

The Ramton Gallow  
Mysteries:  
The Witch of Primrose Hill

By

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# Chapter One

## The Missing Pupil

The strange thing was that most of the people in the small Worcestershire town of Ramton Gallow didn't notice anything strange. Of the rare few that did, only a rarer few lived to tell about it. And those they told didn't believe them anyway, passing the tales off as childish stories, because you see, as is almost always the case in life, it is children that can see the strange things of the world.

Twelve year old Daniel Grade just couldn't wait to hear the end of school bell ring as he walked into the first lesson of the day, English with his form teacher, Miss Prig. "Piggy" Prig they all called her, not to her face obviously, that would have been silly. The name really suited her though, as she was plump, had an upturned nose and a tendency to wear clothes that were predominantly pink. Today, as usual, was no exception. She had on what looked like a brand new fluffy pink cardigan over her pink dress, the length of which was just too long for her five foot frame, as the hem of the dress skimmed along the floor as she entered the classroom and walked to her desk in front of the blackboard. Placing her large shoulder bag, which she carried with her everywhere, on the desk, Miss Prig opened it up and started taking out books and piling them next to it.

'Right, class,' she said as the clock on the far wall ticked over to 9 o'clock and the bell rang out in the corridor to signal the start of the lesson. 'If you could all bring up to me your homework from over the weekend, we can then start with what we have to do today.'

Her squeaky voice and cheerful demeanour was not helping with the pupils Monday morning sluggishness. As they slowly lined up to hand their homework in one by one,

Daniel hung back so he could get on the end, just behind his friend Shauna Spinner.

It was at that point that Daniel noticed something different about Shauna; she had had her hair cut. Instead of her blonde hair being tied in a ponytail that stretched down to the middle of her back, it now rested on her shoulders in a neat bob.

‘Where’s Billy?’ she whispered over her shoulder to Daniel.

‘No idea,’ he replied. ‘He’d better not be late again or else he’ll probably get a detention this time. Nice haircut by the way.’

‘Thanks, my Aunt Lucy came round and did it last night,’ she smiled. Shauna’s Aunt was the local hairdresser, and had a salon in the town centre.

At that moment a rather lanky, scruffy looking boy sneaked in through the classroom door. It was Billy Tool. The left side of his shirt was sticking out from underneath his black school jumper, and his collar was all over the place. He managed to drop his school bag at the side of his desk and join the line behind Daniel without being detected by Miss Prig.

‘What are we all lined up for?’ he asked, tucking his shirt in and straightening his collar.

‘We’re handing in our English homework,’ said Shauna, waving her neatly written on sheets of lined A4 paper.

Billy darted back over to his bag, unzipped it, took out his homework and jumped back in line again.

‘You cut that close, mate,’ said Daniel, with an air of admiration in his voice.

‘No need to worry about me, Dan. I’ve got everything under control.’

Daniel smiled, that was what Billy always said, just before things went drastically wrong.

As they had handed in their homework, Miss Prig gave each one of them a copy of Roald Dahl’s *The Witches*.

‘When I was younger,’ Miss Prig began once everyone was seated back behind their desks, holding a copy of the book in her hand. ‘This was my little sister’s favourite book. I must have read it to her about a dozen times, always finding something new with each read. She said it taught her and me something really important – how to spot a witch.’

‘There is no such thing as witches.’ Shauna blurted out, rather louder than she had meant it to.

‘Are you sure, Miss Spinner?’ asked Miss Prig.

‘Well, I’ve never seen one. Not like the witches in this book.’

Miss Prig let out a deep sigh before she continued to address the class. ‘For today’s lesson I want you all to start reading *The Witches* and to have a five hundred word essay about the book by Friday’s lesson.’

Though there were a number of moans from some in the class, they all opened their books and began to read. Billy yawned before he had even got past the first line. He hated reading, it always made him tired, unless it was a comic book, and then he was riveted and you couldn’t prise him from its pages.

By the time the bell went to signal the end of the lesson and the beginning of the morning break, to Daniel’s surprise he had already read over a third of the book. As he placed it in his bag he looked over to Billy, who at that second startled himself awake.

‘The lesson’s over?’ asked Billy as he rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hand.

‘Yeah, how far did you get?’ asked Daniel.

‘Page ten, how about you?’

‘Just a few pages more,’ he lied.

After the mad rush to get their coats, everyone went out of the main door of the school and into the playground.

Ramton Gallow High School had been around for a long time, over two hundred years in fact. Etched in a stone plaque

over the door was the year 1805, still visible despite being badly weather beaten.

The strange thing was that the plaque was the only thing about the building that had aged at all. Though the style of the building was dated you could be fooled into thinking that the last brick had been laid only yesterday. It looked like an enormous village hall, with an archway entrance, above which sat a small clock tower and bell. The arched windows looked as though they would have been more at home on a church than a school, though the building *had* once served as a church for Sunday services for a short time during the Second World War. This was not due to anything war-related, but to the fact that the vicar of St Michael's Church at the time had fallen asleep while lighting candles in his vestry. This resulted in part of the building being burnt down, and a vicar who only just managed to escape with his life and no recollection of losing consciousness.

