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Opening extract from

Say Her Name

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James Dawson

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'Twas in the middle of the night,
To sleep young William tried,
When Mary's ghost came stealing in,
And stood at his bedside.
O William dear! O William dear!
My rest eternal ceases;
Alas! my everlasting peace
Is broken into pieces.
I thought the last of all my cares
Would end with my last minute;
But though I went to my long home,
I didn't stay long in it.

From 'Mary's Ghost: A Pathetic Ballad' by
Thomas Hood

Drip, drip, drip.

Drip, drip, drip.

Drip, drip, drip.

This was *really* starting to get on her nerves. Taylor Keane tightened the kitchen tap with all her might, even using a tea towel to gain a better grip, but the relentless dripping continued. Where was it coming from? Leaning over the sink, she twisted the handle and threw the window open, snaking her arm through the opening and into the balmy night air. She held out her open palm. It wasn't even spitting.

The strangest thing was, wherever she went in the house the volume of the drip remained consistent, like it was following her around. She may well have snoozed through Physics, but she was pretty certain that wasn't possible.

She opened the cupboard under the sink and, pushing past

about a trillion bottles of bleach, disinfectant and furniture polish, found the U-bend. A quick swipe of her finger confirmed it was bone dry. No leaks there.

Drip, drip, drip.

This was so typical. Her parents only went out one night a week to their ridiculous salsa class and she was left alone with a plumbing emergency. She'd called and called but they weren't answering their phones.

Worst. Night. Ever. Bad enough that Jonny hadn't come over like he'd promised. They were supposed to be watching a DVD/making out, but he'd cancelled, saying he felt 'fluey'. The scummy liar was probably down the arcade with his mates. Taylor cursed her fatal weakness for big arms and blue eyes.

Drip, drip, drip.

'God, that is so annoying.' She clutched handfuls of her tousled caramel-blonde hair and stomped out of the kitchen and into the lounge. Locating the remote control, she muted the TV.

Drip, drip, drip.

It seemed to be coming from above, perhaps the dead space between floors. She scanned the ceiling for bulges. Maybe she should just call a plumber . . . she was sure that's what you were meant to do in a leak situation. Surely her mum and dad would only thank her for preventing the collapse of the ceiling. It was almost 9 p.m. though, and she shuddered at what an emergency out-of-hours plumber might charge. She didn't even have ten quid in her purse.

She padded barefoot across the plush beige carpet into the hall and peered up the sweeping staircase to the first floor.

Maybe it was coming from upstairs – in fact the bathroom was the most likely source. It was worth a look.

Drip, drip, drip.

Louder, clearer than ever: thick, viscous drops landing on a solid surface. But where? She'd lived here her whole life (well, when she wasn't away at school) but suddenly the house seemed alien and strange. It was super-lame, but she really wished someone else was in the house right now.

Taylor put a brave toe on the first step. She arched her neck back, angling to get a look at the upstairs landing. The coast was clear. High above her head, the light fixture cast a claw-like shadow over the ceiling. She hesitated. A voice in her head whispered, *Don't go upstairs.* 'Get a grip, Tay,' she muttered to herself. With that, she took the steps two at a time, showing the house just how unscared she was. This wasn't some stupid horror film that Jonny had brought over to try to freak her out, it was real life and they simply had a leaky pipe.

Emerging onto the landing, she peeked around the banister. *Nothing to see here*. The water tank was in the attic, but horror film or not, there was no chance she was going up there by herself, not with spiders the size of kittens. Yet the dripping persisted. If anything, the liquid splattered with greater frequency – tapping out an increasingly hectic rhythm.

There were two possible sources on this floor: the main bathroom and the en suite in her parents' room. Clenching her fists, she arrived at her parents' room first. With dim streetlight filtering through the blinds, she found the room immaculate as always and with no evidence of flooding. She crossed to the tiny bathroom. Snapping on the light, she saw at once through

the glass shower door that the dry cubicle was not responsible for the dripping. The toilet also appeared fine; there was no water on the tiles at all.

One option remained. As she returned to the landing, she cursed. The leak was worse still. The drips were now almost a current, as if liquid were pouring onto the floor.

