

The
Black
Air

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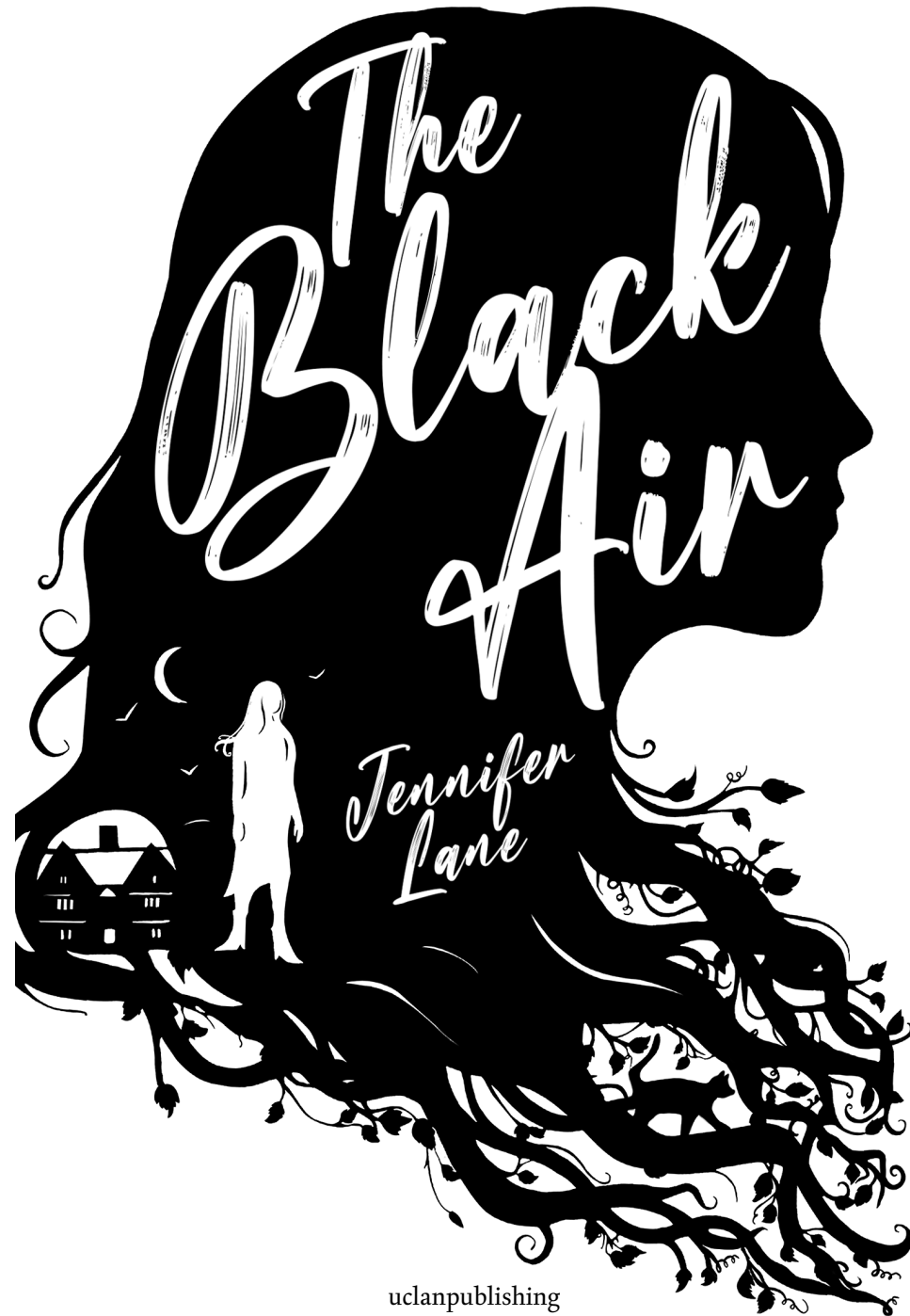
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Chapter 1

*I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.*

Anne Sexton, 'Her Kind'

*Women who are wont to practise enchantments...
do not allow them to live.*

King Alfred, ninth century

Long Byrne had a history of violence.

There had been two murder cases. In 1866, Mrs Meredith Fillstone had stared through her father's telescope at the moon for seven hours straight, mesmerised. She'd drawn herself a bath, ordered a new chandelier, then shot her husband and five kids with a hunting rifle.

