

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 NINE

The Cat, the Camera and the Cross

Elivia chewed on her thumbnail as she stood before the six of them staring back at her. With a gulp, she glanced beside her to her friend. Her only friend. Her best friend.

Anna Clearwater was tall. Taller than all the girls in their class, and even some of the older ones. She was strong too; infamous on the hockey pitch and in the playground. She'd had to fight for respect from her peers and now, no one messed with Anna. No one would dare. With Anna, Elivia felt safe and that Tuesday evening, she needed her. She wouldn't be able to face this alone.

It had happened again. The last time, she'd put it down to her imagination. To her innate ridiculous fear getting the better of her. It had taken her weeks to tell Anna. Even though they'd known each other since last September and been friends since, growing rapidly closer and closer each week, Elivia was still nervous around Anna.

She was so in control with a no-nonsense attitude. Anna didn't believe in the supernatural. She was like her lawyer father. She believed in facts, witness statements and expert testimonies. Anna wouldn't believe her. She would laugh in her face, call her ridiculous and then Elivia would lose her only friend. But she hadn't been able to keep it secret any longer. Like a tap ready to burst, she'd had to tell Anna everything.

Elivia had told her best friend the story of the road sweeper one night at one of their many sleepovers. It wasn't long until the end of term and Anna had wanted to know the details of her first date. The first date she'd ever been on and with the cutest boy from the boys' private school. His name was Bart Elingston-Goldberg. She'd seen him several times in town when she and Anna visited every weekend to shop and have lunch at their favourite café off the Market Square, but he was always surrounded by a team of intimidating friends. Nonetheless, he'd caught her eye a few times and they'd shared flirtatious smiles. Or at least, Elivia hoped they were flirtatious.

She wasn't even sure how to flirt. She'd read all the magazines and Anna had given her a few tips but Elivia wasn't as graceful and naturally sexual like her best friend. People called her mouse at school and in a way, she was. Little, shy, quiet and white. People asked her if she dyed her hair – she didn't. People asked her why she didn't look like her dark haired, dark eyed parents; that was because she wasn't theirs. She was adopted. A fact she didn't reveal to many. But Anna knew. Anna knew everything and now, Elivia would tell her this.

Lying in her king sized bed together, surrounded by pillows, toffee popcorn stuck somewhere in her hair, Elivia had told Anna everything, starting with the movie she and Bart had gone to see.

On one of their trips to the city centre, Bart had approached her and asked for her number. From there, he had asked her out on a cinema date at the Vue in the centre of town. She'd been thrilled and so nervous she'd been sick before she left her house. Texting Anna the entire time, her father had dropped her off on Common Garden Street and she'd met Bart outside the cinema along the shadowy alley off the Market Square. Upon arriving, he'd kissed her cheek. It had been such a mature action Elivia had lost all ability to speak and had simply nodded when he'd suggested they see *The Happening*. She would have much preferred to see the new *Narnia* film but felt that one, it was too childish, and two, she didn't want to argue. She was on a date with Bart Elingston-Goldberg; she would see whatever he wanted.

So they got popcorn and Cokes and sat on the back row in the busy cinema. They'd talked a bit before the film, tentatively sharing popcorn and while the film played, Elivia had sat quietly, nervously, and hyper aware of Bart beside her. A boy. Her first boy. Her first date. She felt as though she was on top of the world. Nothing could spoil this.

But something always spoiled it.

After the film ended, they'd planned to get KFC. Walking hand in hand, Bart led her out the cinema and back into that dark alley. It had been an evening date and it was already starting to get dark outside. She felt a chill and pulled her jacket around her tighter. She'd been about to walk up the alley toward the Market Square to head up the KFC at the top of the city centre, when Bart had given her tug and led her down the alley instead. She was too nervous to ask where they were going or why, and when he continued walking, out of the alley, up the street and into an even narrower walkway, full of shadows, tucked away from prying eyes, Elivia hadn't known what to do.

She couldn't speak. She couldn't lift her heavy limbs as Bart crushed his lips to hers and wriggled his cool hands up beneath her top. It wasn't until he grasped her breasts, those small breasts which sat awkwardly in her bra that always bunched up beneath her clothes, did she finally find herself.

Giving him a shove away from her and asking him to stop hadn't been enough though. But the panicked slap to his face had halted his advances.

"What the fuck? You frigid bitch!" Bart spat, frightening her back into the wall. "I thought you wanted this."

"I wanted to go to the cinema with you –," she said quietly, like the mouse she was. Shoulders hunched, she grasped her arms close to her as if that could protect her from Bart's next vicious words.

“Yeah? And I paid too. Least you could do is let me feel your tits. Fucking frigid little virgin,” Bart scoffed and without another word, walked out the alleyway, leaving Elivia huddled by the wall, tears streaming down her face.

For a few minutes, she didn't move. She did nothing but cry into her palm, the sting of his words forming a lump in her throat; the ache of rejection hanging heavy in her chest. Eventually, she was able to call her dad and through her weeps at just the sound of his comforting voice, she'd begged him to pick her up. He'd promised to be five minutes and to meet her on Damside Street opposite the bus station.

It wasn't a long walk to their meeting point but it was a lonely one. She tried to keep her tears to a minimum but fortunately for her, there was nobody around. Good, she didn't want anyone to see how upset she was. Her makeup running, her hair dishevelled and her skin itching from Bart's groping hands. She felt disgusting; dirty and used. Worthless. Why did boys have to be so cruel? What was so wrong with dinner and a movie? Nowadays, they wanted more. They wanted sex appeal. They wanted blow jobs and wild adventurous girls who would get their kit off anywhere. There were a couple of girls like that at Elivia's school; rumours circulating about what they got up to with boys, sometimes men a lot older than them. But Elivia didn't want that.

Was it too much to ask for someone to hold her hand and no more? She was fourteen. She was just a kid. Why couldn't she stay that way a little longer? What was so good about being an adult anyway? They always looked so miserable.

As she walked, she thought about calling Anna but she was too ashamed to tell her best friend. Anna received plenty of male attention. She wasn't like Elivia. Anna was able to wield her sex appeal and keep all the boys at arm's length. But no one ever called her frigid, even though Elivia *knew* Anna had never done any more than kiss a boy. It wasn't fair. So keeping her phone in her handbag, Elivia headed down the first of many alleyways to reach the agreed pick-up location.