Though the sun was shining brightly, this was still a usually cold February day. The half term break was next week, and Daniel couldn't wait until he had the chance to stay tucked up in his warm bed all day, which was exactly where he wished he was now.

As he, Billy and Shauna made their way across the playground; Daniel heard his name being called from over by the football pitch. Looking over in that direction, he could just about see the waving hand poking out from over a crowd of fifth form girls.

'Daniel,' the person called again, and though he still couldn't get a good look at him, Daniel knew that the waving hand belonged to his older brother.

You could tell that Daniel and Matthew were brothers. If you had a picture of Matthew from three years ago you would swear it was Daniel, now though Matthew was a clear eight inches taller and three stone heavier than his younger brother, but the resemblance was still striking. They both had dark

black hair, piercing blue eyes and a cheeky grin every time they knew they were in trouble. Girls seemed to flock around fifteen year old Matthew, but, apart from Shauna, they never went near Daniel.

As Daniel and his friends approached, the crowd of girls parted to let them through. Matthew was sitting on the arm of one of the school's wooden benches, which housed the members of Matthew's gang – Peter Grey, Andrew Lint and Marcus Fox. As usual, Peter had a girl sitting on his lap, running her fingers playfully through her hair and whispering in his ear.

'I don't think you'll be getting any more problems off Anthony Trainer from now on, Dan,' said Matthew, getting off the bench and putting his arm around his brother's shoulder. 'Foxy and Lint sorted him out for you Friday evening up Primrose Hill, and he hasn't turned up today. Bet he's too scared to show his face.'

Andrew Fox and Marcus Lint gave out an affirmative nod and grunt. They were both big lads for their age, fifteen stone each and well over six foot, and constantly looking as if they were on the verge of ripping someone's head off.

They were the reason no right minded person ever tried to bully Daniel, Matthew wouldn't allow it, as Daniel's brother it was his job to do the bullying, but he never did. Yet on the previous Friday after Daniel had finished his P.E. lesson, Anthony Trainer tried his luck. With Matthew at home ill, and Andrew and Marcus in detention, Anthony decided to steal Daniel's rucksack and throw it onto the school roof. He had got as far as taking the rucksack, giving Daniel a bloody lip in the process, before Peter came around the corner and saw what was going on. Anthony instantly dropped the rucksack and ran for it. Peter stopped Daniel from going after Anthony, and waited with him for Billy and Shauna to come out of the changing rooms so the three of them could walk home together as they always did. Daniel remembered that

Matthew had been on the phone a lot that evening after he told his brother what had happened.

‘You’d better be careful that the Headmaster doesn’t find out what’s happened,’ said the girl sitting on Peter’s lap.

‘Why?’

‘Because Matt, it’s not just that he hasn’t turned up today, he hasn’t been seen at all since then, that’s why.’

‘How do you know?’ Peter enquired.

‘Well, I heard Anthony’s mum talking to Sarah’s mum Saturday night when I went ‘round Sarah’s house to stop over that she hadn’t seen him since Friday morning when he left for school,’ said the girl, without taking a single breath. ‘Also,’ she continued, ‘Anthony’s mum was up here this morning to talk to the Headmaster about it, and I’m surprised that he hasn’t made an announcement or talked to anyone yet to see if they’ve seen him.’

With that she went back to whispering into Peter’s ear, and a worried look appeared on Andrew and Marcus’s face.

‘What did you do to him?’ asked Daniel, a little guiltily.

‘Nothing,’ said Andrew. ‘We just pinned him on the ground and told him if he ever touched you again we’d throw him up on to the school roof, and to show him we meant it we chucked him into old Mrs Harris’s front garden and went home.’

‘We did throw him pretty hard though, Andy,’ said Marcus. ‘And as we went I think I heard Mrs Harris’s front door open. You don’t think she took him inside do you?’

Andrew just shrugged, but his face had gone slightly pale just thinking about the possibility.

‘What if she did?’ asked Daniel.

Marcus’s face was one of surprise. ‘Oh, you don’t want to go inside Mrs Harris’s house, they say that if you do you don’t come back out.’

‘You don’t honestly believe that?’ Shauna scoffed.

The two large boys just nodded, it was the first time the group had ever seen them look even remotely scared.

It wasn't long before the bell went and everyone piled back into the school. By lunchtime everyone had heard the story of Andrew and Marcus throwing Anthony Trainer into Mrs Harris's front garden and never being seen again. Some had even gone on to speculate what had happened to Anthony inside the house, each story more gruesome than the last.

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The last lesson of the day was Daniel's favourite, Art with Miss Sanderson. Miss Sanderson was everything that Miss Prig wasn't. Tall, slim, beautiful, and never ever wore pink. She had arranged a bowl of fruit on a desk in front of a dark blue backdrop at the head of the classroom so the pupils could do a still-life picture, allowing them to choose what ever medium they wanted to do it in. Daniel had chosen pastels on a black sheet of paper. Billy was eagerly drawing the fruit in pencil, trying to finish as fast as possible so he could just sit down for the rest of the lesson and do nothing. Shauna on the other hand was taking her time, lightly sketching her picture before using her watercolour paints. They were halfway through the lesson when Miss Prig came to the door.