She hurried into the main bathroom, pulling on the light cord. The bulb seemed to falter, wheezing and shuddering as it came on, only filling the room with a thin, stuttering, greenish glow. Taylor wondered if the leak was affecting the electrics. Everything else seemed normal, but the water was at its loudest. The shower curtain was drawn along the length of the bath. She suddenly felt exceptionally blonde. All that fuss and it was just the shower trickling into the bath.

The lights flickered again. Even dimmer. The prickly feeling in her stomach wasn't going away. *It's just the shower*, she told herself. Taylor inched over the tiles, steadying herself on the sink pedestal, catching sight of her ashen face in the ornate mirror that hung above it. She reached for the shower curtain, teasing the edge of the plastic veil. *Do it like ripping off a plaster* . . .

She yanked the curtain aside, only to knock bottles of shampoo into an empty, white bathtub. The showerhead hung expectantly over her, no water running from its face.

'What the . . . ?' Taylor groaned, stepping away from the tub. 'This is insane!' *Drip, drip, drip*. It was *so* loud. Where was it coming from?

And then she saw. In the very corner of her eye, she saw *something* move in the mirror. Something that wasn't her. Mouth dry, she turned to face the glass. It was *impossible*, but

her reflection wasn't alone; something else waited within the frame. Taylor screamed.

The glass was no longer solid, more like a rippling silver pool on the wall. A slender hand, as white as marble but slick with blood, reached *through* the glass and clutched the basin, pulling itself from the reflection into the bathroom. Glistening red rivers ran from the dead fingertips, coursing through splayed fingers. It pooled around the taps and in the sink. As the hand reached for Taylor, thick red beads splashed onto the mosaic tiles.

Drip, drip, drip.

Chapter 1

Hallowe'en

Piper's Hall School for Young Ladies aged 11–18 sat on the top of a rugged, exposed cliff-face, a cove much battered by high winds and higher waves. The school perched, gargoyle-like, high above the shore. Nothing about the architecture said 'school'; towers and turrets were topped with vicious metal spikes, while even the sprawling green playing fields were the colour of slate in the midst of a storm. By day it was a nightmarish vision, by night it was worse.

Locals referred to it by many names, some ruder than others, but all the townies in neighbouring Oxsley stayed clear. With good reason . . . it was every haunted castle from their childhood nightmares. Even from miles out at sea, you could see forked tongues of lightning reach down to lick the casements.

Worse than the sinister appearance, it was full of posho, toffee-nosed, boarding-school brats. Well, that was certainly

Bobbie Rowe's verdict on why anyone with an ounce of common sense would avoid her school.

The cold sawed through Bobbie's bones, the pathetic rubbish-bin fire doing nothing to keep their party of seven warm. They were gathered in a squat PE shed at the outer limits of the hockey pitch, the shutters over the windows rattling in the howling gale. Clamping her jaw shut was the only way Bobbie could stop her teeth from chattering like a cartoon woodpecker.

This whole evening was so lame. So lame she could cry. Bobbie didn't even *like* most of these people, and she certainly wasn't bothered about Hallowe'en.

'And the noise grew louder . . . drip, drip, drip . . .' The fun-size bonfire cast a demonic red glow across Sadie Walsh's ruddy face. 'The babysitter oh-so-slowly reached for the shower curtain and, taking a deep breath, she flung it open!'

'Oh God! What did she see?' squealed Lottie Wiseman, nervously chewing her hair.

Sadie narrowed her eyes in glee, building the anticipation until her audience was salivating for the grand reveal. 'The poodle was hanging from the shower rail, its throat cut, and blood drip, drip, dripping into the tub!'

The two guys on the opposite bench, who had no business being at an all-girls school at *any* time, let alone in the middle of the night, chuckled to one another.

'And on the mirror . . .' Sadie continued, a twisted, manic look in her eye, 'written in blood, were the words "Humans can lick hands too!"'

Lottie and Grace managed a coy faux scream for the

delectation of the smuggled-in boys. Bobbie did not scream, only shifting slightly to kick-start life in her gym-bench-numb buttocks. While boarding school turned some girls into ticking hormone bombs, it had only succeeded in making her excruciatingly shy around boys.