She told the authorities that she had done it "to save them from the witches' influence". Or so the story goes.

Nutcase.

We've got a *lot* of them.

In 1958, a twelve-year-old girl had dreamt she was being eaten by the dogs of two witches out on the moor. They were tearing chunks from her arms, stripping off the skin from under her puffy white nightgown. She'd woken up and told her sister, who was sleeping in the next bed. When the sister didn't believe her, the girl had smothered her to death with a frilly cushion.

Nobody spoke about the little girl any more.

Long Byrne had seen two murder cases, but there had been more than two murders. There was the girl whose parents nabbed her when she got pregnant at fifteen.

They said she'd run away, but we all knew better.

Tawny lived for the thrill of this gossip, while I churned the old stories and legends over in my head as I read quietly in my bed at night.

Then there were all those women hanged for being witches out on the moor on 31st October 1623. They were all murdered really, weren't they? Rose Ackroyd. Jane Hollingworth. All of them. Eighteen girls in long shadowy skirts, sent up to the gallows in six sets of three.

Long Byrne at its finest.

Tawny and I were long-time Long Byrners. What did that say about us?

It wasn't that Long Byrne was cut off from the world. It just felt that way; nothing but a labyrinth of grey, stone houses – farm gates hanging off their hinges, roadkill-splattered tarmac between the hedges.

These are places you can't see on Google Maps until you really zoom in close. The kind where buses only go by twice a day, and where they sometimes have to close down the school because a crow has got into the air ducts.

It probably made us what we were today – big-lunged and hardy, like cattle or wolves. We weren't afraid of anything.

We were fearless, Tawny and me.

“Are you sure you can't see it?”

“A hundred and seventy per cent sure.”

“But what if I have to turn around really fast?” she said.

I was lopsided in the doorway; my foot already out on the step. “We'll be late again.”

The ladder in Tawny's tights poked out like a white worm stuck to a chalkboard. You'd have to be blind to miss it. She scowled at her reflection in the water-marked hall mirror that had probably been there as long as the house, and yanked her skirt down an inch further.

“Fine. Guess the whole school's going to be climbing my stairway to heaven.”

I grabbed her college bag from the coat stand and started out at a trot.

I didn't know why I was in such a rush. It's not like we'd have been in trouble. OK, we'd have been in trouble, but only Miss Rillington's famous finger wag. You never got into serious trouble with Tawny around anyway. Even when she tried extra hard.

We pushed down the cobbled lane, boots gripping hard on the slope. The sun was already cresting the hills and lasering into our eyes. Through our squints, the light filtered everything into a pale gold that made Tawny's charity-shop red velvet blazer glimmer. Tawny and I had raided the charity shops on one of our trips to the city this summer, splitting my allowance straight down the middle so I could buy her a dress that made her look like Audrey Hepburn with boobs. I'd come back with a load of old-man jumpers that swamped me but Tawny said they made me look 'cute'. I was anything but: my face was pinched, pale and anaemic – someone had once nearly put pennies in my coffee cup when I was on a park bench.

My house – Alder Farm – was closer to school, so staying over at the Browns’ attic apartment was never a good idea on a week-night, especially when you had to hop three stiles, jump the brook, and sometimes stop off at Pat’s for a panini before arriving at school. That didn’t stop me, though. It seemed like we spent half our lives hungover from tiredness, only dragging our pyjamas on at 4 a.m., and scaring ourselves silly with bargain-bucket horror movies, because we’d run out of chick flicks two summers ago. Now we’d started sixth form, my presence at the Browns’ breakfast table had reached three times a week, and a good night’s sleep was a fond but distant memory.

Since Mum had died, I was pretty much left to my own devices.

Just before we reached my farm, we passed Hollingworth House, the old creepy manor house where the Long Byrne witches had once lived. Nobody went there any more, but kids sometimes ran up the lane on a dare and prayed that no ghosts followed them home. We walked by the Slip, just before the high street. It was a dirt-track with a kissing gate into the wood, which led out to the moor and the craggy river where no one even took their dogs for a swim – they’d be swept off out to Garistone Lake in the blink of an eye. And besides, the locals tended to avoid the moor completely. It was too haunted.

From the path, you could see the old hanging spot; the gallows had long been torn down but the clearing where the witches had swung to their deaths was still obvious because nothing ever grew in that place. I remember when Tawny first dragged me there against my wide-eyed protests.