'Excuse me Jill,' she said to Miss Sanderson. 'The Headmaster needs to have a word with Daniel Grade.'

Jill Sanderson looked over at Daniel, who was already putting his pastels away, and told him not to worry about it and that she would put everything away for him if he wasn't back for the end of the lesson.

Slowly, Daniel left the art room and walked just behind Miss Prig to the Headmaster's office. When they got there, Miss Prig gently knocked on the door and waited for an answer.

'Come!' said a loud voice from the other side of the door.

‘In you go, Daniel,’ she said, opening the door for him.

Mr Raven, the Headmaster, was sitting down behind his long wooden desk. He stood up as Daniel entered the room. His tall thin body, shoulder length white hair and long gaunt face added to the fear factor that encompassed the students of Ramton Gallow High School when ever they came into his presence. He looked at Daniel with his narrow grey eyes, which lay behind large gold spectacles. Seeing the fear in Daniel’s face, Mr Raven smiled to try and put him at ease. It didn’t work. His tobacco stained teeth and narrow blood red lips made him look more menacing than friendly.

‘Do come in, Daniel,’ he said, pointing to an unoccupied chair on the other side of his desk.

It was then Daniel noticed the other man in the room, sitting in the chair next to the one Mr Raven was pointing to. It was a police officer. He was a heavy set man with short black hair and plump rosy cheeks. He was also smiling at Daniel, though this smile had a more desirable effect than Mr Raven’s was having. Daniel considered that if the police officer was smiling at him then he wasn’t going to be in trouble; it was a stern faced policeman you had to worry about.

‘This is Sergeant Riley,’ introduced Mr Raven.

Daniel walked over to the chair, trying not to look at either Mr Raven or Sergeant Riley, and as he sat down, the Headmaster followed suit.

There was a pungent smell of coffee and stale tobacco smoke in the room. Mr Raven’s white mug sat on the corner of the table, the last drops of his lunchtime drink still at the bottom. Though he had banned smoking in the staffroom, the ban did not stretch to his office, and Daniel could just about make out the marks on the tabletop where Mr Raven’s ashtray had sat before he had tucked it away quietly in the top draw of his desk.

‘Now,’ the Headmaster continued, ‘you may have heard the rumours going around the school that one of the students in the fourth form has disappeared; Anthony Trainer.’

Daniel nodded, his stomach was tying in knots and he was worried that he might not be able to stop himself from being sick.

‘I have spoken to his mother this morning, and she is frantic with worry. What we can gather from talking to some of the other students is that you were one of the last people to see him Friday at the end of school. Could you please tell us what you remember?’

Daniel told them everything that had happened between him and Anthony up to the point where Peter Grey had come around the corner and Anthony had ran off.

‘What happened after that?’ asked Mr Raven.

‘I waited for Billy and Shauna to meet me once they had finished getting changed and we walked home.’

‘Did you see Anthony again on your way home?’

‘No sir.’

‘Do you have any idea what happened to him?’

‘No sir,’ he lied.

Daniel didn’t want to get Andrew and Marcus into trouble, they were his brother’s best friends, and they had been doing him a favour. He knew that if it wasn’t for them he would most certainly have been the victim of far worse bullying than anything Anthony Trainer could have done. It was good to have them around, even though they had been, in Daniel’s opinion, very heavy handed. The test would come for him though when the next school year started in September. There would be no Matthew, or any of his friends, around to protect him.

‘Had Anthony ever picked on you before?’ asked Sergeant Riley.

‘No sir,’ replied Daniel.

‘Had you seen him ever pick on other people at the school, Daniel?’

‘Sometimes,’ he said, trying to think if that was really the truth or not, ‘once or twice maybe.’

‘We have had problems with him before,’ said Mr Raven, knowing where Sergeant Riley was going with his questions, ‘but nothing serious, no one really has a grudge against the boy. His school work has been improving, especially in Maths and Art. I honestly do not see any reason for him to have runaway. I...’

Mr Raven caught himself, remembering that Daniel was still in the room.

‘I don’t think we need to ask you anymore questions,’ he said, looking over at Sergeant Riley to see if he was also finished with Daniel. Sergeant Riley just shook his head. ‘You may go.’

Daniel got up and walked out of the office. As he closed the door he could hear Mr Raven and Sergeant Riley start talking again, but he could not make out what they were saying.

It felt a long way back to the Art Room, and as he slowly walked back there his mind raced with thoughts as to what had really happened to Anthony after Andrew and Marcus had left him in Mrs Harris’s front garden. Marcus did say that he only *thought* he had heard her front door open, it could have been any front door; he could have easily been mistaken. Neither Andrew nor Marcus would ever get awards for their intelligence. And anyway, Mrs Harris was old, at least eighty, Daniel thought, how could she have done anything to a healthy fifteen year old. According to the papers it was usually the other way around, though of course, things like that never happened in Ramton Gallow. Daniel came to the conclusion that Anthony was probably too scared to come to school and probably went to a friend’s house that his mother

didn't know about. He'd turn up in the end, and this whole situation would just blow over.