'Whatever, Sadie.' Sitting next to her, Bobbie's best friend Naya spoke out. 'I've heard that story a million times before, and FYI, it's an *old lady* and a dog, not a babysitter . . . why would a babysitter be going to bed at someone else's house?'

Bobbie giggled and pushed her geek-chic-but-actually-necessary glasses back up her button nose. Thank God for Naya – she just about made Piper's Hall tolerable. She noted that one of the local boys (the cuter of the two – the mixed-race one with closely buzzed hair) was also grinning but Sadie did not look thrilled at the negative review.

'Oh, I'm sorry, Naya. I forgot you were the expert on everything Hallowe'en related – my mistake.'

Naya pursed her full lips. 'I'm not saying I am, but you promised a *true* ghost story. Oh hi . . . is that Trade Descriptions?'

Once more Bobbie laughed. Sadie was full of crap at the best of times, and in an institution where laxatives were traded like cigarettes in jail, that was really saying something. 'Okay. You want a true story?'

The circle chanted agreement. Except Bobbie. At Naya's insistence she'd abandoned *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* for this demented charade . . . *'It's Hallowe'en!'* she'd begged, *'one night a year . . . live a little!'* Naya would pay for this. Bobbie didn't know how, but she'd pay.

'Don't say I didn't warn you . . .'

'Sweet Jesus, Sadie!' Grace Brewer-Fay, the final member of their illicit party and reigning monarch, finally spoke. She could not have looked more bored if she'd tried. 'Can you just get on with it please? I don't want to be here all night.' The Head Girl delivered the last two words in precise, soap-opera seduction mode as she stroked the boy she was nestled against – the same cute Hollister model one. As Grace ran her fingers over the smooth, taut, brown skin of his forearm, Bobbie couldn't help but wonder what it felt like. He was *gorgeous*, and even keeping the admission in her head made her cheeks flush raspberry red. It was so silly, he didn't even know she was here; Bobbie was ever the chameleon, happy to fade into the wallpaper.

Sadie puffed herself up like a particularly proud peacock. 'Well this one *really* happened, right here at Piper's Hall.' Grace and Naya voiced instant disbelief. 'It's true! This all went down when my eldest sister was here! If you don't believe me, I'll ring her for you right now!'

Bobbie rolled her head on Naya's shoulder. 'Can we go?' she whispered, so only her friend would hear. 'I have like two chapters left to read and I was just getting to the big finish.'

'Are you kidding? We're getting to the good stuff!' Naya's New York accent, somewhat watered down after three years in England, always strengthened when she was excited.

'Who knows the story of Bloody Mary?' Sadie once more leaned into the fire. Any closer and her face was sure to melt. Bobbie reluctantly raised a limp arm and so did a couple of the others. 'You may *think* you know the story . . . but it's been diluted and changed as it got passed around. The true story,

the original, so to speak, started right here at Piper's Hall . . .'

'As if!' barked the second boy, whom she'd overheard the hot one call Mark. Bobbie always felt sorry for boys called Mark. Like who names a kid after something you wipe off a kitchen counter? It was just mean. He too was an Oxsley townie, muscular-stocky, and wore a gold stud in his left earlobe. Bobbie liked to imagine he was a farmhand or chimney sweep, but knew that was more her Oxsley snobbery than any truth. 'I've heard that story loads of times!' he went on. 'There was a film about it!'

'Yes, Mark, that's because so many Piper's Ladies have gone out into the world and spread it . . . the *real* story all started two hundred years ago when a Piper's Hall pupil called Mary Worthington killed herself. It was a night just like this one . . . lightning lit the sky and thunder crashed!'

Right on cue, the dingy storage shed shook under a mighty peal of thunder. Despite herself, Bobbie grasped Naya's arm.

Sadie revelled in the chance drama. 'One Hallowe'en, she went to her lover – a local boy in the village – to ask him to elope. In those days, it would have caused a huge scandal – a young Piper's Hall girl having an affair out of wedlock. When he refused, she begged, but he laughed in her face. He'd got what *he* wanted. So Mary ran back to the school in the pouring rain, found a length of rope, took herself to the bathroom and hung herself. The last thing she saw was her own reflection in the mirror as she dangled . . .'

