

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 ELEVEN

Dumb Dom

It was decided. They needed to find out what *It* was. On Wednesday they'd all met at the Burrow Beck, once again just before curfew and after Tom and Elivia's day at the university, to discuss the next step. They'd all put forward their theories, Tom acting as a referee of sorts when things got heated and they all began talking over one another. Soon, they'd all stated their thoughts and come to the conclusion that this thing, *It* had been here before.

Emily informed them all of the killing spree of children back in the early 1980s. How it had all started with the killing of a little boy in the woods. The police had believed the Occult were to blame and therefore hardly investigated the following crimes all of which had similar features. It was during the 'Satanic Panic' craze, where people had believed the devil was around every corner and hiding in every wheelie bin. They'd seen demons and witches everywhere and in a town like Lancaster, with its infamous history of witches and witchcraft, it had been especially rampant. People had been frightened; fear had run through the streets like the flood water.

Emily had dug deeper still; to twenty-seven years before that to more killings. More tragic disasters that no one ever talked about. The people of Lancaster had very short memories indeed. It seemed as if any further back than twenty years and the history evaporated into its pages and out of people's minds forever. But there were still some things written; some things remembered and that was what they needed to find.

The internet wouldn't do. They needed archives. Archives only the town library would have and so, that Thursday morning, Emily set off into town. But this time, she wouldn't be alone. Dominic was coming with her.

As the only one of their odd little pack that hadn't witnessed this monster, or whatever *It* was, he seemed more determined than ever to understand. After all, if they were right, this thing had murdered his brother. That was reason enough to find out what *It* was and how to defeat *It*.

Emily didn't speak much on the bus. He could tell she was uncomfortable around him. In fairness, Dominic felt awkward around her too. They had never been alone and never even had a conversation without their friends around. But Dominic had warmed to the girl over the past and week half since finding her in the forest at the end of Dorrington Road; bruised, battered and a head full of twigs from her fall. She was soft and warm and quiet. But

the quiet between them was not empty like it was at his house where his parents only muttered their words as if trying to keep their voices down; as if speaking at a volume louder than a whisper would somehow insult his brother's memory. This type of quiet between himself and Emily Fox was a gentle quiet that seemed to envelop them. And while she shifted awkwardly, arms tucked around her backpack as she held her breath and seemed to try to take up as little room as possible on the seat beside him on the bus, there was still a gentleness that Dominic appreciated. One that calmed him as they drove closer to the town centre and closer, hopefully, to knowledge.

Erika had said they all needed tokens. An object of some sort that made them feel safe. Glancing to Emily beside him as they walked through St Nicholas's Arcade and out the other side, heading to the library, Dominic viewed her golden cross shining in the brilliant July sun. It had protected her and Erika from It in the woods. The cross couldn't kill It but it harmed It somehow, giving them enough chance to get away.

Will spoke of the cat, though he had yet to see it again. A token of his childhood and the pet he'd had as small kid; the thing that had brought comfort to him in the long nights.

Then there was Tom's camera. Its powerful flash had blinded It and given him and Elivia the chance to run. Their belief in these things had saved them. Given them power. Expelled the fear from their chests.

Fear. It was the key. It unlocked them, made them open and vulnerable to whatever this was that was hunting them. Without fear, they were closed; harder to reach. The power in these things protected them. Dominic wondered how much. As he did, he fingered his own token in his jean pocket.

His brother's rocket ship. It was small, barely the length of his palm, with a red nose and wings. Toby had painted it himself and it had sat stationary on his bedside table since his death. It had been his brother's most prized possession and now, it was Dominic's. He had snuck into Toby's room – tomb – to get it. He prayed his mother didn't notice. He wasn't sure what she would do if she ever discovered he'd taken something of Toby's. Was it so wrong to want to feel close to him? To want to fill the pit inside of him that his brother had once filled. His mother made it sound that way; as if he would be stealing from her, desecrating Toby's memory and very body if they so much as stepped inside that room.

But that was wrong. Dominic was keeping Toby alive. And besides, only one thing had harmed Toby and that thing was still out there; stealing and murdering children.