Nothing fazed her, especially not the ghosts of girls who’d been dead four hundred years.

We stopped at Maldew’s Corner Shop to sate Tawny’s liquorice cravings but I stayed hovering by the stack of yesterday’s newspapers at the door. My eyes settled on the growing ladder on her thigh.

“What’s up with you?” said Tawny. “It’s assembly. You’re not missing anything.”

“You’re functioning at minus five miles per hour.”

She snorted. “*All right*. Not my fault you can’t get enough of Miss Rillington.” She tossed an Allsort into her mouth and sauntered out of the door. I hadn’t had my morning coffee yet from the school canteen so I let out a slow breath, forcing myself to let it slide. You had to pick your battles with someone like Tawny, but somehow I knew I had to get to assembly even if it meant getting poked in the ribs by Tawny’s sharp nails all day. My stomach whirled.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just woke up with a feeling this morning.”

“Oh, not one of your feelings again.” Tawny rolled her eyes. “Remember, last time you had one of those you thought your stepmum had stolen your notebook with all your little stories in, but really you’d just left it in the hen coop?”

“Hey, one of these days, Alexa’s going to do it. Anyway, come on.”

The school steeple with its clattering bronze bell reared up, looming over a few stragglers. Even though the building tripled up as a primary school, high school and sixth-form college, there were still only a handful of muddy kids in

each class, and no one quite knew how to teach Physics, so we'd had to learn that one ourselves. Every winter, a load of farmers got together and hired out the assembly hall for their Christmas disco. After New Year, the whole place reeked of spilt stout and old pigs. The ratio of swine to Long Byrne students was particularly high.

We stumbled through the side door and into the packed assembly hall. Everyone's clothes rustled as they craned around to look at us. My stomach knotted even tighter. All the grotty Year Sevens and sullen Year Tens were jammed in on bum-numbing benches. I was hoping Lower-Sixth would get off to a better start.

At the brim of the stage, on the lectern, Rillington was hawk-eyed under her grey bob.

"Mr Lawrence has asked me to remind you that smoking will not be permitted behind the sports block. I'm looking at you, Matthew Bridge."

She tried to ignore the clang of the door as we shuffled into the back row, but even she had to pause while Tawny kicked the bench and smacked her bag on the floor for maximum dramatic effect. I heard her distinctive tut. Despite the September heatwave, Rillington wore a long, clingy woollen dress. No one over forty should opt for skin-tight anything. She even had lipstick on – must be an important day.

"The hockey team has raised over a hundred pounds for the new sports kit," Rillington said in a monotone. "Give them a big round of applause, everyone."

There was a short spatter of funereal clapping. Some kids were already twisting their heads round to check the clock.

Tawny shook out her dark hair and widened her eyes at me. *SEE? Look what you got me up early for.*

I tried to stare straight ahead, but the kids in those rows were all straining for a glimpse of a girl with bright-blond hair, sitting three rows in front of me, poker-straight. I could only see the back of her head, but something about those alert shoulders told me I hadn't seen her in Long Byrne before.

I nudged Tawny. "There," I breathed. Tawny squinted through the crowd. She locked on to the target. We shared raised eyebrows.

"And now," said Rillington, raising her head, "for something I know you've all been dying to hear about—"

"She's retiring?" hissed Tawny.

"Long Byrne High will be staging a re-enactment of the terrible events that make our village so famous. As you'll know, this Halloween marks the four-hundredth anniversary of the infamous hanging of the Long Byrne witches."

Everyone seemed to grow an extra vertebra. This was new. A bit of gore and gruesomeness before 9.30 a.m.? We held our breath.

Rillington put on a voice she seemed to think was mysterious. I despised her for it. "We all know the story of the witches. Even four hundred years later, people still come from all over the country to see where Rose Ackroyd and Jane Hollingworth were put to death out on the moors."

I started nodding before I caught myself. We knew all this. Even though I hadn't grown up in Long Byrne like Tawny had, I knew it all by rote. Mum had loved the story

of the witches too and had often written about magic and mysterious things.

Tawny sat jangling her foot over her knee, looping a long glossy strand of black hair around her finger. If she'd had any gum on her she would have blown the biggest bubble possible and let it pop like a white bomb. Maybe she didn't remember the spells we used to make up like I did, but I could see her eyes fixed on the stage.

