

DREAMCATCHERS

AFTER DARKNESS LIGHT



TOM SAREGA

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PART ONE: STRANGE TIMES

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, 3rd September, 2012

109 Days To Go

Ronnie couldn't remember the exact month he started having his nightmares only that it was after the killing began and before his Dad had gone to war. Nights blurred into days, days into nights and sleep deprivation had muddled his mind. Fuddled his mind. Damn, he couldn't think straight anymore.

He lay down in his bed, staring at the ceiling, like a corpse with its eyes wide open. He wondered if this was how Clifford Montgomery had looked underneath the lid at his funeral service. His mother had told him not to go but he had snuck in anyway, just to get a peek – to see what the fuss was about. He overheard the chatterboxes outside the church telling each other with more and more horror how poor Mr. Montgomery had been walking his dog behind the church cemetery, where it had mauled him to death. They couldn't believe it, they said, as his dog Spike was ever so docile and would never turn on him like that. The news from Tom Davies, the coroner, was the worst of all. The funeral would be a closed casket service because the raging animal had near torn through Clifford's neck; his head was hanging under his armpit when they brought him in. What confused Tom Davies, however, was why the doting pet had then clawed into Mr. Montgomery's chest and ripped out his heart.

The animal was shot immediately.

Ronnie vacantly heard his mother bawling at him to get up this instant or he would be late for school.

CHAPTER TWO

Ronnie's mum buzzed around her kitchen like an agitated fly. Her face was blotchy and stressed and her brow creased as she multitasked, buttering Ronnie's sandwiches and crumpling a pile of his clothes into the washing machine. She jumped, startled, as she heard the metal snap of her letterbox spring back into place and scurried into her hallway. She fingered through the morning mail. One was from her husband. She gingerly placed it at the front of the clutch of letters and would open it later.

"Come on! Let's go. Otherwise you'll be late for school." She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled up the stairs. Ronnie jumped down two at a time and rubbed his purple-ringed, doe-like eyes. He stretched his arms high above his head and yawned deep and long. A hideous, recurring nightmare had prevented him from sleeping. He had lain rigid on his bed the entire night as a sickening, primeval animal had bayed and roared after him in his mind, its sharp incisor teeth gnashing after him and its jowls dripping acidic saliva, burning his face. He had been too petrified even to close his eyes. "Put your school clothes on and let's get going. I've got to get to the florists early you know, I've got a big order coming in. Just wait till I tell your father!" She wagged a frustrated finger at her son.

Stationed in Afghanistan, Ronnie's father was an Army Sergeant serving his country with pride. By late morning, his mother would open the letter and all would be well with the world, as he would write that he was safe.

Ronnie jumped into his pressed, flannel grey St. Monedel's school trousers that his mother had hung up for him, slung on his blazer, wrapped his striped navy and maroon tie around his shirt collar and wedged his heels into the backs of his shoes. He shuffled through the front door and his mother slammed it behind them. Minutes later, they were on their way to school, with Ronnie's

mother driving erratically as she threw furtive, worried glances at her son. He was looking ever so tired lately.

Floretta Rough dearly wanted Ronnie to attend a secondary school where he would flourish. He was an intelligent but stubborn boy so she decided it best that he went to a school where achievement and a strong work ethic were encouraged. Her thoughts first turned to the nearest Academy with a decent reputation for schooling, a half-an-hour drive from the family home. Upon meeting its gruff and discourteous staff, however, she decided to look elsewhere.

Thankfully, the answer lay closer to home. She had attended an open day at the local St. Monedel's school and was greeted politely by its engaging music teacher, Mr. Snowdon, a wiry man who buzzed with infectious enthusiasm. She spoke to neighbours and friends from the surrounding villages about the school and many recommended it. They spoke of smart uniforms and a traditional, disciplined approach to schooling; exactly what Ronnie needed.

If there was one thing that Floretta Rough hankered after herself, it was family stability. Before his posting abroad, her husband's job had often taken the family around England and Ronnie, who was an only child, had become independent at a young age. But it was unfair, she would fret, for a boy on the cusp of his teenage years to keep moving. The family needed to settle somewhere and after living in Monedel for over a year, she felt quite at home. She had been lucky enough to secure a job as a florist and finally felt like life was working for her.

She had smiled as Mr. Snowdon recounted the history of St. Monedel's, waving his arms as if he was conducting an orchestra. Founded as a monastery in 697AD, it had evolved into a church and then, in the last few centuries, a school. It was a tall building, constructed with thousands of dark flint stones and supported by wide, sturdy buttresses. Leaded, latticed windows dotted its walls and its slated roof stretched skywards. It was a large and impressive structure, hinting at its historical importance to the town.

The house-proud Mrs. Rough, however, noticed a few areas of the school that warranted some upkeep - a jaded school sign hanging limply from its hinges and a schoolyard riddled with potholes

and surrounded by crumbling walls. St. Monedel's was old, she was reassured, and every year there was some kind of maintenance. Floretta's gold Honda Civic weaved through school run traffic and rolled up to the gates. Inside of the car, Ronnie's mother corrected her son's mess of a tie and brushed his lank brown fringe into a manner she considered more fitting for a new boy's first day at secondary school, much to Ronnie's embarrassment.

"Oh Ronnie you look awful, you're half-asleep! Now that's not going to impress the teachers is it? And on such an important day?" She harped in an anxious, high-pitched tone. "Now go on in there, smarten up and show them how good you are."

"Sorry mum, I had a nightmare," Ronnie mumbled sheepishly.

As he was soon to find out, he wasn't the only one.

CHAPTER THREE

Ronnie's eyeballs throbbed with tiredness. His head down with his long hair flopping around his temples, he scraped his shoes along the ground as he ambled into the schoolyard, stumbling through a pothole. He climbed the steps into the assembly hall next to the main school building. Inside it was chaos, with first-year pupils fidgeting nervously at the periphery while elder, more confident students pushed and shoved in a melee.

Mr. Smedley, the school's heavily bearded, barrel-chested science teacher restored order in a strikingly straightforward manner. "Big 'uns at the back! Littl'uns at the front," his gruff, angry voice growled across the hall. The misbehaving students simmered down without looking at him, as his voice was even more intimidating than his bear-like figure.

"Adams?" Mr. Smedley yelled as he began registration.

"Yes sir," squeaked a frightened pupil.

"Burton?"

"Yes sir."

"Boxer?"

"Nope." Billy Boxer sniggered. Mr. Smedley's eyes bulged from their sockets at the disobedient boy as his friends around him erupted in laughter.

"Quiet!" Mr. Smedley leant over and bellowed into his ears, wiping the smirk instantly from his face.

Ronnie craned his neck forward to see who was causing the trouble and was gladdened, instead, to spot one of his friends, Tommy Bailey.

Ronnie and Tommy knew each other from their primary school in Hickleston, a neighbouring village to Monedel. They had cemented their friendship the previous spring, when Tommy saved Ronnie from serious injury after he crashed into a bike shed chasing a football, and brought the flimsy, rusting structure down. The overweight Tommy wobbled over just in time and was strong enough to hold the collapsing shed, allowing Ronnie to scramble away on his hands and knees. Now they were at Monedel together.

With the morning registration over, Mr. Snowdon led a discordant rendition of “All things bright and beautiful” by teachers and pupils alike. The school bell ended the torture and the new school year had begun.

CHAPTER FOUR

Frederic Fontaine was always thinking two steps ahead. He had a natural ability to be organised and logical. The afternoon before his first day at secondary school, he was knelt over a neatly unfolded map on the floor of the conservatory at home, a short pencil tucked under his wiry hair, plotting a drive-in route to school for his mother the next day.

“You know I don’t know where you get it from.” His mother, Marjorie Fontaine, called cheerily in from the kitchen, wearing pink marigolds and accidentally flicking water at him with a dish brush.

“From ‘is father ‘o course,” Gerald Fontaine’s Sunday newspaper rustled as he chuckled heartily.

Bald, ruddy-faced and lithe, Freddie’s father had risen to Chief Engineer at The Monedel Manufacturing Corporation, the largest employer in Monedel and had been its loyal servant for almost thirty years. With his index finger wagging in front of his nose, he would put his modest success down to “sheer bloody hard work” and would often remind Freddie, the rest of the family, or, in fact, anyone who would listen about how to get on in life.

Gerald Fontaine kept a keen eye on his children’s education. He felt that it was as much his responsibility as a parent to educate his children as the schools to which he sent them. He was delighted, then, when Freddie began to show an interest in engineering and how things worked. Freddie had shown a real gift for numbers and would often follow him into the garden shed to help him out with building things – just to find out how they were made.

“That boy’s gonna’ be better ‘an me someday,” he would often whisper to his wife as they retreated to bed after the ten o’clock news.

“You should be telling him, not me,” Marjorie, who was by far the most sensitive of the couple, would reply.

Freddie’s older brother and sister, both of whom looked like their mother, with soft, heart-shaped faces, had already left home. His older brother ran his own flying school close to Monedel while his sister had headed straight for the bright lights of London to pursue a legal career. Freddie, meanwhile, had inherited his father’s genes. He was thin, with dark brown eyes and a slightly rouge complexion but his most obvious feature was a full head of black, curly hair as entangled as a birds nest. “You should enjoy it son,” Mr. Fontaine would chuckle, “if you’re anything like me, you won’t keep it for long.”

Freddie’s parents were a generation older than those of his friends, but they were still young at heart, especially his father, who was fond of practical jokes. Freddie’s most vivid infant memory was of his father’s return from work one summer lunchtime, unknown to his mother, via a joke shop. He had purchased a large, plastic tarantula with a bulbous abdomen, fat hairy legs and fluorescent green eyes and left it crawling on the kitchen floor. He had split his sides laughing when Marjorie had walked in to make the children some lunch, let out a terrified, shrill scream and burst past her young son through the conservatory, out onto the patio and up the garden. Unfortunately for Freddie, his mother’s reaction branded his psyche. Ever since that moment, Freddie had learnt to be intensely afraid of spiders, just like his mother. On the eve of his first day at secondary school, Freddie was dreaming of a family holiday in Greece. What he didn’t expect to appear, however, were spiders – lots and lots of spiders.....