## Chapter Two

### Through The Window

All the way home from school, Billy quizzed Daniel on what happened in the Headmaster's office. Much to Shauna's annoyance, Daniel must have answered every question about three times by the time they got to his house, No. 14 Pine Road. On their way they had walked up Primrose Hill, and on passing Mrs Harris's house, they couldn't stop themselves from looking at the dark windows.

'It's watching us,' Billy had said, shivering slightly as if someone had walked over his grave.

'Yeah, I know what you mean.'

'Nonsense,' barked Shauna, 'there is nothing wrong with the house. It's all in your imagination.'

She shook her head, angry with herself for even contemplating the idea that something was amiss, and carried on walking ahead as the boys slowed down, their eyes still fixed on the windows.

After searching his pockets for his front door key, Daniel let them into his house, and after not forgetting to wipe their feet on the mat, he led them into the living room. Daniel's mother was in there, busy doing the ironing, not taking her eyes off the television as she did so. Her long red hair was tied back tightly off her face, and there was a glistening film of sweat covering her brow.

'Sit down if you can find a space,' said Mrs Grade, as most of the chairs were piled high with neatly folded clothes, 'and Daniel will get you a drink, won't you dear?' The grin she gave her son told him that this wasn't really a question, but an order.

As Billy and Shauna found a space each on the sofa, in between a pile of Daniel's freshly ironed boxer shorts, Daniel asked them what they would like.

‘The kettle has just boiled,’ said Mrs Grade, ‘so you could have a cup of tea or coffee if you want? It’ll warm you up after being outside in the cold.’

‘I’m all right Mrs Grade, thank you,’ said Shauna.

‘I’ll just have some orange juice, if you have any please.’

‘Right then, Daniel, get Billy an orange juice, and I’ll have a cup of tea. I could really do with one after washing and pressing you and your brother’s clothes for the past two hours.’

As Daniel went into the kitchen, Mrs Grade turned off the iron, folded the last of Matthew’s t-shirts, and then after picking up a pile of clothes off the nearest chair and placing it on the floor, she sat down.

‘Ah, that’s better,’ she said wiping the sweat off her face with one of the kitchen towels she had just ironed. ‘How was school?’

‘It... it was all right,’ spluttered Billy, wondering if Mrs Grade had heard about Anthony Trainer’s disappearance.

‘You know just the usual stuff, teachers and lessons, break times,’ said Shauna.

As Daniel came back in with the drinks, he asked his mother if it would be all right if Billy and Shauna stayed for dinner as they had a lot of homework to do. Mrs Grade agreed, as long as they both phoned their parents first to clear it with them, and then she set about doing enough food for everyone.

Daniel and the others sat themselves down at the dining room table, got out their books and each began working on their history essay that needed to be handed in to Mr Busby in the morning. There were times that Daniel wished that he could stop always leaving his homework to the last minute, but as Billy kept pointing out to him, where would the fun be in that.

At ten minutes past five, Matthew stormed into the house. He had been playing on the school’s football team, and they

had just got back from their away match, defeating West Lumley High School two towns over. Though he was now in his school clothes his hair was a mess and his face had streaks of mud down one side.

‘Daniel,’ he said, angrily. ‘Did you tell the police about Andrew and Marcus attacking Anthony on Friday?’

‘No,’ said Daniel sharply.

‘What did you tell them then?’

‘I told them that Anthony took my rucksack, Peter scared him off and that I hadn’t seen him since. Why?’

‘Well,’ Matthew began, ‘just as we were about to get the minibus to go to the match a police car pulled up and they took them both in for questioning. Luckily they are only our subs, and they can’t play football to save their lives, so the team didn’t suffer. Anyway, just after we got back I called Andrew from the phone box on the corner hoping they were back and to see what had happened. He asked me to find out if you had told the police what they did because they seemed to know everything.’

‘Well, I didn’t tell them.’

‘I told him that you wouldn’t,’ said Matthew, not very convincingly, ‘but I did say that I would ask you about it to make sure, and if you say you didn’t then both of them are going to have to believe you.’

Matthew left as abruptly as he had arrived and went upstairs to have a bath. The three of them sat in silence for a second, all wondering the same question.

‘Who do you think told the police?’ asked Billy.

‘I’ve got no idea.’

‘I have my suspicions,’ said Shauna in a hushed voice. ‘I think it was Jenny Davis, Peter Grey’s girlfriend. She doesn’t like Peter hanging around with them; she nags him about it all the time. She calls them “pig-headed bully boys”.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Girls talk, Billy, that’s how I know.’

‘You mean girls eavesdrop and gossip.’

Shauna gave Billy a harsh look and carried on with her homework.

‘You know what, Daniel; I think if we weren’t friends she’d have given me a slap for that.’