She wasn't nervous about the walk. There was no one around. While she had only come to Lancaster eight months ago, she felt safe in this student city. Nothing bad ever happened here. Well, at least, not until the children started going missing. But they were children. Little kids snatched off the streets when their parents weren't looking. It was tragic and horrifying but Elivia wouldn't let it get to her. She was a teenager, not a baby. And she wasn't scared easily. No, there were only a few things that truly frightened Elivia Spencer.

As she walked along the eerily silent streets, just her shoes clicking against the cobblestones, her ears pricked up at the sound of an engine. There were cars that sometimes drove down these wide alleyways to get to the back of the various businesses in the area but it was first and foremost a pedestrian zone. So for a while, she didn't think about it. However, as the engine grew closer, that deep humming and the sound of something skittering around and around, Elivia's heart leapt in her chest.

She told herself she was being ridiculous. Her innate fear of road sweepers was something she needed to grow out of. Ever since she was a child and had first seen one of those hunched over mechanical creatures with its bristled teeth and great blinding eyes, she had been terrified of them. Over the years, she'd felt more and more pathetic. Everytime she saw one, her heart doubled its pace and her throat became tight. Her dad was always telling her that it was a silly fear and her mother even laughed about it, but it wasn't funny to Elivia. It was real. All too real and while she tried her best to hide it when she was in public or with Anna, here, alone, with that groaning engine growing closer, Elivia didn't want to face her fear. She didn't want to be brave. She wanted to run.

So run was what she did.

Grasping her handbag tight to her side, Elivia quickened her pace. Soon the sound of her footsteps was being drowned out by the sound of the road sweeper getting closer. Glancing behind her, it entered the alleyway, the swishing sound of its large circular bristles echoing off the high old walls of the city. Round and round they groaned, kicking up dust and dirt, and sucking it all up into its guts. The two lights at the front peered back at her, blinding her. From this angle, her vision blurred by the brightness, they almost looked like eyes; its bristles a hungry mouth. Even as she told herself she was being insane, her pulse soared and her hand around the handle of her handbag became clammy.

Turning back around, she broke into a jog, flying out of the alleyway and pressing herself to the wall on the right hand side. With any luck, the road sweeper would grumble past her and take the left.

Because the devil always takes a left.

Chest rising and falling to the same beat as her thunderous heart, Elivia pressed herself as tightly to the wall as she could and waited as the droning engine got closer and closer. She didn't look around at the narrow street. If she had, she would have realised that there was no one around. She was alone as the road sweeper emerged from the alleyway, slowly and with purpose. It halted ever so slightly, like a predator searching for its prey before slowly turning on its axis to face her.

The windows of the cab were blacked out, the lights too bright. She held up her hand to block them out but still, it was useless. She couldn't see the driver as the sweeper rumbled towards her, the wind from the fast-moving bristles kicking up around her ankles and sending a chill across her body.

She told herself she was being ridiculous. Told herself to stay still. It would pass. It was a road sweeper. The driver inside was just doing their job. It would pass. It wanted rubbish, not a teenage girl. It didn't want her.

Yet as she opened her screwed up eyes and viewed the hulking white machine edging closer, Elivia knew that wasn't true.

It wants me.

It will suck me up.

It will eat me whole.

Elivia took off in a full out run. There was no way it would catch her moving at about 3mph. Yet with every corner she took down more and more alleys, moving closer and closer to the pickup point, it always seemed to be right on her tail. Everytime she looked back, it was as close before and as she turned that final corner, it followed her, edging down the tight alleyway, groaning and droning away; its lights flickering as if blinking hungrily, scuttling towards her like an insect.

She still couldn't see inside the cab to the driver – if there even was a driver – but she could see those bristles. Vivid red bristles winding around faster and faster like chomping teeth ready to swallow her. She cried out a plead – for if this was someone controlling it, they had to know that was she terrified. That this wasn't funny. That she was on the brink of collapsing in her terror.

Just as she screamed, the heel of her shoe caught in one of the cobblestones, sending her flying to the hard ground.

Rolling onto her back, Elivia tried to reach for her handbag which had dropped where she tripped. Just as her fingers grazed the leather, the sucking wind of the street sweeper swept it up into its belly.

She would be next.

Heels digging into the cobblestones, hands behind her, Elivia scuttled away as quickly as she could, begging again and again for the road sweeper to stop. But it kept coming. Faster and faster. Louder and louder. The lights burning her eyes. The bristles caressing her shoes, her ankles – she would be devoured. She grabbed the bin beside her and heaved it down into the path of the sweeper.

Leaping to her feet, forgetting her handbag which was no doubt torn apart in its insides, Elivia flew down the end of the alleyway, looking back only once as the road sweeper let out a mechanical groan. It sounded furious. It sounded alive.

Grasping the wall for support, Elivia blinked again and again, unable to believe what she was witnessing. She lingered there as the road sweeper cried out and rocked from side to side before ploughing straight over the bin; rubbish oozing from the lid like guts from a dead animal. It clambered over it, seemingly unstoppable.

It wanted her. It would get her – it would eat her whole.

Stumbling backwards, Elivia was startled out of her daze of fear, eyes fixated upon the road sweeper droning closer, at the sound of her father's voice.

“Alright, Lilypad!” Johnathan Spencer cheered from the open window of his BMW. He came to a halt beside her and opened his mouth to speak again when Elivia yanked open the passenger side door and flew inside. “Where’s your handbag, love?”

“Drive! Dad, please! Just drive!” Elivia wailed, smacking the steering wheel and beseeching with him to go. She looked out the window again and saw the road sweeper was even closer. It would take them all. It would stop at nothing until it had her. “Dad!”

“Calm down, Lil! I know you’re scared of them but –.”

“Please, Dad! No, it’s not like that! Please!” she screamed, tears flooding down her red cheeks as she looked from her dad’s sad expression to the road sweeper at the end of the alleyway. Clicking the lock down on the door, she edged away from the window as the road sweeper lingered, as if it were staring back at her. So she knew;

I will eat you whole.

Elivia let out a hiccup of horror, covering her lips as the road sweeper moved off, this time, turning away and trundling down the street; as if it hadn’t just chased a fourteen year old girl through the dark city streets.

“See?” Johnathan said, resting a gentle hand on her thigh. “Nothing to be scared of? Now, tell me what happened with that boy?”

They drove off, leaving the alleyways of Lancaster city centre and the road sweeper far behind.

Elivia didn’t care about Bart anymore. He didn’t exist to her. All that pain of rejection and hurt had evaporated the moment that road sweeper, or whatever it was, had started chasing her. The moment she’d realised that all was not right in this world. Like a mouse, she had been chased and like the prey she was, she would be hunted again.