.....It was early morning in Greece. The sun was already burning hot and yellow in a cloudless blue sky, not that Freddie would have known, as he was snug and comfortable in his soft bed. His mother loved the relaxed Mediterranean lifestyle and was sure that she would be able to convince Freddie’s father to move there one day but for now, a two-week holiday would suffice. His mother had booked the four-star Landmark Hotel but as it was the height of the school holidays, the only available apartment had been on the 22nd floor.

Marjorie Fontaine skipped out of bed early and packed a small bag of bronzing creams. Within ten minutes, she was down at the pool in her two-piece bikini and sunglasses, beating the other tourists to the sun loungers. His father followed shortly afterwards in small swimming trunks and a pair of blue goggles. He wanted to swim fifty laps of the pool before the gaggle of families and children arrived. Success only came with discipline and that applied as much to his lithe physique as it did to his career.

“See if you can make it down for breakfast sleepyhead,” his father called into his bedroom on his way to the hotel lift.

Freddie woke bleary eyed an hour later. He had already missed breakfast. He climbed out of bed, ambled to the bathroom, splashed water over his face and his mass of curly hair, slipped on a clean white t-shirt and pair of red shorts and went to forage for something to eat in his hotel room. At no point did it seem amiss to him that he would find a box of Weetabix and a single pint of milk – which just happened to be his favourite breakfast cereal. His normally sharp brain did not understand that they should not have been there. His parents had not shopped for food as they were on a package holiday.

Freddie grabbed the yellow cereal box. It was already open. He dipped in his right hand to grab a couple of fibre blocks that he was going to liberally coat with sugar and afterwards slurp the sweetened milk.

Instead, his mind swam.

In his hand was a black, hairy spider whose pulsing abdomen filled his palm. His mouth turned sticky and sour with fear. His legs wobbled beneath him as he stared at the red-striped spider for a fatal second. Freddie’s lips wrapped tight around his gums as its fangs plunged deep into his wrist.

Freddie could only think of needles; hot, venom-laced needles thrusting through his skin and into his bloodstream. He warbled frightened as he instinctively hurled the arachnid at the wall. He staggered into the living room, bumping into the hotel T.V. along the way. His cells were popping,

bubbling, boiling inside of him. The arachnid scratched its hairy legs over the marble floor after him.

Freddie had to get out. He was hallucinating. The poison was coursing through his veins, stripping his insides like acid. With every heartbeat, he felt an explosion of pain. He made for the apartment door. Hundreds of smaller spiders swarmed from under and around the doorframe, their fangs snapping after him in a malicious, clicking chorus.

Freddie twisted, his eyes searching frantically for the hotel balcony. It was the only way out. There were hundreds, thousands of them, spreading like a virus across the room. He limped towards the glass balcony doors. The spider's bite was paralysing his limbs, interrupting his brain signals to his body. He dragged his dead left leg behind him. He was half-way there, he would have to jump.

Freddie collapsed in the middle of the living room floor, his chest rapidly rising and falling. His breathing shallow, armies of arachnids scuttled from under the living room sofa and chairs towards him. He had lost all motor function. He could not close his eyelids. The spiders itched along his legs, up his shorts and under his T-shirt. The large, hand-sized, red-striped spider danced imperiously through Freddie mass of wiry, curly hair, its pads tapping one by one onto his forehead, down towards the bridge of his nose. It lifted its pulsing body and its quivering fangs up into the air and plunged deep into the whites of his eyeballs.

Freddie's breathing quickened and stopped.

An hour later, his mother and father returned from beside the pool. Marjorie Fontaine twisted the handle of the apartment door as they giggled like newlyweds. When he looked into the room, his father dropped his bottle of beer to the ground in shock, its liquid soaking a brown, urine-like stain into the carpet.

Freddie's body was cocooned in spiders' webs. His eyes had been eaten and in their place were black arachnid abdomens. His tongue was black and striped red. Hundreds of spiders were feasting upon his dead, limp body, creeping in and out of his nose, mouth and ears.

Marjorie Fontaine opened her mouth wide and curdled the skin-crawling roar that had been stalking Freddie for months.

CHAPTER FIVE

Freddie's first hour at St. Monedel's was tough. His eyelids were as heavy as suitcases and he struggled to keep them open. His pores were dancing an itchy jitterbug across his pale and clammy skin. All he wanted to do was sleep, but he was far too afraid for that; please, anything but that. He wrestled with his tiredness through assembly and until 10am, when he began to feel a little better. He bumped into a spare desk and sat himself down as the next lesson began.

"Good morning," chirped Miss Seymour as she breezed into the drab, yellow first-year classroom. Miss Seymour was a young teacher, in her early twenties, with a petite figure. She was smartly dressed in a long, mauve, flowing skirt and a pastel pink sweater. Her auburn hair was tied behind her head.

"Good morning ma'am," some of the kids replied.

"I'm Miss Seymour and I'm your maths teacher for the year," she introduced herself as she walked to the front of the classroom and scribbled her name in chalk on the blackboard. "Now I know that it's your first day at St. Monedel's, so I thought I'd let you know that it's also my first day," her soft voice wavered slightly, "and you are my first class, so you'll have to bear with me." She turned to her teacher's desk and scanned her lesson plan to see which item she should cover next. "Right, we've been asked to assess your levels of knowledge at the beginning of the year, so we've got a little maths test for you. If you will please pass these question sheets to each other."

The class groaned. Freddie, who was sitting next to Ronnie, figured that it might stimulate his stagnant, throbbing brain. "We're going to do a timed test with no calculators," Miss Seymour elaborated as the pupils passed out the sheets amongst each other, "if you'd like to start, you've got five minutes to answer as many questions as you can."

Ronnie had been hoping for an easy introduction to life at secondary school. Upon reading the paper, however, he realised that the test was going to present a stiffer challenge than expected: difficult questions such as nineteen times nineteen, twenty-five times twenty-five, thirty-three times thirty-three, long division and fractions. Freddie, next to Ronnie, removed a small pencil from behind his ear and ploughed through the assignment. Ronnie's question paper, meanwhile, was blurring in front of his eyes because of his tiredness. The five minutes deadline passed and Ronnie had only completed half of the questions.

Miss Seymour turned to the blackboard and chalked up the answers to the difficult calculations. "If you'd like to pass your answers to the person next to you to mark, we'll see how you did."

"I wasn't ready for that," Ronnie chuckled to Freddie, wondering how he had fared.

"It wasn't so bad," replied Freddie, his tired eyes blinking at the chalkboard as he marked Ronnie's paper. "How did I do?"

"You got them all right," laughed Ronnie and whistled in recognition of his talent. "That's pretty impressive. I'm Ronnie by the way, Ronnie Rough." Ronnie held out a hand. Freddie shook it.

"Thank you. Freddie, Freddie Fontaine."

"What's three hundred and forty times two hundred and fifty one?" Ronnie asked once the lesson had finished and the class was aware of the tough curriculum that lay ahead. He tapped the numbers into his calculator.

"Eighty five thousand three hundred and forty," responded Freddie after five seconds pause for calculation. Ronnie was still gawping when the next teacher entered the classroom.

CHAPTER SIX

“So what have you two been up to then my dears?” Grace and Kate Goody’s grandmother asked in a creaky voice. It was a Sunday, and the well-to-do Mrs. Goody always took her daughters to visit their grandma, every Sunday, without fail.

Kate opened her mouth to reply but her non-identical twin sister interrupted before she had a chance to speak. That was just like Grace, vying for attention. “And then I went into town to buy some new spikes, and then I went training,” Grace launched a barrage of sentences at her hard-of-hearing grandma.

“Please slow down dearie, my ears aren’t what they used to be.”

“The girls are starting at a new school tomorrow Mum, St. Monedel’s,” said Mrs. Goody, in between chewing one of her mother’s home-baked cakes.

“Oh, that’ll be nice,” replied their grandma, fiddling with her hearing aid. “Your grandfather, bless his soul, went there, left barely a year or two older than you two mind. And what are you doing this evening?”

“Training again, at Cromer’s Corner Athletics Club,” blurted Grace, her eyes lighting up as quick as the firing of a starter’s pistol. Kate relaxed back into her chair; her grandma would have to wait until next week to find out what *she* was up to.

“Oh yes, Grace dear,” the old lady wrinkled a smile at her enthusiasm, “you’re going to be the Olympic sprint champion.”

“I will be one day grandma.”

Grace was good to her word, however. She loved sprinting along a track, something about it made her feel alive and free. She returned home from training and went to bed immediately, hoping that she wouldn’t be too tired for lessons the next day. Try as she might, however, she could not

stop her nightmare from invading her mind. She was crouched behind the line at the beginning of a race, one she desperately did not want to win....

“On your marks.”

Assume the position, Grace thought. One leg behind her, the knee firmly on the ground, the other in front, the knee tucked tight beneath the chin.

“Get set,” the starter bellowed. The back of her neck tingled and her hairs stood on end as she anticipated the loud crack of the pistol and the moment where she would spring from her toes and fly down the track. She lifted her taut frame, her nails clawing into the grass, ready to pounce forward like a leopard.

“Go!” Her arms and legs were a blur of muscular but elegant effort. Competitors trailed in her slipstream as she glided like a skater across the grass. Victory was certain. Grace Goody would win the St. Monedel Sports Day one hundred metre sprint race. Her new friends would clamour around her wanting to share in her victory.

She ducked to the line, ready to break the tape and raise her arms aloft in triumph. But she could not cross it. She could move neither forwards nor backwards. She was running on the spot, striding just as wide, and pumping her arms just as hard as before. She looked down and her stomach cramped tight at what she saw; her spikes were scraping the turf up beneath her.

