



YOUNG GOTHIC



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M. A. BENNETT



WELBECK
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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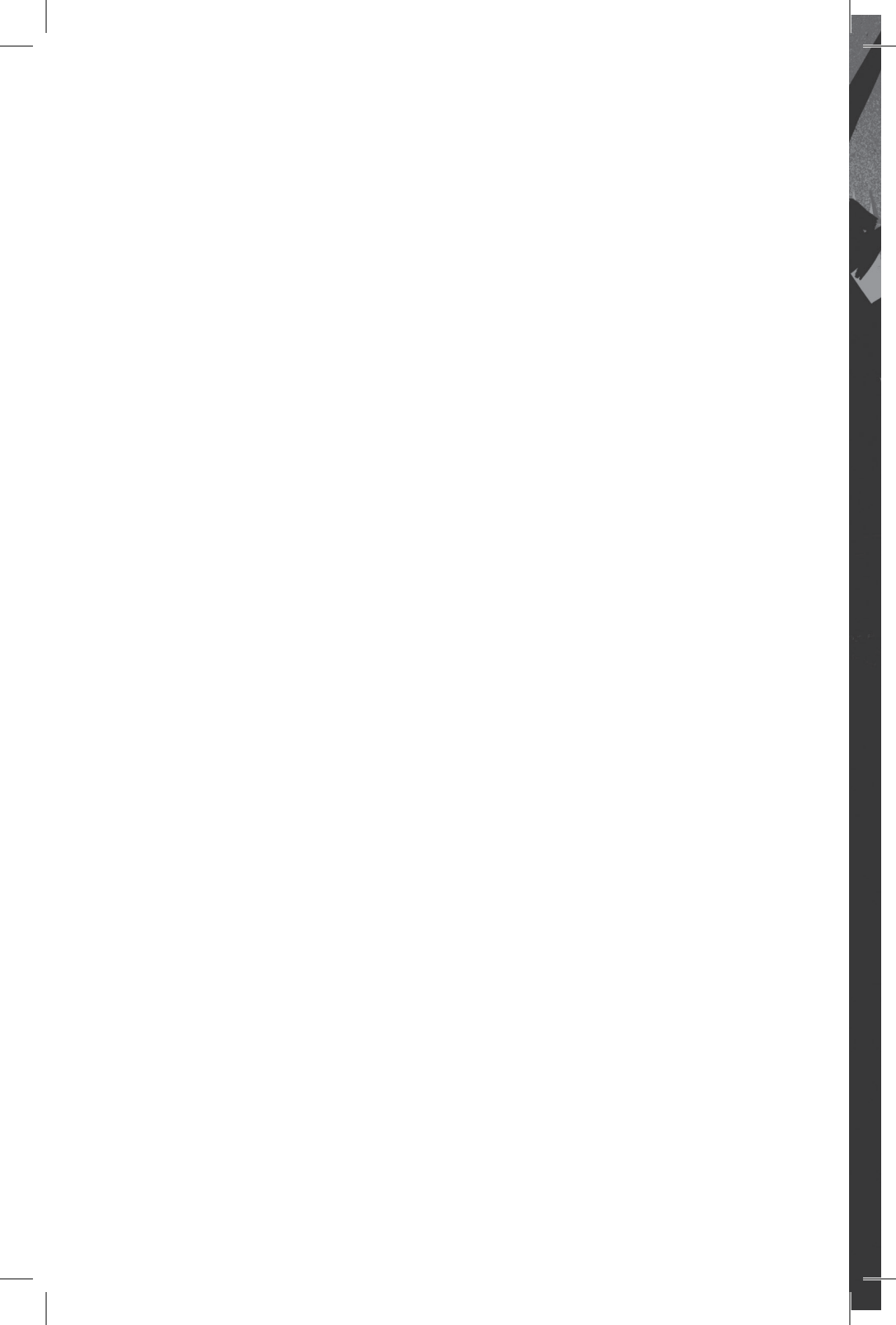
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For Conrad
who also survived an Operation

Content warning: This book contains some strong language and mentions of child loss, abortion and sexual coercion.





**THE
PRE-CREDITS
SEQUENCE**

It is a dark and stormy night.

The phrase sticks in my head as I set out from the villa. 'It was a dark and stormy night.' I happen to know where it's from. It's the opening line of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1830 novel *Paul Clifford*. Just one of those factoids, those useless pieces of pub quiz trivia that stick in your head. Funny how those stupid details float to the surface when you're in a panic. *Dark and stormy*. A clichéd line of fiction, a drink made with rum. And the classic beginning to a horror story.

Which is what this is.

