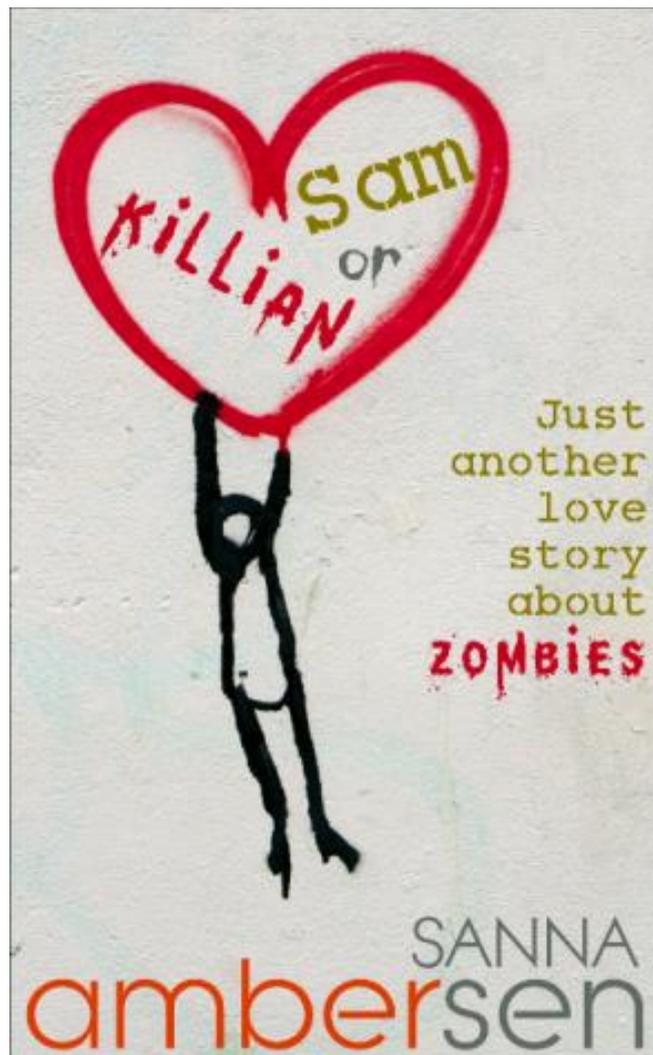


Killian or Sam?

Just another love story about Zombies

by

Sanna Ambersen



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Contents

Chapter One.....	4
Chapter Two.....	6
Chapter Three	13
Chapter Four	16
Chapter Five	22

Chapter One

“Sam or Killian?”

Hannah stopped peeling off her pale rose nail polish and turned to refocus on her irritating best friend.

“You’re joking right?”

Amy tugged on the lobe of her ear; thinking maybe she had pushed her long-time friendship just one step too far, she continued cautiously.

“Oh come on, it’s such a tedious lesson. Just this once let’s be shallow, we do shallow with the best of them and I fancy a bit of mind sharpening bitchiness.” She watched Hannah raise her eyebrows and wished she’d just considered the question silently.

“Look I can handle shallow but the question has little educational merit.” Hannah replied trying to morph her sarcasm into a witticism whilst letting her gaze wander to alight on Killian’s expansive shoulders. Turning to Amy she knew she was waiting for a response.

“Samuel is one of our closest friends; he’s been sniffing around you since kindergarten and Killian, well.” She snorted in vague disgust.

“He could keep an STD clinic in business alone. Didn’t Margi calculate that he had slept with at least eighty per cent of the higher school females and none of us are convinced the males are safe?” Hannah let her sigh slip effortlessly between her closed lips.

“So in summary, you’re expecting me to choose between an almost family member or the school lech, both of which would rather die than touch me.”

Hannah was surprised at the flow of words tumbling out of her mouth and the pointed bitterness of her final comment. Glancing away looking out onto the herb garden she considered her answer.

“Samuel.” She concluded pivoting in her chair. “If this stupid game ever turns into a ‘Hannah fancies Samuel’ comment I will eat you, all of you, not just your liver, and it won’t be with something sophisticated like Fava beans, it will be with own brand common stuff ok.”

The slithers of discarded nail polish lay waiting for disposal and rather than being just a pile of childish nothing, they was significant. Of what she wasn’t sure, but whatever it represented in her overactive hormone soaked mind, it made her sad.

Amy rested her face on her hand.

“But Killian is totally gorgeous. Look at his wide Neanderthal forehead and deep set eyes, and those full lips. He’s tall too, who doesn’t love tall and his shoulders...” Amy shrivelled under Hannah’s toxic gaze.

“You mentioned educational merit, and this is an art class so you have to admit he’s the one you’d want to see naked with a pencil in your hand. Come on admit it.” Amy replied deliberately trying to tease out a response.

Hannah looked across at his profile.

"If I walked over there and asked him my name he wouldn't know. I've spent years of my life in the same room as that moron and he's never said 'hello' or 'goodbye', he's never even insulted me!" Hannah felt sad and she wondered why that was.

"Killian is only out for what he can get. He hangs with Lucy, who likes the attention of the rest of the school, and he gets exactly what he wants from her but he bores easily and so there he is chatting up Collette, poor girl. He's using Lucy to get close and then he'll pounce." She considered the scene for a moment.

"It's like watching a natural history film."

"We're still going to this thing tonight yeh." Amy asked deftly changing the subject. Hannah knew without turning, as good friends do, that Amy was peeling ever smaller strips of paper from the edge of her book and aimlessly rolling them into tiny balls. She'd then spend time arranging them into a long straight line by height. Hannah nodded depressed by the merest thought.