Snatching their lives from their veins. Taking them away from their families. It needed to know It wouldn't get away with it. It needed to know that It wasn't invincible. That they weren't afraid of It anymore.

"You didn't have to come with me," Emily said as they entered the library through the automatic doors.

“I wanted to,” Dominic said, suddenly struck by the realisation that Emily hadn’t had friends before, or at least not recently. Without Tom, Erika and Will, Dominic wouldn’t have any friends either. No one wanted to be friends with the boy who’d pissed his pants in primary school.

His teachers called him ‘slow’. The doctors called him dyslexic. The kids called him dumb. Whatever you wanted to call it, he was different. It took him longer than the other children to work out maths sums, recall facts and words or how to spell certain things. He couldn’t memorise as much but when it came to music, he excelled.

His fingers remembered the chords, the positions on the neck of a guitar or on the keys of a piano. He was a wunderkind in music classes; it was everywhere else he is slacked. He was put in ‘special learning’ classes, therefore furthering him from the rest of his peers. And why? Because he couldn’t perform mental arithmetic? Because he couldn’t read as quickly as his classmates? Why did any of that matter in the grand scheme of things?

He wasn’t stupid. Far from it. But it wouldn’t matter if he was the smartest boy in school. Emily was evidence of that. If you were different, you wouldn’t survive. Sometimes, Dominic felt like the only fish in the river swimming in the opposite direction. It was more difficult but it was the path he’d been given.

No matter, even if he wasn’t dyslexic and hadn’t wet his pants in year five when a teacher had put him on the spot, he would still be the kid with the dead brother.

And that fact hurt the most.

“Oh,” Emily said, shooting him a small smile which lit up her round face.

No wonder Will likes her...loves her...

Emily Fox was a pretty girl. Under her shyness and the many layers of clothes she wore like a protective barrier against the barrage of bullying, she was pretty with chestnut brown eyes and pink bow shaped lips. Dominic wondered if the girls at her school only picked on Emily because she *was* pretty. Her weight was her sore scab that they picked on to try to ease their own envy.

But what did he know? He was Dumb Dom; brother of a dead boy.

They started with the local history section; scouring through the books written by historians about Lancaster and Lancashire’s history. They used the computer to cross-reference and search for key words in the books within the library and across the entire British library database. It was Emily’s plan to learn as much as they could about the city and its history. Then, once they’d built a timeline, they would search through the text for any mention of the killing or abduction of children, or any mention at all of a creature, or clown.

While they'd all seen It in varying forms, for Tom It had been a clown; a puppet clown. Emily believed the clown was Its most natural form because of this. Dominic wasn't so sure but they had nothing else to go on.

Next they checked the newspapers all the way back to the start of the 20th century. They planned on doing more but since the time was getting on by this point, they skimmed through the articles on the large machine in the back office with the help of the librarian, Hettie. Dominic had been surprised when Emily had lied about their true intentions, stating it was for a history project. He hadn't thought that a girl like Emily was capable of lying; then again, there was plenty he didn't know about Emily Fox.

He remembered her family's car accident though. He'd seen the wreckage of it driving over the Skerton Bridge since the traffic had been deterred away from the Greyhound where her parents' car had flown through the barrier and down into the River Lune. Trundling along in the traffic, Dominic had viewed the crane lifting the car from the depths, water pouring through its open doors and smashed windscreen. He remembered what he'd thought too –

No one could survive that.

But Emily had.

It had been all across the news, just like his brother's death. The lone survivor, she'd been called, in a tragic accident that had wiped out her entire family. Her mother. Her father. Her sister. Out of all the people Dominic knew, Emily understood loss the most, and as she turned to give him a shy smile as they sat at the large machine, he matched that smile the best he could.

To think, they would never have met if not for the murder of his brother. If not for this thing killing children – attacking them.

It thought It could scare them. Capture and devour them and feed from their fear. But instead, It had pushed the eight of them together, making a united team. One of strength and faith. It had made a mistake and now, they would make sure It regretted it.

