corner of her eye, she would see something. She wasn't sure what for everytime she turned to look at whatever it was, it had gone.

*It's just your imagination.*

But just as the thought struck her, a new one hit home.

*Just like it was your imagination the night of the crash?*

*Did you not see something there too?*

Emily wasn't sure what she'd seen that night or there in the church, but when the font at the back of the church had sounded, a great giant splash, Emily had fled the church screaming. Upon returning with Rupert, crying and beseeching with him that something had been in there with her, they'd found the church empty. And furthermore, the font had been empty also. Rupert had called her hysterical and stopped asking her to clean the church. For which, she was both thankful and put out. No more extra pocket money. But at least she would never have to be in the church alone, at night.

Until tonight.

She had begged Lindsay to convince Rupert otherwise. On the short walk from their house on Ardengate to the church, she'd beseeched him every step of the way, crying at one point to which he'd told her to grow up. Now as she stood beside the pulpit, hoover nozzle in hand and a mop and bucket at her feet, Emily sniffled back her tears and got to work.

She was fourteen. She was practically an adult. She had been seeing things that night.

*And Friday night?*

With the hoover running, she could barely hear her thoughts but this one stuck her.

What she and Erika had faced in the forest hadn't been their imaginations or hysteria. This had been real. Touching the cross around her neck, Emily willed herself to be brave. She was locked in this church and with God looking over her, she would be safe. She was being ridiculous.

She switched off the hoover when a sound echoed up the church. The small motor died in a high pitched whine until all was silent. Emily straightened and stared down the aisle. She was alone, the pews empty and the corners of the church only filled with shadows. She looked to the closed wooden doors and glanced behind her.

There was no one and nothing there. She was totally alone and yet somehow that notion scared her more.

"Get it together, Emily," she cursed under her breath and stomped on the button on top of the vacuum.

With that, the high pitched whine returned and her thoughts were drowned out once again. For a little while as she worked she forgot. She focused instead on sucking up the dirt and bits from the red carpet, running it along the back of each pew, relishing in the satisfying sound of crumbs and other pieces of dirt skittering up the tube. She'd almost forgotten all about her fears for this church when the hoover suddenly died.



Turning around, she looked to the Hoover. Its lights were off. She groaned to herself; the vacuum was older than her. Stamping back to it, she checked; switching it on and off. Then, she followed the cord to the wall where she discovered the switch was off. She frowned. A blown fuse wouldn't turn off a switch. She pushed the button and the Hoover rumbled to life. Heart thumping in her chest, she told herself to be brave and wandered back over to the nozzle.

She worked for a little longer, running the nozzle back and forth across the pews and carpets until once again, it cut out. Straightening up, Emily looked to the wall socket.

This time, the plug had been removed.

She dropped the nozzle on the ground and turned in a quick circle, her breath coming quickly, her pulse throbbing in her ears as the fear crushed her.

"Who's there?" she squeaked, "I have a phone – I'll – I'll call the police." It was a lie. She'd left her phone at home.

Rubbing her sweating palms down the sides of her leggings, Emily did another couple of turns, her eyes wide as she searched each wall and corner.

"Who's there?" she called out again, her voice quivering with fright.

She wished she sounded braver. She wished she could be frightening and scare whoever, or whatever, away. But she wasn't brave. She was a scared little piggy as she stood sweating by the pews, nozzle at her feet and a loud crash of water coming from the back of the church.

Just like before.

This ignited something inside of Emily. Call it curiosity or perhaps she was simply fed up of being scared. Of being chased and made to feel afraid. With a strange emotion, one like fury, bursting through her, all fear dissipated as she left the Hoover behind and stomped up the aisle, heading for the font.

She approached it slowly. Even from here, she could hear the water sloshing, dribbling down the stone sides and leaving wet puddles on the flagstone floor. Gulping back her fear and confusion and burning with that frustration she took one giant step towards it.

The font only ever had water in it on the day of baptisms. It was empty the rest of the time but tonight, it was dark with water. Fathomlessly dark and deep though Emily knew it couldn't be so. Had someone filled it? Was there a baptism tomorrow she didn't know about? Had Rupert done it this evening to save time? That didn't sound like him. None of this made sense to Emily as she peered over the side and viewed her rippling reflection; her round terrified face staring back at her.

Hands on the stone sides, she watched as the water suddenly stilled; as flat as glass but black. As dark as a gaping mouth. It couldn't be possible. How could water go so still?

With intrigue, Emily lifted a hand from the side and slowly reached toward the surface; she just wanted to feel it. She needed to know. Would it feel like glass too?

Just as her fingers skimmed the still surface, the water broke open and a scaled hand emerged, grasping for her.