She lifted her arms like a mime artist against an invisible wall. She pushed and she strained, her cheeks puffing red. Mud splattered against her calves as her feet spewed out soil behind her ankles. Her legs rotated dirt. She was sprinting herself into a brown, soggy ditch.

Horror spun her legs faster. Her cramp rose to her chest as sheer, unadulterated panic gripped and twisted the air out of her lungs. Her limbs were flailing. Gurgled screams mixed with desperate, grasping breaths. Pure terror dragged her mouth across her face as she relinquished all control over her body. Dirt slipped around her waist as her knees scraped bloody against the ditch.

The earth rose. The ground crumbled onto her, around her chest, her armpits, her neck. She stretched her arms towards the light, still scraping and grazing against the mud. It spilled into her ears, her eyes, and her mouth.

Finally, she uttered a muffled groan.

Then there was darkness; congealed, wet darkness, and a last gasp for air.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Crash!

Mrs. Worley, St. Monedel's geography teacher, thrust into the classroom with such power that the doors left handle-prints in the walls behind them. Ronnie's jaw snapped shut as he watched her rock angrily to the blackboard to scratch her name in chalk. Mrs. Worley was a plump woman dressed in plain, ill-fitting clothes and frumpy flat shoes, with greying, curly hair and thick-lens spectacles.

"I," she trumpeted, "am Mrs. Worley, your Geography teacher this year, and before we start, let's lay down a few rules about what I expect from my students," she said haughtily. Mrs. Worley was an old fashioned, battle-hardened teacher who believed in strict discipline. She reeled off a code of conduct that she demanded her students abide by and presented them with a homework timetable for the entire term.

"Right, now that we know where we stand, let's sort the wheat from the chaff shall we? Let's see who I should be bothered about teaching this year. What is the capital of Russia?"

The class remained silent. Grace could feel the limelight beckoning. Sitting at the front of the class, she shot her arm up in the air, hoping to answer the question. Mrs. Worley's spectacles nodded towards her for an answer.

"Moscow," she said proudly.

"Very good," replied Mrs. Worley, "and your name is?"

"Grace Goody ma'am," responded Grace politely.

"Good, good," she hummed, "what is the capital of China?" Mrs. Worley looked around for another volunteer. Most of the pupils avoided her hawk like gaze. Grace raised her arm. "Yes Grace?"

“Beijing, ma’am.”

“Very good again.”

“And the capital of Greece?”

“Athens,” Grace shouted out.

“Yes, correct. Let’s give someone else a chance shall we? What is the capital of Finland?” Mrs. Worley peered towards the back of the class. With no answer forthcoming, she returned to Grace.

“Helsinki.”

“Excellent.”

“Well aren’t you gonna’ get the gold star?” Billy Boxer muttered a couple of desks back from her. He hated school, he hated teachers and he couldn’t stand teachers’ pets. It wasn’t Grace’s fault. She hadn’t deliberately set out to make herself the target of a school bully. She was interested in athletics and the Olympics, and, well, it just so happened that most of them were held in capital cities. To Billy Boxer, however, she sounded like she had swallowed an encyclopedia. What a Miss Know-It-All; he would just have to teach her a lesson of his own.

“Let’s have a little fun first,” he whispered to himself and unclipped a paperclip from one of Mrs. Worley’s handouts. He lurched to the edge of his chair, took careful aim over his classmate’s shoulder and flicked the clip at Grace with his index finger. It spiraled towards her and bounced off the back of her perfectly tied and plaited hair.

Grace pretended not to notice.

Billy jerked his head over his shoulder to check that Mrs. Worley, who had progressed to quizzing her pupils about mountain ranges, was not looking. He grabbed a rubber from his desk and pitched it hard at the back of Grace’s head. “Bullseye!” He smirked, as the rubber dipped and slapped the nape of her neck.

“Stop it!” Grace whined and span around on her chair to catch the perpetrator. To avoid suspicion, Billy looked idly out of the window like many of his bored classmates. Grace huffed, staring accusingly behind her, and swiveled back around.

Zeeewp. A plastic ruler fizzed past her ear like a small missile and rattled against her desk and then the floor.

“Stop it!” Grace pleaded, her throat clogging with humiliation. She knew for sure that others were watching her now. This wasn’t the kind of attention she wanted.

Two of Billy’s spiteful friends joined in the geek-baiting, taking turns to throw crumpled pieces of paper at her.

“Goody Two-Shoes, Goody Two Shoes,” Billy Boxer whispered a rasping chant as the balls of paper bounced off her back and shoulders.

Kate, who was sitting towards the back of the classroom, clocked what was going on. She had to do something to help her sister. If you were bullied on your first day at school, you could be damned sure that the rest of your school life would be a living hell.

Ronnie beat her to it. “Come on guys, that’s enough!” He leaped up from his chair and yelled angrily at them, just as Billy Boxer was looping another paper projectile towards Grace’s head.

Alerted, Mrs. Worley span around and caught Boxer red-handed. She marched double-time towards her desk, picked up a metre-long ruler and stormed towards him, blood rushing to her cheeks and her eyes darkening like thunderclouds.

Booom! She raised the wooden ruler above her shoulder and slapped it furiously onto his desk, landing only inches from his fingers.

Colour drained from Billy Boxer’s face. He shoved his fingers under his legs.

Boom! Boom! Boom! She thrashed his desk like a jockey whipping his horse down the final furlong.

“I will not tolerate behaviour like that in my class!” Mrs. Worley shrieked. “Do you hear me? I won’t have it! You do that again and you’re for it, do you understand?”

“Yes ma’am,” Boxer mumbled, cringing, his face reddening with embarrassment. All eyes were on him now. His friends were smirking. Grace and her knight in shining armour would get some, that’s for sure.

“I’m sorry I didn’t hear you. Do you UNDERSTAND?” Mrs. Worley bent forward and screeched at him.

Boooooomm! The ruler shaved his nose.

“Y-Yes ma’am,” he announced louder, his voice trembling. Some of the boys behind Boxer muffled giggles. Other pupils looked on goggle-eyed at the spectacle.

Kate had to step in. Billy Boxer had been humiliated enough. Whatever he suffered now, her sister would get back three-fold later on. She hated helping out a bully, but she had to think of her sister. She leant back lazily in her chair, laid her legs onto her desk and casually stared up at the ceiling, hoping to catch Mrs. Worley’s attention.

Freddie, two desks to her right, admired Kate’s kooky fashion sense. She wore a blouse and a small blazer yet her hands were relaxed into the pockets of boy’s school trousers. Her navy and maroon tie was wrapped around her waist as a makeshift belt. She slipped forward slightly, her trouser leg riding up to reveal luminous green socks nestled in heavy Doc Martin boots. Blonde hair streaked with red highlights cupped a soft face. She waited for Mrs. Worley to react.

“And that goes for the rest of you aswell!” Bawled the teacher, facing the rest of her pupils, “I simply will not have this kind of behaviour in my classroom!”

The soles of Kate’s shoes on her desk acted like a red rag to a bull. Mrs. Worley bound over, her nostrils flaring and snorting as she thwacked her ruler against Kate’s desk. Kate had nonchalantly moved her legs to a safe position.

“I can see you’re going to be trouble aren’t you missy? Just you be careful,” she warned, wagging her ruler at Kate, “or you will join Boxer there in detention.”

“Ok,” Kate lowered her head submissively.

Mrs. Worley twisted around, seeing if anyone else wanted to disrupt her class. “Now let’s get on with the lesson,” she barked. She rocked towards her desk and threw the ruler into the corner of the room.

“Well done for stopping that idiot Boxer,” Tommy called to Ronnie as they approached their lockers after the class. It was the first opportunity he had had to speak to his friend. A number of other first-year students congregated near them to discuss what had just happened.

“Yeah thanks Tommy, he’s a complete twat.”

“You’re telling me!” Kate butted in, overhearing their conversation. To her left was Freddie and to her right was Grace, who felt like collapsing from shame.

“Yeah, they’re a bunch of idiots,” Grace said glumly, moping towards the boys with her chin low against her chest.

Ronnie stepped forward. “Hi Grace, I’m Ronnie,” he held out his hand. Grace shook it, smiling weakly. “And this is Tommy.” Tommy nodded. “Tommy this is Freddie, Grace you know and...?”

“Kate.”

“Kate,” Ronnie repeated.

“Just want to say thanks for what you did in there,” Kate continued, “although we should be careful, I’m sure Boxer will want some kind of revenge after this.”

“Don’t worry, stick with us, we’ll look after you,” Ronnie tried to sound confident.

“Will you now?” Billy Boxer yelled from across the school corridor. He strolled over to them, flanked by a handful of other bullies who were grinning menacingly.

“Damn,” Kate cursed over her shoulder, creasing her eyelids in frustration. “So soon?” Ronnie, Freddie and Tommy stepped forward like bodyguards to form a protective barrier around Grace.

“Goody Two Shoes! Goody Two Shoes!” They chanted, mixed with spiteful laughter. Boxer and his underlings surrounded their prey like a pack of hyenas. Boxer lifted his arms, urging their chants higher. “Goody Two Shoes! Goody Two Shoes!”

Ronnie’s cheeks tingled. His hands were clammy with fear but he knew he had to do something. He had to make a stand for Grace and his new friends. He broke the line, his doe eyes staring cold into Boxer’s. “Piss off!” He growled, screwing his face as if he was chewing a wasp.

The crowd silenced. Ronnie looked a foot taller to Boxer. “What?” The bully replied.

“You heard,” spat Tommy, striding to his friend’s shoulder. Boxer was sure he could handle Ronnie, but one punch from his fat lump of a friend would probably knock him out.

“We’re only going to tell you once,” said Freddie calmly, now at Ronnie’s other side. “Leave her alone.” He clenched his fists, ready to move.