"He might choose that time to pounce." Amy continued.

Hannah turned incredulous at both her friend's lack of understanding and judgement.

"Killian? Go to a school dance? You are some sap, girl. He would never go to a school dance, even I don't want to go, yeh yeh but for you anything."

Hannah turned away and watched the bee land on the primrose. It was rather too large to be there, she watched it totter and sway and was reminded of Mrs Johnson climbing out of her mini. Hannah smiled and pushed to the back of her mind the thought of the ritual humiliation of the stupid school dance.

Why did Amy want to go anyway? She glanced over and watched Amy throw one of the paper balls at Sam's head. He turned happy to have something other than work to do; grinning he turned back to his sketch pad.

Chapter Two

Hannah ducked under the awning and waved the taxi driver away. She only had enough money to get her to this entrance. It cost another two quid to get to the other end of the school. She watched the rain dropping from the sky, the perfect backdrop to her blank gaze. It didn't take a scientist to calculate she'd be soaked in seconds and these were new shoes. She watched a drop of water bounce from the floor onto the toe.

Options; she needed to get to the dance without getting soaked through to her bones, paper dry would be better. The old science building that once linked the younger students and the sixth form was directly behind her. Reaching out hopefully she turned the handle and to her surprise it opened.

Hannah crossed into the darkened corridor. Her new shoes crunched on the broken glass scattered on the floor. She lifted her feet dislodging the glass. Clicking her heels together she grinned and whispered, "There's no place like home". If only it was that simple to find herself back in her room wearing PJs and watching Netflix. Submitting to the inevitable boring humiliation of the dance she sighed and continued on her way.

This was a direct route to the hall. As she marched confidently forward, she considered who would have broken into the empty classroom. Never having watched a horror film her imagination didn't conjure up dark images around every corner. Instead, this place was now a covert location for Russian rebels. Perhaps she'd feign kidnapping? Would alien abduction free her from this torment? She imagined Amy's disbelieving frown and chuckled. There was no escape.

The air was stale, and she wondered how the dust and dirt had collected inside the corridors. It had only been closed for six months and now it looked like a set from one of those post-apocalyptic movies aimed at the teen market, where youths would inevitably prove themselves by saving the world.

That tangential thought didn't linger. Hannah was more concerned with the origination of the thick layer of dirt. Had the dust been hiding just waiting to explode from secret dust bombs? Or had it always been raining down steadily from the ceiling? And if so, this dust must have dropped silently onto her hair and clothes over the day to be carried off home. Wasn't dust supposed to be mostly dead skin cells? How many months of dust would it take to build a person?

Her mind instantly thought of Killian. Shaking away the image she continued her journey. Running her finger along the wall she peered at the slug trail free of dust and the pile of decaying flesh balanced on her fingertip—yuk.

Peering into deserted classrooms she felt a dark fascination for what might be hiding. There was no fear just the hopeful yearning for excitement of an adolescent girl. Turning left she stretched her legs as far as her shoes would let her, stopping to adjust her thigh length socks and correct the symmetry of her skirt; she looked good.

It was the third week in the month and Amy and Hannah had decided this was the week they dressed to impress. This ritual had started a year ago when Samuel

had got himself a girlfriend. They had been crushed at his departure from the solo partner club and had fervently confirmed they were single because they were too busy and too proud to spend hours of their life arranging hair and applying makeup.

It was then Samuel made 'the comment'; she remembered the moment well. He had stopped sucking noisily through the straw of his juice and had announced that they would both be 'really pretty' if they 'made an effort'.

After much sulking and pouting they had considered his comment sensibly. They then confessed that they didn't want to always be without a boyfriend but they refused to be shallow, it was then they decided that they would allow themselves one week a month to join the others. In those five days they'd 'make an effort' and show the school that the Geek Girls could look good, in fact as she adjusted her other sock, they could outshine the others by a mile.

It had worked instantly. Suddenly they weren't alone in the Diner, doors were held open and greetings made. Even on the other weeks they had sharpened up their presentation, not too much, just enough to show everyone they were pretty good looking gals.

Hannah slowed her walk as she entered the penultimate corridor. She slowed to deconstruct the noise. Heat rushed up her chest and neck. That was a recognisable groaning sound. Surely Killian hadn't come to this stupid event to entrap Collette. Her embarrassment crystallised to anger, he was such a shit. She crept past the opaque glass which contained that elemental sound.

If she took another two steps, she'd pass the door and be on her way to a really lame party. Then the low moaning stopped, and he laughed. There was something manic, almost despairing about the sound. Hannah stopped, listening to her heart hopping high into her throat, she pushed open the door.

Killian was sprawled like a discarded Lacoste display dummy. His legs wide and his belt unfastened, his shirt open and his arms splayed to the side. She considered the image; he should have been taking the sun on a French beach not lying in the dust in a deserted school classroom. That boy knew how to pose; rumour was he had been modelling all summer and was making a name for himself as the 'next big thing'. He was born to be admired, to be yearned for, to be adored and here he was at her feet.

Hannah didn't understand what she saw but she knew it was better to leave. Her shoe scraped the floor; she hadn't removed one of the tiny shards of glass and it woke him from his reverie. His heavy eyelids fluttered as they opened to show his glistening pupils. He frowned as she watched the smile, the jaw dropping, blushing inducing grin, curl his lips.

There was something visceral about his smile. It was so rare and to be the cause of that emotion was hypnotic.