As quick as a flash, Shauna’s hand darted out and cuffed Billy lightly on the back of the head.

‘Sometimes Billy,’ said Daniel, failing to hide the amused grin on his face, ‘you need to know when to keep your mouth shut.’

Trying not to look to see the expression on Shauna’s face, the boys put their heads down and got on with their homework.

‘Hello all,’ said a voice about half an hour later, it was Daniel’s father.

Mr Grade had just come in from working in his office in the centre of town, and the smell of food that lingered in the house was very welcome to him. He looked like a larger, older version of Daniel and Matthew, except for the fact that his hair was receding from his forehead and he had a goatee beard with a few grey flicks in it.

Going straight into the kitchen, he gave his wife a kiss on the cheek and whispered something in her ear which made her giggle. Daniel wondered if it was from what his father had said, or from his beard tickling his mother’s cheek. A few seconds later Mrs Grade came out with two plates of burger and chips, and after Daniel and the other two quickly put their books away, she placed one plate in front of Shauna and the other one in front of Billy.

Matthew slumped his way to the dining room table from watching the television in the living room, and sat down next to Shauna. He smiled at her, but to his surprise she did not return it. A large number of girls at Ramton Gallow High School would have swooned if Matthew had sat next to them, let alone smiled at them, but from the look on her face he

reasoned that she was annoyed by the way he had talked to Daniel when he had arrived home.

After tea had been eaten, Billy and Shauna gave their thanks to Mrs Grade, and went home before it got too dark outside. Daniel went up to his room to continue reading *The Witches*. He read for about ten minutes before he realised that he couldn't concentrate anymore, not with everything that had happened that day swirling around in his mind, so he put the book down and started playing on his games console. By nine thirty his eyes were getting heavy and his hands were getting sore from the constant clicking of the buttons on the control pad, so he switched off the console and got into bed.

Just as he pulled the covers over him there was a weak knock on the bedroom door, and his mother poked her head round before Daniel could ask who was there.

'Are you all right?' she asked, concerned.

'Yeah, mum. I'm fine.'

Daniel wondered if she knew he was lying.

With a smile, Mrs Grade came into the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

'You know you can tell me anything, don't you?'

'Yes, mum, I know. There's nothing wrong. Honest.'

'Ok then,' she said, bending down and giving him a kiss on the forehead. 'Goodnight, sweet dreams.'

Slowly, she walked out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Though he felt drained of energy it took Daniel another hour before he could fall asleep. He felt bad about lying to his mother. He could have told her, part of him wanted to tell her, and along with that he was still worried about what would happen when he went back to school. What if Andrew and Marcus didn't believe he had nothing to do with the police taking them in?

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At school the next day, Daniel was still worried that Andrew and Marcus would not believe Matthew and extract their revenge on him. The history lesson seemed to fly by, even though it was Daniel's least favourite subject and it usually would drag on for what felt like three times its normal length. By the end of morning break, however, he didn't need to wonder about his physical safety anymore.

'Hey, Daniel, we've been looking for you.'

Daniel slowly turned around. Coming across the playground were Andrew and Marcus. Daniel braced himself for the beating he expected to get, closed his eyes and said, 'I didn't tell them anything.'

'What?' said Marcus.

Daniel opened his eyes. Andrew and Marcus were standing only a few inches away, towering above him.

'I didn't tell the police that you went after Anthony.'

'Oh yeah, we know. Matthew told us. He said you might be worried that we still think it was you.'

Daniel began backing away; the fear was etched on his face for all to see.

'It's all right,' said Andrew heartily, putting his meaty arm around Daniel's shoulder, 'we believe you. We still got a month's detentions though for going after him, but at least we didn't get charged with anything.'

Daniel felt relieved, though he was still a little tense with Andrew's big arm giving him a friendly shake, and as the bell went he walked into the school and let out a huge sigh of relief.

The rest of the school day went smoothly, and the rumours flying around as to what happened to Anthony, and what Andrew and Marcus's involvement had been in the disappearance, had died down. As usual, Billy and Shauna were going to accompany Daniel back to his house. Shauna had finished reading *The Witches*, and as Billy had not even

touched the book since Monday's lesson, she said that she would help both him and Daniel do their essays for Friday.

After leaving through the school gates, walking right along Pickering Lane, and turning left on to Primrose Hill, they noticed an argument going on up ahead of them, just outside Mrs Harris's house. Five children from Ramton North Primary School, which stood at the top of Primrose Hill, at the corner with Pine Road, had been playing football in the street. That was until three older boys who, by their uniforms, attended the High School, had intercepted the ball and would not give it back.

It was then that Shauna noticed that one of the Primary School boys was her brother, Rodney.

'Hey,' she shouted, running up the street towards the boys. 'Leave them kids alone.'

The older boys just laughed at Shauna. That was until they saw Billy and Daniel running up behind her. It seemed that one of them recognised Daniel as the boy from the rumours about Anthony.

'Run, quick,' said one of the older boys to the others, 'before he sets those big lads on us.'