It's factually true tonight. It is dark and stormy. The wild skies are torn apart by lightning, the rain slashes down and I can feel the thunder rumbling my ribs. What a night to have to go into the woods. A bird flies overhead and plunges into the forest behind the house, as if to show me the way.

In the forest it is even darker. Norse peoples of the past used to think that night was a great wolf devouring the sun, and they would clash pots and pans to scare it away. I'm sure they're much too polite to do that here in Switzerland, but I wish they would.

It is too dark to see anything at first, let alone a person. I would have missed her altogether but for the fact that she's wearing a white sheet, like some sort of Halloween ghost. I call her name and she turns. Our conversation is short but to the point. Then a flash of lightning illuminates us both. Now she

can see me properly. She looks at me like I'm a stranger, as if she doesn't know me from Adam.

And now she starts to scream.

Maybe it's the lightning that scared her. Or maybe it's the shock. I did sort of sneak up on her. It couldn't be helped though. We had to have this one last talk. Because she *can't* be allowed to do what she's planning to do. But neither of those things, the lightning nor the shock, explains the terror on her face when she sees mine. That only leaves one thing that's scaring her.

Me.

Her face frightens me in turn. Eyes wide, as if they had glimpsed down the pit of hell, mouth wide too, the whole face a gargoyle of horror. For the first time in my life I am looking at fear – pure fear.

I have to get her to stop screaming. We aren't far from the villa – someone will hear. One of the other three members of my strange new family.

But before I can speak again she turns and runs from me, into the undergrowth.

I walk in the stormy glade for a time, unsure of what to do. I don't know if there would be a point in going after her – she's clearly terrified of me, so it might do more harm than good. But then I make up my mind. I can't just leave her.

Not in her condition.

I find her in a clearing, lying prone on the forest floor. She's now silent. And that's somehow worse.

There's this bit in *The Silence of the Lambs* where Clarice Starling, the detective character, is explaining the meaning of the title of the movie. She says that she lived near a farm when she was young and they raised lambs. She used to hear them bleating

pitiably when they went to slaughter. But it was worse when they stopped, because that meant they were dead. It's also said that when there's a car crash, paramedics always attend the silent person first. If someone's screaming, that means they're alive.

Now I'm even more afraid. This is on *me*. I gave her the shock. For a moment I just stand over her, unsure of what to do. Then there is another crack of lightning, heaven wide, and suddenly it is as bright as day.

For a split second you can see the beauty below the villa; Lake Geneva like a haunted mirror, Chateau Chillon on its little island in the middle of it, and the silver slopes of Mont Blanc far beyond. Then the vista is gone as quickly as it had come.

But the lightning galvanises me – it was the shock *I* needed. I come to myself and fall to my knees on the wet earth, and try to revive her. Nothing. And her face is still the same, contorted with horror. I could run – *I* am still alive – and go to ground in the villa where this had all started. But I know I have to do the right thing for once in my life. I fumble wetly for my phone, my fingers as cold as the grave. Our Young Gothic WhatsApp group is open – as it always is. Shaking, I close it and call 115 – that was the emergency number we'd all been given when we'd arrived. I'd wondered why at the time; now I was so thankful. After all, time was of the essence if a spark of life *did* exist within her.

I speak to the operator, giving the address as clearly as I can.
The Villa Diodati.

I wait with her until I see blue lights circling the lake below like a collar of sapphires, and then it's back to doing the wrong thing. (I suppose we always revert to type.)

I run away.

Soon there will be gendarmes with their sharp eyes, and sharper questions. Trying to get to the truth. And I can't face that.

Because the truth is that the other three are innocent.

But me?

I am a monster.

EUE

The Villa Diodati is the most beautiful house I've ever seen.

It's like a mini palace, in an elegant cream colour, with eggshell shutters and a tiled roof of grey-blue slate. Bizarre when you think about it, that such a gorgeous house was the birthplace of so much horror.

It's actually quite hard to comprehend that I'm here. It was such a performance getting away from home I couldn't actually believe I was going to manage it. All the packing, all the arranging of three months of medication, all the anxious tears from Mum and the reams of advice from Dad.

I practically had to talk my mum out of getting me a chaperone to fly with, like a little kid. But I'd finally got on the plane, and as it took off I felt like I was soaring too. Free. I literally hadn't been alone for about three years. I'd always been in the company of a nurse, a doctor, other kids on the ward or my parents. I ordered a Coke and some Pringles, stuck in my headphones and lost myself in a reread of *Frankenstein*, unable to believe I would shortly be staying in the very house where an eighteen-year-old Mary Shelley got the idea for this absolute classic.

There was a driver waiting for me at Geneva airport, with my name on a sign. He drove me through the most stunning scenery to Cologne. It was like travelling through a fairytale. Turreted

castles, emerald vineyards and the distant pearly shimmer of the Alps. And reflecting it all, the blue expanse of Lake Geneva.

