

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 SEVENTEEN

The Witch's Spell

“Will you turn that down?” Will grumbled, glancing over his shoulder to where Sam tutted and down *Blackstreet's No Diggity* down on his iPod dock.

“Alright, keep your knickers on,” Sam snorted, slouching back on his bed, elbows behind him and legs dangling off the side. He looked from Anna on his one side, then to Erika on the other with a smug grin that Will didn't like.

“This is serious,” Dominic said strictly, leaning against the chest of drawers, Tom perched on the top as the eight fourteen year olds sat and stood in various positions in Sam's bedroom. It had been his idea to meet there, since his dad was away for the night on business down in Manchester. It was the only house where all of them would be accepted without question and so the only place they could discuss their plans.

How to kill It.

“I know, I know, I just thought we could do it to some tunes,” Sam said with a roll of his eyes.

“Shut up, Robinson,” Erika mumbled, followed by a titter from their friends.

“You love it,” Sam smirked, shooting Erika wiggle of his eyebrows which she pointedly ignored, her focus on Emily sat in the desk chair. Will stood at her side, his attention already upon sweet Emily Fox who held a thick serious looking book in her grasp.

“Can we get on?” Anna huffed.

“Alright!” Sam said, gesturing to Emily who cleared her throat.

“Okay, so me and Dominic ordered this book from the library,” Emily said, holding it up for them all to view.

“What's it about?” Elivia asked, perched on the edge of Sam's bed next to Anna's long legs like a small bird on a branch always ready to take flight.

“The Pendle Witches,” Dominic spoke up.

“More importantly, it was written by their Coven. It's been added to over the years and this is the latest edition published in 1998,” Emily explained.

“So what does it say?” Tom asked.

“A lot ...,” Emily mused, opening the hardback book and flicking through its pages. Upon lifting her gaze, she saw them all staring patiently back at her. “Sorry, erm, well, it mentions a shapeshifter...”

“Like that fucker last night?” Sam grunted.

“The fucker that’s been killing the children,” Erika clarified.

“That killed my brother,” Dominic said plaintively, silencing them all.

Emily gave another clear of her throat to ease the tension. “Not only that, there is some old text about a spell.”

“A spell?” Sam scoffed.

“Really, Robinson?” Anna said, shooting him a sneer, “You can believe you were chased by a shapeshifting crab clown thing in an abandoned theme park in Morecambe but spells, that’s where you draw the line?”

There was another chorus of nervous titters as Sam waved away Anna’s words and Emily searched through the book for the page she was looking for.

“What did the spell do? Kill these things?” Tom asked.

“I don’t –,” Emily hesitated, her anxious eyes darting to Dominic who straightened.

“We don’t – I mean, from what we’ve read, I don’t think there’s more than one.”

Silence fell upon the teenagers once again, poignant silence as they tried to process what they were being told.

“But if the Pendle Witches talked about this *thing* that means –,” Erika said, sitting up, her hands tented as she looked from Emily to Dominic.

“It’s fucking old,” Sam chuckled.

“It’s infinite,” Dominic said firmly, wiping the grin from Sam’s lips.

“Brilliant,” Anna said, throwing up her arms in defeat. “How are *we* supposed to kill something ancient? That’s like – that would be like trying to kill a god!”

“If you believe in gods,” Dominic grunted, ignoring Emily and Tom’s firm stares.

“This is hopeless,” Elivia sniffled.

“It’s not hopeless,” Will spoke up, “What else did the book say? What was the spell?”

“It wasn’t a spell to kill It,” Emily said, grasping the book close to her chest as if it and only it could protect her now. “It was a ward.”

“A what?” Anna frowned.

“A protection spell,” Dominic said.

“To protect them? The witches?” Tom pressed.

“No, the people,” Emily said, “I’ve tried to find any trace of this thing in the history records but once you reach the early sixteen hundreds there’s nothing.”

“So It didn’t exist before then?” Anna questioned.

“I don’t think it’s that,” Emily mumbled.

“We think it’s because of the witches,” Dominic said.

“But if there’s a Coven there now why can’t they stop It?” Erika said.

“That’s on the belief that witches *actually* exist,” Sam added, to which all seven stared back at him. “What?! I mean, so the Pendle Witches may have been *real* witches,” he said, using air quotations around ‘real’, “but what if these new ones aren’t? What if the ‘magic’ died with them?”

As usual, Sam Robinson had stumped them all; stuck wondering whether he’s the smartest guy they’d ever met, or the stupidest.

“I think Sam might be onto something,” Emily said, shocking them all, no least Will whose mouth twitched enviously as Sam grinned proudly over at Emily nodding keenly. “Maybe the power did die with them. Maybe...maybe –.”

“We need to go to Pendle,” Erika interjected.

“Pendle? As in, Burnley?” Anna blinked. “We’re fourteen and ride bikes. How are we going to get there?”

