

'til the End of the World

Year One

Story Four

All the Good Girls

Opening

October 2005

The light burned low in the church, as the last of the sunlight slipped over the hill. The shadows had long since come to this small pocket of life, a place where the oaks shaded the churchyard and played shadows over names long-forgotten engraved on headstones. The place was quiet, still, reflective.

Churches in Calendar were numerous, though many were really small chapels. This was one such, open most hours of the day and maintained by a rotating visitation of various chaplains. There was none in attendance that night, as a single solitary figure sat upon the polished pews, out of the cold of the night air.

The soft lingering scent of incense hung in the air, from small services done long in the past. Rows of candles, small red tealights, flickered to the left of the altar at the front. Far too many, one would think, for such a small and out of the way chapel. It was set back from the road, deep amongst the graves.

But people liked to pay their respects. Tealights were lit every day by passersby, by the people who came to remember loved ones. So many loved ones were gone from Calendar, as if the place had more than it's fair share of loss and grief. But it was no different than anywhere else. It was simply that there, in Calendar, people would pay their respects. They would forget the horror, the pain, and the strangeness of losing their relative to sudden neck rupture. But they would remember the person.

It was as if the townsfolk would stare only long enough into the abyss to realise, they needed to knock on the light. Otherwise, they ignored the things watching back at them. It made it easier that way, to live in innocence unafraid of the sword dangling over their scalps.

The figure in the church as long since past that. They sat alone, having taken off their coat due to the slight stuffiness in the air. The chapel was warm, large stained glass windows having leant it a greenhouse effect during the day that the night was quickly whisking away. She shivered a little, as though a chill came through an open door.

She mused on innocence. It was something powerful, she knew, something so well-sought after and yet something that was often lost. She mused people tried to keep it, tried to hold onto the blissful ignorance they believed naively to be the essence of innocence. The gift of the youth.

Idiots, the young in town may be the only ones with eyes wide open.

She knew, had learned, how hard innocence truly is to find. She knew, as she stood, and began to make her way down the aisle, that innocence was not a possession. It was a moment. A point in your life when you realised that there is true evil in the world. Not only from monsters, but from men, and more importantly – from oneself.

As she made her way to the bank of candles, their lights flickering slightly at her arrival – the soft brush of wind from movement, she picked up one of the spare ones. She dropped a small

amount of change into the donation box, before using the small click lighter to burst the wick into pungent smelling flame.

As Sara Carpenter placed the small red candle into the holder, amongst the other flickering remembers of things past, she knew, more than anyone else the truth of innocence. The bitter truth. Once it is lost, you can never get it back.

'til the End of the World

Episode 4 – All the Good Girls

Starring:

Ricky Kent, Sara Carpenter, Luke Cross, Amy Donaldson, Mark Matthews and Sam Summers

Act I

Two Nights Earlier

The shadows cast by the moon above clung to their creators with webbed hands. The mausoleums, headstones, graves of people long since forgotten and faded into time, were each accompanied by their darkness, stretching out and pooling around them with the slow, almost lazy, progression of the moon across the sky far above.

There was, as always, things within the darkness. Bathed in inky black, a baptism. They watched, they waited, and when movement began to skitter through the broken remains of memories past, they prepared to strike.

Ricky felt his blood begin to rise once more, the tingled adrenaline rush that came with something happening. After several weeks of quiet patrols and empty streets – wheelie bins bothered only by the odd machinations of a weeing dog or a fumble of a stray cat – there was finally some motion. He waited a little longer, lingering in the shadows of the mausoleum beside him as he waited to confirm that, yes, indeed, this was finally what was looking for.

And, as the figure moving it's way through the gravestones, with the confidence of the unseen, moved into the daylight Ricky became ninety percent sure he was onto something. The way it moved, the way it dressed. A normal guy from town would not dress like he was in the 80s, with sleeves rolled up on his jacket and a mullet. Well, not except the creepy guy that hang around at the few spots of nightlife, rotating around them like a different kind of predator. And, of course, most normal guys from town would not be wandering through a graveyard at two in the morning.

Well, he figured, that meant he wasn't a normal guy either.

The blood was not up in the creature, he could tell. The eyes were not given their characteristic red tint he'd been so used to seeing, because clearly it thought it was alone as it wandered back to it's nest. Ricky began to wonder if this was perhaps the last, since he was alone. Had they managed to eliminate all of the other lost and lonely remnants of Satana's little band? He hoped so, vamps were getting so last season.

Not wanting to lose sight, he slid to the edge of the mausoleum, darkness still his friend. The creature, the more he studied it's fluid movements the more he became convinced this was a predator, moved towards the edge of another of the large stone monuments that adorned this mainly forgotten graveyard. With a look, left and right, he opened the door with screaming hinges and slipped inside into the darkness.