The house is right on the lake. And now I'm standing here, at the door of the actual Villa Diodati, wondering what to do next.

The driver pulls away in a crunch of gravel, and for a moment I am alone with the house. I look at the dove-grey double doors and have one of those strange sensations when you feel like you could be back in time. There's nothing modern in my eyeline and for that instant I could be *her*. Mary Shelley.

I lay my hand on the door handle and the spell is broken when I see the skull bracelet on my wrist, the one I got in Camden Market. I'm back to being Eve. I push the door and it opens, with a classic, Gothic-novel creak.

For a moment I can't see a thing because it is so bright outside. But then an elegant hallway resolves like a Polaroid developing, and I see a grand stairway and some open doors. I walk through one of them into what seems to be a kind of parlour. There are some big picture windows with a stunning view of the lake. I gape at the vista for a moment, then turn to examine the rest of the room. There are floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, elegant chairs and couches, discreetly patterned rugs and hazy landscape prints in gilded frames.

And a single book, in a glass case.

I walk up to it, and peer beyond the glass. The volume is dark, centuries old, with that kind of greeny-black leather cover. The title is tooled on the front in faded gold lettering. It reads:

FANTASMAGORIANA

There is a catch in my breath. This is *the* book; the book that the Dead Poets read aloud to each another one dark and stormy night, the book that inspired Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Polidori's *The Vampyre*. I place my fingertips on the case as if it is a shrine, which it kind of is. I'm so close to something *they* touched.

'Look at it.'

I spin round and retract my fingers at once as if the glass burns.

'Take it in your hands and look at it.'

There's been someone else in the room all along, lurking in a slice of shadow beyond the long curtains.

He comes out of the darkness like he is part of it. A strange-looking, quite elderly man with watery clouded eyes of the palest blue. He is immaculately dressed in a grey lounge suit and his black shoes are mirror-shiny. His hair is long, snowy white and tied at the nape of his neck with a black velvet ribbon. The hair, and the fact that there is a gold watch chain peeping out of the pocket of his waistcoat, gives him a strangely antiquated look.

He stoops and kisses my hand with olde-worlde courtesy, right on the skull bracelet, like he is pledging some sort of allegiance to the dead. His lips are curiously cold. He straightens up and smiles. His teeth are yellow, but the smile is warm. I wonder how old he is. 'You would like to see the book, I think,' he says, a statement, not a question. He waves his hand towards the glass case in an elegant gesture. You can see the smoky ghost of my fingerprints on the pristine glass. He already knows I've been snooping.

'The other three are not here yet,' he says. 'We have a moment. Please – feel free to take a look. See, the case just lifts – like this.'

He has some sort of mid-European accent which stalls on the Fs and the Ss. He lifts the case in one movement – it is essentially an upended fish tank – and places the glass carefully on a couch. The book is revealed in its velvet nest, and there is a puff of my favourite smell in all the world – old paper and book leather.

I look to him and he nods. I take a step forward and pick up the book. It is reassuringly heavy and warm from the sun, as if it is alive.

I turn to the title page. It says:

FANTASMAGORIANA
OU
RECUEIL
D’HISTOIRES D’APPARITIONS DE SPECTRES,
REVENANS, FANTÔMES, etc.;

Suddenly he is at my shoulder. I didn’t even see him move. ‘It says the story of spectres, revenants and ghosts.’

‘I know two out of three,’ I say. ‘What’s a revenant?’

He looks at me with a strangely piercing gaze, as though he knew exactly what had happened to me. ‘Someone who has come back from the dead,’ he says, in almost a whisper. ‘It means, literally, one who has returned.’

Me, I thought. *I’m a revenant*. And then I remember. He *does* know what happened to me. Well – most of it, anyway. He’s read my letter. This must be Herr Necker.

The old man smiles. ‘The rest of it’s in translation. Don’t worry,’ he assures me in quite a different voice. He sounds faintly amused.

It takes me a minute to process what he’s saying. ‘You mean I can read it?’ I blurt. ‘While I’m here, I mean?’

He waves his pale hand again. 'Of course. And there could not be a better room to do so – this is the very sitting room where the poets read it, there, by the fire.' He points to the empty fireplace and I see four comfortable-looking chairs arranged around the empty grate. I get another of those 'back in time' feelings, as if I can almost see the young Mary Shelley huddled over the fire, with Shelley, Polidori and Byron. 'You are to treat the Villa Diodati – and everything in it – as your own. All I ask is that you strictly follow the instructions at the beginning of the book.'

And it's as he waves that I notice his nails. They are as bleached as bone and each one is filed to a toothsome point.