“Bus?” Elivia suggested, much to all their surprise.

“It’s far,” Tom said.

“But we need to go, right, Erika?” Elivia said, leaning forward around Anna and Sam on the bed to see Erika nodding.

“I think we need to go to Pendle Hill. If the witches did have a way to stop It, maybe – I dunno, I just got this gut feeling.”

“Gut feeling has saved us so far,” Dominic agreed.

“So we’re going to Pendle?” Anna asked, searching all their faces as they reluctantly agreed. “Do you think – think It can hurt us there?”

“I’m not sure,” Emily replied. “It seems everything is centred around Lancaster. Maybe Its power extended beyond that before but the witches somehow contained It to the city? I don’t know but I think Erika’s right. Ever since we first discovered that the thing,

Pennywise, was at the hangings in that drawing, I've had that same gut feeling. We're missing something – a piece of the puzzle.”

“And you think that piece is in Pendle?” Sam questioned.

“Yes,” Emily said firmly, looking to Will and only Will. “What do you think?”

Every single one of them saw him gulp. Saw his demeanour change as he stood up straighter, dropped his bruised limbs from where they'd been folded across his chest. Watched his lips twist, his eyes flutter quicker as his heart rate no doubt rocketed. Perhaps the only person who didn't see this was Emily as she flushed nervously under his gaze.

“I think it's a great idea, Emily,” Will smiled.

What followed was a long drawn silence as Emily and Will stayed staring at one another. Tom nudged Dominic in those seconds, the two boys smirking knowingly. Elivia blushed and looked away to view Sam's collection of Xbox games on his shelf while Anna rolled her eyes and pulled bobbles of thread from her legging. Meanwhile, Sam, beside her, was too busy viewing Erika's profile as she watched Emily and Will with a soft, almost longing smile. A smile that was so rare on her face that Sam wanted to bask in it for just a little longer.

“So it's settled?” Anna said, breaking the soft moment, the respite from the storm that the eight of them had found in this bedroom somewhere near Williamson Park. “Pendle? Tomorrow?”

“Yep, bring your bikes,” Sam announced, “and Ems?”

“I'll bring lunch,” she said with a tut but seemed in no way offended as they cheered merrily.

They could almost pretend it was a fun day out, an adventure with friends, and not a mission to discover the truth of the Pendle Witches and their power over a murderous, shapeshifting, ancient creature that had a taste for children.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pendle Hill

Emily had tried to Google how long it would take to get to Nelson, the small town in the foothills of Pendle Hill just north of Burnley, but it had been unclear. Anywhere between three hours to ten, which didn't narrow it down. And so Emily set off with this strange group of people on the bus towards Preston that Monday morning, bike at the front with the others, anxious about returning home before curfew. Once again, she'd lied to Rupert and Lindsay, stating she would be at the library working on her summer school project. Unless one of them called the library neither would discover her lie but still, it sat deep in her churning stomach as she watched the Lancashire countryside fly by beyond the murky bus window.

It wasn't only the lie and the bumpy, winding bus journey that was making her stomach churn. She'd ended up sat beside Will and just the scent of him wafting into her nostrils with each inhale was enough to make her feel ill. It wasn't an unpleasant smell; far from it. It was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted. But the heart palpitations and the clamminess of her palms made her feel nervous; forming tight knots in her stomach as she tried to keep her belly pulled in and her breathing calm.

It was hopeless. She could never be calm around Will Bennet.

Little did she know, he felt the exact same way, only he was better at hiding it as he sat with one long leg in the aisle, chatting to Dominic and Tom across from them. Sitting in front, Anna and Elivia shared an earbud each, passing the time with music and mindless chatter; anything to distract them from their mission. In the seats in front of Dominic and Tom sat Erika and Sam. She didn't look as pleased with the arrangement as Sam, who had one arm slung over the back of her seat. Nonetheless, she hadn't asked to move and Will doubted that a girl like Erika would put up with something she didn't enjoy. He'd known her long enough to know that, in fact, he believed, she quite enjoyed Sam Robinson, in a strange way; perhaps even in a way she was yet to even understand at just fourteen.

It was the same reason why any of the eight enjoyed one another. Underneath Elivia and Anna's wealth, Emily's strict religious upbringing and the grief of her family, Dominic's sullen expression, Tom's excitable manner and passion that was akin to a puppy, Sam's arrogant exterior, Erika's defensive one and Will's own bruises and swollen lip, they were the same. They were losers. And furthermore, they'd all witnessed the same thing.

It.

Witnessed It and survived It. More than once. That meant something.

What, Will wasn't sure yet, and wouldn't discover for many years, but it was something powerful. Perhaps even as powerful as It. And if they learnt how to harness that power they would stand a chance. Or so Will hoped that Monday morning, travelling south to Preston.