The older boy that was holding the ball kicked it away as hard as he could and turned tail and ran with the others.

As they disappeared around the corner, Daniel didn't know whether to feel insulted or honoured. He would have preferred it if they had been scared about what he could have done to them, instead of his association with Andrew and Marcus. Though truth be told, he wasn't really good in a fight anyway, and was glad he didn't have to prove himself if things had turned violent.

He and Billy were out of breath by the time they caught up with Shauna, who was now talking to her brother.

'WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR?' Rodney shouted at his sister.

'I didn't want you to get beaten up.'

‘I can take care of myself, Shauna. Come on you lot, let’s go to the park and play there.’

‘But... but my ball’s gone into that garden.’ One of other young boys cried, pointing towards Mrs Harris’s house.

‘Well, go and get it,’ said Rodney, impatiently.

‘But...but that’s where the old witch lives.’

‘She’s not a witch; she’s just an old lady,’ said Rodney.

‘Well, you get it then.’

Rodney didn’t move, you could see by his face that he hadn’t believed what he had said.

‘Will one of you go and get it?’ Shauna mouthed almost silently to Billy and Daniel, hoping that her brother couldn’t hear her.

Billy shook his head, so Daniel, taking a big sigh, lumbered along to Mrs Harris’s front gate. He could just about see the football resting near the wooden gate to the back of the house.

The front gate creaked as he slowly opened it, and as Daniel crept along the garden he cautiously hid himself against the side of the house, stopping next to the kitchen window. Sneaking himself underneath, Daniel managed to pick up the ball from where it lay and start back.

Just as he was halfway along, he heard a large crash come from inside the house. Instinctively, he poked his head up and looked through the window. Daniel could see that Mrs Harris’s cat had just knocked a pile of pots and pans onto the floor from off the kitchen table. Mrs Harris was bent down picking them up one by one cursing the feline as she did so. The cat stood there for a second just looking at her, before darting through the cat flap in the back door.

It was then that Mrs Harris stood up, making Daniel gasp. He had seen Mrs Harris once or twice in town, but now she looked nothing like he remembered. Instead of her full head of curly grey hair, she was bald, with only a few long strands of white coming out of the sides and back of her head, her

face seemed more drawn and wrinkled without her makeup on, and as she turned her head towards the window, Daniel could see her large nostrils flare as if she was smelling something.

Daniel ducked back down and held his breath, counting the seconds away while he waited for her to hopefully leave the kitchen so he could move and get out of her front garden.

Suddenly, with a deafening squeal, Mrs Harris's cat leaped onto his shoulder, digging its claws into him. He stood up sharply and came face to face with Mrs Harris, with only a thin piece of glass between them.

She stood there, her face expressionless. For a second Daniel couldn't move, her eyes seemed to freeze him to the spot. With the feeling that his lungs would burst unless he did so, Daniel let out a loud scream and ran, stumbling for the most part, out through the front gate and back into the road.

## Chapter Three

### Mrs Harris's Cat

‘She is not a witch, Daniel,’ said Shauna, taking off the cap of a tube of antiseptic cream in Daniel’s kitchen.

‘You didn’t see what I saw,’ he sucked in a pained breath through his gritted teeth as Shauna applied the cold cream to his skin. ‘Be careful will you.’

Shauna just gave out an impatient sigh and continued to treat the long scratches Mrs Harris’s cat had left on Daniel’s shoulder, and though he tried not to, he winched until she had finished adding the last plaster to his wounds.

‘You’re such a baby. Anyone would think that you’d been attacked by a panther from the way you’re reacting.’

Daniel did not answer back; he just slipped on a t-shirt from a clean pile of washing which he hadn’t yet taken upstairs to his bedroom, and sat down at the kitchen table next to Billy. He didn’t mind the way Shauna acted, fussing around him like a mother hen; she had been that way ever since all three of them first met at primary school when they were six. Always bossy, though caring with it, and a lot smarter than them, making sure they were doing the right thing the right way. He put it down to the fact that she was a few months older than both him and Billy, and, as it had been commented by many of her teachers, she was mature beyond her years. Billy, on the other hand, thought that she was a pain in the neck when she acted that way, and was glad Daniel was getting the attention and not him.

‘Well, what did you see?’ asked Billy, taking his copy of *The Witches* out of his rucksack.

Slowly, Daniel gave both Billy and Shauna every detail of what he saw from the moment he walked into the front garden to when he raced out of it, heading for his house without even stopping for them.

‘So, from that you get the idea that she is a witch?’ enquired Shauna.

Daniel picked up Billy’s copy of *The Witches* and turned to the part where it described what witches looked like and pointed out the parts which corroborated his idea.

‘Look, bald head.’

‘It says that they are completely bald. You said that she has long bits at the sides and back.’

‘All right then, Shauna. Large nostrils, I told you she was sniffing the air. She could smell me.’

‘I can smell you as well, mate,’ said Billy, holding his nose.