Hannah refused to acknowledge how her body had dissolved into a puddle at his feet. She was an adult and she knew his little pathetic tricks. Hadn't she watched him use the whole range of his techniques on every girl in the school? Not every girl, she reminded herself. Couldn't they see who he was? Couldn't they see what he was?

“Hannah?” He whispered. She rested her hands on her knees gasping for the oxygen that had left the room as he spoke. How could the mere whisper of her name affect her body in such a physical way? This was just biology. Pheromones, it was just a biological reaction and she uncurled and diverted her embarrassment into anger.

“What’s up Killian? Where have you left Collette?” She wished she’d turned and left. Could he see her jealousy green and shiny like a snake curling around her tongue? He raised an eyebrow knowingly.

“Who’s Collette?” He replied puzzled. Then he giggled and rolled slightly as if to get up then he slumped back and that’s when she saw the needle in his arm. There was still liquid inside and she licked her bottom lip concerned now by his appearance.

“Are you alright?” She asked stepping closer.

“Woow. Stay where you are little girl, I’m the big bad wolf remember. I eat little things like you for breakfast!” Raising himself he delivered his slurred words with such intensity. She remained still refusing to back away.

“Shhhhoow.” He yelled waving an arm. “Go to the party or whatever the stupid thing is and leave me alone.” He noticed the syringe with surprise and moved his right hand towards it.

“Why not come with me? Come on Killian lets go show them how to dance hey!” He looked up at her as she tried to distract him whilst stepping closer.

“What are you doing here? You’re way too classy for a school dance.” He replied suddenly appearing lucid.

“Amy asked me to come.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Oh come on, she’s my best friend, we’ve been through a lot together.” Her dislike of him was now heightened by his dismissive tone. How dare he comment on her friends? He swung himself upright and Hannah stepped back in shock.

“Like what exactly? What exactly is ‘the lot’ you’ve been through. You’re kids; you know nothing about pain, about real pain.” He stared with dark ominous eyes. Hannah released her anger and started counting on her fingers.

“Parents having an affair, separating, divorcing, arguments, domestic violence, any of that sound familiar Mr Model Man with your perfect family, perfect house and perfect body!” He let his lips relax into a soft smile.

“All of that twice over and more.” He turned and pushed the rest of the liquid into his vein.

Hannah didn’t think, she flung herself at his prostrate body collecting the syringe. She leaned over him and felt her brain teeter with contact.

“What’s in the syringe? What’s in here?”

He turned his face away smiling.

“Food.” He whispered laughing.

“I need you to tell me what’s inside. When the ambulance arrives I need to tell them what you’ve taken.” He sighed and grabbed for the phone she now held in her

hand, it slipped fish like through her fingers and landed behind his head. She scrambled over his body reaching for the phone.

His hand skimmed her thighs as he moved his hands under her skirt. She reached the phone as she felt his fingers touch the lace of her underwear.

I must push his hands away soon, very soon she thought.

"Please tell me what's in the syringe?" She asked her voice suddenly weak with passion. He shook his head and licked his lips.

"You have the most amazing arse." He said running his fingers around the edge of her knickers. She felt a sob bubble.

"This stuff you have taken, it could kill you, it could really kill you." She watched him smile and listened to his slow hand clap.

The space on her bottom where his hand had rested felt cold and bare. Hannah pushed on his chest and straddled his leg kneeling in front of him. She brushed away a tear.

"Ok." Hannah was about to go to Plan B, which was a shock as she hadn't had a Plan A. Killian watched tears roll over her high cheek bones. He thought about his skiing holidays with his mother and stepfather, he thought about the thrill he had felt as he threw himself over the edge of a cliff and the adrenaline that screamed through his veins. Reaching out tentatively, he touched a tear with his fingertip.

"You should wear waterproof mascara." He whispered. It was obvious now where every tear had raced, lines like black striated rock contaminated her face.

"It's more expensive and I don't usually need it. I rarely find a school friend trying to kill himself, at least not on one of my dressing up days." He laughed as his words morphed into a cough. She moved closer and held his face in her hands.

"Please Killian, please just tell me." He shook his head. She recognised the stubborn expression and stood up to dial for an ambulance. His hand stretched high as he tried to reach her then slumped back and watched her pace with a calm and sensible rhythm. All the time the tears flowed and she pressed her hand hard onto her heart.

"Thank you." She replied to the phone. Turning she found him trying to stand. With wild arm movements he tried to bat her away but instead he stumbled into the push and she tumbled into a discarded table. They both froze.

"I'm sorry. I didn't..just go to the dance. Getaway from me. Go Hannah, go." Mumbling he tried to formulate words; his brain was working hard to fight the drug.

"Why did you do this? Killian please just tell me why?" She begged. Hannah suddenly couldn't cope with the momentous things that were happening right in front of her. Maybe if she could keep him talking, maybe that would help. Hadn't she seen that in a film somewhere; just keep them awake?

"They've always said he's wild, hard to control, hard to manage, just too much work for a couple who should never have had children. In biology I was amazed that inside, inside a body, there is so much..." He struggled to find a word as he pointed to his abdomen. "Stuff." He laughed.

"I don't have that inside me, I'm empty." He swayed and waved his arms dramatically.

“I told them, all of them, I’m empty and they said ...’it’s a phase’”. He staggered, and she held his belt as he crashed onto his knees.

“I’m strong and in good health, I can’t wait any longer. This...” He pointed to the syringe.

“Poison. It’s simply poison.” She whispered through the tears. He smiled and pulled her face close.

“If you say so, I think it’s a miracle cure because right now I don’t feel empty, not a jot.” He sniggered and laughed then she watched his eyes glaze as he slumped onto his back.