Boxer could see that they weren’t going to back down. He considered, for a brief second, about landing one on their little ringleader in the middle; but then clocked the size of Tommy’s forearms. Better a standoff than taking a fall in front of his friends.

“You’re next,” he jabbed a finger at Ronnie. “I’m going to get you soon,” he hissed. He lifted his arms once more, instructing his moronic friends to follow him and he turned and walked away.

“Thank you,” said Grace, feeling a little stronger as her tormentors disappeared out of the corridor and into the schoolyard.

“That’s ok,” replied Ronnie, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder, “anytime. You’re with us now.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tuesday, 6th November, 2012

44 Days To Go

2 months later

Ronnie was worried. His nightmares were becoming much more intense and frequent and had evolved into something even more awful than before. That morning, he had watched his own death for the very first time and he woke with a foul taste of bile coating the back of his mouth. His brain ached from intermittent sleep as he walked towards the canteen for lunch, stumbling across the schoolyard like a drunk. He almost tripped in a pothole.

He noticed Mrs. Crowbag at the edge of the yard, her bony, claw-like fingers scratching bristles of facial hair on her face. Approaching her seventies, she had spent her entire life at St. Monedel's, first as a pupil, then as a teacher and finally as Headmistress. Her skeletal shoulders jutted through her top like a coat hanger. She had a gaunt, sucked-in face and piercing, brown, eagle-like eyes. She gave him the creeps.

Ronnie walked in a dazed stupor along the corridor, semi-conscious thoughts drifting into his mind. "Why hasn't the school been repaired?" He mumbled to himself. "Don't they care?" Further along, another thought jarred him. *Why are there no photographs? I've never noticed that before. Back at Hickleston we had them everywhere; school teams, yearbooks, everything. Strange.* And then, finally, as he entered the canteen, *is that Grace? Why is she crying?* Grace's quivering voice snapped him out of his trance.

"Grace, what's the matter?" Freddie asked, craning his neck forward in concern. He was nervous, rubbing his hands together. Grace took one wet lingering look at him, leant her breast into the table, thrust her head into her hands and sobbed behind them.

“I-I-I c-can’t tell you,” she sniffled.

“Why not? Why can’t you tell us?” Tommy asked. His voice was abrupt and impatient.

“I can’t!” She wailed. “You don’t understand!”

“Sis’, you can tell me,” said Kate, sitting next to her. “You can tell me anything.” She stroked her sister’s back to soothe her frayed nerves.

Grace shook her head behind her hands. “I can’t. If I do I’ll die, I’m sure I will, just like in my nightmare.” Her tears streaked red tracks on her face. The others were mute around her, visualising for an awful second their own hideous deaths that they had witnessed that morning.

Ronnie’s cheeks tightened as he imagined his skin melting like butter, as acid spewed over him from some crazed, hungry monster; Kate inhaled sharply as she saw herself lifeless and drowned in dirty, brown water; and Freddie blinked as he remembered fangs plunging like needles into the soft whites of his eyes.

Ronnie coughed, attempting to shake off the frightening images in his mind. “You can tell us, you’re with friends, we might be able to help,” he whispered.

“Ok, you really want to know? Then, FINE,” she growled at her friends like a cornered animal. “I die, ok? I’m running in a race and I run myself into the ground. The earth swallows me up, and I am buried underneath all of it. I can’t breathe and I die ok?” Another torrent of tears soaked her face.

“It was only a nightmare,” Tommy said desperately, shuddering as he pictured his arms, legs and head breaking off from his grey, rotting body, “and nightmares are NOT real.” His voice was pleading, as if he was trying to convince himself as much as Grace.

He was. They all were. They all knew how utterly scared Grace was; that she would have given anything to be able to climb out of her body and escape her nightly torment if she could. They had all cried their own tears, in secret, and now finally, after months of suffering, one of them had spoken.

Grace was brave. Very brave indeed.

CHAPTER NINE

Tuesday 27th November, 2012

24 Days To Go

Like a dam bursting, Grace's confession acted as a catalyst for her friends to divulge their own dark secrets. One by one, they relieved themselves of the heavy psychological burdens that they had shouldered since summer. Only after they had each spewed out their skin-crawling terrors and confided that their nightmares concluded in a horrific, primeval roar, had Ronnie suggested that something very odd might be happening.

Tommy asked if maybe it was coincidence. Maybe they could just leave it all alone. Maybe they would get a good night's sleep, wake up tomorrow and everything would be fine. But that wasn't good enough for Ronnie, or the others. Two of them having similar nightmares might be a coincidence, but five? Ignoring that would be asking for trouble.

They agreed to keep a log of the frequency and the intensity of their nightmares over the weeks that followed. Kate, however, had taken matters into her own hands.

She had started with the best of intentions, but had gotten impatient, conducted a little internet research and diagnosed herself as suffering from a brain virus. She feigned a hot temperature and convinced her mother that the onset of fever was inevitable. She was scheduled in for a morning consultation with her doctor and by early afternoon, she was back at school discussing it with her friends.

"So, what happened?" Tommy asked, trying his best to look inconspicuous at the edge of the schoolyard. Billy Boxer and his friends had been skulking around for a while, waiting to pick one of them off like lions circling a herd.

"Yeah, why are you back in school? I thought you went to the doctors," Ronnie continued.

"I did," replied Kate.

“And?”

“Well, nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Kate stared at Ronnie blankly.

“Yes! I knew it!” Tommy blurted, He could barely contain his relief. “That means there’s nothing wrong with me.”

“What do you mean? Nothing wrong?” Freddie asked.

“Mum was there, telling the doctor about it and getting all stressed about my “fever”, so I just told them what’s been going on.”

“What?” Freddie screeched. He had thought about telling someone other than his friends, but doubted that anyone would believe him. “Were they shocked?”

“No, not at all. The doctor just smiled at me, then at my mum, and said that I have an over-active imagination.” Kate whined and ground her teeth. She was working herself into a temper.

“So we’re fine then?” Tommy asked, grinning, as if the matter had come to a satisfactory conclusion. Ronnie began pacing around them.

“It just doesn’t feel right,” he said, rubbing his top lip. “What else do we know? Who’s been keeping a log of their nightmares?”

Grace, who had been feeling slightly jealous at the attention her sister was receiving, stepped forward. “I have.”

“Ok, and what did you find?”

“They’re definitely more intense. And since I started the log they’re happening about twice as often.”

“I’ve been keeping one aswell,” said Freddie, rustling a notepad from his pocket. He flicked the pages quickly, “yep, that’s about the same for me.”

“Do we agree then?” Ronnie asked. “The nightmares are definitely getting worse?” They all nodded reluctantly. “Well then, that means that the doctor is wrong.”

Tommy’s shoulders slumped. “This isn’t going to go away, is it?” He grumbled.

“No,” Ronnie replied, “I don’t think it is.”

CHAPTER TEN

Wednesday 28th November, 2012

23 Days To Go

Ronnie had dearly wanted to be wrong but all the evidence pointed to the contrary; something awful was plaguing their dreams. They agreed that the sooner they understood what it meant, the better. The next day, Freddie and Grace volunteered to visit the school library, to see what they could find out.

Given the fact that none of their school friends had ever mentioned it, the two of them half-expected the library to be closed and its doors gathering dust. When they reached the east side of the school, however, polished, heavy oak doors greeted them, which Freddie heaved open across a varnished wooden floor.

Inside, squinting at books on a tall shelf was a small, doddering old man. He turned slowly and ushered them in with pink, stubby hands. Wearing grey cotton trousers and a cream shirt snug around his plump belly, he shuffled over, flattening wisps of white hair across his scalp.

The library itself was cosy, with four oak bookshelves lining its walls and four more squeezed across its middle. The air smelt of quiet, musty knowledge. Moreover, it looked clean and organised, which pleased Grace no end.

“Do you really look after this whole library?” She asked, smiling. “It’s lovely.”

“Needs must my dear,” the old librarian replied softly, “You never know who might show up. How can I help you?”

Freddie, acutely aware that they were on a schedule and would need to return in time for class, got straight to the point. “Erm, we were just wondering if you have any books that could help us on dreams, please?”

“Dreams, eh?” The old man scratched his balding plate.

“Yes, please,” added Grace, “We’d like to know what they mean.”

“Well I’m not sure that we have too many books about dreams here, maybe only a couple,” the librarian muttered apologetically, “will that do? Most of our books are about the school curriculum you see. Or do you want to try the internet-thingy on those computers,” he pointed to a set off three clunky, white terminals, “or perhaps the larger town library?”

“Whatever books *are* here would be really helpful,” Grace smiled sweetly, melting the librarian. She did not want to return to the others empty handed.

“Of course, follow me.” The librarian tottered over to the ancient desktop computers, bent gingerly over one of them and tapped onto its keyboard deliberately with a single index finger.

“Now what did you say you were looking for?” He rambled to himself, “Ah yes, that’s it, dreams and their meanings.” A minute later, he held a printout of five book titles in his hand.

With some assistance from Freddie and Grace, holding steady a tall, thin, wooden ladder, the librarian soon located four of the five books at the top of one of the bookshelves and dropped them into Freddie’s arms. His muscles straining, Freddie leant backwards to carry the heavy volumes over to the nearest table.

The old librarian’s nails rasped against his scalp once more. “Well that seems to be all that we have. The other has quite possibly been booked out.”

“Thank you, mister,” said Grace, who was already leafing through one of the leather bound volumes. “Thanks for all your help.” The old librarian wrinkled a pleased smile at her and shuffled his way to another part of the library.

Grace clutched a ream of crisp, white pages and let them cascade past her fingers, wafting a rich, inky aroma near to her nose. The larger volumes were the size of doorsteps and she rightly judged that the research would take days. There was little point in getting started now, she thought to herself, with only twenty minutes remaining of lunch break. “Do you mind?” She grinned at Freddie and glanced at the heavy volumes, implying that he should carry them.