Emily let out a shriek of terror as she leapt backwards, but not far or quick enough. The scaled hand had a hold of her forearm and it was pulling her. It was strong – almost ripping her arm from its socket as she fell towards the font and dangled over the side, her face just inches from the water. Here, she could smell the salty, fishy stench of this arm; she could see its webbed fingers, its bright red fingernails and as she stared down into the blackness, two yellow eyes glowed back at her.

Emily let out another scream as she tore her arm backwards and fell to the floor. Her backside slammed against the flagstone ground with a thump. The pain shot up her back but she didn't have time to think as the scaled arm grasped the side of the font and another sopping wet arm emerged, grasping the other side.

Now the screams wouldn't come. She couldn't even express the air from her lungs to breathe as she shuffled backwards, choking and sniffing as the tears streamed down her cheeks. Closer and closer she shuffled to the door. Once there, she turned onto her knees and pushed, only to realise it was locked.

Rupert had locked her in. Believing she would be safe from the monster outside. Little did he know, he'd trapped her inside with it.

“No!” she wailed, slamming her fists against the heavy wooden doors as more splashing sounded behind her.

She daren't look back. She didn't want to see whatever it was. She didn't want to watch it approach; grinning perhaps because it knew it had won. It would devour her. It would chew her whole.

Emily gasped for breath, clutching the golden cross around her neck as she slammed her other fist into the door again and again, pleading for someone, anyone to hear her. For someone, *anyone*, to answer her prayers.

*Don't let me die here!*

All of a sudden, the wooden doors opened and she fell out onto the ground.

“Emily!”

“Will?” She looked up at him, confused and horrified. “What –?”

“Run!” he yelled, practically dragging her to her feet and away from the doors. “Run, Emily, run!” Grasping her hand, Will tugged her on.

As he did, Emily dared a look behind her. There, climbing out of the font, was the stuff of nightmares. The thing from her memories. It had been there that night, in the River Lune. It had grabbed her. It had tried to drown her. And now here it was, coming back for a second try.

But Emily wouldn't let that happen, and neither, apparently, would Will.

They ran as fast as they could, across the churchyard and out the back exit onto St Paul's Drive. The lights inside the church blared from the windows and the open door but Emily dared not go back. She never wanted to go there again and left it behind as she and Will ran down the steep decline of the road, along the alleyway opposite and into Victoria Avenue. Here, they finally came to a halt.

Emily doubled over, choking and gasping for breath, the vomit burning in her throat. She couldn't catch her breath. She feared her heart would never slow and when she looked at Will, hands on his knees and panting beside her, it didn't help.

"What – what – what were you – doing there? It's past – *curfew*," Emily panted.

Will straightened, mouth still agape as he tried to regain his breath. "Tom said you'd be there tonight. I had to see you."

"Why?" Emily said, hand over her heart, her fingers around the cross.

"I missed you today," Will said, chin low and a bashful smile on his lips. "We all did."

"Oh," Emily said, her breathing and heartbeat slowly returning to normal. "I, er, missed you too."

"Yeah?"

"All of you."

She viewed his crestfallen expression momentarily before he looked back down the alleyway and up St Paul's Drive.

"What was that thing?"

"I don't know," Emily said, licking her dry lips and coming to stand beside him as they both peered up the way they came. "But I've seen it before."

"When?"

"On Friday night, in the forest, with Erika."

"Tom told me about that."

"It was real," Emily said.

“I know, I believe you.”

She turned to look at him dubiously. “You do?” Will nodded. “How?”

“Because –,” he hesitated, “I’ve seen it too.” Emily stared wide eyed at him as Will stepped closer. She flinched as his hand stroked a loose strand of hair away from her eyes. “The other night, in my alley. But it wasn’t – it didn’t look like that.”

“No, it didn’t look like that on Friday in the forest. It was a witch for Erika. But then it changed. It can shift its form.”

“It was a homeless guy for me. I thought – I thought it was one of those patients from the asylum, you know?”

“No.” She shook her head. “This isn’t human.”

“No,” Will agreed, “No, it isn’t. So what is it?”

Emily blinked slowly before looking at him again. “I don’t know, Will. But I think it’s killing the children. And I think we’re its next targets.”

“We have to stop it then.”

“How?”

He was quiet for a moment with thought. His face hard, his thick eyebrows knitted together. Then slowly, he turned to look at her with those bright cinnamon eyes and Emily felt her heart begin to race all over again.

“We need the others. We have to do this together. You and Erika fought it together. Me and you outran it. And with me, I wasn’t alone. There was this cat –.”

“We’re stronger in numbers.” Emily nodded keenly. “We have to stick together.”

“If we want to defeat it we need everyone. We need to stay together.” At that, he held out his hand again.

Emily looked from it to his face and slowly, she entwined her chubby fingers with his slim ones. He smiled down at her and in those seconds, the creature, the shapeshifter, whatever it was could be right behind them but Emily couldn’t care less. Not when Will Bennet was holding her hand.

After all, they needed to stick together. They needed the others.