

A MONSTER CALLS BY PATRICK NESS
EXTRACT 8

“Hey!” she said, catching up with him and planting herself right in his way so he had to stop or run into her. She was out of breath, but her face was still furious. “Why did you do that today?” she said.

“Leave me alone,” Conor said, pushing past her.

“Why didn’t you tell Miss Kwan what really happened?” Lily persisted, following him. “Why did you let me get into trouble?”

“Why did you butt in when it was none of your business?”

“I was trying to *help* you.”

“I don’t need your help,” Conor said. “I was doing fine on my own.”

“You were not!” Lily said. “You were bleeding.”

“It’s none of your *business*,” Conor snapped again and picked up his pace.

“I’ve got detention *all week*,” Lily complained. “*And* a note home to my parents.”

“That’s not my problem.”

“But it’s your fault.”

Conor stopped suddenly and turned to her. He looked so angry she stepped back, startled, almost like she was afraid. “It’s *your* fault,” he said. “It’s *all* your fault.”

He stormed off back down the pavement. “We used to be friends,” Lily called after him.

“*Used* to be,” Conor said without turning around.

He’d known Lily forever. Or for as long as he could remember, which was basically the same thing.

Their mums were friends from before Conor and Lily were born, and Lily had been like a sister who lived in another house, especially when one mum or the other would babysit. He and Lily had only been friends, though, none of the romantic stuff they got teased for sometimes at school. In a way, it was hard for Conor to even look at Lily as a *girl*, at least not in the same way as the other girls at school. How could you when you’d both played sheep in the same nativity, aged five? When you knew how much she used to pick her nose? When *she* knew how long you’d needed a nightlight after your father moved out? It had just been a friendship, normal as anything.

But then his mum’s “little talk” had happened, and what came next was simple, really, and sudden.

No one knew.

Then Lily’s mum knew, of course.

Then Lily knew.

And then everyone knew. Everyone. Which changed the whole world in a single day.

And he was never going to forgive her for that.

Another street and another street more and there was his house, small but detached. It had been the one thing his mum had insisted on in the divorce, that it was theirs free and clear and they wouldn’t have to move after his dad had left for America with Stephanie, the new wife. That had been six years ago, so long now that Conor sometimes couldn’t remember what it was like having a dad in the house.

Didn't mean he still didn't think about it, though.

He looked up past his house to the hill beyond, the church steeple poking up into the cloudy sky.

And the yew tree hovering over the graveyard like a sleeping giant.

Conor forced himself to keep looking at it, making himself see that it was just a tree, a tree like any other, like any one of those that lined the railway track.

A tree. That's all it was. That's all it *ever* was. A tree.

A tree that, as he watched, reared up a giant face to look at him in the sunlight, its arms reaching out, its voice saying, *Conor-*

He stepped back so fast, he nearly fell into the street, catching himself on the bonnet of a parked car.

When he looked back up, it was just a tree again.