Freddie piled them onto his forearms, leaning them against his chest and under his chin. His legs buckled under their weight.

“Are you ok?” Grace asked, noticing that his face was turning redder than usual.

“Sure,” Freddie grunted, sucking a breath into his cheeks. The books, however, were far too heavy. He took two steps and tumbled forwards, throwing them into the air and thrusting his arms out to protect himself. His shoulder crunched onto a shelf and his wrist and palm knocked off a clutch of other books to the floor.

“Oh my God Freddie, what happened?” Grace giggled at his clumsiness. Freddie scrambled to his feet and brushed himself down.

“It’s nothing,” he replied, his face beetroot with embarrassment. “I’ll be fine. I’d better pick these up.” He knelt down and put the books back on their shelf, one by one.

“Look at this,” he whispered as he waved the final book at Grace.

“What? What am I looking for?”

“Look at the title.”

Grace read it aloud. “Dreams, meanings and,”

“Ssshhh!” Freddie interrupted, putting a finger to his lips.

“Dreams, Meanings and Other Essays,” Grace said under her breath. “I don’t get it.”

“Don’t you think it’s strange?” Freddie answered, crouching, eyeing suspiciously the area where the librarian had been. “It’s the missing book. That old librarian told us it was loaned out.”

“Do you think he’s trying to hide something?”

“Maybe, I don’t know.”

“Come on Freddie, you’re exaggerating. He’s an old man. He probably forgot that it was still here.”

“Look at this place. I’d be surprised if he didn’t know where every speck of dust is.” Freddie was determined to convince her.

“Come on, we’ve got what we came for, let’s take this stuff and go. We need to get back to class.”

Freddie could see that she wasn’t interested but he still wanted to prove his hunch. “Ok,” he nodded and lugged the heavy books to the checkout desk one at a time. He laid the smaller, newly discovered paperback at the top of the pile. Grace pressed a buzzer and the old man tottered over to assist them.

“So, you’d like to loan these out?” He smiled, placing his hand on the column of books in front of him.

“Yes please,” replied Freddie, his eyes narrowing as he watched the old man with suspicion.

“Oh silly me, I must have misplaced this one. You know I’d forget myself sometimes,” the librarian chuckled upon seeing the paperback. “Take these books for as long as you need them. They haven’t been used for some time.” Freddie furrowed his brow; the librarian didn’t *act* guilty.

“There you go, all checked out.” He handed the books to Freddie, who forced them into his and Grace’s rucksacks until the zips were bursting. “I hope you find them of some use.”

“It’s weird, why would he lie?” Freddie asked Grace as they headed down the corridor away from the library.

“Oh Freddie, you’re being paranoid,” she tutted, “Sometimes you think too much.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Wednesday 5th December, 2012

16 Days To Go

With so much information to wade through, Grace and Freddie split the task between them, squeezing in research in around their homework, which was increasing by the day. After a week, with their nightmares throbbing with malice in their minds, a haggard Ronnie asked if they were ready to tell the group what they had found.

“Well, I’ve almost finished. There’s just the small book to go. I’ll make a start on it tonight,” Freddie replied.

Grace was about to pull out an orderly file from her rucksack when Ronnie agreed that it was best to wait until they had finished. She wasn’t too disappointed though, the dream meanings she had identified were so varied that she could make no sense of them at all. A little more time would allow her to get some clarity.

Three hours later, Freddie returned home after school, his limbs aching and fatigued. He crawled up the tope carpet stairs to his bedroom, squeezed himself next to his computer in the corner of his room, and flicked the on switch.

He rubbed his sticky, red eyes and reached for the mysterious plum-coloured paperback on his desk. Covering his mouth with his hand as he yawned, he pushed open the cover with the other, flattened it down and then slid the book towards himself. The book settled on his lap with its spine resting against the rim of his pine desk. A loose, ragged piece of paper rustled downwards and hung limp like a torn flag from the rear of the book.

Freddie jerked forward, pinched a ream of pages with his fingers and flipped them over. Staring back at him were jagged edges; a whole chapter had been torn away.

“Hmmm, that’s odd,” he muttered aloud, “I wonder who did that?” His curiosity had been piqued and he no longer felt tired. He flicked to the front and saw that the chapter index was still there. He scanned the bottom of the page, Chapter Thirteen was gone, entitled “Navigating the Dreamworld” by an author called Mr. C. Canasteda.

For a moment, Freddie considered reading the entire book, as he had promised, but then dumped the idea; this was much more interesting. He fired up Chrome on his desktop and went straight to Google search. *Let’s start with Canasteda plus dreams*, Freddie thought, *the guy did write this chapter after all*. He tapped it in.

Nothing of any use came back, there were thousands of blogs about dreams. Freddie quickly realised he could not hope to go through them all and anyhow none were written by a C. Canasteda. He would have to try something else. *Right, so what nationality is Canasteda?* Freddie asked himself, *Spanish? Portuguese?* He typed in a new search query of Canasteda plus Portugal. Google returned over sixty thousand hits. “The name Canasteda must be really popular in Portugal,” he sighed. Canasteda plus Spain was better, yielding eight thousand websites to browse through, but nothing seemed to relate to dreams.

Ok, let’s try a different tack, Freddie mused as he doodled on a pad. *Maybe Canasteda plus author? That might work.*

Freddie gave a gentle, hopeful “Click” on his computer mouse, expecting thousands of replies, and smiled when he saw that he would only have to wade through three hundred or so. When he got to the page ranked eighth, however, he snapped his pencil lead on his pad in shock. Mr. C. Canasteda had been a teacher at St. Monedel’s.

His eyes zipped across a description of a photograph linked to a local e-newsletter. “*Mr. Carlos Canasteda, proud St. Monedel’s Chemistry teacher and text book author, with other members of The Monedel Rambling Society.*”

“Oh my God! This Mr. Carlos Canasteda used to be one of our school teachers!” Freddie coughed in surprise, his diaphragm thrusting upwards, punching the air out of his lungs. He

downloaded the PDF onto his desktop to read it through thoroughly, thoughts buzzing chaotically like bees inside his mind.

A local memorabilia enthusiast called Mrs. Higginbotham had created the website. The newsletter was one of numerous postings, including pictures of St. Monedel's from years gone by. Open-mouthed, Freddie followed the trail across the internet and printed off all of the pertinent information that he could find about Carlos Canasteda. He summarised the main points in a document to give to the others. "Oh wow, this is getting weird," he murmured and printed out copies for his friends, "just wait until the gang hears about this."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mr. Carlos Canasteda was born in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1940 to parents of modest means. He graduated from the University of Lisbon where he received a First-Class Honours degree in Chemistry.

In 1961, he relocated to the United Kingdom to start work at a research and development laboratory for an oil company, just as an explosion in vehicle ownership and gasoline consumption was about to begin.

However, after only two years he quit, deciding on a dramatic career change and chose, instead, to teach. He started out at a busy London school before turning up at the small, country town of Monedel in 1966, where he found employment as a Chemistry teacher.

He moved into a small, Georgian cottage near to Monedel and was a popular, studious member of the community during his time there. By all accounts he was green-fingered, often seen tending to his garden.

He enjoyed taking in the beautiful local scenery, studying the local wildlife and was an enthusiast of rambling. Former St. Monedel's pupils remembered him to be a thorough, engaging and inspiring teacher. He married a young girl from the neighbouring town of Haversham called Eve Downing in 1970, and was thoroughly contented and settled. Then, after six years at his post, in 1972, he disappeared, never to be seen or heard of again.

Thursday 6th December, 2012

15 Days To Go

“See, I told you. I told you that we should leave this alone,” Tommy griped and shook his head. He screwed Freddie’s paper up into a ball.

“I’m worried too,” Grace’s voice wobbled. Her eyes bored towards Ronnie, “What do we do? I mean, he disappeared right?”

“Look, if you want out, I’ll understand,” said Ronnie, avoiding their gazes whilst scraping a stone under his foot in the schoolyard. “But if we do nothing, I don’t think this is going to go away. Remember, we don’t actually know what happened to him yet. We shouldn’t imagine the worst. We need to find out some more before we start jumping to conclusions.”

“Ok, so how do we do that?” Kate asked, wanting to be constructive rather than jumpy; both her sister and Tommy were overreacting.

Ronnie scanned Freddie’s printout again. “Freddie, this website on Carlos Canasteda, was there any mention of dreams, or that he was interested in dreams?”

“No, none,” Freddie replied.

“Ok, so where did you find this information?”

“From three or four people,” Freddie elaborated, “but the main source was somebody called Mrs. Higginbotham.”

Tommy’s face transformed from an angry scowl to one of recognition. “I know Mrs. Higginbotham!” He blurted. “She lives down the road from me. She’s probably the oldest woman in the world, like one hundred years old or something. She has lived in Monedel’s forever.”

“So she was here when Canasteda was a teacher at our school?” Ronnie asked, the cogs in his mind whirring.

“Definitely,” replied Tommy.

“What are you thinking then?” Grace asked, intrigued, “that she might know what happened to Carlos Canasteda?”

“It’s worth a try isn’t it?” Suggested Ronnie, “What else do we have to go on?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Saturday 8th December, 2012

14 Days To Go

Mrs. Higginbotham lived in a small bungalow at the bottom of Rowntree Hill, one of the most sought after locations in Monedel. Quaint, beamed cottages huddled steadfastly along its steep incline, each with an impressive view of the surrounding evergreen countryside. Mrs. Higginbotham's residence, meanwhile, overlooked the picturesque River Mon.

Defying her advanced age, Mrs. Higginbotham would trek daily up the hill to the grocers to collect her provisions, despite the protestations of the shopkeeper and neighbours to deliver them to her. Often, she would sit for hours on a rickety, wooden rocking chair in front of her house, drinking hot cacao and watching the world go by, as if waiting for something.