“I’ve seen it,” Elivia finally spoke when the silence amongst the eight of them became too much. “Well, I think I have. It wasn’t a clown when I first saw it.”

“It was a witch for me,” Erika said, Elivia’s eyes drifting to the girl with raven feather hair. “Ems?”

All attention fell to the round girl next to Erika, with dark hair pulled back tight in a ponytail at the back of her head. She struck Elivia as odd looking. In fact, together, they all looked peculiar. As if they didn’t belong with one another. Not Erika with her dark hair and sullen expression, or Dominic with his pained green eyes, or the tall boy, towering over them all and constantly flicking his toffee curls out of his bruised face. Nor the blond boy Elivia

and Anna had both met before; Sam Robinson. His dad was the most infamous drug dealer in the city. They'd bought drugs from him before; or at least, the weed. They still hadn't got the ecstasy pills Anna had requested, which seemed to be the thing bothering Elivia's best friend the most that Tuesday evening, an hour before curfew.

"It was – it was –,” Emily stammered and before she could finish, Anna was interjecting.

"You got my drugs, Robinson?" she snarled, arms folded over her chest.

Elivia closed her eyes with exhaustion.

"No, not yet. I have more pressing matters right now like not being murdered by a shapeshifting monster!" Sam snapped.

"We paid good money!" Anna retaliated as loudly and fiercely.

Elivia shrunk away.

"Hey! Calm it!" Erika shouted, silencing them all. "Sam's right. This is more important than drugs."

"It's not your money on the line, skank," Anna sneered.

"What did you call me?" Erika took a defiant step towards Anna who didn't flinch. Dominic and Will both reached for the girl's slim bruised arms to stop her.

"Nothing," Anna murmured.

"No! Fucking say it!"

"Guys!" Tom interjected. He stepped into the middle of their circle.

They'd met at the Burrow Beck in Hala. It wasn't a place Elivia had ever visited until the previous Saturday. She never thought she would come here again and yet here they were; this random cluster of teenagers that only shared one thing in common.

They'd seen a monster.

Elivia looked to Anna, staring at her profile, willing her to tell the truth. For she'd seen it too. But she knew her best friend was scared. She didn't want to admit it.

After Elivia had finished telling her story of being chased by the street sweeper at their sleepover weeks ago, Anna had been quiet for a long time. Elivia had been frozen with her fear, terrified this was the moment she would lose her only friend. But after a while, Anna had turned to face her with that same terror in her eyes and finally, she'd spoken.

I've seen it too.

Elivia needed her to tell the truth now. To be brave like she knew Anna Clearwater was. But when it came to this, Anna's bravery faltered. Right when Elivia needed her.

"Right," Tom said around a deep exhale, his head moving back and forth to each of them. "We've all witnessed it, alright?"

"Have we?" Sam questioned, his eyes dancing from Anna to Dominic.

"I don't need to have seen it to believe. I believe you!" Dominic said. "It murdered my brother and it murdered the other children too. I believe."

"And you?" Tom said, his focus on Anna. They all turned to look at her. "Have you seen it?"

Anna's fierce exterior faltered ever so slightly. She glanced at Elivia who nodded encouragingly.

Be brave. Please, Anna!

"Yes," Anna said, stamping her foot on the ground as if frustrated by the truth, and not at all scared. "Fine, yes, I've seen it! But it wasn't a clown or a witch. It was – it was just my imagination!"

"No! No, it wasn't!" Tom said, moving towards her. "This isn't our imagination. This is real. What did you see, Anna?"

With a shuddered exhale, Anna looked to Elivia beside her who took her hand and gave it a squeeze. Anna shook her head, closing her eyes as the breath exhaled through her tight lips. "It was an executioner."

"A what?" Will frowned.

"You know, the ones with the sack over their head with just eye holes?" Anna said, her voice thick with her emotion. Just like before, when she'd told the story to Elivia, she looked tense and skittish, shifting from foot to foot, her agitation red in her cheeks. "At the castle."

"The castle?" Sam spoke.

"My dad, he's a lawyer. I sometimes help him with his boxes and papers. But I'm not allowed in the court so I just sit in the office until he comes back for breaks. I was there – waiting for him when it...oh this is absurd!" she said, letting go of Elivia's hand and throwing up her arms. "I was just hallucinating!"

"You take drugs?" Erika scoffed.

"Fuck you, skank!"

"Call me skank again!" Erika launched forward, stopped only by Dominic's arm around her waist.

“I’ll call you whatever I like, bitch!” Anna scowled, daring Erika, taunting her.

This was getting them nowhere and Elivia was rapidly becoming tired. She wasn’t sure how much more she could take of this and they were losing light; losing time. It would be curfew soon and they would have to go home. And then what? What were they going to do?

“Will everyone just stop?!” Emily bellowed, shocking them all into silence.

Anna and Erika backed away from each other. Everyone turned to where Emily was breathing heavily. She glanced to the tall boy, Will beside her who gave her a reassuring smile. She took a spot by Tom in the centre.

“We have to know what *it* is,” Emily said steadily, searching all their curious faces. “Tom, you said you could harm it?”

“Slow it down more like,” Tom replied, holding up the camera still hanging around his neck. “I took photos but they’re all blank.”

“Had your hand over the lens?” Sam smirked.

“Sod off, you know I didn’t!”

“Okay!” Emily said, hands up to calm the rising temper.

Her influence over the group shocked Elivia. She knew this girl. Had met her last Saturday and been shocked she knew Sam Robinson of all people. Elivia had seen her at school being pushed and shoved around. She was like a shadow; always against the walls or huddled in corners. But not here. Not with these people. She was larger than life, colour in her cheeks and life in her eyes. She was a completely different person.

“Okay,” Emily said. “But the flash? Taking photos? It hurt *It*?”

“Yes.” Tom nodded, glancing to Elivia who nodded too. It was the only thing that had stopped it from catching them and...well she wasn’t sure what would have happened then.

She’d read the news reports. Heard her parents talking about the dead children’s bodies which had been discarded like broken furniture. The bite marks. Their intestines spilling out of their stomachs. Their eyes missing...

Elivia raised her thumbnail to her mouth again, chewing urgently to stem her rising nerves.

“And my necklace.” Emily touched the golden cross around her neck. “When me and Erika were chased, it recoiled away from us when it saw this.”

“It was your faith,” Erika said with gravity.

“What do you mean?” Sam questioned, his arms folded across his broad chest.

“Tom, your camera is everything to you, and Ems, your faith in that cross, it was your mother’s, wasn’t it?” Erika said gently. Emily nodded, her defiant frame wilting like a dying flower. “Those two things you believe in, you trust in, you feel safe with,” Erika said, her eyes down as she thought. “They protected you from it.”