But before I can get a good look at them the door opens.

G

There is no one on the door so I walk right into the villa. There's a sort of stairwell and some open doors. I hear voices from a room so I go in. The room is big and bright and posh and there's two people in it. An old-timer and a goth like the ones you see haunting Camden Market. The goth is holding a book. She looks shook, and drops the book as I come in as if she's been caught nicking. She's really pretty and really skinny. She's got this long sheet of dyed black hair, dead straight with about a centimetre of blonde roots. Not my type but she looks peng.

The goth arranges the book gently on a cushion thing, carefully like it's a bomb. The old guy puts this glass case over it.

I nod at both of them. The old-timer comes over to me and bows. He looks about a hundred.

'Ah, Mr "G the Poet", I presume?' he says, all delicate.

I shrug. 'Just G is fine.'

Out of habit I put out a fist, not thinking that he won't really know what to do with it. So we end up doing this weird thing – he takes the whole of my fist in his hand and sorta shakes it. His fingernails are freaky – all sharp like guitar picks. His smile is freaky too. 'It's been a long time since there was a poet in residence in this house,' he says. 'You are very welcome.'

He sounds kind of sweet and sincere, like he's not just bullshitting. I start to think he's OK. 'I'm Herr Necker,' he says.

'Ah. OK, the guy from the ad,' I say, nodding.

'Indeed,' he replies. 'And this is Miss Eve Robertson. Another guest of the villa.'

He makes it sound like the house is an actual person. I offer the goth my fist and she bumps it, a bit unsure. She's got this china-white skin but when her hand touches mine she blushes a bit. She recognises me for sure. Usually when girls meet me they're all over me for selfies and shit, so I like this quiet vibe. It's cute.

There's a bit of a silence and I walk to the big windows. The view is pretty cool. The lake seems to go on forever and there's this island in the middle with a castle on it.

This'll do.

It's just what I need.

'Nice place,' I say to the view.

'I'm glad you like it,' says the old guy. 'This house is considered to be one of the finest on the lake.'

'Just you here?' I ask. I know he was the contact for this gig but I wasn't really expecting the main man to be doing the wet work.

'Goodness, no,' he says with a little chuckle, as dry as dust. 'The Villa Diodati has a full complement of staff. They will wait upon you hand and foot.'

This sounds so oldy-worldy I'm not sure what to say.

Then the goth pipes up. She's got this nice silvery voice that sounds like a chime. 'I've always wondered,' she says. 'What does Diodati mean? Is it just a family name or does it have some other significance?'

He looks pleased to be asked, like a teacher who's just been

given an apple. 'It means God in the Machine,' he says. 'Literally Dio – God, Dati – Data. So God's data, if you will. Speaking of data,' he says, 'I expect you'd like the Wi-Fi password.' It was such a weird thing for this cosplay dude to say. 'It's all you young people seem to want. Switzerland has blanket coverage and high-speed broadband, so you'll have no trouble getting online. It's **diodati1816**, all lower case.'

It seems to me like a shadow crosses the lake. Like a dark hand reaching out to pull me back to the real world. I don't want it. I want to slap it away.

'Nah,' I say, turning back to the room. 'I won't be needing it. Digital detox, that's G. Get my head straight this summer, you know? Work on my shit.'

Skeletor nods. 'I think that's very wise. You know, one of the poets from 1816 was of the same mind.' He looks at me with his creepy eyes in this kind of meaningful way. The irises are so pale they look about the same as the whites. 'Byron did the same thing.'

'The burger guy?'

He smiles his yellow smile. 'The poet. Lord George Gordon Byron. He was in many ways the first modern-style celebrity. One of his lovers coined the term "Byromania" for the commotion which surrounded him. He came here to get away from people.'

I didn't really give a crap about Byron, but it sounded like me and him had some shit in common. And this Necker character knew it too. He'd read my email, after all.

He was dead right, of course.

I was running from something.

But I was pretty sure that she would never find me here.

REN

Geneva, 16 June 2016, afternoon

I'm LATE, as usual!!

My gran used to say I would be late for my own funeral, and I guess she was right. At least she was on time for hers.

I did have to fly from Leeds-Bradford airport. I bet all the others are southerners, flying from London, which is much easier. They were probably on the same flight, come to think of it.

All right, all right. Full disclosure. I missed my flight because I overslept. I've always found it a real struggle to get up in the morning and even on a day as important as this one it was no different. (In late afternoon/early evening I always feel much more chipper, and night-time is party time!!) I set about FIFTY alarms on my phone but still slept through, and of course with Gran gone there's been no one to get me up. I had to get a later flight but luckily there was still a chauffeur guy waiting at Geneva airport when I arrived, with a sign saying JAMES RENFIELD. So ODD to see my real name printed like that. No one called me James apart from my gran. She refused to call me Ren. I haven't thought of myself as James since she died. The name gives me a little shiver of fear.