Rillington was drawn up tall and rigid with importance. *Go on*, I willed her. *Tell us something we don't know*.

"Long Byrne School is proposing a restaging of the events that happened, to find out what really went on all those years ago out on the moor. We're hoping some of you would like to get involved in the re-enactment. We will need a whole cast, a script and people to help with the stage lighting."

A crazed rumbling broke out. A few enthusiasts waved their arms in the air before snapping them down like they were on elastic.

The new girl's shoulders were still square and rigid.

Rillington smiled through thin red lips. "Don't worry, you don't have to sign up now . . . I'll leave a sheet here for anyone to put down their details. We've put some refreshments at the back if anybody would like to come and ask any questions about the re-enactment."

She might have finished by scattering rose petals. Refreshments? *Refreshments*? There was a round of applause, louder than I'd expected. I was impressed – she'd managed to infiltrate the Long Byrne School swamp of apathy with orange juice and biscuits.

We all unfolded ourselves and rubbed our arses. Tawny dug her elbow into my ribs, making me yelp.

"Is this what your feeling was about? A play?" she smirked but her eyes glittered.

I glanced over at the refreshments and saw the area was already filling up.

Tawny snorted. "Go on then, go and gnaw her ear off. You're witch mental."

I felt my neck get hot. "Am not!"

"You're signing up though, right? Your eyes are popping out of your skull. You know I'm in." She flicked her hair over her shoulder dramatically. "I was born for the stage."

I looked at Rillington wielding her red clipboard as she sauntered around the room, checking for unbuttoned blouses and dirty knees. I realised my fingers were hurting from gripping the bench. I shook them out.

"Maybe . . ."

Rillington shooed out Matty Bridge and his lot before they started a food fight. Along the back wall was a long table covered in a sticky plastic tablecloth stencilled with old crayon. There was coffee! Turns out she'd do anything to bribe us into a school play – not that she'd needed to make an effort; there was already an orderly queue forming in front of her clipboard. The idea of writing the play made my heart start buzzing too. It was a feeling I'd never had before. I'd been writing ever since I could remember – all scrawled in the back of notebooks and hidden under my mattress. I liked to read Mum's stories, the ones that she hadn't sent to her publisher before she died. Maybe one day I would finish

them for her so people could still read her words. I longed to be a writer too – then I could get out of here once and for all. Now, she would never leave Long Byrne, but I would.

Could I really write something for the re-enactment? For everyone to hear? I'd always had a crazy imagination. I blushed even though there was no one there to see. I'd been eight when I told Mum about the gigantic purple cat that lived in our roof and that I would sometimes climb the rickety attic ladder to feed it with tuna sandwiches I'd saved from lunch.

“And why does it like to live in our roof, Cate?” she asked.

“It likes us. It thinks we smell nice.”

“Oh, does it now? Does it want to have us for dinner?”

“No! It really likes us. The yellow cats with the spiky tails – they're the nasty ones. The purple one just wants to keep us safe.”

She'd snorted and dropped the book she was reading; something really heavy and old, like a spell book she'd just unearthed from a witch's trunk. I could still see some dust in the ridges the title formed on the front cover. “Cate, you have the biggest imagination! What are you going to do with it all?”

I'd shrugged and said I wanted to check on the cat. Maybe I could start catching some mice for it.

“You'll have to find somewhere very, very special for all those thoughts. They might just get you into trouble one day.”

What would she say if she knew I wanted to write about the witches?

My feet were itching to move to the line but Tawny was smirking at me.

“At least let me grab a coffee before class.” I rolled my eyes

and went over to pour myself a brew. Black, no sugar.

“You're hardcore, sweetie pie,” she said, getting first dibs on the custard creams.

“You want one?” I asked, holding up the jug.

She pulled a face.

I put the pot down and took a big slug of scalding liquid. Tawny said coffee tasted like cat piss – how did she know? I'd once managed eight espressos before midday and had spoken fluent Spanish for three hours.

A cluster of witchy-devotees had followed the headmistress, mainly a bunch of goths who fancied themselves the reincarnation of Rose Ackroyd. The Witch Groupies. We'd grown out of that years ago, although I'd kept the outfit. Tawny looked at these girls with a crumple of disdain, but she couldn't hide her excitement. The last time Long Byrne High had put on a play she'd got to play Nancy in *Oliver!* and had performed a memorable, gutsy death scene. I still regularly thought about that last rattle of her dying breath as Bill Sikes lunged in for another blow – I think we all did.