“But how?” Will asked.

“The cat –,” Erika said, “the cat that was with you. What did it do? Where did it go?”

“It just hissed at it and it disappeared. I dunno where the cat went. I called him Bruce.”

“Like Batman.” Sam grinned.

“Exactly.” Will smiled, his eyes falling back to Emily who blushed.

Elivia wasn’t blind. She knew how much this boy liked this girl. It made her think of Bart. She hadn’t seen him since their date. She hoped she never saw him again.

“I had a cat when I was kid,” Will added, hands stuffed in the pockets of his tatty jeans. “My mum took him when she –.” His eyes became dark as his chin lowered. “But it was mine. Whenever I was with him, it was like, you know, I was okay?”

Erika nodded slowly and as Elivia looked around at them all, they all made expressions of agreement. Of understanding. It was a shared pain amongst them that Elivia felt suddenly excluded from. Looking to Anna, she could tell her best friend felt the same.

“The cat, the camera, and the cross,” Erika said, pointing to each of them. “We all need to carry something we have faith in.”

“Like what?” Elivia squeaked.

“Whatever makes you feel safe. And we have to stick together. *And* Emily’s right. We have to find out what it is in order to know how to fight it.”

“*Fight it?* You can’t be serious! It almost killed –,” Anna hesitated, deflating where she stood. “It’ll kill us.”

“No,” Erika said, chin high to them then. “Not if we kill it first.”

Those six words rippled across them all. It made them stand taller. Made the fear in their hearts recede and in its place was strength. Bravery only teenagers had. Pure recklessness and complete and utter assurance in their power. This thing may be killing children but it hadn’t killed a teenager yet. Maybe it couldn’t but it wanted to. Elivia knew that. She’d felt its hunger for her and Tom that afternoon. In the alleyways. In that road sweeper. It wanted them. It didn’t know why it couldn’t get them, why they kept escaping, making it even more determined to taste their flesh.

But if they could harm it, they could kill it.

That gave Elivia a small slice of confidence as she looked from each of their various brave faces. And what a strange brave bunch they were.

Just before curfew, the group split up; Sam heading north east toward Williamson Park on his own, while the rest of them walked and wheeled their bikes up to the A6, the main road which cut through the middle of the city, and down into Greaves. Slowly, one by one, they said goodbye, leaving Elivia and Anna to walk the last stretch on their own.

As Elivia passed along Bridge Road, her eyes lingered on the drain where Toby Johnson had died.

Murdered.

Peering down at the gaping black hole, she felt a sudden urge to run. Nonetheless, she kept her pace calm as she and Anna walked side by side up to Ashton Road and then left along to Haverbreaks Road.

It wasn't so much a gated community. There was technically no gate. At the top of the private road were two brick columns and a black elegant sign stating 'Haverbreaks'. A black iron fence ran around the entire estate but there was no gate. However, there was a road block. Down the incline and around the gentle curve there was a black pillar in the road stopping cars from using the estate as a through-road. Every year, their parents paid the estate association for the upkeep of this pillar which was controlled by a remote possessed by every resident. Without a remote, the pillar stayed up and blocking any traffic. On foot, anyone could enter, which was how Elivia and Anna entered the estate, past the pillar and winding up one of the many roads where great mansions and huge pointlessly decadent houses sat behind their own gates and fences.

This wasn't a friendly neighbourhood. There was no sense of community as there were in the other neighbourhoods of Lancaster. Everyone stuck to themselves. There was no one on the streets having a friendly chat. Every stayed behind their walls and looked down on anybody who didn't leave in an expensive car, for it wasn't as if anyone jogged. They had their own private gyms in their houses for that.

Haverbreaks was desolate; a ghost town as Elivia and Anna traipsed up the steep hill to their houses which sat by side, but still a far distance from each other.

Elivia said goodbye to Anna first, who clicked on the intercom and slipped inside the pedestrian gate to the side of the big entrance. Anna's house wasn't even visible over the high walls. Elivia had only ever seen it on the few times she'd stayed over her house. It was older than most of the other houses, built in the early 20th century, but no less grand. Elivia's house, however, wasn't as cosy and was far more contemporary with polished floors, the latest technology and every surface glistening clean – only after their cleaner had been in. But it

wasn't a home. Not the way so many of the penthouse hotel rooms of her parents' chain of elegant hotels had been over the years. This place felt like a husk; empty and cold.

She wondered what type of house Tom lived in. She'd seen him go through the front door of a terrace house on Hastings Road. It had a red door and a bay window, and stairs going straight up from the door, but inside? Was it warm and cosy? Was there a fire? Did he have a small tidy bedroom full of all his things?

Elivia wasn't sure why she was bothering to think this much about Tom. She'd only met him today and while they'd seemingly fought off the devil together earlier that afternoon, Elivia felt a yearning to know him. If only for the comfort she felt when she was with him. She would deny the butterflies in her stomach if anyone asked. Fancying a boy like Tom Right was an absurd notion. Not only because fancying anyone while they were being hunted by a shapeshifting creature that wanted to eat them was a ridiculous idea, but because Tom already had a boyfriend, which could only mean –

He wouldn't be interested in me.

A girl.

And so Elivia left her crush for Tom right outside on the street and headed inside.

As usual, there was no one home. Her parents were both in Manchester still. It was a long commute but they didn't seem to mind. Much work needed to be done at their latest hotel, another St James, and so it meant long evenings by herself. Elivia hadn't minded before but as she switched off the alarm and reset it now she was inside, she found the loneliness oppressive.

Perhaps she should have asked Anna to stay with her tonight. Then again, her best friend had plenty of other things on mind without having to babysit Elivia.

Trudging into the kitchen, she dumped her handbag down on the sparkling white kitchen counter. It was already dusk outside, the house's large expansive garden and its tall trees and thick bushes encircling it foreboding. Picking up the remote control, she switched on the blinds which came sliding down and turned on the warm spotlighting. All at once, Elivia felt better. Safer somehow.

Erika had told them to stick together and to find something to keep with them that gave them hope. Something they had faith in. That would protect them from It. Elivia wasn't sure what hers could be; what brought her comfort? What made her feel safe?

Mum and Dad.

She couldn't carry them around.

Reaching into her handbag for her phone, her hand found her ring binder; the one keeping all her projects and papers for her week long summer art course at the university. She loved art but she'd loathed every single minute of the course her mother had signed her up to.