So now I'm all in a panic. *Great.* I had it all planned – I'm in

my favourite tailcoat and wine-coloured silk cravat and now of course I'm BOILING. I take my jacket off in the back of the car and roll up the sleeves of my dress shirt. Reluctantly I lose the cravat too. I wanted to be FABULOUS when I walked into the Villa Diodati, but better to be casual than a sweaty mess, I suppose. I was considering a corset this morning – thank GOD I thought better of it. Even *I* thought that flying in whalebone might be a bit uncomfortable!!

There's aircon in the car, turned up to nipple-hardening levels, so I start to cool down. I check out my hair in my phone. It's actually behaving for once, so I look out of the windows at a different kind of view.

This is the first time I've been abroad EVER and Switzerland is a stunning place to start my international jet-setting! It's GORGEOUS. It's a beautiful June day and you can see the mountains (the Alps??) really clearly. As we wind round the hairpin bends, now and again you can see white waterfalls spewing from the rocks, blowing in the summer breeze like Gran's net curtains.

At one junction we have to stop for oncoming traffic and I see a tiny building on the corner. It is almost like a birdhouse, freestanding with a little shingled roof. I know what this is – I wasn't raised by a rabid Catholic for nothing. It is a roadside shrine. Instead of a bird, a saint nestles inside it. I can't at this distance see which one – and TRUST ME, I know them all!! – but I catch a swag of blue cloak which suggests to me it's probably the Blessed Virgin. I can see the flash of a crown of gold, and there is a tangle of dried-up-looking flowers at her feet. People have even left offerings of food and drink – I can see some bread and some wine. My stomach suddenly gives an enormous rumble

so loud I bet the chauffeur guy can hear it!! I start to salivate and hope there's something to eat at the villa! To distract myself from thoughts of food I watch an old couple who are approaching the shrine, the woman clutching some fresh-cut blooms. Obviously they're going to swap one bouquet for the other. As the car slows something strange happens. As if they're totally synchronised, both the old dears turn as one and look at me, right in the eyes through the car window. It's properly creepy for about a second until I realise they're much more frightened of me than I am of them. They look utterly terrified. The old lady drops the flowers on the ground where they scatter. Both of them cross themselves, and then they both clutch at their hearts, as though my gaze actually HURT them! Then we slide past and the moment's over. I swivel round in my seat to see the old lady sort of double up; maybe she's bending to pick up Our Lady's flowers. The old man seems to be stooping to help her. Then we round a bend and they are gone.

We reach the lake and I forget about the old couple. The water is as blue as Mary's cloak, and of course my eyes are on stalks for a glimpse of the Villa Diodati. Actually you can't see it until you are right on top of it, because it's shrouded by a little lakeside forest. Nice and private for Polidori and his poet pals. Nice and private for US.

With a little jag of nerves I wonder who the other three are that I'm going to be spending my summer with. The driver drops me off – apparently my luggage has gone on ahead. I look up at the Villa Diodati, absolutely GOBSMACKED. This house is where *The Vampyre* was written, so it's where the vampire as we know him was born. Without *The Vampyre* there would be no *Dracula*, and without *Dracula* I wouldn't be here. I put my jacket back

on and tie the cravat quite loosely. (No time to do a Mailcoach right now, my favourite Regency knot!!) I go right up to the dove-grey doors, unsure of what to do. My gran was very big on manners and it seems rude just to walk into such an important place without being invited.

So I raise my hand and knock.

HAL

INT. VILLA DIODATI, DRAWING ROOM — DAY

There had been nobody around when the driver dropped me off, so I just walked in the front door and followed the sound of voices, and now I'm in this bright room with three other people.

To my surprise I recognise two of them at once.

One is that rapper who really blew up over the last year. Calls himself the Poet or something. Looks like Daniel Kaluuya. (No one really knows about Daniel Kaluuya at the moment but I think he's going to be big.)

The second is dressed entirely in black, has these far-apart eyes and china-white skin, and looks like Anya Taylor-Joy. (No one really knows about Anya Taylor-Joy at the moment but I think she's going to be big.)

It's Gothic Girl.

Shit.

This girl has been in my face for the last year or so, and she even tried to get my YouTube channel taken down. I came here to make friends and what do I find? My arch enemy.

I go to shake hands with the rapper guy, a bit shyly, because he is everything I'm not. Good-looking, dressed in flash clothes (all labels) and his hair is in neat wee knots all over his head

like *Hellraiser*. He's wearing these blue shades and looks completely comfortable in this room, which I'm sure I don't. He holds out his fist and I bump it awkwardly. Then I nod at Gothic Girl, as politely as I can, even though I think she's an utter bitch.