Moving her body onto his she held his face in her hands.

“Please Killian I’ll help you. I’ll help you if you just stay with me.” He registered her face and ran his hand up her skirt.

“How? Tell me how you can help such a puerile narcissist?” Hannah felt the heat of remembered comments colour her cheeks as she sobbed softly trying to gain control.

“I didn’t mean...”

He smiled as he pulled her head to his neck.

“Yes you did, you meant every word because it’s true, but there’s no correlation between narcissism and deafness. In fact it’s probably the opposite. I always pay particular attention to what the Geek Girls are talking about; disappointingly it’s not about moi.”

Killian rolled swiftly his body taking her with him and there she was looking up at him through mascara streaked tears, her pupils impossibly dilated, her breath unsteady. How could anyone be so enchanting? He had something to share with the girl in his arms but the words wouldn’t form, somehow the pathway between thought and speech had washed away.

Slowly he felt himself slipping into blackness. He had to fight the encroaching nothingness, what he needed to say was important. He had been too embarrassed before; he had to say now, before it was too late, he focused. Words slipped out but they weren’t right, that’s not what he had wanted to share.

“You are unbelievably sexy. We could be...”

Hannah watched his pupils shudder as he collapsed onto her. She pushed him away screaming. His body was shaking and the tremor was getting stronger. Hannah looked for something for him to bite on and eventually pushed her phone between his teeth. His body began writhing and in panic she weighed him down with her own. As his pupils widened foam dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

Could he see her? Did he know she was there with him?

An ambulance was keening in the distance. The phone buzzed in his mouth as it received a text and again with a call; she sniggered through her tears at the wobble of his chin. His fit stopped. She pulled out the phone wiping his saliva on her skirt and dialled back confirming their hiding place to the paramedics.

“They’re in the yard; they’ll be here any second. Please be ok.” She held his hand as he looked vaguely in her direction, she wasn’t sure if he was conscious but just in case. Hannah pressed her lips on his cheek and collected his head into the

crook of her arm. She watched his hand wriggle from her grasp and spread his fingers lacing them between hers.

Hannah could hear the dull thud of the sound system as the party started. Brushing away his fringe, she felt his hand twitch. She could hear shouting, feet pounding and harsh gasps moving along the corridor.

“You damn well stay alive this skirt is covered in your foamy saliva.” He shuffled slightly. “It’s going to be alright. I’m not leaving you. I’m never leaving you until you’re well enough to walk away from me.”

Then the paramedics arrived and she was dismissed. They bombarded her with questions but she repeated what she knew. Handing them the empty syringe she climbed into the ambulance.

She held his hand as he lay still. An oxygen mask covered his soft lips and nose. The siren blaring as they moved through the town, lines of traffic parted. It was still raining, and the paramedics were talking about food. Would it be kebab or curry for supper? Naan or rice? Chapattis or Paratha?

What had started as a distraction was now irritating.

How could they think about normal life whilst he lay here? Time moved on, was still moving forward whilst hers was stuck inextricably linked to this man and anyway, what the fuck was a paratha?

The ambulance screeched as a brood of hen party women flooded the road. Their squealing filled the drizzle as the ambulance lurched forward into the city traffic.

The outside world meant nothing it was just a dark smudge on the window. The only thing that was real was his hand. Cold and hot, dry and sweaty, small and large—everything merged in one. How could his hand be wide and strong like a man and vulnerable like a child? Forcing a smile in his direction, she saw he was looking. She squeezed his hand.

“Even now you’re still stopping traffic.” She bantered hoarsely. He coughed, and that was when her surreal journey crystalized. Hannah woke in that second and felt her lack of years and experience keenly.

It was a simple cough, but she didn’t know what it meant? Was it a good sign or bad? Why didn’t someone explain what was happening? She unfastened her seatbelt to get closer.

“Don’t die baby, please.” She whispered panicked by his stillness. The paramedic guided her back to the seat as she clung to Killian’s hand.

He held on tightly. His hand ached with the pressure. If he let go he’d fly away, upwards to the sky but wasn’t that what he wanted? Hadn’t he wanted to disappear? Killian wondered at her capacity for pain. He watched her lift his hand to her cheek; he saw his fingers loose in hers. Reality couldn’t hold him now.

The paramedic forced her back into her chair.

They jerked to a stop and the doors opened. It was still raining and as they pulled the stretcher out she watched raindrops land on his trousers. A nurse pulled his shirt closed and Hannah wished she’d had the forethought to cover his chest.

What would people think? She'd been alone with him and his shirt was open and his belt unfastened. People would jump to the wrong conclusions. He turned to face her and her blip of reluctance to follow disappeared.

The rain collected on her hair and soaked her clothes; so much for not getting her shoes damaged. Her mother suggested suede was a mistake. She shivered as her teeth chattered.

A nurse was covering Killian with a blanket. "Stay with us sweetheart... what's his name?" The nurse asked.

"Killian."

The nurse smiled. "A good old Irish name. Stay with us Killian, your girlfriend's here. Quick let's get inside before you catch your death."

Hannah watched his expression, and saw his lips curl.

"Don't even think about it." She whispered as they raced along the corridor.

The hospital was harsh and bright and she refused to release his hand as they sprinted through the maze of bright lights and flappy doors.

Chapter Three

Killian had liked to watch her, he always had, not directly, that wouldn't be allowed. He kept himself open to opportunities; to glimpse her hair as she dashed into class or a slow study in a dirty pane of glass whilst he pretended to daydream. It was his greatest pleasure watching her being Hannah.