Tawny put her head really close to mine and I got a waft of her strawberry shampoo. “Who do you think she is then?”

“Who?”

“New kid,” she said, jerking her head to the right. “Think she knows what she's let herself in for?”

I looked over to where the girl was hovering at the door. Her hands were knotted in front of her stomach. Her long blonde hair was a single glossy sheet, film-star straight. There was a coolness to her gaze that reminded me of catwalk models pretending their outfits weren't cutting into their

waists. She looked like she wanted to bolt out of the room to a place very far away from witch hysteria. If I could just go over and ask for her name—

“Ey up,” hissed Tawny.

I wheeled my head around to follow her gaze. Pad Mitchell and Jamie Duxbury were hovering by the Viennese Whirls, looking at us like they’d struck gold.

“What are they staring at?” I followed their eyes.

“My stairway.” Tawny bared her teeth in a feral sort of grin, kohled eyes flashing, and seductively stroked the white line on her thigh with her index finger. The boys looked away quickly, knocking their teeth on their plastic cups. She turned to me. “You got a marker pen?”

I had a quick rummage in my bag. “Biro.”

She whipped it out of my hand. “Give it here.”

Tawny cocked her leg up and coloured in the white space with the sharp pen tip. Her skirt rode all the way up and I tried to keep an eye on Pad and Jamie, but they’d already diverted their attention to the blonde girl. She was now surrounded by Year Twelve boys – a grim fate.

Tawny jerked her head up and pretended to sniff the air.

“Uh oh. She smells fresh to them.”

That was the trouble with Long Byrne: everyone had known each other since they were four years old. Occasionally parents made their kids mix with the kids in Stoutbridge to lessen the threat of inbreeding, but there were still a fair few extra nipples and toes here and there despite their efforts. Any new blood got honed in on like a rabbit in a fox den; I knew that from my traumatic first week at Long Byrne High

and my chest flooded with sympathy for the blonde girl.

Rillington had extricated herself from the Witch Groupies and was heading our way. I took a step forward but Tawny thrust the Biro at my chest and said, “I’m going in!”

“Wait, I—”

But before I could finish, Tawny was dragging me across the hall towards the new girl, her full hips swaying.

“Hi!” She grinned and I saw the girl’s eyes flicker with shock. Not surprise. I’d be shocked if Tawny turned her smile on me for the first time too. “Go on, the lot of you!” Tawny shooed the gaggle of boys away by crashing into them. They redirected their feet in a confused way, like they had just been tasered.

“Hi?” the girl said.

She sounded like she came from somewhere very far away from Long Byrne – which wasn’t hard. Maybe the city, or one of the posh-knob schools up in Hillbury. Her voice was crisp and low.

Tawny pressed on. “So, we couldn’t help noticing that you’re new, and we’re wondering how that feels.”

The girl blinked twice. “Sorry?”

“Well,” Tawny let her shoulders fall dramatically, “newbies tend to feel one of three things – complete terror of the local predators; superiority; or total violation. You haven’t been violated yet, have you?”

New girl bit her lip. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“Fantastic news! You’ve got plenty to look forward to then.” And with that, Tawny thrust her hand out at the girl. “I’m Tawny.”

“Bryony.” She shook it. Not looking terrified, just perplexed.

“This is Cate.” She gestured to me grandly; the magician’s assistant. I gave a small wave. Bryony nodded as if we were swapping cards at a business meeting.

“Need someone to take you to class?”

“Um, I’m actually meant to go to the office to sign some papers.”

“Great, it’s on our way.”

I couldn’t tell what Bryony thought of her sudden entourage, but she allowed herself to be steered out of the hall like a celebrity being escorted to her next interview. I saw her take a long sideways glance at Tawny before her green gaze met mine. Before I could smile, she focused intently on the floor.

Pad and Jamie looked at Tawny approvingly, saluting a leader.

“So you’ve just moved here? Where from?” said Tawny, touching the new girl’s elbow in the Tawny Way. Bryony didn’t flinch.

“On Saturday, from London.” Her gaze didn’t leave the floor. She sounded unsure about the location.

I could feel Tawny’s gush swelling in her chest before she let loose. *Here it comes*. It was coiled up and waiting to spill from her tongue. I prepared my eardrums for a bashing.