After a little while of silent searching, scrolling through newspaper after newspaper, Dominic needed the toilet. Telling Emily he'd be right back, he strolled out of the dingy messy office in search for the toilets. Following the signs down a set of stairs, where the light from the great windows within the library couldn't penetrate the looming shadows, Dominic headed toward the men's toilets.

One look at the urinals, he decided on the cubicles. He wasn't like most boys his age. Peeing in public, even here in the toilets, set his nerves alight. He could still hear their laughter; their cruel words swimming around his head as he stepped into a cubicle and unbuttoned his jeans.

He's pissed his pants!

He's pissed himself, Miss! Look at him!

The warm urine had run down the inside of his thigh, soaking straight through his underwear and to his school trousers. He'd needed the toilet. He'd begged his teacher to let him go. She'd told him they'd just had break and that he should have gone then. But she didn't understand. He hadn't been able to go at break, too busy hiding from the likes of Charles Freeman, a vicious boy in his class, and his band of followers who found it hilarious to chase him every recess. His only respite came from the small space tucked behind the playground equipment box; a box he was later stuffed inside and kept in for an entire hour during lunchtime. He hadn't had enough time to go to the toilet that break; his bladder at the point of bursting.

As punishment for his whines to go to the toilet, the teacher had called on him to answer maths questions. They hadn't been particularly difficult but standing there, at the front of the class before all his sniggering peers, Charles's eyes burning a hole through his back, Dominic hadn't been able to focus. The numbers on the white board had blurred, sweat had crawled down his neck and the panic had made it arduous to breathe. And all the while, he'd been trying to hold in his full bladder until he could no more. The momentary release hadn't been worth the lifetime of abuse.

As he peed now, his body was tense with that memory making it difficult to squeeze every ounce of urine from his tight bladder. He'd had countless bladder infections because of it. The doctors couldn't understand why he continued to get them even now at fourteen. He'd even been sent to see a therapist who'd picked at that old wound and asked him probing questions about his masturbation; questioning him whether he ever stuck objects into his cock. He'd been horrified at the notion; humiliated and ashamed. But most of all frustrated.

No one listened. No one understood. It had all begun when Charles Freeman and his friends had picked him for their latest hunt. It had all begun when he hadn't been allowed to leave his classroom to urinate. It had all begun when that same teacher called on him to do mental arithmetic in front of the entire class as punishment for needing to urinate. None of this was his fault and yet he was being blamed; called a troubled child and having to endure a painful conversation with his dad about masturbation. Only Dominic must suffer the consequences for the actions of others. He must suffer it for the rest of his life.

He was Dumb Dom; the boy who'd pissed himself with the dead brother. It didn't get any better than this.

Pulling the chain, Dominic left the cubicle and set about washing his hands; pumping a great glob of soap onto his palms and washing them vigorously as if he could wash off the trauma. But it would take much more than antibacterial soap to wash away those kinds of memories.

Drying his hands on the paper from the dispenser, the type that disintegrated and left bits of paper all over your palms, Dominic dumped the wet wad in the bin and headed for the

door, still picking bits of green paper from between his damp fingers. Tugging open the door, he went to step out when something made him stop.

There, on the floor, in the centre of the empty hallway, was a toy. Not just any toy. It had belonged to Toby.

It lived in the shed now, or at least, so Dominic had realised when he'd set Erika up in there last week. On the shelf, the monkey with its cymbal hands, one of Toby's favourite toys as a young child. Now here it was, sitting on the floor, staring back at him, cymbals pulled apart ready to smash together. Dominic knew the sound. It rang out in his memories making him flinch. In between his confusion for how this toy had ended up here, the terror rippled up the back of his neck.

It wasn't possible. It simply couldn't be real. He wanted to raise his fists to rub his eyes when he remembered the sticky bits of paper still stuck to them. So instead, he stayed motionless, staring back into the blank beady eyes of the monkey.

It couldn't be a duplicate. This very item had come from an independent toy store in a small town in Maine, sent by a distant relative, or so Dominic remembered in those moments as he faced off with the toy that appeared so harmless then, and yet, the fear he felt was predatory.