‘Hey,’ said Daniel, then sniffing under one of his armpits. ‘Fine, I smell a bit, I was scared. If you had seen her like that it would be more than just your armpits that are a bit whiffy.’

‘Daniel,’ interrupted Shauna, ‘it also says that a witch has to wear gloves to hide her claw-like fingernails. Was she wearing gloves?’

‘Not that I remember.’

‘Also it says that her pupils change colour. Did her pupils change colour?’ asked Shauna.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘That’s because she is not a witch, she is just an old lady. Some old ladies lose their hair; some old ladies have large nostrils. It’s just a rumour to scare little kids. I’m glad my brother didn’t believe it.’

‘He didn’t go into the garden though did he?’ said Billy.

‘Fine, maybe I overreacted,’ said Daniel, not really believing that he had overreacted but wanting to get on with his homework as it was nearly half past four.

The three of them settled down at the table and began writing their essays on the book. Two hours had past by the time they had finished, all making sure that their work was different enough to seem as if they had done it independently. Billy really had no idea if what was in his essay was correct or

not, but as Shauna had said that he would be all right with it, he put it confidently away in his rucksack.

Billy and Shauna left Daniel's not long after finishing their essays. Mrs Grade had asked if the pair wanted to stay for dinner again, but as it was too late to tell their parents, they declined.

After he had eaten, Daniel sat himself in front of the television and started flicking through the channels until he found something of interest. This did not last very long as his mother came in from finishing the washing up, took the remote control from his hand, and as she sat down next to him, switched over the channel to one that was showing one of her many soap operas.

Daniel didn't complain. He had learnt from bitter experience that if he did the result would not be in his favour. His mother didn't have many vices, but watching soap operas was one of them.

At about nine o'clock, the front door opened and in stormed Daniel's father, muttering something that a young person's ears should not be hearing.

'What's the matter, dear?' Mrs Grade asked as her husband walked into the living room, her eyes, as usual, not moving from the television screen.

'Oh, nothing much, nothing much,' he huffed, sitting down in his favourite chair and loosening his tie. 'Oliver Perkins wants the weekend off to visit his sick grandmother.'

'That's reasonable,' replied Mrs Grade.

'Not when he had a four days off two months ago to go to her funeral.'

'Are you sure he's not talking about a different grandmother.'

'Oh,' said Mr Grade, his face softening. 'Fine, I'll let him have to time off then.'

'Good. Is there anything else troubling you?'

‘Not really, only that I nearly ran over a stupid cat that was sitting on the driveway. I had to swerve to miss it and almost hit next door’s wall.’

‘Did you hit the cat?’ asked Mrs Grade.

‘No,’ he replied.

‘Did you hit the wall?’

‘No,’ he said again.

‘Well, there’s no harm done then. Now be quiet I’m trying to watch the telly.’

Knowing the drill, and even though the daily run of soap opera’s had finished, Mr Grade went quiet and took his tie off completely.

They sat in silence, except for the sound coming from the television, for another hour before Daniel decided he would rather go to bed than watch the ten o’clock news. He said goodnight to his parents and went into the hallway. As he reached the foot of the stairs he heard a noise coming from just outside the front door. He paused for a moment, wondering if he would hear it again, but as it hadn’t returned after a few seconds, he put it down to his imagination and started to go up to bed.

However, he hadn’t gone up more than three steps when he heard it again, this time much louder than before. It sounded like a short, sharp high pitched whine. Tentatively he went back down and over to the front door. He looked through the small spy hole to see if anyone was there, but all he could make out was the dark road that ran in front of the house.

Taking a deep breath, he decided to open the door and have a look outside. Maybe he really was imagining it, but he wanted to make sure. Pulling the door handle down as far as it would go; he slowly opened the door inwards and peeked into the cold night air.

‘All right Daniel, let me in, it’s freezing out here.’

It was Matthew, his front door key in his hand, millimetres from where the lock would have been. Daniel was slightly

startled to see his brother standing in front of him; though as Matthew's curfew on a week night was ten o'clock he wasn't all that surprised.

'You just made it,' said Daniel, stepping back to let his brother in.

'Yeah, Jenny was keeping Peter talking on the phone for most of the night so we didn't get much game playing done. One of the draw backs of having a girlfriend, they never shut up when you want to do anything that doesn't involve them.'

Daniel laughed slightly in agreement, though as he, Daniel, had never had a girlfriend any truth to Matthew's statement was lost on him.

As Matthew went into the living room, Daniel closed the front door, taking a quick look outside just to make sure nothing else was there. Just as he was about to put his head back in he saw it, a flash of green by the back tyre of his father's car. It was the eyes of Mrs Harris's cat. She meowed at him, and though it wasn't as loud, Daniel knew that the cat had made the noise he had heard.

'Go away,' he hissed.

The cat just stood there, her green eyes shone as they caught the moonlight.

'Go away,' he repeated, louder this time, with more urgency in his voice.

Just as Daniel was about to shout at her, the cat darted underneath the car, giving one last meow as she disappeared into the shadows.

