TOBY AND THE

SILVER BLOOD WITCHES

by

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Toby and the Silver Blood Witches

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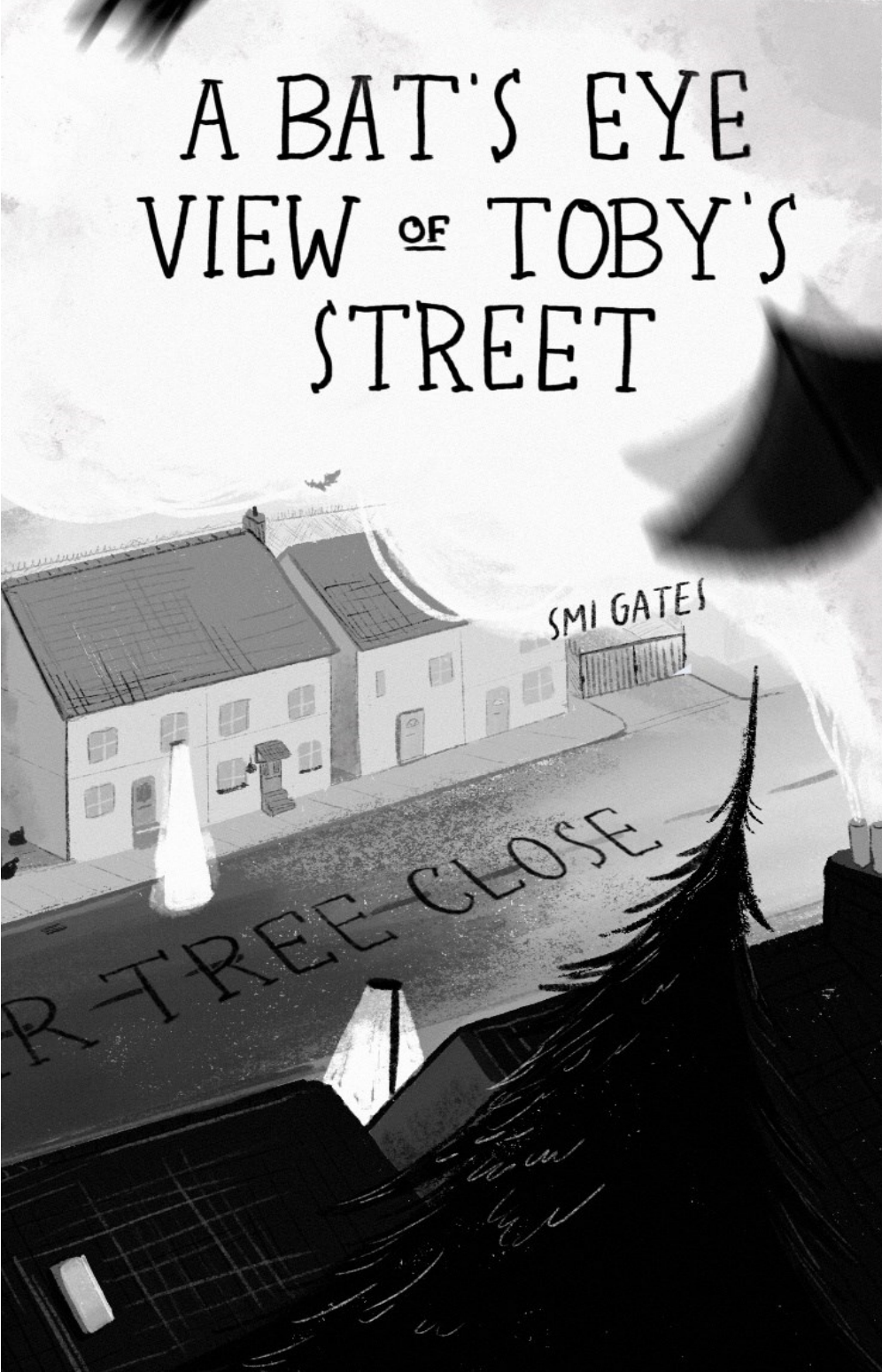
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For my mum,

for everything


SMI
CAR PARK
TOBY'S HOUSE
MRS WINTERBERRY'S HOUSE
NO MANS LAND

A BAT'S EYE VIEW OF TOBY'S STREET





CHAPTER ONE

One more sleep. One more day at school. Then the whole of the summer holidays to keep an eye on Mum.

Toby lifted the glass to her lips, and she sipped weakly.

"Thanks, love."

"Are you going to be too hot under the duvet?" He wiped his brow. This heatwave had been going on for days.

"I'll be fine."