For this was possible. Hadn't his friends' proved that?

The witch in the woods. The merman in the font. The flying statue in the park. The clown in the tunnels beneath the university. The road sweeper. The executioner.

It.

It was here and this time, It was here for him.

Reaching into his pocket, Dominic grasped the rocket tightly as he edged along the hallway, glancing up to the beaming light of the open-spaced library. It felt like miles away then as he inched to the side, eyes falling to the monkey whose head slowly turned to watch his every step. Dominic stifled his gasp of terror and focused his glower down It, so It knew.

I'm not scared of you.

You can't hurt me.

As he came to a halt at the bottom of the steps leading up into the main section of the library, he scowled down at the toy as Its head came to a halt at an odd angle, completely twisted from Its body.

"Do you hear? You can't hurt me! You can't hurt *us*!" Dominic bellowed, his fingers enclosed tightly around that toy rocket ship. His brother's. Toby's. Who was dead at the hands of this thing...

It wouldn't take him too.

But just as he thought those brave words, the toy moved.

Not just Its head this time, but Its entire body; the cymbal hands flat to the floor as Its legs slid out from underneath It until It appeared to be on Its hands and knees. Then, with Its eyes staying upon a frozen, panting Dominic, the toy's body moved around to meet Its head.

Now It faced him and while Dominic knew it wasn't possible, that this thing couldn't hurt him – not here in a busy library, in broad daylight – all sense and logic flew out his mind as the monkey toy took one shuffled pace towards him, Its cymbals crashing to the floor as It cocked Its head.

And then It laughed.

That terrible, bone chilling laugh as It flipped over backwards. Dominic stumbled onto the steps as the laughter rang out around him, drilling into his very core. With that backflip, It landed, only now It was bigger. No longer able to fit onto ones palm, but the size of a cat. With another flip which brought It closer to Dominic, still sprawled on those steps, one arm back and the other stuffed in his pocket, the toy grew again; shrill hiccupping laughter as Its cymbals crashed flat to the ground and It became the size of a dog.

Again and again, closer and closer, larger and larger, until Its cymbals crashed at the toes of his feet and the monkey loomed over him now the size of a great hulking gorilla; those cymbals the size of satellite dishes and that laughter low and booming as It grinned down at him with burning yellow eyes. And in those seconds as Dominic stared up at the thing that had murdered his brother –torn his arm from his torso and meant to devour him – the thing that had attacked his friends, the thing that had killed all those other children and mutilated their bodies, he wondered if all their strength and faith was wasted. That now, staring into Its eyes, he finally understood.

This was bigger than all of them. It wasn't some creature from an old movie that could be tricked into a net. This wasn't a person that could be demasked by the *Mystery Gang*. It wouldn't leave unless they made It. Unless they killed It once and for all.

But how? How could one kill something this powerful? They were just kids.

No. Teenagers.

And I won't let it forget that.

Crawling backwards up the steps away from the monkey, Dominic's eyes never left It as he held onto the rocket ship in his pocket and shook his head. The monkey leered towards him, those eyes still glowing and while entrancing, he wouldn't be fooled.

"You can't hurt me. I'm not afraid of you!" Dominic roared, his fury for his brother's murder, for the torturous bullying, for the silence of his parents, for everything that stuck inside of him like burning indigestion, boiled out of him.

All was silent. Neither one of them moved as they stared back at one another, the yellow in Its eyes dimming ever so slightly. Then, It leaned forward; cocking Its head to the other side as Its jaw opened wide. Dominic peered down Its gullet and listened to those devoured souls pleading for help. As white lights appeared and threatened to take him. Then with a snap, Its jaw closed.

Dominic found Its eyes once again and through his anger cracked real fear. Genuine terror and hopelessness as It spoke;

“You should be.”

And finally, Dominic believed.

Pulling himself up the last step, he leapt to his feet. Pelting along the hallway, he ran out into the light of the library, leaving the corridor and the toy behind. But It would never be far away.

It knew their scent. It wanted them all. It felt like a test of Its strength. If It could have them, It could have the world. And even in his state of pure fear and helplessness, Dominic knew they couldn't let that happen.