'We've all heard that story!' Grace scowled, flicking her shampoo-ad blonde hair.

'Doesn't Bloody Mary refer to Queen Mary because she

killed hundreds of Protestants?' Bobbie breathed in Naya's ear as the dim recollection of a Year 6 History lesson swam through her memory.

Naya grinned broadly. 'I don't think Sadie got that memo!'

At the other side of the circle, Grace stood, hauling her beautiful boy bounty to his feet. 'Caine and I are off. We have better things to be doing . . .' Ah, so his name was Caine. C*aine*. Cool name. 'Bobbie and Caine' had a nice ring to it. *Yeah, that's gonna happen*.

'Just wait!' Sadie smiled sweetly, licking her lips. 'That was just the background . . .'

'I wanna hear the end of the story.' Caine plonked himself back onto the bench, much to Grace's obvious dismay. Poor Caine mustn't receive the Piper's Hall newsletter . . . no one defied Grace Brewer-Fay and lived to tell the tale.

Banshee winds threatened to lift the roof clean off the shed and Bobbie hugged herself tight. Sadie continued her yarn. 'There are so many different versions of what happened next, but everyone agrees Bloody Mary can be *summoned* . . . it happened right here in the school. A girl did it, a few years ago when my sister was here. There are rules. It has to be during the witching hour – midnight. You have to light a candle to help Mary find her way from the Other Side. You need a mirror too; you see, Mary's dying soul became trapped in the mirrors, unable to cross into the afterlife. And then, all you have to do is say her name five times . . .'

'What happens then?' Caine asked, eyes wide.

'No one has lived to say . . . they don't even find the bodies. They just vanish . . . or so they say.'

The room fell silent, hanging on the consequences of Sadie's last words until Naya started a slow handclap. Caine, white teeth twinkling in the dim light, joined in. His smile lit up his face further; Bobbie couldn't take her eyes off it. There were dimples. He was straight off a bedroom wall poster.

It was weird. Bobbie wasn't usually interested in guys her own age: teenage guys looked like little boys to her. The 'teenagers' she fancied on TV were all fake because the actors were really in their twenties. Caine was different though: no acne, no braces, no ill-fitting sportswear – he looked like the guys on TV. *He mustn't be able to move for girls hurling themselves at him at Radley High*, she thought, which made it even weirder that he'd go for Grace. She was certainly pretty, Bobbie mused, but then so were lots of poisonous flowers.

'They never find the bodies? Well isn't that convenient?' Naya whooped. '*And there was never a shred of evidence*!'

Equally unimpressed, Grace scowled. 'Well, I'm *so* glad we stuck around for the ending. When's the film version coming out?'

Sadie folded her arms and pursed her lips. Somehow, Bobbie foretold the next sentence before it had even escaped her mouth. 'Fine. You won't mind doing it then, will you?' *That* was the true crescendo to her tale, the other ending a false finish, drawing them to this inevitable conclusion. You could have heard a pin drop at the far side of the hockey pitch.

'What? Are you serious?' Naya replied. Lottie watched the scene with bushbaby eyes.

'I'll do it!' Caine offered at once, rubbing his hands together.

'No! Don't!' Poor Lottie was on the verge of mental collapse,

judging by the look on her face.

Sadie stood, throwing down an invisible gauntlet. 'Well if the story is total rubbish, you won't have a problem summoning her.'

'Go summon a clue!' Naya snapped. Oh God. Bobbie had seen this happen numerous times . . . Naya Sanchez just didn't know when to back down. She braced herself for the oncoming storm. 'Why don't you do it if you're so tough?'

'Sigh. Rewind – I already did!' Sadie posed, hand on hip, every inch as stubborn as her frenemy.

'Then why aren't you dead?' Bobbie finally spoke up, hoping to douse Naya's fire. She pulled the sleeves of her heavy cable-knit jumper over her hands to keep them warm.

Sadie stalled at the centre of the circle, her parade rained on. 'I don't know! It didn't work. But Lottie will back me up, she saw me do it!'