As if he needed convincing any further, Ricky knew he was among the dead and undead that night – and so made his way across the graveyard in search of his prey. The mausoleum was a little

larger than the one behind which he'd been waiting, at least twice the size. Family size, he thought, grimly. The handle, rusted as it was, was twisted and bent out of shape, explaining the ease by which the creature entered.

All was silent, the darkness inside completely impenetrable. As if he needed more proof, for darkness meant nothing to the heightened senses of a vampyr, he unsheathed his dagger, readied his torch and prepared to step inside. There was no movement, there was no sound. Of course, they didn't need to breathe the same way he did. His own heartbeat thundered in his ears as he once more succumbed to the shadow.

When he felt for the button and flicked on the light, a face projected out of the darkness towards him. White, pale from moonlight, and glinting teeth. The thing, his full demonic creature visage now on full display, launched at him from the depths of the crypt. His reaction was instantaneous, he drove the hand with the torch in it forward and met the vampyr half-leap.

Fist connected to bone, as the glass of the torch cracked under the blow. A cheekbone by the feel of it. The creature stumbled but wasn't done. It swiped for him, a series of nails so sharp they may have well been claws raked over the back of his hand and he cried out as he dropped the torch.

"You little fucker," he hissed, as the torch landed with a clatter and span around to settle, bringing a brief strobe-light effect to the space. He lashed out with one boot, feeling it connect to some part of the creature both soft and yet unyielding. Something fleshy, maybe a thigh, but hard enough to bruise bone.

Going back on the offensive, Ricky threw himself in the direction of the stumbling shadow, and together they landed hard on the ground. Ricky managed to right himself, scrambling up and pinning the creature down beneath him. He could feel it squirm, hear it hiss, feel the brush of fangs against his hand as he pressed it's face down into the dirty stone floor.

But something caught his attention, then. A shape slumped against the wall. Now starkly lit by the settle torchlight, Ricky saw cold dead eyes staring at him. Skin, pale and never to be flushed with a summer's heat again. A boy, perhaps not even yet ten. Cold enough that people would have been looking for him. Perhaps for a while.

He wished he could say later that he snapped. But it was nothing so simple as that. Something came over him, that was true, but it was not a flash of furious vengeance. It was cold, dark, rotting in the pit of his stomach as he reached out for the torch. Thankfully, the boy was taken back into the darkness, as Ricky felt his mind let go.

His fist rained down and connected with hard cartilage. A nose, an eye socket, it didn't matter. He drove it down, with the torch in his hand, and heard the scream of pain. Then again. And again. And again. Though the rage was cold, it built, as he yelled out into the darkness now the only ears to hear himself. He brought the torch down again and again, until only the fires of the internal combustion and the singing of the fine hairs on the back of his hand forced him to fall backwards onto the cold stone floor.

The torch, a broken bloody and useless lump now, was tossed to one side. The only, brief spark of light came from the dying combustion of the vampyr as nature went about it's course and turned dust back to dust and ashes back to ashes. He was bathed in the fire of his kill, before once more darkness took him.

He sat there for a long time before slipping away and anonymously calling the police. Sat there in the darkness, with only death as his guide.

* * *

Sara could not decide if this was a disaster, or if this was merely her paranoia manifesting. Perhaps if she thought about it long and hard enough, she would wish it away. Like that Gwyneth Paltrow was always on about with her 'think positive, be positive' nonsense. Or was it Britney Spears? She'd lost track.

From where she stood, with the display board in front of her, people might be thinking she was contemplating on the school orchestras of yesteryear. Of course, she was not. Not only did she not care about the school band, and could play no instrument greater than a triangle, she also did not spend most of her time staring at the faces of pimply people who were by now way too old for her and also couldn't have gotten laid even when they were in high school. Which given the front picture was the band from 1987, was a likely no.

Of course, what it did give her, the nice shiny plastic barrier between her and the faces of solitary-Saturday-nights-past, was a great view of the potential spot forming on her forehead, directly between her left and right eyebrow. Part of her wanted to press at it with a nail and see if it really was there, or whether it was warped like a funhouse mirror. Wait, did that mean it was bigger or smaller than she thought it was?

She had been told, by several reliable sources (many of which were her older and slower brained cousin Mindy) that if she should poke the beast, it would only come back stronger. And perhaps bring friends. Like Hydra.

She settled for an ever so gentle nudge, and unfortunately whether because she'd imagined it or not – or because she had been fiddling with it since she'd noticed it earlier that morning despite her self-delusion she hadn't been – there was definitely movement. A shadow.

A spot.

She almost missed him when he passed behind her like a spectre. The quick flash of a jump scare in a Japanese horror movie. But she whirled, brightened already by seeing another familiar

face, who was pliable enough to reassure her there was no spot. Even if she had a giant traffic light on her forehead.

“Ricky!” she greeted. He didn’t seem to notice her as first, “Hey, Ricky!”

She turned to look at him brightly. The look of thunder she got as he stopped and turned to her, was one of an irritated gentleman.