Toby perched on the edge of the bed. If he made sure everything was quiet and peaceful, if nothing unexpected happened, Mum would be able to rest. Then maybe she'd get better. There was a chance, right?

The floorboards creaked in the attic above, and his mum flinched. "It keeps doing that today."

"The windows are open, remember?" said Toby. "It's probably that."

He turned to close the curtains. Light spilled from the room onto their patio below with its rickety bench and plant pots full of weeds. At the bottom of the

garden, the hedge loomed out of the darkness. It was high and thick to keep people out from what lay beyond. On the other side, a lamp flickered in the building.

Toby drew in a sharp breath.

A girl stood at the distant window, her long golden hair illuminated in the light from the lamp. *That was strange*. Surely all the workers would have gone home by now? Despite the hot July evening, a chill crept through Toby's bones. *This could not be happening. Not again.*

He forced himself to look away. Above, the night sky was clear. Behind him, his mum's breathing was shallow and laboured, her frail body almost swallowed by the plump pillows.

It was no use, he couldn't resist. His gaze strayed to the window as if the girl were a magnet. She was staring right at him.

A memory scratched at the back of Toby's mind and images swam into his vision. *A woman ... a woman at the window ...* No! He had pushed her out of his thoughts for so long. He would not remember her now.

"Toby?" his mum whispered from the bed.

He yanked the curtains closed.

"Is everything OK?"

"Fine!" Toby flicked off the light and hurried out of the room before his mum could ask more.



CHAPTER TWO

Fifty-four minutes to go. Only fifty-four minutes. Toby fidgeted at his desk the next day, willing the maths teacher to arrive. Shrieks and laughter swirled around him. He checked his watch again. Fifty-three minutes to go. Just this last lesson and then six whole weeks off. No more school. No more Bull's Eye Bean.

Dacker sauntered past, giving Toby a sharp nudge. "Holidays aren't going to be much fun for you, are they, Bean?" he sneered. "Got to look after Mummy, haven't you? I bet they take you away one of these days. A kid shouldn't be doing all that stuff."

It was the longest speech Toby had ever heard from Darren Dackman, and an icy hand gripped his insides. But he had no time to respond. From behind came the sound of paper being crumpled: Dacker and his gang were beginning their favourite game. Instinctively, Toby reached for the tuft of white hair which grew at the nape of his neck.

Beside him, his best mate, Roger, squirmed in his seat. "You could always dye it brown like the rest of your hair. Get them off your back," he whispered.

Toby raised his eyebrows. “Yeah right.”

The paper missile, crushed into a tight ball, bounced off his shoulder. The gang jeered at whoever had missed.

“Hold still, Bean!” shouted a rough voice. Then a pencil sharpener hit him hard on the back of his head. With that force, it could only be Dacker’s right-hand man, Boz, twice the size of the rest of them, who had thrown it. Sure enough, Toby heard his whoop of delight, “Bull’s Eye!”

Toby didn’t turn round. He never did. But he knew the great oaf would be celebrating, arms in the air, as if he’d won an Olympic gold medal.

Roger shifted and glanced behind.

“Ignore them!” Toby hissed.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” asked Roger.

Toby shrugged. “There are worse things to deal with.”

“You don’t care about anything anymore! Not since your mum … well you know.”

Toby glared at his friend. What did a stupid pencil sharpener matter when his mum … He stopped himself. *Don’t think. Don’t feel.* That was his survival tactic.

Usually it was best not to retaliate when the gang was on the rampage; it only made things worse. But today was different. In an hour, Toby would be free from Dacker. Today was a chance to do something. As Boz continued to clown around, Toby scooped up the

pencil sharpener from the floor. He passed it from one hand to the other, deciding. Everyone held their breath as the sound of Mr McClean's footsteps tapped up the corridor. Toby hurled the sharpener at the blackboard several metres away. It ricocheted off and flew into the wastepaper bin with a satisfying clunk. The girls' giggles turned to appreciative murmurs and Roger's cousin, Jazz, cheered. The teacher entered the room before Boz could respond. *One to Toby.*

The maths lesson finished and the bell rang; school was over for another year. Chattering excitedly, the class gathered up their belongings and streamed into the sunshine.

"Are you sure you can't come tonight, Tobe?" Roger asked, spinning a football in his hands. "It is the holidays."

"I've got to get home. Get Mum a drink. She hasn't seen anyone all day. You know that!" said Toby.

"You'll be there tomorrow though?"

"Of course!" He'd never miss the Saturday kickaround – the only time he could forget about everything, thinking only of the ball and where to pass it next.

"Good! I want Player of the Year on *my* team this week," said Roger.