Every head in the smoky outhouse turned to waif-like Lottie, who, frankly, would go along with anything her best friend said. 'It's true. She did it three nights ago . . . and she did it right, but nothing happened. It was really scary though!'

'You're kidding? The fake ghost didn't appear? Big shocker.' Grace's lips curled into an all-too-familiar smirk.

Sadie stood her ground. 'Okay. So do it. Or are you scared?'

Grace shrieked with laughter. 'Sadie, babe, do you really think that's going to work on me? I *invented* peer pressure.'

Sadie crumbled under the immense power of Piper's Hall's own Bloody Mary. That was the thing with Grace. She was like a cobra; she'd dance all night, but one bite and it was all over. Bobbie had no idea why Grace was as mean as she was – she

must be pretty insecure to spend so much time picking on other people. Whatever the cause, Bobbie didn't care enough to try to reach out to the human cactus, quite sure she'd only get pricked for her efforts.

'Well I'm gonna do it!' Caine rolled up the sleeves of his hoodie and did a merry warm-up jig, like a boxer psyching himself up for a bout.

'What?' Grace sprayed venom.

'I'm gonna do it!' he repeated. 'It's Hallowe'en. I ain't afraid of no ghost.'

'I'll do it too.' Naya rose to her feet and approached Caine. 'What is it they say – "Everyone deserves one good scare on Hallowe'en"?'

'Get in!' Caine delivered a high five to Naya.

This could not be happening. This night was turning into a repeat of the Spring Ball fiasco (identical-dress-faux-pas flashback) and Bobbie knew just what was coming next. Grace vs Naya.

'You must be kidding!' Grace said, nostrils flaring. 'If you think you're creeping off into the night with my boyfriend, those last few brain cells must have finally lost the will to live.'

Caine's mate, Mark, sniggered and parroted the word 'boyfriend' under his breath. Caine didn't look thrilled either, but let it slide with a curl of his beautiful lips. New dimple action.

'Well, Grace, you'd better come too then!' Naya smiled like a flight attendant on speed.

Bobbie heaved herself off the bench, feeling her knees crack as she dragged her tired limbs towards Naya. 'Nay, let's just

go to bed. It's late.'

'Yeah, listen to Blobbie, Naya . . .'

Bobbie opened her mouth, poised with a witty retort, but as always, Naya leaped in first, wheels on fire. 'Don't call her that! I'll do what I want. Come on then, Sadie, which bathroom? Let's go. Bloody Mary, on the rocks.'

Chapter 2

The Summoning

The shrill, unanimously ignored pleas of Mrs Craddock, the housemistress, haunted the long corridors and high ceilings of the dormitory blocks. As it was Hallowe'en, the strung-out housemistress had allowed the young ladies of Piper's Hall some free cord to run riot with but, as midnight neared, her patience had finally run out.

'Ladies! Into your rooms now please!' She was a woman on the edge, but who wouldn't be after shepherding adolescent girls for twenty-five years?

Bobbie, Naya, Grace, Sadie, Lottie, Mark and Caine listened from downstairs, next to the fire escape they'd just crept in through. Their faces and hands were red and raw, even from the short dash across the rain-lashed hockey pitch. Naya was in a tug of war with the door, struggling to pull it shut in the fierce winds.

Checking the coast was clear, Sadie pushed on an oak panel located between the kitchen and dining room. 'I can't believe

you have legit secret passages!' Caine said with boyish glee.

'Keep your voice down,' Grace snapped. 'Do you have any idea how much trouble we'll be in if we get caught?'

'Sorry.'

The so-called 'secret passages' had been Bobbie's only reason for agreeing to come to the school – the promise of *Scooby Doo* revolving bookcases and *Temple of Doom* caverns filled with bugs had appealed to her eleven-year-old self.

Turned out, the 'secret passages' were, in fact, little more than servants' passageways from when the main block of the school was a stately home. Allegedly there were priests' holes too, dating back even further, although Bobbie had never seen one. The corridors and stairwells weren't even 'secret' as such, but Lowers – the younger girls – tended not to use them once Uppers had over-egged how much trouble they'd be in if found trespassing in them. Oh, and naturally they were 'haunted'.