Glancing back, the toy was gone. All evidence of It ever being there gone too.

Panting for breath, Dominic straightened up and turned to head to the office where Emily was no doubt wondering where he'd got to, when he crashed into something solid.

For single second he thought it would be the monkey, coming back to claim him. When he opened his eyes, he saw Emily.

She looked as frightened as he did; but there was something else in her eyes. Excitement? Triumph.

“I've got it!” she exclaimed, tugging him by the hand and leading him back through the library.

“Look,” Emily said, placing a sheet in front of him. It was still warm from the printer.

He picked it up. He'd seen this picture a thousand times. It was of the hanging of the Pendle Witches, drawn many hundreds of years ago for the documentation of the trial written by the clerk of the court, a Thomas Potts. It was what was unusual about the trial, among several other things; it was documented in an official publication, *The Wonderful Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster*. He'd seen this drawing plenty throughout his life, as had Emily, no doubt. Yet now, as his eyes scanned it, something seemed different. There was something he hadn't noticed before.

“Do you see it?” Emily asked, leaning over his shoulder next to him, her finger on the top right hand side of the drawing.

Dominic's eyes narrowed in on the picture; on the two figures standing in the window of the tower on the right hand side. His eyes went first to what appeared to be a woman peering out the window watching the hangings. Then, he noticed the figure standing beside this woman.

He'd never given this grainy, half drawn figure much thought before but as he shifted in his seat, eyes close to the drawing, he finally saw what Emily was hinting to.

It was a clown.

"It was there," Dominic breathed, "at the Pendle Witch trial."

"Yep," Emily said. "And I suspect at every other tragedy that's happened in history. I just have to check it. What's more interesting –," she said, slipping down into the seat beside him and opening her notepad.

Dominic viewed the neat writing and saw the dates. Each one in intervals of twenty-seven years.

"Twenty-seven years?" He frowned.

"Every twenty-seven years."

"So the Occult killings in the 1980s?"

"It."

"And –." Dominic looked down again to the next era. "– 1954?"

"When the dam on the Lune up near Caton burst open and killed two hundred and fifty people. Just washed them away."

"So it's an event. A trigger?"

"Exactly. Something triggers It every twenty seven years or maybe, when It wakes, something happens, I'm not sure. But look, in 1927 there was fire at the textiles factory out in Skerton. They said the fire burned so hot that just the air was hot enough to set people alight," Emily said slowly with a nauseous look in her eye. "And finally in 1899, there was a flu. Some people have posturized it was the start of the Spanish Flu."

"But the Spanish Flu wasn't until –."

"1918. Lancaster had the lowest death rates."

Dominic frowned deeply. "But it came from Spain?"

"They don't know that for certain. But whatever it was, wiped out over 50,000 people, Dominic. It killed a third of the world's population then. And yet Lancaster? Which has some of the highest abduction rates in the country – yes, I checked – was practically untouched, with just ten or so deaths and one hundred cases. And why? Because it wasn't time."

“Wait, stop,” Dominic said, keeping his voice low as he shuffled closer. He pointed down to the clown in the drawing again. “Are you saying that this thing, It wakes and triggers some devastating event?”

“Fear, Dom. We even said it ourselves. It feeds on it. It needs the community scared.”

“So the floods last year?”

Emily nodded. “It was the worst one since the fifties, like I said, when the dam burst open.”

Dominic needed to stop. He needed to breathe. Facing the clown and now this? It was too much. Head in his hands, he took deep shuddering breaths to calm his thundering heart. He flinched at the feel of a hand on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw a nervous Emily staring back at him.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have –.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m fine,” Dominic swallowed. “But It was here.”

“*Here?*”

He could see that this new event had shaken Emily’s foundation of trust. This library, he knew, was a safe space for her. To know that It could reach them even here changed everything.

“What happened?” she asked. “Did It hurt you?”

“No,” he said firmly. “No, it was just a warning. But It’s coming, whatever It is.”

“That’s what we need to find out next,” Emily said, her hand resting beside his on the table.