"That was over two years ago!"

"I'm sure you'd still be Radton's best striker if

you could get there."

"Well, I can't."

Roger threw the football at Toby who deftly returned it.

"Oof!" exclaimed Roger as it thumped him in the chest. "Nice!"

"You need to work on your reaction skills!" Toby dodged out of the way as his mate tried to clout him on the head.

"See you tomorrow then," yelled Roger and he raced after the rest of their mates to the park.

Toby trudged home, the heat from the sun baking the pavement under his feet. Reaching the entrance to Fir Tree Close, he stopped at the solid metal gates. They were as high as a house and as thick as a wall. Beyond lay the SMI, the building behind Toby's garden. People said the initials stood for Solar Material Investigation, but that was all Toby knew. He'd lived on this road his whole life, twelve years now, yet he still couldn't pass without staring, without wondering what mysteries the barrier concealed.

Toby had managed not to think about the girl at the window all day, but now his thoughts went to what he had seen last night. Why had she been in the SMI? Maybe he'd imagined her. That was what he'd told himself the previous time. The time he'd done nothing. Light and dark could play tricks on your eyes, couldn't they?

Could he have imagined somebody at the window twice though? Could he have imagined a woman staring at him, a woman screaming … *Don't think about it. Don't think about it.*

Footsteps echoed behind Toby, and he turned to see Jazz bounding up. He'd known her as long as he'd known Roger, and that was pretty much forever. The three musketeers, or so they had been once. Jazz might be Roger's cousin, but sometimes she felt like Toby's too.

She gave his shoulder a playful push. "Nice throw earlier! It's about time that lot stopped pushing people around."

"It's not like the five-time champion of dodgeball would miss a shot," said Toby, puffing up his chest and giving a wink.

"Whatever." Jazz poked him in the ribs.

They looked up as a powerful BMW roared past and pulled into the entrance to the SMI. For a moment, Toby was blinded, dazzled by the reflection of the sun on the gleaming paintwork. A tinted window slid open, and there was Dacker, sitting in the passenger seat. He raised his arm and flung a crumpled ball of paper, hitting Toby on the chest. Slowly, the gates whirred open and the car purred through.

Toby and Jazz peered into the grounds, making the most of this rare opportunity, but there was little to see. The grass was carved into lawns with razor-sharp edges and not a blade out of place. Beyond stood a

two-storey concrete building, a dark and silent silhouette against the sky. Then the gates clanged shut, enclosing the private world once more.

"How come Dacker's allowed in the SMI?" asked Jazz, her brown eyes wide.

"No idea. I think his dad has a high up job there. I was never allowed in when Mum was a cleaner."

"I wonder if Dacker knows what they do?"

"I doubt it. The employees aren't allowed to talk about their work. I was never able to get any details out of Mum."

"I can imagine you tried! We never used to be able to get you to shut up, you were a right chatterbox." Jazz paused and fiddled with a stray wisp of her black hair. "How is your mum, by the way?"

Toby grunted and scraped the toe of his shoe along the pavement. Silence fell.

"Anyway, I think you're right," said Jazz after a moment. "Dacker can't know anything. He'd be so full of himself if he did, he wouldn't be able to keep it to himself. Can you imagine? He'd tell Boz and then the whole school would know."

The paper Dacker had thrown lay in the gutter; Toby gave it an idle kick. It began to unfold revealing Dacker's untidy lettering scrawled across the page. Toby picked it up.

Meet me at the park midnight tonight.
I have something you will want to see.

Do NOT bring anybody with you.
Be there or else.
You have been warned.

Toby's heart sank. What on earth could it mean? This was definitely not part of his summer plan.

"What does it say?" Jazz leaned in to get a closer look.

"Nothing," answered Toby.

Before he could pull the note away, she grabbed it and scanned the writing. "Don't go."

"Mmm," he grunted. "Might be worse if I don't."

"Then I'll come with you."

"Better not, it says not to take anyone," said Toby. "I'll be fine by myself."

A loud rumble echoed around the neighbourhood. Dark clouds were looming on the horizon.

Jazz slung her schoolbag over her shoulder. "Got any plans for the holidays? See you around?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe. Maybe. You hardly ever go out anymore! We're having a big family party next week. You should come."

Toby hesitated. A party with Jazz and Roger would be fun. Their Mauritian families were always so welcoming. So different to his own quiet house. But it didn't feel right to go. "I can't leave Mum."

Jazz shot him a sad smile and dashed off in the other direction, her ponytail flapping up and down.

Another boom of thunder sounded overhead. Toby hurried past the towering SMI gates and several red brick houses until he reached number twelve.