

# Witch River

The sun had just begun to set as Maya cautiously crept through the rough, rusted remnants of the window frame, careful not to cut herself on the broken glass. The sun's golden light carefully guided her as she deftly leapt from the rusted window ledge to the chipped red paint of the box beneath and onto relatively stable ground again. The doors of the old Barn were even more rusted than the windows. Maya wasn't entirely sure the Barn wouldn't collapse on her if she tried to enter through them, so she never did. Although the Barn wasn't the safest place to meet someone, it was the best way to ensure they would be alone, bar a few birds, crickets and frogs forming their own sunset choir in the overgrown weedy bushes.

It wasn't a cold evening, it did manage to hold some warmth and humidity, but there was also an odd chill in the air that was more characteristic of the night. Fluttering moths and other insects were only visible in the streams of sunlight flooding gently through each of the shattered windows, as magical as the stained glass of ancient ruins. The weedy bushes of the outside had overtime invaded the Barn, burrowing under the walls, bursting through cracks in the floor and planting their roots in their conquered territory. Wiping her hands on her jeans, Maya took a few moments to get used to the sight of the Barn in the minimal amount of light offered to her.

Dust motes mingled with the moths and insects in the light, seeming to keep far away from the depth of the shadows and giving a grainy feature to the Barn, as if by entering the Barn, Maya had walked into an old film. Tables were strewn about the massive space of the Barn, held hostage by vines and weeds and the small amount of wildlife still inhabiting the area. The Barn had a musty smell to it, but the fresh air invading from the window's made it bearable as long as one stayed away from the back of the Barn where the damp collected and created its own ecosystem. This small, insignificant part of the world, Maya thought, seemed as though it had just existed. As if the Barn had always been there, and the world had grown around it. It was a silly thought, Maya knew. It just seemed to Maya that this place was too peaceful to be part of the world she had just left. At least, that was how Maya usually felt.

Standing in the muted restlessness of the Barn, Maya found herself on edge. The vines tightly gripping the tables appeared to be in a state of suspense, and it seemed to Maya as though the world around her was holding its breath. The singing of the birds, crickets and frogs stopped, instead replaced by an unnerving stillness that cloaked the Barn in the faithful beat of Maya's heart and the rise and fall of her breath. There was something wrong that Maya couldn't quite understand. A presence lurking somewhere in the peaceful world of the Barn that was obliterating its calm, and it wasn't someone who was supposed to be there. Trying to seem inconspicuous, Maya went about wiping the nearest table of the dust it had collected since her last time meeting there. She didn't know what this presence was, or if it was just her mind playing tricks on her, but she knew her instincts

were always right. Although she was meant to meet him here, she couldn't risk her own safety, and she knew he could handle himself. What Maya needed was to find a safe way to leave. She would get in contact with him and, although Maya preferred the neutral safety the Barn offered her, they would find a new place. This one had been compromised, even if only in her mind.

*There.*

Stepping back from the table, she saw something flit in the dark shadows of the Barn, the far corners that couldn't be stained by the dying light. It was definitely human. And it was coming towards her. Startled, Maya turned to her only exit: the chipped paint of the box behind her and the window she prayed she would reach. She didn't. Maya heard it before she felt it. There was a *whoosh!* like the sound of a racquet slicing through the air and Maya gasped as she was thrown off her feet and into the far side of the wall. She shot up like a bullet, only to be pinned against the wall by some invisible force. She barely had time to register the sudden pain she felt in her ankle. She tried struggling against it, but the pressure kept increasing, so she stopped. Maya felt utterly helpless. Her feet dangled a few useless inches above the ground, and her body was pressed uncomfortably against the grotesque walls she often tried to shy away from. The Barn walls themselves were a lot sturdier than Maya gave them credit.

Like a butterfly pinned to some cruel collector's book, Maya watched defiantly as her attacker freed themselves from the shadows and into the glare of the rapidly failing brightness. She felt her heart do a somersault. The world around her at once felt still and muted, and loud and alive. She couldn't bring herself to speak, only stare in horror at the ghost before her. At least, she should have been a ghost. There was no possible way in Maya's mind that *she* could have made it out alive. The woman before Maya stood tall and proud with a sharp straightness in all her features. She was a cacophony of lines and angles, and there was not a hint of softness anywhere in her. In the setting sun, she was a lit-up jack-o-lantern, with a malevolent grin carved into her face. Bragging her own strength, she lowered her arms.

"You thought I was dead, how pathetic."

## Bio

I lived in three different countries by the time I was 8, so I never really had passion for writing. That was until my family and I moved to Northern Ireland where we live now. I started to read a lot of books, so by the time I was 12 I started writing, but took a break and then reignited my passion for it a few years later. I've been writing ever since, and I don't ever want to stop.

## Editors thoughts

I liked this story and chose it as my winner because the piece is very atmospheric. The story is full of well-crafted descriptions and builds up the tension nicely. I appreciated the use of the dialogue which is what this competition is all about.

In my opinion, this could very well grow into a novel and I encourage Emma to look at that.