He took it gently and gave it a small squeeze. This time, neither of them flinched and shared another small smile.

“There’s a book I think might help called the ‘The Witch’s Curse,’” Emily said as they packed away their things into their backpacks; all the print-outs of information they would take back to the group, and together, they would try to decide what to do next. But one thing was for sure, they had to stick together. Together, it didn’t stand a chance. “I have to get Hettie to order it but it should be here soon.”

“What’s it about?”

“When I was cross referencing shapeshifters with the books in the library, I came across a page about the witchcraft. Specifically, the Pendle clan. They have text about a shapeshifter from this area dating back hundreds, maybe thousands of years. If anything can tell us more, it will be this.”

“Sounds great, Emily,” Dominic smiled. “What would we do without you?” he chuckled wearily as they headed out of the library and into the humid heat beyond. The moisture in the air caused their clothes to cling to their skin as they headed across the Market Square and for the cover of the St Nicholas Arcades.

“I’m sure you’d manage,” Emily replied, a bashful, downtrodden expression that made Dominic wonder exactly when this girl would realise how important she was. And not just to them and their group but in the grand scheme of things.

It was always far easier to knock something down than build it up. That Dominic knew all too well.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Cat

His dad wanted beer and it was up to Will to go get it.

But he couldn't get it from the Spar on the main road at the top of the hill from his house. The lady there, for one, didn't like his father. They'd had a dispute a few years ago over Ashley's alcoholism and his treatment of Will. Ashley had told the woman it was none of her business and to keep her 'loud moth' out of it. Instead, Will was sent to the Costcutter on Greaves Drive, where Ashley's friend had set up a tab and never refused Will service when he came to collect his father's beer twice a week.

Some would call Ashley's friend, Graham an enabler. It was what Tom called him. Will only had one word for Graham Sutler and that was 'dickhead'. A big bulging man in his fifties, who made leering remarks at his female customers and refused service to any who tried to complain. Needless to say, the shop didn't get many customers, only from the locals and Graham's friends. And Will.

He dreaded going even if it was a shorter walk. His loathing for Graham ran deep down to when he and Ashley had found it funny to lock Will as a small boy in a dog cage under the table. They'd pushed food through the bars and made him shit his pants. No better than a dog. Graham still joked about it now as if it was a funny incident Will was supposed to laugh it off.

But, of course, the men couldn't do that to him now. Will had inherited his father's stature. Almost 6ft at just fourteen, with broad shoulders and thick legs from cycling and the athletics he buried himself into at school, he was growing tall and strong. Far too strong for Ashley's liking. The beatings were becoming less regular as if his father didn't have the energy. He could still get Will to the ground if he wanted but the alcohol hadn't only melted his mind but those old muscles too. His days of being a notorious bare knuckle fighter were over. He was nothing but a drunken fatso now, barely able to make it to the kitchen and back. And never to the shops. That was Will's job.

So that Wednesday evening, having collected a twenty pack of canned beer from the Costcutter, Will considered Graham's remarks about his size and when he was going to 'bang his first bird'. When Will had simply shrugged and grunted a reply, Graham had called him a faggot.

Faggot. It was what the kids at their school called Tom and Dominic.

Faggot. Homo. Batty. All names for being gay. Homosexual. Will saw the way locals sneered in revulsion whenever his friends held hands or even shared a kiss. As if they were pulling down their jeans, bending over and showing their arseholes to everyone, which Will would find quite amusing. Perhaps that's exactly what they should do. Maybe their community would be less shocked by that than their hand holding and love for one another.

For it was love. A tender type, a companionship, a friendship with deep roots.

Will had grown up with this type of hatred for homosexuals but he hadn't ever felt it himself. Not the disgust, not the loathing and utter revulsion. He didn't understand it. His dad said Will was just as bad as them, a sympathiser. Will knew that by not having a problem with Tom and Dominic's relationship didn't make him wrong or even homosexual himself. It meant he was good.