They switched buses in Preston to head east toward Blackburn and Burnley. They changed buses again in Burnley and arrived in Nelson, three and a half hours after they left Lancaster. It had been a long, tiresome journey, with stop-starts and plenty of confusion on which bus to take and the timetable, but they'd made it one piece.

While before, Will's thoughts had been preoccupied with getting home, now he was here, walking his bike along the pavement alongside Emily's, following a map Tom had borrowed from his grandparents, who were both avid walkers, heading toward Pendle Hill just on the outskirts of town, he suddenly became indifferent to the return journey. To buses, timetables, minutes passing or the cold home that waited for him back in Lancaster. He was, instead, consumed with only one thought and that was the mission at hand.

It was four miles to the village of Barley positioned on the side of the great Pendle Hill and a long trek. Where they could, they cycled but the country lanes were narrow and dangerous and grew gradually steeper and steeper until they could cycle no more. By the time they reached Barley, an idyllic village with its very own Pendle Inn pub, they were exhausted and in need of a break. Stretched out on the lawn of the pub, their bikes discarded, they ate the lunch Emily had made for them, regrouping and recuperating for the next half of their long journey.

The journey to the top of Pendle Hill.

From its base to its summit, it was approximately a two and a half hour climb. One none of them were particularly looking forward to. Upon further research, Emily and Dominic had discovered the legendary nature of Pendle Hill; the draw, the mystic air and the strong belief that at the summit, the power of the Witches could be felt. They'd come this far in the hopes of discovering something, anything, they needed to see it through. Even if it was only based on gut feeling. As Dominic had said yesterday, it hadn't steered them wrong yet.

After lunch, they cycled the last mile to the base of the hill and the start of the official path which wound its way steeply up the side. Leaving the bikes by the snack shack at the car park, the kind woman working there confirming she would keep an eye on them, the eight set off in their most sensible shoes, doused in several layers of sun tan lotion Emily had brought for them all.

It was by no means the largest hill or mountain in England. At just five hundred and fifty seven metres above sea level and just forty five miles from the Lake District where many of those hills and mountains rivalled this one, it was the peculiar hump that stunned and amazed tourists and locals alike for hundreds of years. Set within a relatively smooth landscape of gentle rises and dips into the valley and the higher rugged backdrop of the

Trough of Bowland to the west, Pendle Hill was like a sleeping giant; one who had dropped down for a nap after a particularly long walk. There this giant had stayed and slept for so long the earth had reclaimed him; covering him in smooth grass and sandstone. It was a spectacular sight and somewhat intimidating to the eight teenagers as they started up the path, the hulking hill looming over them, almost challenging them to climb it.

And climb it they did. Until they were sweating and out of breath. The first quarter was a breeze. The second strenuous. The third arduous. But the closer they came to the summit, their achievement stretching out behind them as they rose higher and higher into the sky, that final quarter became easy; enjoyable even. Everytime they looked back, they had climbed higher and the view became increasingly awe-striking. Breath-taking; the air sucked right out of their lungs as they stood mesmerised. For eight teenagers who had each experienced very different lives, to experience this one together, standing at the top of Pendle Hill, the whole world bowing beneath them, it was a feeling none of them could put into words. They were simply silent; mute in their wonderment.

Fortunately for them, it was a clear summer's day and while the sun burned down on the tops of their heads, the cool breeze, which swept through their hair and clothes, kept them content as they stood for a few minutes, catching their breaths and taking in the view; Tom taking photos on his digital camera, never one to miss a photo opportunity. Once ready, Emily led them over to a strange circular collection of stones, at the centre of which stood a triangular white pillar.

“What's that?” Sam asked, the booming nature of his voice lost somewhat on the great gusts of wind blowing across the summit.

“It's the mark of a Bronze Age burial site,” Emily said dismissively as she removed the borrowed book from the library from her backpack.

“Ah, right, erm, anything to do with us and you know, that murderous clown?” Sam said, looking around at the group for even just a grin. No one returned it, too busy watching Emily turning the pages of the book.

There were just a handful of walkers on the summit, many of whom shot daggers in the direction of the teenagers. If only these grown-ups understood. These weren't just any normal kids. These kids were here with a purpose.

“Right, yes, here it is,” Emily said, holding down the pages with a firm hand to the centre as the wind licked at the edges. Tendrils of dark hair, which had escaped the ponytail tied tight at the back of her head, whipped across her face. Will yearned to tuck these aside but kept his hands firmly in the pockets of his ratty old jeans.

“Yes, erm – *some believe that the power of the Pendle Coven derives from Pendle Hill. Its relevance and mystic strength has been witnessed by many, most famously by George Fox, English Dissenter and founder of the Religious Society of Friends, otherwise known as the Quakers of Friends, who experienced a vision at the top of Pendle Hill in 1652. In his autobiography, he wrote – ‘As we travelled, we came near a very great hill, called Pendle*

Hill, and I was moved of the Lord to go up to the top of it; which I did with difficulty, it was so very steep and high. When I was come to the top, I saw the sea bordering upon Lancashire. From the top of this hill the Lord let me see in what places he had a great people to be gathered.”