Tommy and Ronnie volunteered to meet her and meandered along the cobbled streets to her bungalow unannounced. The winter sun's rays warmed their faces while birdsong twittered nearby. They slowed their pace as they approached her, as the old woman was rocking back and forth on her chair with her eyes closed. She looked as if she was sleeping.

"Go on, she knows you," urged Ronnie, whispering. He nudged his friend's shoulder with the palm of his hand. Tommy glared at him.

Mrs. Higginbotham's thin lips curled into an amused smile. "I've been expecting you," she greeted them eerily, "not you specifically, but someone."

Tommy's heart fluttered. "Sorry Mrs. Higginbotham?" He asked nervously. He twirled a finger near to his temple to imply that she was either senile or eccentric, or both.

"Now that's no way to treat your elders, is it Tommy Bailey?" Her voice coarsened, "now behave!"

“Sorry Mrs. Higginbotham,” Tommy apologised, his face blushing. Beneath his embarrassment, his mind raced, trying to figure out just how she had seen him with her eyes shut. Ronnie, meanwhile, cursed his friend’s foolishness under his breath. He would have to take him to task about it later.

“I hope we’re not bothering you Mrs. Higginbotham, we’ve come to ask you some questions about our school if that’s ok?” Ronnie got straight to the point.

“And you are?” The centenarian enquired.

“Ronnie Rough ma’am,” replied Ronnie, immediately sensing that he should be polite in her presence.

“Glad to meet you Ronnie.”

“And you ma’am.”

“So, the school ‘eh?” Mrs. Higginbotham opened her wrinkled lids to reveal glassy, azure eyes, “be truthful now, you’ve also come to ask about Carlos Canasteda haven’t you?”

What? Can she read our minds? The thought blared like a tannoy in Tommy’s head. His throat choked dry and sticky around his Adam’s apple. “What? How could you know?” He asked in a throttled, fearful voice.

Mrs. Higginbotham lurched backwards in her rocking chair and giggled like a little girl. “Tommy Bailey, it’s quite simple. For as long as I’ve known you, you’ve only ever said so much as good morning and good evening to me. So if you’re asking me about the school it can only be because of those newsletters my clever grandchildren created on their computer contraptions. And a great deal of that was about Carlos Canasteda.”

“Oh,” replied Tommy, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Yes, we have also come to speak to you about Mr. Carlos Canasteda,” Ronnie answered plainly.

Mrs. Higginbotham rocked forward, her chair creaking. She wore a long, white cotton dress embroidered with roses and her hair was neatly coiffed, curly and silky grey. She leant over the armrest of her chair and stretched for a large teapot on a stool next to her. Holding the base with one hand and the handle with the other, she filled three of four available cups with a frothy, reddish-brown liquid, which Tommy assumed was hot chocolate. Even at one hundred and two years old, Mrs. Higginbotham still had a taste for the finer things in life. It was, in fact, rich cacao from Guatemala.

“Would you like some?” She asked, smiling, setting the pot back on the stool. They both nodded. “Well you’d better come and sit down here then,” she turned slowly to face them, “we have much to talk about.”

Tommy and Ronnie sat cross-legged on the patio, opposite Mrs. Higginbotham, clasping their warm cups of cacao in their hands.

“So, where shall I begin?” Mrs. Higginbotham asked, staring deep into the boys’ eyes. “St. Monedel’s? Or the mysterious disappearance of Carlos Canasteda? Or both, as I believe they are related?”

“Please, whichever you wish,” replied Ronnie, happy that the old woman seemed to welcome their visit.

“Thank you, then I shall tell the story in the best way that I can, those newsletters have created quite a fuss haven’t they?” she mused. “You know, ever since Carlos’ disappearance, that school has gone to the dogs. Did you know that before he went missing, St. Monedel’s had a wonderful and deserved reputation?”

“Yes, I heard. I think it was one of the reasons my mum sent me there,” nodded Ronnie.

“That is perfectly understandable, and admirable. She wants the best for you of course. But I do feel that the school is trading on its past. Have you ever wondered why, when we live in this

lovely little town, with its Tudor houses and beautiful countryside, that there is an eyesore such as that school?"

"Hasn't it always been like it?" Tommy asked, and slurped his bubbly drink.

"No, it hasn't. It has fallen into terrible disrepair. It is *such* a shame. And that new headmistress, not that she's new now, is doing nothing to help."

"She gives me the creeps," said Tommy, shivering, imagining Mrs. Crowbag's skeletal arms and bony fingers.

"And probably with good reason," Mrs. Higginbotham nodded. "I'm never one to indulge in rumours or idle chat but Carlos' disappearance was odd, and, well, that school has been odd itself ever since. Not that I could ever prove any of this, of course."

Ronnie's doe eyes hardened in concentration. He was beginning to think that calling in on the oldest woman in Monedel had been a very good idea indeed. "What happened to him then?" He asked.

"To Carlos? Well, nobody really knows," Mrs. Higginbotham said huskily, as a small gust of wind blew a grey curl onto her forehead. She felt for it and pushed it neatly back into place. "The story around town was that Carlos just upped sticks and left. That was what he was like the gossips said. He was a quitter they said. He left Portugal, he left his job in the oil industry, and he left Monedel and his poor young wife, Mrs. Eve."

"Is that what you think? Was he the type of person to do that?" Ronnie asked her. As he expected, she was not slow in giving her opinion.

"I don't believe a word of it. I tell you, at my old age, I've come across a few no hopers in my time, and, trust me, Carlos was as solid and reliable as they come."

"What about his wife? Mrs. Eve? What happened to her?" Tommy asked. Her name was not familiar to him.

“Yes, the poor young thing. She is still at their family home in Haversham, just outside of Monedel. She honestly thinks he left her and has lived there for the last forty years with a broken heart.” The old woman shook her head at the tragedy. “But as you know from my memoirs, I don’t think he left her, I think he disappeared.”

“Disappeared? How?” Ronnie’s eyes fixed on her. He was hooked on her story like a fish on bait.

“Well, to answer you,” Mrs. Higginbotham feigned a sigh, enjoying the attention, “I really should tell you more about the history of your school. Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure,” said Tommy, before Ronnie could reply.

“Well, to start with, how old do you think it is?”

“I have no idea,” Tommy chuckled. “Two hundred years old maybe?” He guessed, shrugging his shoulders.

“Oh, the school is *much* older than that,” Mrs. Higginbotham gasped and pushed her thin body towards him from her chair. “The school is centuries old, one of the oldest in England.”

Ronnie wondered what tangent the old woman’s story was taking. He wanted her to get back onto Carlos.

“Originally, it was a monastery, over a *thousand* years ago,” Mrs. Higginbotham’s eyes rolled like marbles. “It was inhabited by Benedictine monks and then, over the centuries, it became a church, and was the centre of activity of the town that built up around it. However, in the fifteen hundreds, it was almost ruined.”

“Why’s that?” Tommy asked. He was enjoying his impromptu history lesson. He leant his chubby torso towards her over the rolls in his thighs.

“The Reformation, have you read any books about that at school yet?”

“No, not yet,” said Tommy.

“Well, in the fifteen hundreds, the King of England was King Henry the Eighth. You must know about him, he was the one with six wives?” She stared at them to be sure they were paying attention. “To break free from the Catholic Church, he changed the religion of the whole country to Protestant overnight, but one of his main reasons for doing so, was to steal the churches’ wealth. Many churches had their gold and ornaments stolen, on the King’s orders, including our very own St. Monedel’s church. But some say that he didn’t get *all* of the St. Monedel’s gold.”

Ronnie jerked his head up towards Mrs. Higginbotham and tuned back into the conversation. “Gold?” He asked, creasing an eyebrow disbelievingly into his forehead.

“Yes, gold,” her voice bristled at Ronnie. “Rumour has it that the church vicar had tunnels built under St. Monedel’s, and that the gold is hidden down there somewhere.”

Ronnie noticed it, but didn’t let it show. He wanted to steer the conversation back to his main pre-occupation. “But I don’t understand what this has to do with Mr. Canasteda?” He asked.

“Ah well,” Mrs. Higginbotham relaxed back into her chair; she was expecting the question, “my own opinion is that perhaps Carlos Canasteda found out about the gold and that was his undoing. Maybe he went looking for it and never came back.” She rocked back and forth for a few seconds, letting the boys digest what she had said.

“So Carlos Canasteda got greedy and was never seen again?” Tommy summarised his understanding of her story.

Ronnie pondered it for a moment, putting the cacao to his lips, forgetting that it had long been cold. “So how do we know for sure?” He wondered aloud.

“Well I don’t know that you ever will,” Mrs. Higginbotham muffled behind a yawn, “unless you are willing to speak to Mrs. Eve that is. I tried but she would never give me her confidence. She was his wife, so she knew him intimately. If anything the key to all this lies with him and with her. She may not know it, but I believe that she has the answers.” Mrs. Higginbotham’s shoulders gently touched the back of her chair and her eyelids began to droop. Ronnie could see that the aged woman

was tiring and nodded to Tommy for them to leave. *She is over one hundred after all*, Ronnie thought, *she probably spends as much time napping as she does awake.*

“Mrs. Higginbotham, thank you for your wonderful stories and your time,” Ronnie ended the conversation as he had begun it; politely. “You really are a fount of knowledge.”

“You’re welcome, both of you,” said Mrs. Higginbotham, her eyes thin between their lids. “I don’t know the truth; some of what I have said will be wrong and some will be right,” she whispered, “but when you speak to Mrs. Eve?”

“Yes?” Ronnie was no longer surprised that the wise old owl could anticipate their every move.

“Could you ask her about something that Mr. Canasteda said to me many, many years ago which I have never forgotten? I still haven’t figured it out.”

“Of course,” said Ronnie. Mrs. Higginbotham’s eyes were closing as she rocked gently on her chair.

“It’s all in the chemistry,” she babbled, “please ask her, whatever does that mean?”