“Really! Did you really? Whereabouts? In the centre?”

Bryony moved her lips silently, conjuring up the words, seeming to look at something very far away before finding herself again. “In the suburbs, really.” As she spoke she played with a bracelet on her wrist – a dark brown piece of woven leather cord tied in a tight knot. A delicate silver charm shook to and fro. It was pretty, though I couldn’t tell what

the charm was, and she clung to it fiercely. Tawny babbled on.

“Oh my god, you lucky thing! Did you go to the theatre a lot? I’d go every night of the week.”

Bryony shook her head. “Mum and Dad don’t really do the theatre.”

Tawny swished her hair back. “More fool them. I’m a Scottish Play sort of girl. Right? I’ll bet all that witch stuff in assembly was super weird to you.”

“Maybe a little bit?” Bryony summoned a small smile, which glanced off her chin quickly.

“It’s what we’re famous for.” Tawny let her eyes do a full roll in her head. “Cate’s obsessed with the witches.”

“We *both* used to be,” I corrected. “It’s a legend in this area; people get really amped up about it.”

“I can tell,” said Bryony.

“Tell her,” Tawny elbowed my arm.

“I mean, it’s kind of silly but Long Byrne lives and breathes the story of the witches. It started with two girls – Rose Ackroyd and Jane Hollingworth. They were really close but, one day, there was a big fight and people saw them cursing each other in the street. All hellfire and literal sparks flying. People didn’t like that, not at all – so they hanged them out on the moors on 31st October 1623. You should see this place on Halloween!

“There’s this view that witches were these hunched-over old ladies with warts and too many cats, but Rose Ackroyd and Jane Hollingworth were just two young girls, only sixteen.”

I looked for Bryony’s reaction – her face had become stony. I faltered.

Tawny grinned. "Sounds like you're still pretty into those witches, Cate."

"Anyway," I continued, ignoring her, "we've been taught it since birth, really. There are books about it in the library, with all the grisly facts. When we were kids, we used to make up spells and rhymes. Cringey rhyming couplets, that sort of thing; but the witches were more than a legend and people still think you can see them out on the moors today, roaming around in search of revenge."

"That's the spirit, girls," a voice came from behind us. We spun around. Rillington. She was holding that clipboard in front of her again. "In fact, I'm surprised I don't have your names on my sheet. Cate, I could use your help with writing the script. How does that sound?"

All the blood in my body rose to my cheeks, leaving my limbs light and fuzzy. "Yes, Miss. That sounds good." My feeling from this morning was back. I wanted to do this more than I could put into words.

"Great, I'll put you down." She turned her body and raised an eyebrow. "Tawny, I'm guessing that there's no keeping you away from something like this? You'll have to audition like everyone else, of course."

"Oh, but of course." Tawny grinned. "It's only fair."

"Excellent," Rillington murmured through gritted teeth, jotting both our names down. "Bryony, don't worry. I don't expect you to take part if you don't want to. Unless . . .?"

Bryony shook her head quickly so her pale hair quivered. "I'm OK, Miss."

"Right then," Rillington tapped her fingers against the

clipboard with a *crack*. "On with the show, as they say. Have a good day, girls."

We watched Miss Rillington walk away and Tawny burst into a fit of silent laughter behind her back. "Cate, she loves you back."

I scowled in answer and I saw Bryony give me the ghost of a smile.

We had ended up in the entrance hall. The space had a perpetual air of gloom that could only ever come from echoey old towers with cobwebs that shook in the rafters where no one could wiggle a feather duster. In one corner was the bell-pull for the steeple, a gnarled grey rope that we'd all been dared to pull at some point in our Long Byrne High years. It was an initiation ritual made near-impossible by the careful watch of the school secretary, Mrs Waddington, who sat at her desk nearby.

"Well, here you are," Tawny announced, her grin in place as she squeezed Bryony's arm for good measure. "You'll fit right in, promise."

The girl nodded distractedly, looking straight ahead at the bell-pull, twisted in its knotty curl.

I left for Philosophy, but when I looked back from the end of the corridor Bryony hadn't budged, but stood looking at the rope before her.

After second period, Tawny met me in the canteen, with her hair coiled up on top of her head around a paintbrush. How did she even do that? My hair wouldn't do anything except hang limply by my ears. It only ever looked good after

Tawny had got her hands on it. She huffed dramatically, gesturing to her bun.