“What they don’t include is that he was a mad man,” Sam teased to only a few chuckles. Emily shot him a glare which quickly shut him up.

“Pendle continues to be linked to the Quakers blah blah blah,” she flicked a few pages and halted. “– but the importance of Pendle Hill stays at the heart of our Coven. It is tradition to visit the summit once a year on All Hallows’ Eve when the veil between our world and theirs is at its thinnest so that we may ask permission for our power. So we may find balance between this world and the next. But we feel the pull of the hill all year and it’s the main reason why so many of our sisters find themselves drawn to this place. It is sacred. It is special. It is power.”

“Whoa,” Tom mumbled.

“Can you feel it?” Erika said, eyes fluttering closed, her palms pointed flat to the ground, her posture still as she hummed. “This is it.”

“But the book said Halloween,” Elivia spoke up. “Shouldn’t we wait until then?”

“We don’t have time, Lil,” Anna murmured.

“Anna’s right,” Dominic said. “We can’t wait until October. That’ll be over a year since – since –,” he found himself stuttering, struggling to even say his brother’s name as if it was out of reach for him now. He wouldn’t let that happen.

It could have Toby’s body. It could have his blood. But It couldn’t have his name. His very soul. Dominic wouldn’t let It.

“Toby. Since he died...since he was murdered. And in that time, seven children more children have died and an eighth has gone missing. We don’t have that time.”

“All I was saying was –,” Elivia whispered with a bow of her head.

“We understand,” Emily said, “but Dominic’s right. It’s now or never.”

“So what do we do?” Sam asked.

“We could try holding hands?” Will suggested, eyes dancing nervously to Emily who hugged that book close.

“In a circle?” Erika said, hand outstretched to Dominic, the other to Sam.

Both boys took her hands without question and quickly, the rest followed until they were stood in a circle around the pillar, the uneven ground of stones which circled the pillar beneath their feet.

“And close our eyes?” Tom said.

On command, all eight closed their eyes, their grips around one another’s hands becoming tighter, almost as if seeking each other’s strength as they stood on the summit of Pendle Hill and asked for a miracle. For aid. For anything that could teach them how to defeat It.

Erika’s hand in Dominic’s, his hand in Tom’s which held Elivia’s with that same light grip he’d clutched it with down in the tunnels; a defiant, gentle, protective grip which she appreciated as she closed her eyes and clung to Anna’s in her other hand. Anna’s larger hand slotted elegantly against Will’s who thought less about Anna’s palm against his and more about Emily’s. How soft these hands were, how her fingers interlocked so snugly and comfortably with his. Closing his eyes, it took all of his energy to focus on the task at hand. The same strength it took Emily to concentrate less on her insecurities rising like vomit in her throat at just the feel of Will’s hand in hers and more on tapping into whatever power hummed in this great hill. She was kept grounded from floating up into some distant Cloud Nine, where someone like her could ever be with someone like Will, by Sam’s hand grasped in her other. He was also paying less attention to the task at hand; cracking open his right eye to view Erika beside him, her short raven feather hair flying wildly in the wind. A sight far more beautiful than the one around him.

But they must focus. They were running out of time.

All at once, the eight found themselves distracted from their surroundings, from their very bodies as they all pictured It.

The clown.

The crone.

The merman and the hobo.

The statue, the puppet, the road sweeper and the executioner.

The toy monkey.

The crab.

They saw It. Held It. Wished It dead.

They thought of the children. Their mutilated bodies. Their grieving parents; the agony etched into them for eternity.

They saw the ancient streets of Lancaster. The streetlights reflected in the flood water. The howling wind through the cracks in the windows. The rain lashing down the steep streets. The copper dome of Williamson Park seen from miles around. The Gothic roof of the asylum. The woods at the end of Dorrington Road. The castle and court perched high above the River Lune. The abandoned pumping station...

They saw it all in those moments, as if showing the long dead Witches that it was happening again. It was back and they didn't know how to stop It. They needed help. They needed help now or...well, it wasn't a conclusion any of them were ready to consider seriously. If they did, it would mean giving up hope and they hadn't travelled all the way to Pendle Hill and climbed to its summit only to give up now.

And so they stood, hand in hand, encircled around that white triangular pillar on a Bronze Age burial ground, on top of a mystic hill, begging the dead for help. Pleading for aid. For an answer, a thought, a vision, anything. As the wind swept through their damp hair and clothes, the eight teenagers beseeched that their pilgrimage would not be a waste. Two minutes, five minutes, almost ten, locked inside their minds, gripping one another's hands as they waited. And waited.