'Come on,' Sadie instructed. 'Follow me.' They slipped through the panel and into a narrow, carpet-less corridor, only marginally wider than Mark's blocky shoulders.

At the end of the passage, a rickety, creaking wooden staircase zigzagged all the way up the back of the old block, with exits on each floor. In a conga line they followed Sadie until they reached its exit point on the second floor, outside the dorms. Bobbie was wedged at the very back of the queue. She very much doubted anyone but Naya even knew she was there.

Behind the exit panel – a concealed door in the bay window on the landing between Austen and Brontë House – Bobbie could hear girls giggling and Mrs Craddock becoming more exasperated. Hopefully, the scurrying mass of girls would mask

the fact that five pupils were missing from their dorms, not that Mrs Craddock checked anyway, at least not when *CSI: Miami* was due to start in five minutes.

'Wait until it goes quiet . . . it's way past Craddock's bedtime, she'll be asleep in a few minutes,' Sadie breathed, ear pressed to the panel.

'Whatever,' Grace moaned. Ironically, as Head Girl it was her responsibility to ensure all girls were in their dorms after 9 p.m. and to report any visitors trespassing on the school site. Bobbie couldn't suppress a curious smugness that Grace wouldn't get her wicked way with Caine, at least not tonight. Assuming they survived Bloody Mary, of course. She wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. That said, if she was really honest, she was half curious to see if they'd go through with it, and if nothing else, Caine was particularly moreish eye candy.

The dorms, part of the original school building, were divided into four houses, each named after noted female writers – Austen, Brontë, Christie and Dickinson. The fact they weren't just labelled A, B, C and D was further proof, as if any were needed, that Bobbie's school was massively pretentious. Austen and Brontë were on opposing wings of the second floor, while Christie and Dickinson were the floor above that.

Sure enough, within fifteen minutes, footsteps and voices had faded to silence. Only the electric hum of strip lights and the pained moans of the storm filled the school.

'Right, let's get it on!' Sadie led the brigade out from their shelter.

Lottie left them to it, tiptoeing back to Christie House on the next floor. Bobbie hung back, tugging on Naya's arm. 'Why

are we doing this?'

'Oh come on, Bob!' Naya took her hand. 'I've done this at a hundred slumber parties. I'm just messing with Grace and Sadie! It'll be hilarious!'

'Really? Do explain.' She shrugged, incredulous.

'Duh! I go through with it and then spend the next week creeping around writing stuff on mirrors and hanging nooses everywhere! It'll spectacularly freak them out – I want to see Grace Brewer-Fay wet her bed!'

Bobbie watched as Grace hung off Caine's arm like a B-movie heroine. It was such an act; Grace had more testosterone than both boys put together. Would it be funny to take her down a peg or two? Hell, yes.

In the lead, Sadie and Mark reached Brontë House. Only a skittering night light illuminated the long line of peaceful dormitories – a dim silver light to guide girls to the fire exit. The coast was clear and the bathroom door stood ajar, awaiting them. Bobbie couldn't help but feel it looked a little ominous in the dark, on Hallowe'en night, in a raging storm . . .

She mentally threw a bucket of reality over herself. She should know better. Idiot kids all across the globe were chanting 'Bloody Mary' at mirrors; if it were true she was pretty sure the press would have covered it by now.

'Come on!' Sadie tiptoed into the shower room. Taking a deep breath, Bobbie allowed Naya to pull her across the threshold.

As always, the damp, tiled room carried the eggy scent of hair-clogged drains combined with an infusion of soap and shampoo. Behind the torn plastic curtains, the rusty showerheads leaked

continually, dripping against the ceramic floor. Bobbie doubted even the most desperate spirit would be summoned to this hole.

'Shut the door,' Sadie commanded and Bobbie obliged. Sadie pulled open her shower bag, which she'd already filled with candles and matches from her dorm, and started to set them up around the long, communal sinks that stood before the mirror. This whole thing had been orchestrated to the finest detail – Bobbie wondered how long Sadie had been planning it. There was some sort of unresolved tension between Grace and Sadie: both were in 'The Elites', a long-standing Piper's Hall institution-in-an-institution. Every year, one or two girls from rich, powerful or famous families were initiated into a 'special club' to have secret get-togethers and generally be vile – sort of like the Masons but with lip gloss. From what Bobbie could ascertain as an outsider, Grace and Sadie constantly jostled for Top Bee/Queen Dog.