The third person is an ancient bloke who looks like Gary Oldman as the old version of Dracula in the Francis Ford Coppola film. For a bit I think he is the other winner until he introduces himself – apparently he is Herr Necker, the guy we all had to apply to, the head honcho of the Diodati Foundation, whatever *that* is.

There's barely time to shake his hand before there is a knock at the door. I must have just beaten the fourth person to it.

Herr Necker cocks his head and raises his forefinger, listening. The finger has a pointy nail on it, like a spike. 'Isn't that funny?' he says. 'The *only* one who knocked and waited to be invited in.' We others look at each other a bit awkwardly. Had we been bad-mannered, just marching in? The words might have implied that but the tone was quite different. It just sounded like he was interested in the differences between people.

As soon as Necker leaves the room, Gothic Girl starts hissing at me like the snake she is. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

I shrug. 'Same as you, I guess.'

The poet guy peers at us through his blue sunglasses. He looks amused and interested in equal parts. 'There some beef between you two?'

'No,' she says at the same time I say, 'Yes.'

'Well, I can't imagine *you're* here to do any writing,' she says scornfully, glaring at me from her cat eyes.

'No, but I might make a film though,' I say coldly. 'That way people might actually *see* it.'

'Have you even read a book?' she shoots back.

‘No one reads books any more,’ I say. ‘Your day is over.’

She looks at me witheringly. ‘You’re literally in a place where *Frankenstein*, one of the most famous books in the world, was written.’

‘Famous why?’ I say. ‘Because it was turned into about a million films. Frankenstein’s a decent character, I’ll give you that. But it took the magic of cinema to turn him into the greatest monster of all time. He was the first super-villain.’

‘You see, this is what drives me insane about mouth-breathers like you,’ she says. ‘Frankenstein is the creator, not the monster. One of the commonest misconceptions in the knuckle-dragging community.’

Before I can reply Necker comes back, followed by a small slight figure who’s dressed a bit like him but looks eighty years younger. Together they look like Rick and Morty.

‘This is James Renfield,’ says Necker, and then introduces us all around. James Renfield really reminds me of this actor called Timothée Chalamet. (You’ve guessed it; no one knows about Timothée Chalamet at the moment but I think he’s going to be big.) The newcomer fanboys all over the rapper guy, flapping his hands about. ‘OH. MY. GOD. I *loved* “C ME”. I literally couldn’t get it out of my head for *weeks*. SUCH an earworm.’ He has this kind of actor-y voice but a camp Yorkshire accent; an odd combination. The poet, who must presumably have smoke blown up his arse all the time, takes this well. He offers a fist and grins pleasantly. His smile is pretty charming. ‘My G,’ he says. Then the new guy spots Gothic Girl and, if possible, fanboys even harder over her. ‘THIS. IS. INSANE. I’ve watched *all* your videos. I swear that round table you did about Dracula totally INSPIRED me. I did this thing called the *Dracula Dispatches*—’

'I saw them!' exclaims Eve, with her sickly smile. 'They're great. I gave you a shout-out on my channel.'

'Shut UP,' squeals the new guy, flapping his hands again. 'I'm TOTALLY not worthy.' And he stoops and actually *kisses her hand*, the knobhead. Necker looks on with approval at this piece of gallantry and then, finally, introduces me. The latecomer shakes my hand pleasantly enough with no recognition at all.

Nice.

Then I click where I've heard the name before. *Renfield*. He was Dracula's disciple. The one who eats the flies and spiders. Tom Waits in the Coppola film. This guy doesn't look like he eats anything, not with those cheekbones.

'So,' says Renfield, walking round the room like he owns it and breathing in deeply as if to absorb the vibes, 'what next? What do we do now we're here?'

'Shortly we have a lakeside reception to welcome you all,' says Necker warmly, 'and tomorrow there's a trip to the Giger Museum. There will be a car waiting outside at ten a.m. for those of you who are minded to go. But don't worry, we don't plan to over-schedule you. All excursions are entirely optional. We want to give you space and time to pursue your own interests.'

I'd actually stopped listening after he'd said that holy name.

'Giger?' I say. 'HR Giger?'

'That's correct,' says Necker. 'He was from here.'

The rapper asks, 'Who is HR Giger?'

'Only one of the greatest concept artists of all time,' I say. 'He created the xenomorph monster for the *Alien* film.'

'Oh, yeah,' says G the Poet, as I suppose we must call him. 'That's not a bad little movie.'

‘Not bad?’ I bray, forgetting to be shy of him. ‘It’s only one of the best horror films of all time.’