Daniel shut the door and went upstairs. He could feel the throb from the scratches on his shoulder now, it reminded him of what the cat had done, and he wished that he had gone outside and kicked it in return for its attack on him.

Once he got into his bedroom, Daniel took one last glance at the front garden of his house through the window, looking to see if the cat had returned. When he saw that it hadn't, he

got undressed and slipped in between the cold sheets of his bed.

He lay there for a while, replaying everything that had happened that afternoon in his head. Behind his closed eyes, the sight of Mrs Harris's face peering at him from the other side of her kitchen window made him shudder, though for only less than a second. Nevertheless, it was enough for Daniel to wish that he could scrub the memory from his mind and replace it with something, anything, which would make him feel calm and warm. He was convinced that she was a witch; she just had to be, no matter what Shauna said to convince him otherwise. Maybe the book was not entirely accurate; it was a work of fiction after all. Yet he still had a weird niggling feeling that it might be of use to him, somehow.

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The next morning, Daniel decided that it would be better if he took the long way around to school, and not travel past Mrs Harris's house. So instead of going to the right down Pine Road and on to Primrose Hill, he turned left outside his house and went past all other streets that he could have taken until he got to the last one, Hawthorne Street. Turning down it he turned left at the very end next to the park, and found himself at the far end of Pickering Lane. He crossed over the road and walked all the way up to the school gate where Billy and Shauna were waiting for him.

'Are you all right?' asked Billy, noticing the tiredness on Daniel's face.

'I had a restless night,' he replied, as if that was going to be the end of the conversation. It wasn't.

'Why, dream about witches did you?' Billy tried to be jovial, but Daniel wasn't in the right frame of mind.

‘No,’ lied Daniel, sharply. ‘I just couldn’t get to sleep, that’s all.’

Billy didn’t say anything else. He could tell that his best friend was not in the mood to be interrogated right now, and as the school bell went, the three of them in silence walked towards the main door of the school.

Just as Daniel got a step or two away from the door he stopped dead in his tracks. He could feel something watching him. Tentatively, he looked back over his left shoulder towards the road that ran in front of the school gates. It seemed empty, except for the morning bus that had just driven by. He shook his head, annoyed with himself for letting all of this spook him, and carried on into the school.

Knowing that the coast was clear, Mrs Harris’s cat jumped over the three foot hedge of the house opposite the school gates, padded across the road and slinked through the railings into the playground. She patrolled it for a while, watching to see if any of the birds that were perched on the school roof would dare to venture down, and then after she was confident that they wouldn’t, she jumped onto one of the benches, walked in a circle for a second, and then sat herself down and waited.

She stayed there until morning break, watching the children all spill out of the main door, until Daniel, Billy and Shauna emerged, closely followed by Miss Sanderson, as it was her turn to do playground duty. At that point the cat jumped down, quickly trotted back across the playground, through the railings, and along the street towards the turning to Primrose Hill. Turning her head at the corner, she looked back and watched as Daniel, along with Billy and Shauna, sat down on the spot she had just been occupying, and after they had been joined by Daniel’s brother Matthew and his friends, the cat carried on her way around to Primrose Hill, and out of sight.

‘What you looking at?’ Shauna asked Daniel, nudging him in the side with her finger.

‘Nothing, I just thought I saw something, that’s all.’

He turned back from looking at the corner of Pickering Lane and Primrose Hill, and joined in listening to the conversation between Matthew and his friends.

‘I’ll tell you something, Matt,’ Peter Grey was saying, ‘if she keeps this up, I mean it, I’m going to dump her.’

‘Come off it, Pete. You two have had lots of arguments before, and you’re still together.’

‘Not like this, she knows I’m only a one woman guy.’

‘Who does she think you’re cheating on her with, then?’

Peter didn’t have a chance to answer as his name soundly shrilly from across the playground. He looked over and saw Jenny beckoning towards him. Taking a deep breath, which seemed more at home coming from the lips of a condemned man about to take his final walk to the gallows, Peter got up and went over to her.

Everyone sitting on the bench or standing around it watched Peter and Jenny. Though they couldn’t really make out what they were saying, which was more Jenny than Peter, her flailing arm gestures and ever reddening face, told them that this argument was not going to end happily.

After four agonising minutes, Peter had an angry final word and walked back to the bench. Jenny burst into tears, covered her face with her hands and ran behind the side of the school and out of sight.

‘Well, there you go. It’s over,’ said Peter, sitting back down next to Matthew.

‘Don’t worry about it, Pete. There’s plenty more fish in the sea.’

Peter gave a weak nod and ran his fingers through his hair, seeming to try and drag the stress out of his head.

‘That was a bit heavy,’ said Shauna to Daniel as they walked back into the school after the bell went.

‘Yeah, I know. If that’s what having a girlfriend is like, then you can count me out. It seems way too much like hard work if you ask me.’

‘Me too,’ agreed Billy.

‘It’s not always the girl’s fault you know.’ stormed Shauna, before picking up her stride and heading off to class.

Daniel and Billy looked at each other with a ‘*what’s got into her*’ expression on their faces, before following Shauna into the classroom.