Good like Emily. Her pure heart which radiated out of her. Good because love was love and if anyone could possibly feel that powerful emotion for another human being, be that of the same sex or not, there couldn't ever be something wrong with that. It was pure. The purest form of emotion in this cruel, dark world.

Will had only ever felt it once in his life, until now. And that had been for his mother. Grace. A grace she was; beautiful and elegant and like an angel in his memories. She was always shrouded in a heavenly light, one she took with her when she left their house on Pickard Street, leaving him in shadow. He didn't know where she was or why she hadn't taken him with her. She'd taken the cat, Baggins, with her and left him. How could someone so angelic leave their son behind?

Yet still, she was a figure of warmth, love and safety in his mind, and the cat – his protector. Just like the one he'd met the other week in the alley.

The black and white feline that had materialised beside him and scared off the decomposing homeless man. Will wasn't sure how it had accomplished such a feat, and he hadn't seen it again.

Was Erika right? Had it been Will's faith in that cat, in any feline, that had protected him that night, or had it been the cat itself?

He wasn't sure and as he trudged along the dark streets, long after curfew, kicking rubbish from his path, head down and his latest bruise around neck aching, his dark thoughts turned to the one light that existed in his life again.

Emily.

She was proof that there was still some good in this world and it was worth fighting for. She was strong, beautiful and smart, her intellect shining out of her like a beacon for them all. Since the day she tumbled down that hill and into his life, Emily had given Will hope. Hope that the sun will rise again and whatever nightmare they were in would end. It had to.

They would end it.

Walking with a slight spring in his step, imagining himself telling Graham at Costcutter that he wasn't gay at all, that being gay didn't make one 'wrong', and that beautiful Emily Fox evaded his dreams every night, her soft large breasts always brushing against him and leaving him stiff come morning. With all that in his mind, Will hardly noticed something cross his path.

Always walking on the road where cars rarely drove, to avoid the dog shit on the pavements, Will came to a halt.

At first, panic struck him. He stuffed his hand into his pocket to find a rolled up ball of tin foil. The tin foil from the first sandwich Emily ever made him. It was his token. Grasping it, he pictured Emily. His chest was flooded with a type of power; a heat that made him stand up straighter and search the road in front of him, all the way up to the entrance of one of the many alleyways. He gave a stiff gulp.

He caught sight of its eyes first; shining silver in the reflection of the streetlights. It was an animal of some kind, but what, he wasn't sure as he stood frozen in the middle of the road, the sharp edges of the tin foil cutting into his palm as he squeezed it tight.

Then, the eyes came closer, the darkness falling off of its fur to reveal a cat.

It was black and white; the black features around its face like a mask and the one along its back like a cloak. It was the same cat that had found him in the alleyway at the back of his house.

It was Bruce.

"Bruce?" Will breathed a deep sigh of relief. "What ya doing, boy? Don't you have a home?"

In reply, the cat let out a long happy meow, slinking around the corner of the alleyway, its long tail waving around as if by its own accord. The cat stared back at him with a quizzical expression, its large ears, which seemed far too big for its sleek slim body, twitching and listening to the noises of the night. But its focus stayed upon Will.

"Hey? Where's ya home, lad?" Crouching down, he held out his hand and made a tsking noise, encouraging the cat over.

Cautiously, it made a step towards him, and then tottered over, its tail pointing straight to the night's sky as he rubbed the side of his face against Will's outstretched hand. Will chuckled as he scratched the cat around its large ears and then down its back, watching as it curled up in an arch contently, Bruce's tail wiggling ever so slightly.

"You like that, don't ya?"

Bruce gave another drawn joyful meow as it brushed itself around Will's legs, across his behind and back around his other side, staring up at him expectantly.

"Go on, go home, Brucie," Will said, standing up.

The cat didn't move.

"Seriously, mate, you can't come with me and I can't stay here."

Bruce meowed again, his purring like a little engine. Will's heart weakened. Sweeping down, he scooped the cat up into his arms. Bruce's left paw went to his throat as he hung in his arms, sniffing Will's mouth and nose, his whiskers tickling his skin. Will gave another small laugh as he held the cat up to view him.