All the girls in her art class hated her; they thought she was stuck up. She was just shy; too scared to talk to anyone. These same girls had also signed up and made it clear –

You can't sit with us.

Elivia had been lonely until Tom appeared that morning. At first, she'd thought he would think she was stuck up too but rapidly, they'd become friends. Good friends. It was nice to talk to someone other than Anna. And now the rest of them? Could she be friends with them too?

She liked Emily, Will too. She wasn't sure about Erika and Dominic. And least of all, she didn't know what to think about Sam. But they'd all seen it. They'd all faced it. Dominic's little brother had been killed by it and if they didn't do something soon, it would take more brothers and sisters. Daughters and sons. Good friends. Best friends. It would tear apart families. Friendship groups. It would ruin lives. Even so, Elivia wondered –

What can we, eight fourteen year olds, do?

Putting her ring binder down on the island, Elivia went to turn to the fridge when the first page flapped open, startling her. Cautiously, she turned back to see the puppet she'd made for their stop motion video staring back at her. Tom had been terrified of it; was that why that thing had taken the form of a puppet? Did It take on their greatest fears? Her phobia of the road sweeper had led It to become that. It shifted for their fears. To terrify them. To make them weak. Vulnerable. To make them easy prey. That's why when they were together it was harder. That was why when her dad had appeared, It had turned away. That was why the cat, the cross and the camera had worked, because when Tom had been holding his camera, taking photos, he hadn't been scared. He'd felt brave. Will with his cat; a cat, just like the one who'd kept him company as a child. And the cross; Emily's very faith, the necklace belonging to her mother. She felt safe. That feeling of safety was no match for whatever It was. It fed on their fear and if they weren't scared, It couldn't hurt them.

Elivia picked up the puppet and stared at it; into its dead lifeless eyes and creepy expression. She gave a scoff.

“You can't hurt me.”

At that, she stuffed it in the bin. She hadn't liked it anyway.

CHAPTER TEN

The Noose

“Dad?” Anna called out into the gloom of the large house.

It was always cold these days.

Walking further into the house, dumping her handbag at the bottom of the grand stairs which wound upwards, Anna headed into the kitchen. “Fi?”

“In here!”

Anna followed the sound of her younger sister’s voice into the television room at the back of the house just off from the kitchen. It was dark, just like the rest of their home, the curtains drawn, the lights off and just the cold light of the television illuminating Fiona Clearwater, sprawled out on one of the sofas, her hand stuffed into a large bag of *Doritos*. Anna whipped the bag from out of her dusty-orange clutches and slumped down in the armchair adjacent. She took a handful and chewed pensively, the taste of the cheesy crisps not reaching her. She couldn’t seem to taste anything these days.

“Where’s Mum and Dad?” Anna asked, eyes on the television screen where a kids’ show was playing but she couldn’t pay attention.

“At the hospital.”

“Still?”

“Jen’s with them.”

Anna nodded and thought of her older sister then. Just started university, she was back for the summer. And what had she come back to? An empty broken home that smelt of takeaway boxes, dirty dishes and that medical stench which lingered in the air.

“When will they back?” Anna questioned, glancing over to her younger sister, just ten, who always stared blankly these days at the large television screen that seemed to take up most of the room. She remembered when they first got it. Back before...

“Dunno,” Fifi shrugged, but her nonchalance attitude wasn’t genuine, Anna knew that much.

It wasn’t that her little sister didn’t care. She cared. They all did but there was only so much they could do. Only so many tears they could cry.

Anna nodded to herself and gave back the crisps. She wasn't hungry. She never was.

Getting to her feet, she ran a gentle hand over Fifi's soft blonde hair and left the room. She was as light as a ghost as she headed upstairs. On the landing, instead of heading down the hallway to the end to her bedroom, she went right and to the master bedroom. Pushing open the door which had been left ajar, Anna peered inside.

She could almost smell the cancer.

It had happened just before Christmas. Her mother had gone to an appointment at the hospital. Anna had waited in the car, her mother having collected her from school that day. They'd planned on going to the supermarket afterwards but that had changed. Everything had changed when her mother returned to the car, quiet, her face ashen. Almost as pale as her hair.

"What's wrong, Mum?" Anna had asked, looking up from her phone where she'd been texting Elivia, her new friend. Her only friend. No one wanted to be friends with a girl whose bite was worse than her bark.

She-Hulk.

Man.

Anna the Man.

It was because she was tall. Taller than them all. It should have made her powerful, looked up to. But it had had the opposite effect. It was as if they were scared of her. As if her summer growth spurt had made her into a monster. But Elivia had needed someone like her. And Anna had needed Elivia. Were they friends out of convenience? Perhaps. But it felt like more than that. Or so Anna hoped.

"Nothing, darling," her mother, her namesake, Annabella, had given her a dazzling smile. One Anna had seen straight through.

A week later when her parents had sat all three sisters down – Jenny back from university for the holidays – they'd told them the truth. The doctors had found a lump. They'd done a test. It was cancer. It was late, ferocious and had already spread to the rest of their mother's body. She was going to die and there was nothing they could do.

Anna padded into the bedroom, past the large ugly hospital bed that her father had bought their mother to make it easier for the nurses and for him to get her in and out of, and over to the main bed. That great super king that took up the room like a hearth. The memories this bed kept; holding them tenderly for their family. Kicking off her shoes, Anna pulled back the heavy duvet and crawled inside.

It smelt like them both. Cocooned in the loving arms of her parents' marital bed where Anna had opened Christmas presents, eaten breakfast, slept when she was scared, laid alongside her wilting mother in the later days, Anna closed her eyes to the tears.

She had to be strong. Ever so strong. Not just for herself but her sisters too. For Fiona who had aged in the last six months from a lively, playful little girl, to a heavy, sullen child who looked cloaked in her grief. Their mother wasn't even dead yet and they were already grieving for her as though she was gone. But she would never be gone. Not truly.

Anna took deep long inhales of her mum's scent. It clung to the duvet. Her father must have not changed the sheets since Annabella had moved into the hospital bed a month ago. He must need her scent too. Not the clinical one that stuck to Anna's hair and clothes after every hospital visit, but the true scent of her mum. One of roses and lilac.

Anna hugged the pillow close to her face. It collected her tears; wiped them from her cheeks as her mother did. This smell, it made her feel safe. If she could carry this smell, it could be her item. The one Erika, the girl with emerald eyes and a fat lip, had spoken about. The thing that would keep them safe against –

Don't think about it.

Anna clenched shut her eyes tighter. But she'd opened that door and now, there was no way to close it.