It was total bull. Because her mum was kind of famous, Bobbie had been invited to join in her first year. She'd declined because it looked like some sort of sugar-fuelled, miniskirted anorexia cult, and as a consequence had suffered ever since. She was social roadkill, not that she gave a rat's ass. Naya *had* badly wanted in, however. Grace, who had taken an instant dislike to the sultry American newcomer when she'd arrived in second year, had seen to it that it'd never happen.

Bobbie gave her reflection only the briefest glance in the long mirror, pausing to fluff her rod-straight mousy hair before switching her gaze to the infinitely more interesting Caine – the bronze tone of his skin and the velvet texture of his hair. When the Caine-reflection caught the eye of her own, she whipped

her head down, praying he hadn't noticed her staring. Or worse, what if Grace caught her in the act? She needed to get it together.

'Okay. Almost midnight . . . who's going first?'

Grace drew herself up to full height and admired herself in the mirror, smoothing flawless blonde strands of hair. 'I'm not doing it, full stop. It's for kids.'

'Then why are you here?' Naya repeated.

'Because I know what *you're* like.' Her voice was ripe with accusation.

Caine, apparently sensing the brewing catfight, stepped forward to the looking glass, pulling stocky Mark alongside him. 'We'll go first!'

The shorter boy whipped his arm back. 'I'm not doing it. What if it's real? I'm just gonna film it so I can mock you till the end of time!'

'What is wrong with everyone?' Caine's irresistible smile broke again. 'You are all so soft!'

Naya, hands on hips, joined him in front of the mirror. 'They don't make soft New Yorkers, honey.'

Bobbie raised an eyebrow, unsure whether Naya was trying to be alluring or not. If she was, it wasn't working. And then she felt her feet doing something almost alien . . . they started to move towards the others. It was as if Caine were a computer virus completely infecting her personal hard drive . . . all her usual heuristics were blocked, all the sensible self-defence invisibility mechanisms overwhelmed in her desire to impress a boy she'd met only hours earlier and hadn't even spoken to.

Naya looked to her, a mixture of shock and pride. 'Bobbie?'

'What?' she replied. 'I'm not scared. It's stupid.' She was annoyed that Naya thought she was a weakling when she knew the real her. Grace shot her a look of pity normally reserved for three-legged dogs.

'Go, Bobbie! Love a girl with balls!' Caine stopped. 'Well not like that . . . you know what I mean.'

Bobbie lost herself in his eyes for a second, the first time he'd given her more than a fleeting moment's attention. *He knows my name*. She pulled herself tall. Boys are like dangerous dogs – if you show fear they might eat your face. 'Well, let's get this over and done with before we all get expelled.'

'Yes please,' Grace agreed. 'Bloody Mary is one thing, state schooling is another.'

Sadie backed away to where Grace sulked and Mark flicked his mobile open and started to record their personal, low-budget horror film.

'Whenever you're ready. It's past midnight. If you dare.' Sadie whispered the last word like a somewhat camp crypt keeper.

The three of them looked into the mirror. Predictably, three reflections stared back. Bobbie: petite and delicate, hiding behind her thick glasses; Caine: tall, broad, swimmer's build; and Amazonian Naya: thick black locks tumbling about her shoulders. As unlikely a trio as you could find in a girls' toilet at midnight.

Noisily inhaling through his nostrils, Caine looked at each of them in turn. 'Ready?'

'Yeah.' Naya seemed less certain at this stage in the game. Bobbie responded with a slight nod.

'Okay. After three . . .' he continued. 'One, two . . . three . . .'

They stalled, no one wanting to go first.

'Come on!' he laughed. 'This time . . .'

'B . . . Bloody Mary,' Naya started and the others dutifully joined in, their voices low and monotone. Bobbie felt the air rush out of the room. The night itself had heard them start and held its breath accordingly.