“What do you think?”

I looked up from *The Black Plague in Britain* and raised an eyebrow. Telling Tawny she was hot was like giving Shakespeare a B+ in English Literature.

“I think you need some style tips from Rillington.”

She laughed. “I’m barely letting you have that one. You made me get up way too early for Rillington’s witches today.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, deadpan. “You know I have a colossal soft spot for weirdos, Tawn.”

“Well, I suppose we’ve all got to feel connected to our vibrant village past somehow.” She widened her eyes; a saint. “I mean, you know I love a play but does anyone ever talk about anything other than the witches?”

“You used to think it was interesting though. You used to love the drama of it.” I said, “Eighteen girls just decimated by a ridiculous old law like that? By superstition?”

“Hundreds of people die every day, Cate.”

“Well, *I’m* interested. Everyone here is going to see this play. Besides, I could do with some excitement around here.”

She held a hand to her chest, eyes round. “I’m not enough for you?”

I yanked the paintbrush out of her hair and watched it all tumble loose in a black spiral. She laughed easily. I kept my gaze on her for a second as she tossed her hair back over her shoulder and scanned the room intently for any straying eyes. I wished that kind of confidence was infectious.

Tawny went up to the sandwich counter and bought a

Twix for herself, a carton of milk and a cup of instant for me. The smell of the cheap coffee already wound through the room like burning film strip. It tasted just as bad. Tawny dropped the carton of milk in front of me saying I needed to “stop with the black coffee; you’re not a goth.” I saw the milk was an Alder Farm bottle and I smiled, wondering which of my cows it came from. I reckoned it was Pansy. Tawny twisted off the milk top and dunked her Twix finger in it, slurping off the chocolate as I protested half-heartedly.

The room had filled up around us but there was a notable omission. “I wonder how Bryony is getting on,” I said. “It must suck to move somewhere new when you’re sixteen.”

“Ahh, imagine moving though. A whole new life. I’d call myself Magenta and you wouldn’t have to get up at two a.m. to be a farm bitch any more.”

“You know, Tawn – being a farm bitch isn’t such a bad thing.”

“Getting a life isn’t such a bad thing either.”

I scoffed, but there was something about Bryony that made me fill to the brim with questions. Why would anyone move to Long Byrne? And, especially, why someone like her?

I leant into Tawny. “Maybe she could join our covert gang.”

“The third and final member,” she nodded sagely. “Our coven would be complete.”

When Mrs Waddington rang the steeple bell for third period, we scraped our chairs out from under the sticky tables that all had bent legs and graffiti from 2003.

The rest of the day slid by with no more excitement than

Mr Bentham arguing with Matty Bridge about ‘the beast with two backs’ in English Lit and sunbathing with Tawny behind the gym before the bell released us back out on to the cobbles.

The moon was shining brightly as I brushed my teeth before bed. It lit up the fields and the hills that seemed like mountains in the half-light. I’d never admit it to Tawny but Long Byrne was quite beautiful if you caught it at the right moment.

I spat out a mouthful of toothpaste and glanced back up. Something had caught my eye in the lane below. A person with bright blonde hair was walking silently past the farm using only the shine of the moon to see their way. They took the left-hand fork past our farm and carried on up the lane. But no one ever used that lane. That was the way to the old Hollingworth House. The place where the witches used to live.

Bryony?

What was Bryony doing walking up to the Hollingworth House at 10 p.m.?

I watched until she was out of sight; the blonde hair lost in the height of the hedgerows. It made me bite the inside of my cheek uneasily.

I put the toothbrush back in its holster and found that my last thoughts before I finally fell asleep were of witches.

Witchcraft and fear were all around – you couldn’t escape it. If you had a birthmark, you were a witch. If you had so much as a lisp, you were a witch. But if you kept to yourself, minded your own business and were perfectly normal, you were probably a witch too. People glanced over each other for warts and pimples in the churchyard.

Villagers didn’t look you directly in the face for fear you’d give them the Evil Eye, a look so cursed that even the worst of devils were afraid of it. Young girls and the sick wore it on talismans around their necks to frighten away the hooded figure at the end of their beds.

Ghosts, goblins, ghouls – in 1612, the supernatural was interlaced with reality. Some people were more in touch with it than others. Maybe some people still are.

The History of Long Byrne: Demons on the Moor,

Dr C. Munir