For so long she had tried to deny what had happened at the castle. For so long, she had been able to forget about it, so distracted by her mother's rapid descent into illness, Anna could pretend as if it had never happened. But how could she ever truly forget? That memory would stick with her for the rest of her days. It would find her in the darkest of places and consume her. Eat her whole. Devour her. There was no avoiding it now.

Elivia had seen it too and all the others; that band of misfits at the Burrow Beck. They'd seen it and so had Anna.

It had almost killed her.

It was Easter half term. Two weeks away from school which Anna planned to spend sleeping and shopping with Elivia. Anything to be away from the house and her everyday reality. Her nightmare. Watching her mother become more and more ill; the vomiting, the hair loss from the chemotherapy treatment her father demanded Annabella try, even though the doctors had already told them – promised them.

She has six months, a year at most.

The cancer has spread.

The chemo won't work.

But her father wasn't a quitter. It was in his nature to keep trying and trying even when all hope was lost.

Never give up.

It was their family motto. It was their mantra. But some days, Anna wanted nothing more than to give up.

For as long as her mother was breathing, her father, Christopher, would make her try. Anna wondered who it was even for anymore.

Another important thing to her father was stability. He wanted to keep their lives as normal as possible. Jenny wasn't allowed to drop out of university and Anna and Fifi weren't allowed to miss school. Not for their mother's appointments, not even for a sniffle. The only day Anna had been allowed was when her period had arrived that month, heavier than ever and bleeding through her pyjama shorts and right through to her bedclothes.

She'd been mortified. If it had happened in the past, her mother or older sister had been there to help her strip the bed and put it and her clothes in the wash. That day, she'd had to do it herself and her father had found her crying in fresh clothes on the laundry room floor. She hadn't been able to tell him, of course. He wouldn't understand. But in a way, he had. Christopher had wiped her tears and told her to go back to bed. It was the first and last day she'd been allowed to wallow.

And so when the half term came around, she'd been looking forward to crying in her bed and watching mindless television. But her father wouldn't allow it.

He had a big court case and he needed her help. Lancaster Crown Court was still situated at the castle; high above the city and the River Lune, sitting in the same location it had sat for the last two thousand years. It hadn't always been a court but it had always been a castle and since the mid-17th century, it had been a prison too. Anna hated it.

The security. The coldness. Its high sandstone walls and battlements with barbed-wire and spikes. In other cities, they had beautiful ruins or castles where tours were run. But not here. Not in the seat of one of the most prominent cities of the north, or rather, it had been. Back during the War of the Roses, Lancaster and York had warred for that power. Lancaster had won; its red roses scattered all across the rugged North West. The untameable North West. Untouched by London and the South, it stood strong and proud to this very day, the castle included. It was a horrible place in Anna's eyes; a place she hated visiting whenever her father had a case. But she didn't get a say in the matter. And she couldn't explain her inexplicable fear of the place.

For two weeks, Anna helped lug her father's files and boxes from his car, which he parked across the road from the towering Keep at the front of the castle, into the court area of

the castle. For a fortnight, she ate lunch with him and amused herself while he was in the court room, doing her homework on her laptop and texting Elivia. Without any internet, they were long, boring days made only brighter by the presence of her father during each recess. She liked his colleagues, mostly women; they were kind to her. But she could see the sympathy in their eyes. After all, she was the girl with the dying mother. It was the same at school. People had stopped fearing her and started feeling sorry for her. Anna wasn't sure which she preferred. Probably the fear, for their sympathy made her feel weak and that, in turn, made her angry. Like her dad, she needed to have control and right now, they were both helpless to stop the cancer from consuming her mother.

It was the last Friday of her half term and the final day of the trial. A verdict would be announced and for the most part, her father sat with his client; a man who was on trial for the rape of a young girl. Anna hated her father's position as a defence lawyer. Christopher often tried to explain– *everyone is innocent until proven guilty* – but when it came to matters of rape and other such crimes, how could anyone accused be innocent? It wasn't until many years later would Anna understand what it meant to be innocent and accused. To be accused was to lose.

But as a fourteen year old with no experience of the real world, she despised her father's job and hoped his client went down for the harshest punishment. If found guilty, he would be taken down into the tunnels beneath the castle which led to the prison section. These were as old as the court and prison. The Pendle Witches had been taken through those very tunnels when they'd faced their trials. Had they been innocent? Or had they really possessed the ability of witchcraft?

Anna doubted it. Things like witches didn't exist. The paranormal, aliens and all that looney bullshit was fantasy. Fiction made up by people so bored with their own lives they had to add excitement; they had to scare others with their tales. But Anna didn't believe them.

Her life was far from boring. She longed for boring as she sat tapping her pen back and forth on her notepad, staring around the windowless room her father had been stationed in for the trial.

The walls were wooden panels, the carpet a stained brown. It smelt of coffee and menthol cigarettes. Even with the smoking ban in place last year, the office still smelt of cigarettes; it clung to the carpet. In the very walls. Her father didn't smoke, for which she was glad. She hated the smell of them and couldn't understand the fascination. By smoking a cigarette, you were inviting the cancer into your body. Why would anyone do that willingly?

Glancing at the clock on the wall positioned between two house crests from some forgotten family in the past, she saw it was almost half six. Her father had promised the verdict would be announced by now and yet here she sat. Could she leave? Text her dad and tell him she'd gone home. Catch a bus or walk? Why wait around? The trial would be over soon and he wouldn't need her. Bed was calling. She wanted to disappear beneath its warm folds. She wanted to see her mother; read to her, stroke her frail hair and listen to her breaths.

However raspy, they were breaths nonetheless. Until Annabella's final one, Anna would stay by her side.

Just as she went to flip open her phone and text her dad, having closed the lid of her laptop, Anna heard footsteps outside in the hallway. She gave a sigh of relief. She hadn't been looking forward to the long walk home, especially since it would be starting to get dark outside. After Toby Johnson's death last October, Anna had felt less and less safe on the streets at night, even if the police said it had been a terrible accident. Something about the whole affair and Anna's cynical view on life made her disbelieve that.

Putting her phone in her handbag, Anna prepared herself to leave. She'd already tidied her dad's files and boxes so he would need to only shrug off his black official robe and grab his briefcase and car keys and they would be on their way. Slipping her laptop into her handbag, she listened as the footsteps grew closer.