Nothing happened.

Sam was the first to open his eyes. It felt as though he was waking up from a long sleep. He was dazed but not at all rested. If anything, he was more exhausted as the rest of them proceeded to open their eyes, their faces etched with anguish.

One by one, they released one another's hands, Emily and Will's being the last to let go.

"This is bullshit!" Sam exclaimed.

"Calm down," Erika mumbled.

"No! This is ridiculous! We spent *six fucking hours* getting here and for what?"

"Temper, temper," Anna scoffed.

"Don't!" Sam said, pointing a sharp finger in her direction.

"Sam's right," Dominic grunted. "What was the point of any of this?"

"We had to try," Emily whispered, her voice almost lost on the wind.

"On a gut feeling?" Sam sneered.

"Stop it," Erika snapped, silencing him at once. Arms folded, eyes down on the uneven stones beneath her boots, she shook her head. "This wasn't a mistake. *I know it.*"

"You may feel something but all I feel is cold," Anna said.

"And tired. My feet hurt like a bitch," Tom coughed.

"Will you stop whinging?" Dominic said with narrow eyes, shocking them all.

But before Tom could retaliate, Elivia was speaking.

"I think Erika's right. And Emily. We *did* have to try. What else did we have?"

“Nothing,” Will agreed. “We had nothing.”

“And now?” Sam laughed humourlessly. “We’re out bus fare and a whole fucking day.”

“So?” Erika said. “What else would you have done today? Had a wank? Watched some *South Park*?”

For the first time ever, Sam gave Erika a look of disdain. One that made her close her mouth.

“Erika’s right,” Will said carefully.

“Oh cheers!” Sam exclaimed.

“No! I don’t mean *that*,” he said, glancing bashfully to Emily who cast her gaze to the ground. “What else would we have been doing today? Hanging out at the Burrow Beck? Oh wait! We can’t because they found a dead girl there. Okay, so the train tracks? Well, better not hang out there either just in case It gets us. Oh okay, we’ll just hang out at one of our houses – wait, we can’t do that either because *look at us!*” Will said, positively humming with emotion, silencing all their grumbles for good. Breathlessly, he looked to Emily beside him. She met his gaze this time, smiling proudly as he went on, calmly. “The way I see it, we haven’t lost nowt, alright? So ‘ow about we just enjoy the view and the fact that for the first time in ages, I haven’t felt like I need to look over my shoulder every step.”

He was the first to voice this out loud. This liberation. It had started when they left Lancaster, travelling south to Preston. It felt like passing out from beneath a storm cloud, gradually moving into sunshine and blue skies. The feeling had only grown more apparent the further they got from Lancaster. Stood here on top of Pendle Hill, all eight could feel it. As though they could breathe again. The fear they all lived in every single day, be that their home lives or the oppressive presence of It stalking them like prey, had left them. It wasn’t until now did they finally realise.

Though they may not have found what they’d wanted at Pendle Hill, they had found some comfort. A respite. That had to count for something. A port in a storm was salvation to struggling sailors. Pendle Hill was their port.

And little did they know then, it would also be their lighthouse.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Malkin Tower

Tom wanted to visit the reservoirs to take photos. While some of the group had complained about getting home, all in low spirits over their wasted journey, Tom had managed to persuade them to give him half an hour down at the reservoirs just outside of Barley. It was only a ten minute bike ride down the steep hill from the snack shack to the two reservoirs. No one was entirely sure why Tom wanted to photograph these manmade lakes but none of them could deny the beautiful view of Pendle Hill looming over them from this spot.

They sat in the meadow grass while they waited, some watching Tom climbing into awkward angles for the best shots, some talking; Emily reading passages of the library book to Will. None of them were paying attention when Tom lowered his camera from his face and pulled an expression of curiosity. Raising the camera again, he peered through the view finder and zoomed on the peculiar rock formation he'd spotted in the landscape. Upon closer inspection, Tom came to the astounding conclusion that what he was looking at were ruins.

"Hey guys?" he called. When no one replied, Emily still reading from her book, he called again. "Oi, cretins – look at this."

Dominic joined him first; staring down Tom's outstretched arm and finger to where he pointed across the reservoir and into the next field.

"Do you see that?" Tom asked.

"Yeah – it looks like ruins."

"But of what? There aren't any castles around here. Angie or Mal would've mentioned that," Tom said, reaching into his backpack for his map.

Soon, the rest of the group were joining him to take it in turns to view the ruins through the view finder of his camera. Tom scoured the area of the map and found no known ruins. Was it just a collection of stones? Or was it something more?

"Let's go look," Sam said, cigarette smoking trailing up the side of his face from where the white stick was bit between his front teeth. Without another word, he strode off.