‘Sci-fi films,’ says the Renfield guy.

‘What’s that now?’ I say.

‘One of the best *sci-fi* films of all time, surely,’ he says. ‘Not horror.’

‘Rubbish,’ I say roundly. ‘It has all the hallmarks of a classic horror.’

‘And a classic sci-fi,’ says the new boy, and Eve smirks over him, plainly on his side.

Necker looks amused. ‘Well,’ he says, clasping his hands together with those claw-like nails. ‘This is just like old times.’

I feel my heart sinking a bit. If this is the cast of characters I am going to be trapped with for the summer it is destined to be a bit shite. I can’t see any life partners or friends for life among this lot. Then I have a thought.

I am in *The Cabin in the Woods*. My favourite horror movie, and the one that started my channel.

The Villa Diodati isn’t exactly a cabin, but there is that little tangle of forest out the back, and we have pretty much all the archetypes we need for a classic horror film.

The Nerd (me).

The Jock (G) – he looks hench like he hits the gym pretty hard.

The Clown (Renfield) – he’s certainly dressed like one.

The Virgin (Eve) – I am pretty sure she’s never seen the undercarriage of a guy.

All we are missing is **The Whore**, the body in the opening scene.

Necker glances out of the window. ‘Looks like they’re ready

for us. Come along.’ He opens the glass doors and ushers us through ahead of him, and we walk out into the gardens.

EXT. VILLA DIODATI, GARDEN – DAY

I wonder who ‘they’ are, but soon find out. There are about a dozen staff, wearing black and white, all buzzing around on the foreshore. The grounds slope all the way down to the lake, and the view is incredible. The blue of the lake, the castle in the middle, and the jagged mountains all the way around. It’s hard to believe this place is ours for the summer. There’s a big table with fluted crystal glasses on it, and they’re catching the sun. A waiter is pouring champagne into the glasses and Necker hands one to each of us, then raises his own glass in a toast. ‘To our honoured guests,’ he says. A photographer pops up out of nowhere with a professional-looking camera.

‘Ah. Look this way,’ says Necker, backing out of the shot. ‘A little memento of the day.’

Before we can even arrange ourselves, the photographer has fired off a few shots of the four of us lined up with the villa in the background.

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa,’ says G, holding up his hand. ‘This isn’t going in the press, is it? Or online?’

Maybe he’s paranoid about stalkers?

‘No, no, don’t worry,’ says Necker. ‘This is just to hang on the wall of the Villa Diodati. To record this . . . *experiment*.’

That word gives me a wee shiver of foreboding. Was that what we were?

He smiles. ‘I mean, of course, that if this creative endeavour bears fruit, we may do it again one day.’

'You mean next year?' I say.

He winks one of his pale eyes. 'Maybe in another two hundred years.'

That guy certainly has a niche sense of humour.

'OK, safe. In that case,' G hands the photographer his fancy smartphone, 'do a man a favour and get a shot for me.'

The photographer does as he's asked, hands the phone back and melts away, to be replaced by waiters with silver trays bringing an endless procession of fancy titbits – tiny burgers, chicken satay, cheese on mini toasts. We stand looking out to the lake, munching the delicious nibbles, absolutely knocked out by the view. The mountain peaks look incredible. There's snow on the caps even now, in the middle of June. They look both really close and simultaneously mega far away.

Necker points at the mountains with the claw on his forefinger. 'That's Chasseron,' he says, 'that's Rochers de Naye, and that's La Dôle. We will arrange a hike for you up there, if you like, weather permitting.' He squints at the blue sky as if the light hurts him. 'Although you're luckier with the weather than the others.' He has this trick of talking about the Dead Poets as if they'd left last week, not two hundred years ago. 'They were bright minds with troubled souls.' He looks at us intently as he says this, with those freaky eyes of his. 'They came here to find peace and inspiration, take the air, enjoy nature. But nature had other ideas.'

'Yeah, wasn't it pretty grim for them?' says Renfield.

'The Year Without a Summer,' says Eve; such a pick-me girl.

'That's right, my dear,' says Necker approvingly. 'In April 1815 Mount Tambora in the Dutch East Indies erupted, sending clouds of volcanic ash billowing into the upper atmosphere. By the following summer the sun was almost totally obscured, levels of

rainfall increased and temperatures plummeted. Of course, on the other side of the world no one really knew why this was happening, and the phenomenon took on a sinister and supernatural quality.’ His voice changes slightly, like he’s telling us a horror story. ‘Birds began to roost at noon. On the rare occasions that the sun could be glimpsed, there were dark spots on the surface, and people thought it was rotting. It felt like the end of days. Here at the villa the poets had to light candles at midday in order to do their writing. Little wonder that their thoughts turned to the darkest corners of the human psyche.’ He sips from his glass, smallest claw extended. ‘Of course, the lightning was a gift to the poets. They were very interested in galvanism, the power of electricity. That’s why we have also planned a trip for you to the CERN laboratory, to see the awesome particle accelerators. It’s just on the other side of Lake Geneva.’