They were heavy; practically stomping along. And there appeared to be only one person. Was it her dad returning to tell her that a verdict still hadn't been decided? That they would be there longer? Anna groaned – *I hope not.*

His footsteps sounded angry. They stamped along the hollow wooden floors; she could almost hear the floorboards bowing and creaking under the weight of each foot. Her father was tall but he was a slight man in his late forties. He worked out regularly so any weight was muscle. He was in no means heavy. Not as heavy as this person. Was it a security guard? Maybe sent to check on her? Her eyes stayed fixed upon the closed wooden door as the footsteps came to an abrupt halt outside.

She sat up straighter in the uncomfortable desk chair, her eyes narrowing in on the brass door handle. She held her breath, anxiety suddenly consuming her. She wasn't sure why she was nervous. She wasn't doing anything wrong. She just wanted to go home. Why was, whoever it was, just standing there? She opened her mouth to call out to them when the door handle rattled.

Again and again as if the door was locked.

But the door definitely wasn't locked. Her father would never lock her in here. For starters, what if there was a fire? Yet as she watched, the handle rattled with more force and then came a loud thump as whoever it was slammed a fist or a foot against the door.

Anna jumped back in her seat, the noise of it, the force of it, sending her heart rate rocketing. Sliding the chair backwards further, her wide eyes watched as the door rattled on its hinges, the person beyond it banging on the thick wood again and again. Heart in her throat, the panic gripped her like a vice as Anna sat frozen in the chair, the door slowly giving way with each bang of a fist. Whoever it was, they were strong and they wanted to get in. Badly. But why?

For you.

It's coming for you.

Anna wasn't sure what came over her then as she dropped out of the chair to her hands and knees. Positioned behind the grand table, her elbows and knees trembled as she hung there for a moment, eyes on the door through the gap in the desk. It would cave in at any moment. Was nobody else hearing this?

Who was it? Who wanted to get to her that badly?!

And why was that door locked?

Anna didn't care so much for why. She was grateful. Without it, whoever was on the other side would already be in there with her and then – well she didn't know what would happen but she certainly didn't want to find out.

Her eyes darted for a hiding space. One better than hiding behind the desk. It was there, as she knelt, a cool breeze passed across her face. Glancing around, the wind refreshing against her sweaty skin, Anna's eyes noticed a small crack in the wall. A slither of darkness that ran up the length of the wall and then abruptly stopped. She hadn't noticed it before but as she scurried over to it, she realised what she was looking at.

This castle and its court rooms were old and what she was looking at was a false wall. A door. Her escape.

Pushing it open further, Anna hurried into the pitch black, indifferent to the darkness as she carefully closed the door behind her and listened. Pressed against the door in this tiny space which was no bigger than a broom closet – something she would later learn was in fact a Priest Hole – Anna held still, hand over her mouth to muffle her quick pants for breath. She listened as the door to the office finally gave way.

With a loud crash, the wood sounded as though it splintered and those heavy footsteps entered the room with purpose. Stomping across the wood, marching about the room, shaking the very floorboards beneath. Anna felt each shake; eyes tightly shut her and her bladder of urine threatening to give way. But she held tight, clenching every part of her as the intruder banged about; papers flying, the thump of her handbag and boxes being knocked to the floor; the clatter of the chairs being knocked away and finally the creak of the table being shoved aside. Anna gasped in her terror, biting down on her fingers to stem the noise emitting uncontrollably from her throat.

And like that, all was silent.

Could it sense her? Could it smell her? Would it rip open this false wall and pull her from it? What would she see if it did find her? Would it be a man? An escapee from the prison? A lunatic after a little girl? Or was it something else?

Like what? Come on, Anna, what could it possibly be?

Monsters, ghouls and ghosts – it was all fiction. She didn't believe a word of it and yet, as she sat huddled in the closet behind that false wall, listening to the heavy breaths of the intruder just inches from where she hid, Anna doubted it all.

A damp, wet smell evaded her nose and stung at her eyes. The stench seemed to seep beneath the false door and envelop her, making it difficult to breathe. She could hold her breath no more.

Then, as quickly as it appeared, the stench disappeared and the footsteps stomped out the room; across the splintered wood and dissolving into the distance.

Anna released a deep relieved breath. But still, she didn't want to move. She wanted to stay in this hole, safe and sound and encased in the darkness where nothing and no one could hurt her. Where not even the agony of her mother's approaching death could touch her. But she knew that wasn't possible. She had to get out there. She had to find her dad. He would know what to do.

It would take a true act of bravery to leave the comfort of that hiding space that had appeared to her as if it had known she needed it. But bravery was something Anna knew well and clung to it and her belief of her own strength then as she slowly rose to her feet. Slipping her long nails into the crack, she gave it a tug and felt it pop open. Carefully and cautiously, she pulled it inwards and peered out into the office.

It was carnage. Papers everywhere. Boxes tipped over, sitting alongside upturned chairs. Her handbag was half way across the room, her laptop on the floor having slipped out. It sat beside the splintered wood of the door, not far from where the heavy mahogany table had been pushed all the way to the other wall; pressed up against the book shelves that took up the entire width of the wall. It was a mess.

Whatever had done this had wanted her. It had *needed* her. And Anna didn't want to find out why.

Leaving her handbag behind, she tread as quietly as she could around and across the broken lengths of wood, the brass door handle lying by itself a few metres away. Whatever had done this had been strong. But how had no one heard this? Then again, the court was upstairs; many layers above brick and stone. The rest of the offices empty along this long winding corridor. She was totally alone down here. No one would even hear her scream.

With trembling fingers, Anna grasped the door frame and cautiously peered out into the hallway. It was empty. Not wanting to celebrate too soon, she moved silently out onto the wooden floors and turned toward the right which would lead her along the corridors to the stairwell where she was bound to find someone. If not, she would take the stone steps up to the court and demand to speak to her father, trial be damned. Someone was after her. She didn't know why or who – maybe one of her dad's clients who'd been previously charged coming to seek revenge on their ex-lawyer by harming his daughter. All Anna knew was that she couldn't stay here.

Just as she thought it, those shuddering footsteps returned tenfold, shaking her off balance and into the door frame. Grasping the panelled walls, Anna twisted around as the footsteps seemed to run towards her and saw for the first time what had caused the destruction in the office. What was after her. What wanted her dead.

It was huge, barely able to fit down the narrow corridor with its broad shoulders, hulking great arms, its fists bigger than her head and its fat, flappy belly that rocked up and down with every giant step as it leapt up the corridor toward her. It wore leather trousers and a heavy looking metal belt around its wide hips and great black boots on its giant feet. And finally, on its head, a black hood; pointed at the top with just holes at its eyes; its glowing yellow eyes.