Erika followed and quickly, the rest joined, leaving their bikes on the bank of the reservoir and making their way up and around to the other side, pacing through the meadow with a new mission in mind. A mission to explore. After all, they were only teenagers and hadn't had the chance to be just that in a long time. If ever for a few of them.

As they approached, their assumptions were proved correct. The collection of rocks was in fact ruins. Of what, they didn't understand until they were stood before it.

"It's a house," Emily gasped.

Or rather what was left of a house. A stone, medieval dwelling perhaps, without a roof and crumbling down into the earth with each gust of wind. Each wall was dry stone, the stones packed tightly together, the cracks filled with earth for mortar. It was a building style still used in this part of the country by farmers but none of them had ever seen a house made this way. It looked haphazard and draughty, especially since so much of it had eroded.

Flicking his cigarette aside, Sam went to climb inside over the crumbling front wall where it was lowest when Will stopped him.

"What's the matter?" Sam said, searching all their faces.

"It could collapse right on top of you, you idiot," Will tutted.

"It's stood this long," Sam said, shrugging off Will's firm hand and carefully climbing inside where the ground was boggy from a recent rainfall. "Not bad, but cold in the winter mind," he smirked, causing a few of them to titter. "Who do you think lived here?"

"Well, they do say the Pendle Witches had a house on this hill," Emily said.

This stopped Tom and Erika in their tracks from where they'd been about to climb in after Sam, who had come to a halt in the centre of the ruins, staring at Emily.

"You didn't mention this before?" Elivia said.

"I didn't think it was relevant. Their house, if there even was one, is probably long gone," Emily said quickly.

Sam made a grunting noise and threw open his arms, hinting to the ruins.

Emily tutted. "This could be anyone's house. There's no proof this is Malkin Tower."

"Still worth investigating," Erika said, climbing over the dry stone wall and onto the boggy ground.

After taking a few photos, Tom followed along with Dominic and Anna. Emily, Elivia and Will stayed on the outside.

"But what if it *is* their house," Elivia said in no more than a whisper. "Wouldn't this be like, you know, *desecration*."

"They're dead," Sam snorted.

"Exactly," Elivia replied, wrapping her skinny arms around herself as a particularly chilly breeze blew across them all.

“Elivia’s right. This feels wrong, no matter whose house it is,” Emily said strictly.

“Yeah and it’s dangerous,” Will added, receiving a few jeers in reply from the others inside the ruins who were busy investigating the walls and the hollows between the dry stone.

Poking his finger into a particularly large crevice, Sam came back with more than he bargained for. In his palm was not a strange light stone as he’d originally thought, but a skull.

He released a girlish scream, tossing the skull to the ground where it sat beside a murky puddle of rainwater. Upon noticing his friends shooting him amused grins, he gave a deeper, more masculine groan of disgust if only to make himself feel better as Erika crouched down to investigate the skull without any revulsion at all.

Pinching it carefully between her thumb and forefinger, she lifted it up to inspect.

“It looks like a cat’s skull,” she said.

“Seen a lot of those?” Sam teased.

“Once,” she said, focus staying on the skull in her hand.

Although Sam and Anna exchanged a confused and damn right disgusted expression, no one spoke as Dominic crouched with Erika and she passed it to him.

“You’re right. It looks just like Mr Tibbles.”

“Who’s Mr Tibbles?” Tom frowned.

“Our neighbour’s cat when me and E lived in Skerton,” Dominic replied. “Went out one night, never came back. The owner found its skeleton about a year later positioned outside her back gate, laid perfectly as if positioned that way. She was devastated and so upset they had to cart her off in an ambulance. Before her husband disposed of it, me and Erika went and had a look.”

“What a nice normal thing for kids to do,” Sam grunted.

“We’re not normal,” Erika said, flashing him an impish grin.

“Looked just like this,” Dominic said, rising up and holding it up for them all to see.

“What was it doing in a hole in the wall?” Anna asked.

“Well, if this was a witch’s house,” Emily piped up, still beyond the front wall of the ruin, “it could have been put there for a purpose.”

“To scare the shit out of people?” Sam joked.

“No, as protection,” Emily said. “It says in this book that witches often used the remains of their deceased cats, their companions, to form a ward around their homesteads.”

“Delightful,” Tom mumbled.

“Cats are very important to witches,” Emily said, her focus dancing to Will who was thinking of Bruce, his friendly feline companion who’d been living with him for over a week now.

Every morning, he let him out and every night, Will carried Bruce inside and up to bed. It was harmonious life for the both of them and company that Will hadn’t even known he needed.

“So *this* could be the Pendle Witches house?” Will asked.

“I mean, it’s starting to look like it,” Emily said with a twist of her mouth. “But I can’t say for certain.”

“Malkin Tower?” Erika asked, to which Emily nodded. “The home of the Matriarch, Lady Demdike. It was here they were arrested right?” Emily gave another nod. “*This* is it.”

“This is what?” Anna questioned.