‘Sounds a bit . . . modern,’ says Renfield, not altogether approvingly.

‘Oh, the poets were *very* forward thinking,’ says Necker.

‘That’s how Frankenstein was created,’ I say. ‘In a bolt of lightning.’

‘Frankenstein’s *monster*,’ Eve says witheringly. ‘How many times are you going to get that wrong?’ For the first time I see a bit of colour in her deathly-pale cheeks, like those petals on flowers which are white but have a tiny blush of pink. Being annoyed suits her.

‘That’s right, my dear,’ says Necker, and suddenly Eve is the teacher’s pet. ‘Exactly right. And the particle accelerators of CERN are merely the logical conclusion of galvanism, as you’ll see when you visit. Some of your other excursions will be much closer to home. For example, this boat here is yours for the summer. Come.’

We follow him down to the shore, where a handsome boat of nut-brown wood bobs glossily in the water. There's a name on the side of it in gold scrolly letters. Eve traces it with a black fingernail. 'Ariel,' she reads. 'Just like Shelley's boat.'

'This is Shelley's boat,' says Necker. 'We had it recovered and restored. It only sunk once.'

'The day it drowned him,' says Eve soberly, like she was there.

'That's right,' says Necker, in exactly the same mournful tone. 'But don't worry, it is fully sound now. And perhaps you'd like to go tonight? As we are approaching midsummer it will be light very late.'

'Will you take us?' asks Eve, such an arse-kisser.

'Alas,' he says, 'I'll be leaving you after this reception.' He makes it sound strangely permanent. 'You must take possession of the villa as your own. You will each be given three hundred euros a day *per diems*, or spending money.' We all look at each other. That seems like a *lot*. 'Remember that in Switzerland the number for emergencies is 115, should you need it.' This seems like a very parental thing to say, but I suppose he's covering his ancient butt against lawsuits. 'And tonight you will be left alone to enjoy your first dinner. It will be served at eight p.m. in the Crimson Dining Room. Perhaps you'd all like to change?' He sniffs delicately, pale gaze drifting my way. I look down at my T-shirt. It has a picture of Ghostface from *Scream* and seems perfectly respectable to me.

'Ah, yes, about the dinner,' says Eve bossily. 'I should say I've got a few dietary quirks. I've been . . . unwell, as you know.'

Necker's watery eyes soften. 'Of course,' he says. 'But don't worry. Our chefs here are instructed to make you all whatever you want to eat, to your exact specifications.'

'Whatever we want?' asks the Renfield boy.

'Try us,' smiles Necker. 'Leon!' He clicks his fingers sharply – how he manages it with those nails I'll never know. One of the waiters in black trousers and a white shirt appears at his side.

'If you give Leon your orders, the kitchen will endeavour to make whatever you desire.'

We all look at each other with the first glimmer of camaraderie we've shown. This could be fun. We all kind of wait for G to speak first. He's the famous one, after all. Without hesitating he says, 'Tassot Cabrit.' I have no idea what that is, but Leon isn't fazed. He produces a notebook and writes the order down.

Eve goes next. 'I'd like a plain chicken breast with plain pasta, please,' she says, a meal which sounds about as interesting as she is.

Then the latecomer. 'Steak and chips,' he says. 'Like they do at the Pier Inn in Whitby. It's my favourite pub,' he explains to us. Then back to Leon: 'NO garlic butter – that just ruins it.'

I guess garlic is a bit too bougie for Yorkshire? I muse for a wee while about my own choices. I don't think my fellow guests are really testing this kitchen to the max. I decide to give them a bit of a challenge. Plus I really fancy some tendies. 'Nando's chicken,' I say. That'll fix them. 'Medium spice. With chips, cheesy mash and garlic bread.'

I watch the Leon guy carefully, but he calmly notes my order down with the rest, bows and leaves.

'He don't say much,' observes G.

'Perhaps I neglected to tell you?' says Necker. 'The Diodati is a charitable foundation. We run a special outreach programme in which we purposely employ people who are speech impaired.'

Eve clasps her hands in front of her and pulls a sappy face. 'Oh, that's so *sweet*,' she says, sucking up to Necker.

I look past her to the silent servants, moving around as efficiently and mutely as droids.

I wasn't thinking about how sweet it was.

I was thinking if they couldn't speak, they couldn't tell.