The shriek in Anna's throat tore out of her mouth as she clambered down the hallway, thrown from side to side by the thunderous footsteps of the executioner chasing behind her. The last thing her eyes had seen before she'd turned and run had been not an axe or a blade in its hand, but a noose. A perfectly tied, gruesome noose. For they hadn't severed the Pendle Witches' heads from their bodies. They had been made to hang, from a short noose no less, so they wouldn't break their necks on the long jump, but were made to slowly suffocate. Which was how Anna felt now as her heart rate soared and each inhale caught in her throat.

To die that way...it must be hell. But Anna had no plans to die that afternoon in April as she sped out of the hallway and into the next long corridor.

The executioner stayed right on her tail. For every four steps of her own, it need only take one to fall in pace with her and any moment now it would catch her. It would wind that noose around her neck and make her hang.

She wouldn't let that happen.

This next corridor was older than the last, its floor stone and uneven, leading her ever downwards into the tunnels beneath the castle. She'd thought she was heading for the stairs; she must have taken a wrong turn. But there was no room for panic. She had to keep going.

Once at the end, Anna leapt down the five steep stone steps and found herself at a four way crossway. With the executioner just a breath behind, Anna sped to the right and found herself in a circular room adorned with torture devices within glass cabinets.

What's more, there was no way out.

Looking up, Anna noticed the footholds. The steel jutting out from the brick of the tower and reaching up to the wrought-iron balcony above; steel left behind from when manacles had hung from them and prisoners had been left to hang there and die.

What a terrible place to die...

The dome window high above illuminated her in the glow of the sun setting somewhere far from here, somewhere out over Morecambe Bay. The sight of it drove Anna

on as she put one foot on the glass container of what looked like a very vicious knife and reached up for the first steel handhold just as the executioner entered the tower room.

Pulling herself up with great strength – strength she'd gained from her hockey games and jogging and lifting her father's weights in his gym – Anna's body swung to the side. She dangled there as her left arm reached for the next hold. The toes of her shoes – ridiculous ballet pumps – tried to find a grip against the stone but slipped each time she put weight on them. She wasn't strong enough to pull herself any higher.

And just when she was able to toss her shoes away and use her clammy toes to grip the wall, she felt something loop around her neck and tug.

Anna watched as if in slow motion as the wall moved further and further away from her. She flung out her hands desperately trying to reach for those steel rungs. The air whooshed around her, past her ears and through her sweaty hair and with a great thud, her back hit the stone floor, her head smacking and black dots dancing across her vision.

She felt nauseous. Weak and breathless. Winded and dazed as the rope around her neck tightened until she could no longer draw breath. And then, before she could stop it, she began to move.

Dragging her fingers across the cold flagstone floor, her nails scraping and chipping until they bled, Anna tried to stop the movement by digging her feet into the floor, but without any shoes, she was even less successful as the executioner dragged her out of the tower room.

She tried to call for help but it was useless. Every inhale was a chore and every exhale forbidden. She needed to store her breath for soon she wouldn't be able to breathe at all. Fingers slipping under the rope, she tried to pull to give herself room but each time, the rope only got tighter and with every tug from the executioner, the less she could breathe. She was doomed.

Leaning back her head, her eyes trailed along the dark hair of its bare arm up to where the hood met its shoulder. It wasn't looking at her. It was looking ahead as it dragged her away from the light, away from the contemporary hallways of the courts, and down, deeper into the earth and along a dimly lit tunnel. She imagined these were the same tunnels the Pendle Witches had been marched through. Every convict that had been charged with death at this castle had passed these ancient walls and known –

I'm going to die.

A peace settled over Anna then. A selfish, terrible thought as her limbs went limp and she stopped trying to wriggle free. As she allowed herself be dragged down another set of stone stairs, her back and head hitting each one, her cold toes numb.

I won't have to see Mum die.

I won't have to stand by her grave and say goodbye.

I won't have to listen to her last breath.

Selfish, terrible thoughts that sucked away the fear from Anna's heart and replaced it with anger. Utter fury for herself.

She was Anna Clearwater –

And Clearwaters never give up!

She couldn't leave her mum. She couldn't be selfish. She had to see this through to the end. Till the very end when all hope would be gone and with it, her mother dead. But it had to be done. She was stronger than this. It was about time the world remembered that.

With the last of her strength, the oxygen in her blood low, Anna swung around and grabbed the noose. With a tug, she felt it loosen ever so slightly. With one more, the noose freed somewhat around her neck. She took a deep long breath, fearing it would be her last as the executioner came to a halt.

Twisting around, it bore down upon her, its yellow glowing eyes finding her and grasping her as she struggled. As it yanked at her noose and made her choke. But Anna wouldn't be taken this easily. She wouldn't allow whatever this was to take her. Not without a fight. Not until it understood.

I'm Anna fucking Clearwater!

With a deep bellied growl, the executioner roared as she clawed her nails across its hand, causing Its grip to loosen.

“Fucking bitch!” Anna swore.

Swinging her body around across the flagstone floor, Anna kicked outwards, bare feet colliding with Its pulsing hairy legs, and while It didn't move, not even an inch, the force propelled Anna backwards enough so the noose came tearing free from Its grip; putting enough space between them for her to leap to her feet and run.

To run and not look back, even as Its roar thundered all around her, echoing into her ears. But this time, the vibrations didn't send her off balance and she was able to run back the way they'd come; flying up the steep stairs, through the crossways, up the next set and back into the hallway. It stayed right on her tail, Its fury and frustration billowing out of It like hot steam. Anna felt Its rage caressing the back of her neck but she wouldn't stop for nothing.

She didn't even stop once she reached the stairwell, flying up the stairs, uncaring for whether she was still being followed or not. It wasn't until she went crashing into three prison wardens did Anna finally stop. Did she finally collapse on the floor, heart racing, her breath so quick it made her head swoon. And finally, she fainted; collapsing at the wardens' feet, the noose still hanging around her neck.

Anna opened her eyes to darkness. She was safe, enveloped in the comfort of her parents' bed. The doors were locked. The house's alarm on. But none of this reassured Anna, for it hadn't been her imagination as her father had said. It hadn't been the attention of a fourteen year with a dying mother.

It had been real.

She had seen It. Elivia too. And the other six.

They had all seen It and now, they had been brought together by their fear – no, by their strength. Their determination not to fear It. To fight It. But how?

How could they win against something which fed on their greatest fears? If she faced It again, what form would It take? Would It be her dying mother? Her decomposing corpse? Or would It be just blackness? Oppressive, fathomless darkness, for that was what Anna feared. Eternal loneliness.

For once her mother was gone, what else was left for her?