Killian had sharp angular features but hers were cherubic. He coughed and watched her worried eyes peer into his. She'd hate being called cherubic; she'd translate that as fat. They lifted him to another bed and Hannah reached over and placed her forehead on his cheek.

"Do not die. If you die I'll never speak to you again." She forced a smile and released his hand. She watched his feet disappear into a cubicle.

Hannah picked up her phone, running her fingers over the dints in the plastic where his teeth had taken hold and rang her mother. There was a delay answering the house phone whilst her mother climbed from the sofa and ambled to the phone expecting it to be the usual PPI call.

"It's me mum please answer." She sobbed into the machine. Maria picked up immediately.

"What the hell?"

"I'm at the hospital." Hannah heard her mother's breath move faster.

"It's not me mum or Amy. I, mum it's a boy from school he tried to kill himself. I found him and got the ambulance." She could hear her mother opening her bag, from the handle hung a plethora of jingly fun items.

"Listen Hannah, I only have £30 in cash so I can't get a taxi there and back. I'll call Uncle Colin to catch a lift. I've had a drink." Hannah nodded to the phone.

"It's ok to have a drink mum. It's Friday night you should be out."

"Look if he can't drive I'll get the bus and be there in an hour ok. Say 'yes mum'. Hannah smiled at their private lone parent joke and whispered 'yes mum' in reply.

Medical staff moved busily from place to place. She learned from listening to their conversations he wasn't going to surgery. Sitting quietly she was anonymous, another bleary eyed drunk scraped up from the pavement on a Friday night.

She wasn't accustomed to this; she didn't know the protocol. A doctor crouched in front of her; he had kind blood shot eyes.

"Have you phoned his parents?" He enquired gently. She shook her head bewildered at her sudden necessity to be organised.

"Is their number in your phone?" His voice was sharper now; he was losing patience, too many hours working and not enough sleep. Her body felt separate from her mind. She shook her head.

"Are you with an adult?" The doctor snapped accusingly.

"No I'm not and I can't ring his parents because I don't know their number, I don't even know his." The doctor called for a nurse and reached for the clipboard.

"What's his name?"

“Killian.” The doctor waited. “O’Dwyer. Killian O’Dwyer.” Hannah continued. “How are you spelling that?”

Hannah shrugged and watched their joint look of disgust.

“Don’t look at me like that. I found him, I’m not with him.” She explained slightly too loudly. The room quietened as she realised they didn’t believe her.

“I barely know him. I know his first name, I don’t know how to spell his surname or where he lives, why would I.”

The doctor softened. “You seemed so upset.” He replied gently.

“He could die. He was in my class and I never learned how to spell his surname and he’s dying, I found him and I couldn’t help him, that’s why I’m upset.” The nurse and the doctor exchanged glances.

“We’d like you to provide a urine sample.” The nurse asked gently. Hannah frowned as her phone rang.

“Why?” She asked. The doctor glanced at the nurse.

“I don’t take drugs.” Hannah snapped and answered the phone.

“He’s pissed as usual so I’m on the bus, I’ll be there in twenty minutes. What’s happening? How’s your friend?” Her mother asked.

“They won’t tell me diddly and they want me to give a urine sample. They think.” Hannah licked the tears from her lips. Her mother sighed.

“I have to ask baby.” Her mother continued.

“No of course not.”

She snapped, the tears beginning again.

“Then provide a sample. I’ll be there in twenty minutes so if you don’t want to, ask them to wait.” There was a screech of tyres as the bus arrived. The doctor listened to the conversation and waited for Hannah to close the call.

“I don’t need to pee, I’ve been crying too much so I’m waiting for my mother. She can give authorisation to do any tests.” The doctor scowled.

“It could save his life!” He snapped. Hannah smiled sweetly.

“You’ve taken his blood that will tell you what he’s taken. I don’t take drugs.” She then turned and moved to the corridor to call Amy.

Amy was with Sam in the real world of the school dance whilst she was surrounded by hard edges and even harder expressions.

She was chilled to the core. Her damp clothes had dried on her body and she couldn’t contain her low level shiver. Even lying prostrate in a hospital bed he looked glorious. Hannah had reached for his hand as soon as they’d allowed her to see him. Sitting on his bed she leant close whispering into his ear. Even as he remained motionless he fascinated her. This was a treat, to study his body without fear of a sharp comment that would burn like acid on her flesh. Now she had him to herself and she cherished this time.

Peering closely she studied the delicate bulge of his bicep, the softness of his elbow, and the dark scattering of hair on his arms; dark hair, man’s hair and his hands, such elegant hands. Hannah’s obsessive focus was wrenched away by the nurse’s movement.

Her mother arrived with frizzy hair providing powdered soup with compulsory dried flotsam bobbing decoratively on the top and balsam tissues from a multi-pack not to be sold individually. The nurse had provided a blanket that scratched her bare shoulders. The one sided small talk had dried up after the first hour but she stayed close occasionally whispering something mundane just to ensure he heard a voice, a caring loving voice, her voice.

“It’s been two hours why are they taking so long?” Hannah groaned. The nurse checked a monitor.

“I’m sure they won’t be long now. He’s stable, why don’t you two get off home?” Hannah pressed her lips to his forehead and shook her head.

“I made a promise. I said I wouldn’t leave and I have no intention of doing so.” She felt his fingers twitch and she forced a laugh.

“I’m a stubborn girl; I’ll stay until you walk out of that door.” She watched his expression as his eyelids fluttered and the machine stopped. That’s when he died.