“It’s not Pendle Hill. It’s here. Tom, there’s a reason you saw these ruins. Why we went to the reservoir at all. *This* is why we came here!” Erika said, taking the cat skull from Dominic and placing it carefully back into crevice of the dry stone wall where Sam had found it. Turning back, she held out her hands once again. “We have to do it here.”

“I’m not holding your hand after you touched that thing,” Sam grumbled.

“Stop being a pussy, Robinson,” Anna said, grabbing his hand this time as Erika took his other. He squirmed a bit, receiving a kick to the behind from both girls to shut him up.

Quickly, Will, Emily and Elivia joined them and the eight were once again bound hand to hand, eyes closed and focused. This time, they didn’t think about one another – not Emily’s hand or Will’s, or Erika’s raven feather hair or Elivia’s bird like fingers or even how sweaty Sam’s palm had become in Erika’s – but just It.

The clown. The children. The city.

The flood. The storm. Tragedy after tragedy all forgotten.

They considered time itself as they felt themselves leave their bodies and drift into fathomless darkness.

And then, there was light. Bright, blinding light as a star fell to earth.

But this was no star. It was a ball of flames and its force shook the world. Its impact as it crashed into the rock of the earth sent a shock wave across the terrain, sending rubble and debris up into the atmosphere in a great mushroom cloud. And then, all was silent.

As if the very world was holding its breath as smoke billowed across the landscape, lightning crossing in the purple haze of thunder clouds above.

It occurred to the eight then they were no longer standing in the boggy ground in the ruins of what they believed to be Malkin Tower, once home to the infamous Pendle Witches, in the foothills of Pendle Hill, but rather somewhere more familiar. Or at least, what *felt* familiar for it didn't *look* familiar; its landscape a rocky jagged hellish world full of fire and burning, smoke suffocating them and making them choke. But still, they didn't let go of each other's hands as they watched the thick fog of acrid smoke begin to clear. As ancient trees burning like matches were revealed and the world turned to darkness all around them.

As their eyes landed on the fallen star.

On the once burning mass that had pierced the atmosphere of their reality now sat like a hunched metal insect in the scorched soil of what they knew to be Lancaster, but was then, whenever this was – two million, eight million, ten million years ago – just the rugged countryside of the wild North West. It looked misplaced. Odd. Incomprehensible. Like a single shoe on the motorway, its presence posed more questions and an unmistakable feeling of dread and confusion.

None of them moved. None of them spoke in this dusty haze as the wind gushed around them and their vision of the metal craft – *a spacecraft* – was gradually buried beneath earth and time. As the trees regrew, grass returned and the skies clear. As time rushed forwards, dragging them with it; stomachs churning, heads spinning and the only sturdy thing in their reality their hands gripping one another. Their only fear that if they let go, they too would be lost to time.

Slowly, they witnessed the rise and fall of humans; conquerors, armies, buildings rising up and falling down around them. And inexplicable experience that would scare a grown -up to death; too lost to imagination and the dream world of a child to be able to handle what they witnessed. But not these teenagers. On the cusp of adulthood, they still held that power within each of them as they watched the world decompose with the waste of humans. Trees cut down, stone houses built and their corpses burnt at hearths, the only thing left just grey smoke billowing out of chimneys.

On and on it went, a flash in time like the snap of strobe lights making the group of teenagers weary and nauseous. That was until all came to a halt.

Like a fairground ride stopping suddenly, they stumbled and grasped onto each other for strength as their heads spun. But there wasn't time to grasp where or rather, *when* they were. They must focus on the scene before them, one of great significance.

One all of them knew mattered as they watched a well-built young man walking out of the forest surrounding them with something cradled in his arms. The closer he came, the more the teenagers realised what was in his grasp. It was what his village folk saw too. What frightened them, made them scream and cry in anguish and fear.

A child. Or what was left of this small young soul.

Mutilated. Desecrated. Dead.

And the group knew, without needing to be told, what was responsible. Evidently, so did the village folk for soon, a woman in robes appeared. Grey frail hair trailed across her hunched shoulders and while her face was ugly, she only radiated goodness as she stroked the head of the child in the weeping man's arms and laid a hand across her chest. There was pain in her striking green eyes as she turned to the village folk all gathered on that starry night, smoke puffing from the chimneys of their modest homesteads.

But there was also anger. Defiant fury as she gathered the force of several people from the crowd to join her as they headed into the woods.

The teenagers moved with them as if watching through a television screen. They viewed as the matriarch of this coven, a crone of sorts, stood in the centre of the men and women, old and young, all hand in hand just as the group of eight were hundreds of years later. She raised a sharp looking knife with a curved tip and in the dim moonlight which shone down upon them, she dragged the tip of the blade across her palm, the blood running down her forearm, almost black in this light. Then, she passed the blade to the person nearest, thus continuing this strange ritual until all of the circled members were bleeding.