“Ok, Mrs. Higginbotham, will do. Don’t worry about that,” Ronnie whispered, and they left her rocking herself to sleep.

“Are we going to Haversham then?” Asked Tommy when they were half-way up Rowntree Hill.

“Of course we are,” replied Ronnie, “how about now?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

With Ronnie and Tommy hot on the trail of Carlos Canasteda, the other three had a few hours to burn. For the lack of any other concrete leads to follow, and on the girls' insistence, they had hopped onto a bus into Monedel town centre for a bit of clothes shopping. Freddie waited for them against a shop window outside Monedel Shopping Mall, tossing pieces of a McDonalds take away box around his feet like red and yellow confetti. He had been there for at least twenty minutes.

He didn't mind though. Shops made him claustrophobic. Maybe it was the constant whirr of air conditioning units or the incessant bombardment of advertisements, but there was something fake and overbearing about the mall. His skin tingled as he breathed in the fresh air outdoors rather than the plastic, recycled air inside. He watched from afar the chaotic goings-on at the market stalls along Monedel High Street.

The market traders were out in force, standing in front of rows and rows of cages draped in thick cloth. Tourists hovered around fresh fruits, t-shirts, watches and jewellery while uninterested locals zigzagged through the crowds. Footsteps and chatter simmered through the streets.

A delightful sound of panpipes floated above the cacophony of the street's hustle and bustle, lifting Freddie's spirits like a kite with the wind. Intrigued, he shouldered himself away from the store window to see where it was coming from. He half-expected to see a busker nodding to passers-by as they dropped coins into a collection box, but there was no one. Hands in his pockets to ward off the coming cold, he shrugged and turned back towards the window.

As he did so, he caught sight of his own reflection and stopped dead in his tracks. Staring back at him was a young man, a lot taller than he was. He had caramel coloured skin and long black hair braided with red and green ribbons.

“What the?” Freddie wanted to swear, but stopped himself. He felt disoriented, his ruddy face draining white as his eyes flitted at the stranger staring back at him. He edged closer and the young man smiled, as if they knew each other. Freddie slid his hands from his pockets and rubbed his eyes vigorously. Maybe he was seeing things; maybe the lack of sleep was getting to him; maybe he was going crazy. When he looked back, the young man was gone.

“What film shall we watch then?” Kate asked as the twins exited the mall onto the high street.

“Huh?” Freddie replied, staring bewildered at the window.

“What film, at the cinema?”

He took one last lingering look at the window before focusing his attention on the girls. “Erm, I dunno’, let’s check the schedule,” he said, vague and distant. Ten minutes later, they were placing their cokes in drinks holders at the local Odeon, as the opening credits for Twilight 3: Breaking Dawn, Part II, began to roll. Before long, Freddie was comfortable in his padded chair, following the plotline avidly and had forgotten completely about the young man in the window.

Then, all of a sudden, he returned. He flickered, only for a second, as if he was spliced into the film reel.

“Did you see that?” Freddie shouted to his right, but he was drowned out by the characters’ voices on screen.

The figure appeared again, longer this time, for two or three seconds. He was three-dimensional, like a hologram. It was definitely him, longhaired and wearing a grey t-shirt and a tan coat. He had a set of panpipes hung over his chest.

The stranger cupped his palms over his cheeks. “RUN!” He shrieked at the on looking Freddie. Freddie jerked his head nervously over his shoulder, his eyes skirting across the seats behind him in the cinema. Could others see what he was seeing?

Seconds later, he got his answer. Grace, next to him, gripped her chair over his hand and dug her nails in to the bone. She clenched her lips tight and muffled a terrified scream behind them. She could only see the back of her bobbing head but she could tell that it was her sister. She *knew* it was, with her damp, dyed-red hair. Kate rolled over, her drowned limp body ebbing and flowing through the air like a plastic bag rolling on the tide. Her face was green and bloated, her eyes bulging and bloodshot. Water dribbled from her mouth like drool. She was dead.

Grace grabbed her legs into her seat, pushing herself deeper in until it would give no more. She clamped her eyes shut to escape the suffering of her sister's hideous nightmare.

Kate vaulted out of her chair, her thighs smacking the one in front. She span around, panicked. Grace was gone. Instead, there was dirt, lots of dirt. She plunged desperately onto all fours, scratching at it like a dog. The movie had stopped. She could hear a strangled groan beneath her. She got deeper, whimpering her sister's name, spading the soil away with her hands. Grace's fingers were bent through the topsoil like thin, twisted roots. Sobbing, she finally reached her sister's mud-streaked face. Her lips were blue and her pupils turned back into their sockets.

Grace came to her senses. There was nothing there. *It's not real. It's not there*, she repeated in her mind. She gulped a large, calming breath and tried to slow her racing heart. She saw her sister on the floor. "Are you ok?" Her voice quavered, "The nightmares, right?"

Kate pushed herself back onto her knees and wiped a thin sheen of sweat away from her flustered face. "You were buried."

"You were drowned, just above my...," Grace's voice trailed off as she saw Freddie trembling, his eyes transfixed on the cinema screen. "Freddie! What's happening? Freddie?"

Only Freddie could see it. The red stripe had come back for him. It was horrendous in size, as wide as the cinema itself. It clubbed its head through the screen as if it were tracing paper, sending table-sized shards of glass rotating over his head. It was monstrous, repulsive, the hairs on its body

wide like tree trunks. “Tlick-Tlick,” it crossed its sticky squelching mandibles, strands of saliva hanging like glue. “Tlick-Tlick,” it lifted its quivering fangs, ready to strike.

“Freddie!” Grace shrieked. His whole body went into spasms.

“Freddie!” Kate lunged across and screamed at him nose-to-nose like a platoon commander. She arched backwards and sent a slap stinging across his face. He snapped out of it.

“Ugh, that was awful,” he garbled, dazed, a few seconds later. He rubbed his tingling cheek.

“I know. But we’re ok. We’re all ok. It’s our nightmares, they’re after us,” spluttered Kate.

“We’ve got to get out of here.”

The three of them bumped along the waist-high corridor of chairs in the shadowy cinema. Save them, it was empty. “Tell me I’m not crazy, the cinema - was full - wasn’t it - when we came in?” Grace’s voice faltered from the back of the trio. Yet the movie was still rolling on the big screen.

“Someone’s trying to screw with our minds,” Kate growled angrily from the front and headed towards the exit doors. She grabbed a brass railing along the stairs.

Something, Kate. Something.

Wh-eee-ieeeew, the projector flap screening the movie stopped humming, coughed its last images and whirred to a halt. The cinema went pitch black. Kate’s toes buckled inwards as her foot crunched into a step.

“Whoa!” She yelled as her right hand gripped around the railing, twisting her towards the wall before her face hit the floor. She dragged herself up, and stopped. Something was behind her. Something was panting foul, hot breath against her ears. She felt sharp, icy fingers tease across the nape of her neck. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw lights under the exit door. It was now or never.

She spun on her heels and pumped up the stairs three at a time. She could no longer feel nor hear the thing that meant to harm her, but that didn't matter; she kept going, until the cinema doors thrashed either side. Freddie and Grace sprinted right behind her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

If you were driving at any speed along the country road that bisected the small hamlet of Haversham, you could quite easily have missed it altogether. Haversham was populated by a dozen houses, many of them hidden behind gardens of bushy trees. Ronnie and Tommy arrived, on foot, just before lunchtime and walked into Haversham's only shop to find out exactly where Mrs. Eve Canasteda lived.

"Eve? She lives at number four," a jowled, middle-aged shopkeeper bumbled from behind his counter, as if he wasn't used to visitors, "she was in here only five minutes ago buying her cream cakes. She's got a thing for them you know." So did Tommy. He smiled to Ronnie and insisted that they should bring along some as a welcoming gift. A minute later, they left the shop with a bagful of éclairs.

A little way up the road, they pushed through a creaky, iron gate to Mrs. Canasteda's garden. Leading up to her home was a paved pathway overhung by rusty climbing ivy. The two boys walked through the leafy tunnel and up to her front door, which Tommy rapped with a brass knocker.

"Coming," called out a strong but flustered woman's voice from inside the house. "Who is it?"

"Tommy Bailey and Ronnie Rough ma'am," Tommy replied, "we go to St. Monedel's school."

"Oh, ok." Mrs. Canasteda unlatched one of her locks and opened her door slightly. She peered through the narrow gap to get a good look at the young boys. "How can I help you?" She asked, her voice hesitant. She chuckled at her own cautiousness when she saw that they were barely into their teens; and besides she was wearing marigolds and holding a gardening fork in her hand. She opened the door fully.

“Lovely to meet you Mrs. Canasteda,” said Ronnie with a charmingly polite smile, “but I wonder if you could help us? We’ve been asked to complete a project on the history of our school within the next two weeks and we’d like to gather as much information as we can about the lessons, life at the school, you know, things like that. We’ve been told that you might be able to help us. Do you think you could?”

The petite Eve Canasteda stood before them in plastic green wellingtons, faded dungarees, a thick, cream cardigan and had her ash coloured hair tied behind her head. It wasn’t the first time that strangers had come knocking on her door and she was sure it wouldn’t be the last. But what harm would there be in helping a couple of St. Monedel’s very own pupils? In any case, she would be glad for the company. She held open her front door and circled her gardening fork, beckoning them to enter. “I’ll do my best,” she answered, “come in and I’ll get a pot of tea on the stove.”

Mrs. Canasteda was a hoarder. Along her corridor, as they walked through, were piles of dusty books stacked against its walls and two mahogany clocks, missing their hands, standing sentry opposite each other. As they turned the corner towards her kitchen, Tommy’s foot grazed the edge of an open bag of compost, with small green shoots poking from its soil. A row of the bags, snug next to each other like heavy pillows, lined the route through to her kitchen floor. Mrs. Canasteda was building an indoor nursery, keeping alive her husband’s interest in all things green.