'Bloody Mary . . .' The tension became too much. Caine and Naya dissolved into giggles and Bobbie joined in, not wanting to be left out of the mirth.

'Keep going,' encouraged Sadie from the outskirts. 'That's only two.'

They suppressed their laughter. 'Bloody Mary . . .' and again, 'Bloody Mary.'

The candles flickered and sputtered as a thin, icy breeze infiltrated the bathroom; voodoo shadows danced across the walls and all about the three faces framed within the mirror. The uplighting made their faces gaunt and hollow-cheeked, skull-like.

'One left.' Bobbie looked deep into Naya's eyes and saw that only an iota of bravado remained.

'All together,' Caine rallied them. Between the girls, he took Naya's right hand and her left. Bobbie's heart rattled against her ribs; she couldn't even breathe, let alone say the two remaining words. She looked to the furthest point at the back of the mirror. Crazy, but it seemed to stretch as if she were looking down a long, black tunnel. There wasn't even a reflection any more, but a dark passage. Miles away, at its furthest point, something stirred.

Caine's lips parted. Naya gave her a discreet nod. Bobbie

inhaled and closed her eyes.

'Bloody Mary.' They all said it together.

The light in the room dipped as if the candles were going to go out altogether. And then nothing. The bathroom was silent aside from the monotonous drips within the shower stalls. Bobbie looked to her companions. Naya was clenched so tight she could see the sinew in her neck. Caine chewed his bottom lip nervously.

Nothing.

Bobbie actually caved first. She cracked up and the others followed suit. Wild hoots of laughter tore from their lungs, a bizarre mixture of relief, hysteria and sheer embarrassment. For a fraction of a second, each of them had been well and truly suckered in. 'As if any further proof was needed . . . I'm such a massive loser!' Bobbie giggled.

'The look on your face was something else!' Caine pointed at Naya, doubled up.

'Me? Dude, you didn't look so hot yourself!'

Sadie was in a similar state, supporting herself against the wall next to Grace, who maintained her uncanny impression of a cold, wet fish. Sadie cackled, 'That was priceless! You looked like you were going to actively soil your pants!'

'Thanks for that, Sadie!' Bobbie offered her an outstretched hand, which Sadie shook. 'Okay, I'll admit that was diverting fun for a Hallowe'en night. Well done on a first-rate frightfest. Now, I don't know about you but I'm going to bed.'

'Thank God for that,' Grace sneered. 'Caine?'

'Babe, we gotta head back. I'm staying at Mark's tonight.'

Grace's lip curled with disappointment before she

remembered who she was: nobody's fool, and above all else, a Piper's Hall Lady. 'Fine. I'll catch you later then.' She swept out of the bathroom, closely followed by Sadie.

Caine cringed at Mark. 'Dude, never mind Bloody Mary, I'm in deep trouble now!'

'She'll get over it,' Naya smiled sweetly. 'No offence, hon, but she drags a different village boy up here every weekend. Can you find your way out?'

'The way we got in?' Mark replied.

'Yeah, you're a quick study.'

'Good times tonight, girls.' Caine said 'girls' like 'gewls' and Bobbie kind of loved it. She wondered where he was from – it wasn't a local accent. Caine embraced Naya in a friendly hug. 'See you soon, yeah?' He approached Bobbie with an identical gesture, which she awkwardly returned. Her heart stopped beating and she forgot to exhale, taking in a giant mouthful of his boyish scent – washing powder and macho deodorant. It was a nothing, throwaway gesture to him – he'd never think about it again and she'd remember it forever. Typical. 'Good to meet you, Bobbie – cool name by the way.'

'Yeah. Thanks.' Her tongue was tied in a fat knot.

Checking the coast was clear, the boys made for the exit and Bobbie turned back to the dark rectangle of the mirror, blowing out the candles. They may not have summoned a spirit, but something had sure been awoken deep inside Bobbie. She shook her head and sent her inner simpering girl to the naughty corner; she was meant to be above the Judy Blume stuff.

Bobbie followed Naya out of the shower room, not even noticing the monotonous *drip, drip, drip* that echoed off the tiles.