Chapter Four

Hannah opened her eyes. The clock said 11:57. She rolled on her back and touched her face. It was wet again. She'd managed several two-hour blocks of sleep but most of the time she woke crying then she'd sob until exhaustion carried her away. Clawing herself to sitting she headed to the bathroom for a shower.

Hot water slipped across her back.

If I'd been on time I may have found him before he injected. Maybe I could have stopped him. Maybe he'd still be alive.

"Hannah! Amy is here, she's made strawberry muffins. I'll make coffee and we'll eat together." Hannah dried her hair and pulled on her underwear. She ran her fingers across the lace.

He said I had a great arse.

Tears squeezed through her eyelashes as she pulled on her tracksuit pants and a baggy t-shirt.

Hannah walked into the kitchen and their whispered conversation stopped.

"Talking about me?" Hannah enquired. Her mother wrapped her arms around her and hugged her tight.

"I was telling Amy how amazing you were. How you refused to leave him until his parents arrived. How sad it was, you know." She poured coffee from the percolator and gave her an empty plate.

"You should have seen his parents. His mother wafted in wearing expensive perfume and Jimmy Choos. She stood at the bed side and dabbed her eyes pathetically ..." Her mother interrupted her tirade.

"How about giving Hannah a bun? She's barely eaten since....the hospital visit." Amy lifted out a large bun. It smelt of fresh strawberries and bake sales. The top was crusty. Hannah stared at the perfect bun, sitting in the centre of a china plate on her mother's wooden table.

Maybe I could have performed CPR. Why the hell didn't I perform CPR?

She could feel his lips on her hair and was startled by the wet drips landing on the table from her eyes. Her mother opened a cupboard and cautiously placed a cocktail umbrella in the cake.

"That muffin smells too good to get water logged." Hannah looked up at Amy and watched her sad smile.

Hannah couldn't remember his actual death.

The first time there'd been a host of hospital staff collected around him, it suddenly became physical, with raised voices and fast movements—fetching, holding, adjusting and they had fought hard to bring him back.

Then his parents arrived; traffic had been slow they were forced to go the long way, use the ring road.

The second time everything slowed. The physical world was foggy and vague. It was full of strange people doing weird things with odd instruments. This time she knew he'd escaped.

Time had shattered like the broken vase from Aunty Emma. Hannah tried to gather up the pieces but there was something missing, a shard had escaped to hide under the fridge.

Killian O'Dwyer had never regained consciousness and the second time he died, they couldn't bring him back.

There might have been a taxi ride and getting undressed and maybe drinking sweet tea but maybe not; the world had lost its shape.

Hannah was late going into school Monday. She entered her second class late too. The students looked up as she entered.

"I'm sorry I'm late, the Head..." Mrs Green nodded and turned back to the board.

Hannah felt weary. The world had irreparably changed and yet no one else seemed aware of it.

There were several things Hannah learnt over the past hours. That watching someone die was heart breaking. Even when you didn't know them, the pain you knew they were suffering, a hurt you so desperately wanted to remove caused your own private agony.

Hannah's own body had suffered, her skin looked tired and her muscles ached. There were isolated areas of soreness; her hip from the collision with the table, her knees from the grazes from the floor and her heart from the mental strain of being out of control as you watch a real person drift away.

It was the everywhere dull throb of pain that was so hard to bear. It was a constant reminder of the loss and as it lingered, it was becoming part of her. She'd never known how light she felt until she'd accumulated this weight; she couldn't eat or sleep or concentrate and guilt weighed on her shoulders like a shroud.

The second thing she learnt is people can't talk about death. They pretend it hasn't happened, but it did. Killian O'Dwyer died and Hannah Brooke witnessed it and the world will never be the same.

Everything was pointless and vague. Her world had lost its definition, and she found it impossible to stay focused. The physical pain was a constant reminder that something, someone, was missing and this alienated her from the other students, her friends, and her family.

Her own particular preference was a quick hug, a short comment of regret and then a companionable silence. No long speeches or tirades about her greatness or lectures on the horrors of drugs.

The third thing she learnt is some people are hateful. It had surprised her how wicked people could be. Lucy had been furious that Hannah found Killian. Her whole body pulsed with frustration, her brain almost catatonic with hatred and its focus was Hannah.

In the classes they had together, Lucy ever the exhibitionist would collapse into a heap gathering a support group around her. She'd wail and sob and make sure everyone knew how betrayed she felt. He wasn't supposed to be attending the scabby freakoid school dance. He'd promised to meet her, and she'd waited broken hearted that someone had facilitated his drug taking. They were almost engaged and now Killian had died without fully appreciating how wonderful she was.

Lucy had known someone was making a move on him; he'd been distant, not as devoted. The rumour mill said they were making out in the classroom; Hannah was found with drugs in her blood and her knickers around her ankles. The result was that Lucy, the devoted girlfriend, was distraught at being treated so badly and devastated that this was how he'd be remembered. No matter the story Lucy found a way to make it all about her.

Sam slumped next to Hannah in the Diner. The vultures were gathering around them hopeful of gossip. He placed his arm gingerly around her shoulders.

"How are you holding up?" He whispered. Hannah pushed away her tray.

"I'm not. I wish I'd not taken that stupid short cut and I wish..." Waiting he squeezed her hand tight.

"I wish I'd not found him. He was so unhappy Sam. Really really unhappy. He told me..." Sam squeezed her hand too tight as she followed his eyes as the surrounding tables hushed.

"Why should I lie about what he said? They're lying; they're saying awful things about me." Sam collected her head into his shoulder.