"You don't look like you've got fleas. What about worms? Ya got worms?"

Bruce stared back at him blankly.

"I haven't got any food at my house. My dad's a pig, he eats it all. You'll go hungry."

The cat made no move to get down. Simply gazed at him with those large green eyes. Will was sure even the coldest person wouldn't be able to resist.

"My dad'll kill you if he finds ya," Will said with a sigh. Returning the cat to the road, he crouched back down and swung his backpack off his back. Removing the heavy box of cans from his bag, he held open the bag. "I'll have to hide ya and you'll have to go out during the day but you can sleep with me. How does that sound? Somewhere warm. As long as you don't fart, we'll get along nicely." Will beamed down at the cat as it stuck its nose inside his bag, then his leg, then his other before he was climbing inside and sitting happily in the dark cosy space. "Alright, just sit tight and don't make a noise okay? Or we'll both be dead."

Carefully, Will zipped up the bag, leaving just a tiny hole. He gently returned the rucksack to his back. Collecting the box of beer from the ground, he started off towards his house.

He wasn't lying when he said if Ashley caught them they'd both be dead. His dad, unsurprisingly, hated animals. He didn't even like dogs; kicked them, growled at them. Even had his three vicious German Shepherds removed by the RSPCA a few years ago, which Will didn't mind. He hated dogs; they bit, they barked and they were all nasty deep down. But not cats.

Cats were good and pure; they were loyal not out of loyalty's sake but if you were loyal to it, they would love you forever. You got out what you put into cats and while Will knew it would be impossible to keep Bruce, he would do his best and love this furry creature with every ounce of the love in his cold frightened heart. After all, it had saved his life. How could he ever repay such a debt?

Will didn't use the back door anymore. That would mean going up the alleyway and even with Bruce in his backpack and the tin foil ball in his pocket, he didn't feel safe. He took the front door, cautiously easing inside and whispering a warning to Bruce who sat quietly in his backpack. The cat had barely fidgeted during the walk and he didn't make a peep now as Will stood at the doorway of the living room and held up the box of beer to his father.

“Great one, pop it in the fridge.”

Will didn't reply, simply took the box down to the kitchen and lifted it into the empty fridge. There was nothing to eat but fortunately, Tom had saved the end of his steak and mushroom pasty from lunchtime and given it to Will when they'd bumped into each other. It sat heavy in the bottom of his stomach as he climbed the stairs, the noise of the television chasing up behind him; only muted once Will was alone in his room, the door closed.

Propping the single chair against the door beneath the handle, just as he did every night, Will placed his backpack on the mattress on the floor and unzipped it.

Tonight, his cold dark room, where the window hung bare of curtains and his few ratty clothes sat in a pile on the floor, didn't bother him. Nor did the thin blanket and musty old pillow on his mattress where the springs dug into his back and neck. None of that mattered as he opened the backpack and peered down at the cat staring back at him.

“Home sweet home, Brucie.” Will smiled, stroking the cat's soft head and lifting him out. “Now here are the rules. I'll carry you out in this bag every morning and you meet me in the evening around this time if you wanna come back in, okay? You'll have to get your own food –.” Bruce interjected with a quiet meow. “– yeah I know it's shit but I have to. So buck up, boy. Now, no peeing or pooping in the room, alright? Get ya business done during the day, 'kay?” He sat back on the mattress as Bruce padded tentatively across his bed, sniffing every inch before sitting back on his haunches to have a wash. “And no farting, got it?”

Pulling on a hoodie, Will kicked off his shoes and, leaving the rest of his clothes on, Will placed his backpack by the head of his mattress and shifted down under his blanket. Soon, Bruce was burrowing his way under the blanket too, snuggling up close like a furnace against Will's chest. Tugging up the hood on his jacket, Will hunkered down, blanket to his chin, his socked feet dangling off the end of the single mattress, and his arm gently cradling Bruce's warm soft body as he got comfortable.

The purring from the cat's throat was soothing; like white noise as Will's heavy eyes closed and he was filled with only joy and love as Emily returned to him there in his slumber and lay beside him, Bruce in between.