Once every bleeding palm was returned to one another, a humming began. The teenagers couldn't be sure whether the sound was coming from the people in the circle or from the very earth beneath their feet. Only that it grew louder, rumbling the ground, shuddering in the trees, the forest otherwise silent of all nightly noise until a piercing shriek sounded louder than the humming. It was at this point, the humming became intense as if battling against the shriek from deep within the darkness. At the same time, the crone began to chant in a deep guttural voice. Her words were unclear, another language entirely. One not known to even Emily who had studied Latin. This was old, these were the words of a forgotten language entirely but the translation didn't matter.

The group of teenagers knew. They understood without being told. This was what the Witches had done.

The shriek was It and whatever they were doing, It didn't like it. Whatever power they possessed, whatever spell they were casting, It was determined to fight against it. But It was no match for this Coven. Not against their belief, their power which cast back the shriek, pushing Its energy away. Even as the teenagers stood there in this vision, this flashback, this peek in time, they felt Its energy fading from this place; Its tendrils being ripped from the earth and thrown back, caught behind a wall, entrapped within a cage. The Witches had done this. And, as time began to move all over again and the forest and its Coven disappeared, it became clear that they had done it time and time again.

To keep their people safe. Mankind. They defended humans from It. They had stood like a shield for centuries. For hundreds of years they were the only thing keeping It from eating. Keeping It from feasting on flesh and souls. It was they and then...

They were back in Malkin Tower, only it wasn't the ruins they had found but a house. A home made of dry stone walls and wooden creaky floorboards. The wind howled

throughout the house on the hill as dark silhouettes gathered around a hearth. Twelve in total, men and women, akin to the original Coven the group had seen previously. They were preparing for something, their faces etched with concern and anxiety. The oldest, Lady Demdike, the crone with silver hair and an ancient wisdom in her green eyes, moved into the firelight.

There in her hand was that knife. The curved dagger. One she carefully wrapped in muslin and tucked into the folds of her thick robe. One the teenagers doubted was ever used again.

At once, the heavy door to Malkin Tower burst in. What followed was a blur of bodies all bundling against once another; screams and shouts, commands and orders as the struggle ensued. Village people and official looking men alike grappled with the members of the Coven in that small ground floor room of Malkin Tower, just the flickering light of the hearth to illuminate the spectacle.

Like the fire, these Witches would also die and the truth of legacy, of their intention that night in April in 1612 would die with them.

In a blink, the teenagers were no longer encased within the warmth and chaos of Malkin Tower, but stood atop a hill. The wind, just as it had at the top of Pendle, blew in great chilly gusts through their hair and clothes which looked out of place there among so many 17th century dressed spectators that had turned out to witness the hanging of the Pendle Witches.

Marched up to the horse drawn cart positioned beneath ten short nooses were the accused Witches; wrists bound, their skin drawn and yellowy from their malnourishment and poor prison conditions. They stumbled rather than walked, barely able to hold themselves up as they climbed onto the cart to the sound of cheers and hollers for their death. Chins high to the wind and the sound of people calling for their deaths atop Gallows Hill that morning in August, the ten stood facing out toward Morecambe Bay and beyond.

It would be their final sight.

Lady Demdike was not one of them, having already died in prison, well into her eighties and blind, heartbroken by the sight of her children, her friends, her Coven imprisoned and persecuted. The child, Jennet Device, Lady Demdike's own grandchild, was the one to stand against them. The persuasion of It whispered into her ear; coerced to speak against her Coven, to agree with the judges and other accusers, that her family, her own mother and grandmother, were not only Witches but cursers – *murderers*. Betrayal of the deepest kind.

But it wasn't that which made the Witches angry that day.

It wasn't Jennet's statement nor their peers who longed to see them suffocate to death, feet dangling high above the ground. But rather the sight of It.

Standing within the window of the stone folly which had once sat upon this hill, like a king in Its castle. Proud, triumphant, Its form that of anyone else stood there that day. Only the Witches knew. Knew that It had finally beaten them.

It would return to Lancaster. Its power and appetite would devour souls once again and there was nothing they could do to stop It. No one left to shield against It.

The end of the Pendle Coven brought about by ten noose knots.

As the horse moved forwards, the cart shifted out from underneath their feet, leaving them hanging, hands bound and necks swollen as they took their last breaths staring into the eyes of It knowing they had failed.

Not a sound. Not a whimper. Only close friends dared pull on their feet to hasten their long, agonising deaths. Yet still, the Witches didn't fight. Didn't make a peep as they drew their last breaths and made one last promise.

It was not over. For as long as there was a power against, It would meet Its end. In order for It to exist at all, there must be a balancing energy. And with that, those eight teenagers finally understood.

It was up to them. They, the children of this city, held the power now and they would bring about Its demise once and for all.