"No one believes them. Your friends think they're sad bastard wankers and your teachers are stalwart in your defence, come on, he was a known druggie and he died of an overdose, you stayed all night until his crap parents deigned to end their dinner engagement, it's ok Hannah we know the truth. And where exactly was his devoted girlfriend? He chose to die in the dirt rather than be with her and that's the truth and everyone knows it."

Lucy was gathering attention as she stormed towards them.

"Yeh we know the truth. No matter what the Head says we know the truth." She sneered. Sam smiled sarcastically.

"And why would the Head Teacher lie?"

Lucy leant far too close to his face.

"She gives a good bj." The entire diner took a breath. The teachers knew then they wouldn't reach her in time and Sam flew at her with fake force. She staggered happy at the effect of her comment and what appeared to be an ineffectual attack.

It was only as she walked from the Diner she noticed the chocolate milk shake covering her pale lemon blouse, cardigan and skirt. It dropped onto her shoes in a slow lazy drip. This was the ultimate insult, disrupting her co-ordinated clothes. She screamed and suddenly everyone needed to be elsewhere. Sam held Hannah tight as she whispered 'thank you' in his ear.

"So word on the street is, wait for it, ta dah, Sam (our lovable little rogue) has been ditched by whingeing Wendy." Amy had saved this gossip tit bit hoping to

attract interest. Hannah knew how tiresome her moping was to manage and how hard her friends were trying to engage her in life. She pulled in her core muscles sat up straight and focused on this news.

“On what grounds? He seems to be filling out nicely.” Hannah countered trying to summon up her normal eyelash flutter and smile. Amy frowned.

“Not sure.” She mumbled. Hannah smelt a prime piece of gossip.

“Come on you minx tell me. Who’s the lucky girl?” Amy looked up and smiled in relief as Sam walked straight over to them.

Hannah let her eyes flick between them. She felt her eyes fill with tears, her two best friends in love, how wonderful. Sam and Amy’s eyes met and she almost leapt for joy.

“I thought you were going to the library.” Sam asked Amy.

“I am now.” She giggled squeezing his shoulder as she left. Sam pulled out his phone and switched it off.

“Sorry about Wendy.” Hannah said. He smiled.

“She can go whinge at someone else now.” He replied off handedly.

“Oh!” Hannah exclaimed; thinking about how Killian had been aware of her comments. Sam placed his phone on the table and reached across brushing her hair from her face.

“So the thing is, if I don’t do this then I’ll always wonder, so I have to, but this could ruin everything, so what would you do?” Hannah didn’t understand much these days, her emotional intelligence was barely pulling in F grades and she felt out of sync with her friends. Her mind was too busy. They thought the blank expression she wore was because she couldn’t concentrate, they were wrong. Her brain was hyper active, living two very different lives. She shrugged.

“Just do it.”

Reaching for her juice she tried to stab the straw into the silver target. Both her hand eye co-ordination and her poking motion had been much reduced. Her stabbing at the silver spot was ineffectual and pathetic. Sam took it from her hands and pierced the lid; he held it out.

“Would you come to my parents’ anniversary party with me?” He watched Hannah’s expression remain static.

“Of course.” She reached for the drink.

“As my date.”

“As your date.” She paraphrased.

“Yes, as my date.” He repeated. She nodded and collected the drink. He placed his hands over hers and took a breath.

“As my date; with holding hands and sitting close and maybe kissing, though that might need more time.” She pulled her drink to her mouth and started to guzzle.

Hannah’s mind was methodically rerunning the events just before she found Killian, just as it did every spare minute she had. The inner movie slowly re-ran every possible combination of events. Her favourites were when she somehow stopped him injecting and they sauntered hand in hand to the dance. There were several alternatives to how this happened; the ‘tackling him with some ninja moves’ theme or

her favourite, the 'him falling at her feet in love' theme. These were the desperate options because she knew they were an impossible dream.

Fifteen days ago he was alive.

Fourteen slow days have passed since I found him. Just two weeks. It seems simultaneously forever and like yesterday. I have to stop thinking about him; it's ridiculous. He's dead.

Maybe if I'd moved as soon as I saw him, if I'd not made a noise, and crept up on him. But he'd taken the drug already, but not all of it; perhaps it was the last bit that killed him. I could have stopped that. I was there when he pushed that into his arm.

This juice is too warm.

Why am I doing this? Why can't I stop? Even if I find an option where he won't be found dead what does it matter? He's gone, it's over, he's over.

I think I'm going crazy.

Kissing?

Hannah let Sam's word filter through the thick membrane that was her reliving of the suicide. Sam used the word 'kissing'. Killian's mouth was wide and soft.

I wanted him to wake; I knew there was still a piece of glass in my shoe. The scratching sound it made on the floor was cool. Did I mean to make the noise and wake him? Was it deliberate even if subconscious, so he'd see me?

Holy fuck!

She breathed in the juice and coughed.

"A date? A real date?" She gasped hoarsely.

"Hey don't choke." There was a few seconds silence as they considered his words and then she glanced up and studied him.

If he wanted a date then he was attracted to her and if he wanted to kiss her, he did say kiss didn't he? Then maybe he wanted her as his girlfriend.

Oh, big oh!

"Did she ditch you because of me?" Hannah asked. Sam blushed and nodded. "I couldn't stop talking about you. I wanted to be with you and when she forced me to go watch romcoms all I thought was about our time watching the T trilogy and how much I really wished I was with you. She should be with someone who cares for her and that's not me. I think and you'll hate me for this, but I think I practiced being a boyfriend with her and now I want to do it for real." Hannah couldn't speak.