“I guess you already know that my late husband was a teacher at St. Monedel’s?” She asked, flicking the switch on her kettle.

“Yes, we have been told,” replied Ronnie. He wanted to be sensitive about the subject of Carlos Canasteda. It was best to be discreet.

“Have you spoken to Mrs. Higginbotham? She’ll definitely be able to help you with this homework.”

“We have and she was most helpful. In fact, it was her that suggested we speak to you,” replied Ronnie.

“Did she now? She’s nice enough is Mrs. Higginbotham, talks too much though. Tea?”

“Please,” Ronnie replied. Tommy, meanwhile, was staring at a collection of black and white photographs in a glass cabinet in the corner of the kitchen.

“Is this you and Mr. Canasteda?” He asked, recognising her youthful, pretty face in the pictures.

“Yes, handsome devil wasn’t he?” She beamed. She lifted the stewing teapot and her finest china onto a tray and carried it over to the kitchen table.

“We brought some cakes,” said Tommy as they sat themselves around it.

“Well, where shall we start then?” Mrs. Canasteda asked, “Would I be wrong in thinking that the period you would like me to talk about is when Carlos was a teacher?”

Ronnie felt that it was still too early to broach the subject. “Did you go St. Monedel’s, Mrs. Canasteda?”

“Oh no,” she shook her head and chuckled. “I went to a little school here in Haversham. It closed down quite a few years ago now. One of the neighbours bought it and converted it into a house. Oh well, that’s progress of sorts I suppose.” She sipped her tea. “I left school and went to work at fourteen years old.” Tommy almost knocked his cup from its saucer. That was only three years older than he was. “I went to work on the farms around here, until I met Carlos that is.”

“So how did you and Mr. Canasteda meet?” Ronnie asked gently. His heart warmed as she told her story.

“Silly man got lost on one of his rambling walks didn’t he,” she giggled as she remembered the moment, “he hadn’t been teaching at the school for long and didn’t know the area. I was still working at the farm, you see, and he asked me if I might show him around sometime. It all began there.” She turned her head towards the cabinet and gazed longingly at the photographs for a few seconds before returning to the boys. “We courted for a while and then we were married. A lot of the girls I knew back then were very jealous, he was quite the catch.”

“He was a Chemistry teacher wasn’t he?” Ronnie asked, thinking that it was safe to talk about him now.

“Yes,” she nodded enthusiastically, “and a very good one. I’ve spoken to a number of his pupils over the years who remember him very fondly. It doesn’t surprise me in the least.” Tommy, who was feeling like a spare part in the discussion, leant his breast over the pine table and grabbed one of the chocolate éclairs.

“And then you moved here, to Haversham?” Ronnie asked. “It’s a very nice place.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Canasteda smiled. “Yes we did. Carlos fell in love with this house when he saw it. It has such a big garden, you see,” Mrs. Canasteda pointed out of the window. “I was worried that we might be cut off a bit, you know, socially, from the school. But I needn’t have. We were always invited to dinners, walks, weddings, christenings and the like. Would you like to see some pictures of what life was like back then, for your project?”

“Yes, of course, we’d love to,” replied Ronnie, hoping for clues on what happened to Carlos. Her rosy cheeks dimpling as she smiled, Mrs. Canasteda trotted out of the kitchen and returned, minutes later, with a rectangular tin box, painted with butterflies. She enjoyed taking trips down the memory lane of by far the happiest time in her life. Overall, the boys spent over an hour with her looking through trinkets and photographs. Like Mrs. Higginbotham, Eve Canasteda was an engaging and interesting storyteller. They were no closer, however, to solving the teacher’s disappearance. Ronnie wondered if Mrs. Canasteda really did hold the key to their mystery.

“Mrs. Canasteda, I hope you don’t mind, just getting back to our project for a moment, I wonder if you have any pictures of Mr. Canasteda in the school grounds, you know, to see what the school looked like then? Or perhaps of him being a teacher? Or perhaps some school memorabilia, like books or pens or something?” He asked.

“I suppose I have been rambling on a little bit haven’t I?” Mrs. Canasteda laughed, “I know there are a few bits in here.” She rustled letters and papers around in the box and after a few moments had pulled out a treasure trove of items, including old school photographs, school reports,

textbooks, a hymnbook and even a teacher's baton. "These should be useful for your homework assignment," she muttered as Tommy chewed on another chocolate éclair.

"Can I?" Ronnie asked, his fingers brushing the cover of one of the books.

"Of course," nodded Mrs. Canasteda, "I'll get you something to take these things away with you; that one was a schoolbook Carlos wrote for the school curriculum."

Ronnie leafed through the first few pages and the torn, jagged pages ripped from their library book flashed into his mind. His cheeks tingled with excitement. "Mr. Canasteda wrote schoolbooks? Wow." *This is it*, he thought. *This is the moment when Carlos Canasteda reveals himself*. "Did he write any books on dre-," Ronnie swallowed the word before it left his mouth, "on any other subjects at all?"

"No. He didn't write for anybody else, only the school I'm afraid," Mrs. Canasteda shook her head and neatly placed the items in a cardboard box. Ronnie's heart sank like a stone. Were they wrong about Carlos Canasteda? Was this all leading nowhere? Mrs. Canasteda slid the box across to Tommy, who was daydreaming out of her window.

"Thank you for all this Mrs. Canasteda," said Ronnie, forcing a smile to hide his disappointment. "We are sure to get an A-star thanks to you." He couldn't help but feel that Mrs. Higginbotham was wide of the mark.

"My pleasure."

"Oh I almost forgot," Ronnie slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Mrs. Higginbotham."

"Yes? What about her?"

"She wanted us to ask you something, if that's ok? She said that Mr. Canasteda used to have a catchphrase, something like, "It's all in the chemistry". Mrs. Higginbotham was wondering what it meant?"

Mrs. Canasteda curled a finger over her lips, lost in thought. “Well it might be because that was his profession,” she mused and then looked away, as if the comment had triggered something. She bent over her tin box and sifted through it. “It’s in here, I know it is. Let me find it a moment. Here it is.” She unfolded a thin, faded periodic table and rotated it, so the boys could see, written in slanted, spider-like writing, “It’s all in the chemistry.”

“Fancy waiting all this time to ask me though. You might as well have it for your project,” she folded it and put it in the cardboard box. “Do you think that’s enough to get you started?”

“Oh, it’s brilliant, thank you very much!” Ronnie replied.

“No, thank you. I’ve had a lovely afternoon. Make sure you come back and tell me how it went, won’t you?”

Ronnie and Tommy arrived at the Goody household an hour later.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kate, Grace and Freddie hared out of the cinema, sprinted along the high street and slalomed through the market traders, not looking back. They dared not look back. Kate tripped forwards, hands out, knocking apples and pears from a fruit stall, sending them bouncing in front of her. They zigzagged and jostled their way through a swarm of shoppers until finally they made it to the bus stop. They sat mute and expressionless the entire ride home, as if their emotions had been shovelled out and they were nothing but shells.

Grace burst into her sister's room, looked around disapprovingly and tutted. They should have gone to her clean, neat room rather than Kate's messy bedroom. It made her feel uncomfortable. It was scattered and chaotic, just like her mind at that moment. Kate's duvet was crumpled like a cloud, paper littered the floor and a stratum of unwashed clothes had begun to fossilise across her red sofa.

"Let's all sit down here on the carpet", she said, motioning towards the middle of the room; the place with the least mess. Freddie sat down cross-legged and noticed a stray piece of paper under his thigh. It was Kate's attempt at this week's maths homework. He picked it up and studied it.

"Number four is wrong," he said, his eyes glinting mischievously at Kate.

"Oh never mind. I'm no good at algebra. You can help me if you want," she smiled cutely, hoping that he would correct it there and then.

"Let's see," Freddie said, and scanned the paper. As he did so, a large house spider scuttled across it and onto his hand. Freddie's heart stopped and his eyes fixed on it. He was *sure* it was the red stripe. He twisted his torso like a discus thrower and flung the arachnid towards Kate's wall. "IS IT REAL?!" He screamed at the girls, his hands and arms trembling. "IS—IT-- REAL?!" His head swam.

Kate leaned over and rubbed his thigh, attempting to soothe him. “It’s real Freddie; it’s as real as you and me.”

“Are we going crazy? Tell me we’re not going crazy,” he jabbered and lowered his chin against his chest, his black curly locks dropping onto his forehead.

“We’re not going crazy,” Kate whispered. She moved onto her knees and rubbed his shoulders. His tense frame slumped and relaxed. If only for a moment, he felt safe again. “But we do need to talk about this.”

“Well I don’t want to talk about it,” Grace, behind her, said defensively. If she was honest, she was just as scared as Freddie was. Talking about it would mean confronting what was happening to them. She would rather slam the door shut on her psyche than delve around in its horrors.

“But we’ve *got* to talk about it,” Kate insisted, digging her thumbs in between Freddie’s shoulder blades; Freddie winced. “And we’ve got to tell Ronnie and Tommy. It’s all very well us not getting any sleep night after night because of these nightmares. It’s all very well me walking around like a zombie every day and getting rubbish grades,” her eyes narrowed as she screwed Freddie’s T-shirt angrily between her fingers; Freddie tried to move away as she worked herself into a temper, “but not while I’m awake. I’m not having it stalk me while I’m awake. We’ve got to talk about it. And we’ve got to do something about it. It’s not just me. It happened to all three of us. This thing, whatever it is, is after us, I know it. And it’s scaring the hell out of me.” Then, suddenly, she let go. “Oh, hello, how long have you been there?” She asked Ronnie and Tommy, the latter of whom was holding a box and standing in her bedroom doorway.

“Long enough,” replied Ronnie, “so, what in the hell are you going on about? Are you going to tell us what happened?”

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I hope you find Dreamcatchers a riveting story and thank you for your readership,

Regards,

Tom Sarega