Bizarrely she appreciated and admired his honesty, it was refreshing. Sam had always been frank with her and Amy. That's an integral part of being a best friend.

"But you're a horrible boy, you can't use real people for practice; try reading a book." She whispered softly.

I like that Sam fancies me. That emotion makes my stomach stutter with excitement and expectation. I wonder if this ever happened to Killian, if he ever felt this way about anyone.

“Want to save me from myself?” Sam whispered in return. Hannah thought about Killian’s wet eyelashes and she knew she wouldn’t make the same mistake again. Here was someone to be saved and this time she’d save him.

Chapter Five

“He’s at the door. Did you hear me? In less than a minute your mother will let him in and he’ll be there with her, in your lounge, alone. Do you understand what that means?” Amy pulled at Hannah’s arm.

“Sod the earrings, sod the bracelet, get down there before she shows him baby photographs. Or is that what you want?”

Amy pressed her fingertips at the side of Hannah’s lips and pushed them up.

“And please smile, fake the happiness if you have to.” Hannah blinked back at Amy.

“I am happy. Don’t frown I am, but the cinema is a family affair, you, me, and him and the next day we spend break reviewing it and now it’s just me and him, it’s a real date and what if?” Amy rolled her eyes.

“He doesn’t like you? Thinks you’re ugly? Thinks you’re stupid? That’s not relevant; he knows you and amazingly still wants to go out on a date with you. Now go and stop your mother scaring him to death.” Amy gave Hannah a slight push and then watched her positively gambol down the stairs.

Amy watched them head out of the house. Sam had borrowed his brother’s car. Amy watched from Hannah’s bedroom window and sighed, they looked good together. She watched him admire her legs as she pulled them into the car. Amy waved as Hannah set off and she waited for Hannah’s mother to join her.

“That was hard work wasn’t it?” Her mother sighed. “So are we going to watch the film at the next screening, they’ll still be in when we get there, then you can review it together at lunch.”

Amy smiled shyly. “It’s not necessary.”

“Don’t you stand me up Amelia? I never get out of this house and you need to review the film to smooth this transition, come on it’s for Hannah and Sam and I’m paying.” Amy rolled her eyes dramatically and hugged her arm.

“I’ll get my coat bossy.”

Sam ushered Hannah into the wider couple’s seats and she settled herself, her knees together with her feet tucked under the chair. As Sam sat she pushed back to give him room. He looked at the popcorn separating the two of them and scowled. The lights dimmed and he removed the popcorn and moved closer. Hannah reached for a handful of popcorn and grabbed his leg.

“Sorry. Where’s the popcorn?” She whispered.

Sam pulled her close wrapping his arm around her shoulders and placing the popcorn between his thighs.

“Help yourself.” He whispered.

Waiting for the screen to lighten she stared at the new seating arrangements. Hannah leaned forward.

“You are a bad man who is taking unfair advantage of my popcorn addiction.” He placed his lips near her ear.

“Damn right.” Then he ran his tongue along her earlobe and she shivered. He pulled back embarrassed. That was too much too early.

But this was Hannah. This was the girl who had stood by him through the pimple stage, the proper acne stage, the squeaky voice stage—through all the painful adolescent stages and she was still here. This was his wonderful, funny, erection inducing, sexy friend and they were on an official ‘date’. Sam was almost too excited to breathe.

Sam counted slowly in his head. It was always going to be problematic moving from boy friend to ‘boyfriend’; it needed to be handled delicately. Hannah should dictate the pace.

The trailers burst into life.

“Sorry did you hate that? Sorry.” He whispered, as if talking whilst the film was playing made everything less embarrassing.

It feels strange being touched like that. Sam is a friend. When HE touched me it didn't feel like that. I need to focus on using the past tense and I need to stop comparing my Sam and Killian O'Dwyer. That boy was no angel and his life shouldn't be coloured by how he died in either a good or bad way.

Hannah felt focused on the real world. Suddenly she was aware of her clothes and felt if she'd been really awake she'd have reconsidered this shirt and skirt combination. Hannah smiled, she felt in the moment and genuinely happy thanks to Sam.

Hannah watched him look away embarrassed, she waited and as he turned back she kissed him. He stayed impressively still, trying hard not to overreact. She hooked her fingers through his blonde curls and kissed him deeper. They heard the popcorn container wrinkle under the pressure of his thighs. Scowling playfully she rescued the container and draped her leg over his as they curled around each other.

The film was entertaining and as they left the cinema they dawdled in the foyer. They giggled at the forthcoming films and when she went to the toilet, he phoned Amy who was just escaping from the next screening. She hugged him and Hannah's mum kissed his cheek as they rushed home to be there before them.

Sam collected her in his arms.

“Coffee?” He asked breathless with excitement. Hannah shook her head.

“I can't, I need to get home.” He refused to let her go.

“I have a secret and I'll tell you if you promise not to snitch.” She nodded tugging at his collar.

“Your mother and Amy have just left; they went to the later screening. Your mum said it was ok to go for coffee and kiss for at least ten minutes outside your house.” Hannah giggled as she pulled him through the door.

“Kissing first.” She decided as he nodded excitedly. They parked the car in the parking lot opposite the coffee shop and kissed for longer than ten minutes. He pulled away gasping for breath.

“It's getting late if you want coffee. The last thing I want is your mum grounding you, now you're my girlfriend.” Hannah pulled him back to her engorged lips.

“I don't want to waste time with coffee.” She whispered and they didn't....

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