“What is it, Sara?” he asked her. Not quite a snap but certainly on the verge of unfriendly. She was deterred, she was after all facing the far darker enemy of her own body. After that a teenage boy’s hormones were nothing.

“Someone fall out of bed on the wrong side this morning?” she quipped.

“What do you want?” he asked her, shortly.

She took a moment to regard his face. The bags under his eyes, the dark shadow around him. The pale lifelessness to his skin and the slightly scruffy edge to his uniform that may have indicated it was the same as the one before.

“Are you sure you’re getting enough sleep?” she asked him, genuinely and completely forgetting what he did on a semi-nightly basis. She realised how stupid it sounded even as she added, “You’re looking a little pale.”

“Funny,” he grimaced, “I’m going now.”

He turned and began to walk away down the corridor, but she felt the fire in her and refused to let it go. So, she did the only sensible thing she could think of – she followed him.

“What’s wrong with you?” she challenged, falling into step beside his quick step. “It’s like déjà vu three weeks ago.”

“Sara, I have places to be,” he snapped back, “Things to do. As much as I would love to stop and chat, I don’t want to. So please, today, leave me alone.”

“And what happened to being friends?” she prodded.

He whirled, stopping dead in the corridor, as some errant Year 7s nearly walked into them both. They too were rushing, in that kind of hectic way only an overburdened miniature student could accomplish. Class was never something to rush to.

“Right, friends,” he reminded her, “Not my parents, not my girlfriend, you’re never gonna be those things. So please, get your nose out of my business for five seconds and let me get on with my life.”

She couldn’t believe it. The words ‘taken aback’ didn’t encompass what she was feeling as she looked into his face and heard those words come out of his mouth. So, she simply responded with the only thought that came to mind,

“Fuck you.”

“Better.”

He turned and walked off, leaving her standing there in a cloud of confusion and hurt. It was worse than before. What she sensed in him those few weeks back was pain, now it was more like anger. Deep seated anger. She hated the feeling it brought to her, beyond the confusion and hurt, it pissed her off too.

“Harsh,” a voice commented from nearby. She turned to see Sam standing by the water fountain, her books in hand and regarding her with a level expression.

“What do you want?” she asked, feeling herself bristling with the same kind of energy Ricky gave her.

“To break a vicious cycle,” Sam offered, “I hope. Look, Sara, we haven’t spoken much since...”

“Since you thought my being mugged and left for dead was less important than showing up for your party?” Sara asked her, afraid that despite Sam’s words they were about to repeat the same cycle. To her credit, Sam shrugged, did not escalate and simply turned to face her fully.

“Okay, and the harshness is passed on,” she commented, lightly.

Sara felt her shoulders slump, realising Sam was right and she was projecting what had just happened with Ricky onto her. It made her regretful, but still not ready to back down. Adrenaline and all that.

“What do you want?” she asked, quietly, without challenge.

“To maintain some friendship,” Sam answered, “The way friends are meant to. I wanted to apologise.”

She bridged the distance between them a little, seeming rather contrite herself.

“Look, I’m sorry he snapped at you like that,” Sam continued, “I know you two have the whole puppy-dog dancing around one another thing. But you should remember a simple fact before you blow up at anyone, including him – if your sex organs are on the outside, you’re missing a few brain cells on the inside. Especially the ones controlling mood swings.”

“Thank you for your riveting insight,” she returned, dryly sarcastic.

“Get over him,” Sam suggested, “Get yourself out there. Maybe get your boobies felt by someone else for a change and forget about any kind of relationship – friend or otherwise – with a man named Kent.” She went to turn away, perhaps to return to dreaded class, but a thought struck her and she half-turned back, “In fact, Luke and I are going to Clarus tonight, you should come along. Loosen up perhaps and maybe, just maybe, the bug in your arse will die.”

Sam walked away with that, leaving Sara alone with her thoughts. The last and worst of which came to her with a sudden clarity of the eye of a hurricane.

Why is it the bitch makes sense?

* * *

Sam was proud of herself. In fact, she considered herself on par with the peacekeepers of the United Nations. So sure, Sara had been battered over the head or whatever and spent a night in a ditch – the first of many in her life potentially – which kind of negated Sam’s anger at her somewhat. Of course, the snappy attitude would just not do.

Still, they were friends – and so with an overture of friendship she had warmly put forth an olive branch to restore their fragile friendship and allow Sara to come back into the graces of...their friendship. Or something. In truth, she didn’t really care much for the United Nations – a kind of School Cafeteria of adults, she saw it. And it never really solved any bloody wars, had it?

“You know, you handled that with restraint,” Luke commented, having been regaled the entire story by Sam on their break from GCSE Chemistry. It was a double period, so their loop around the school corridor was merely an attempt to reset their brains.

“It’s something I do well,” she agreed with him, very proud.

“What about when Julie said your dress was the colour of bad milk?” Luke reminded her. Of course, she remembered the incident well – as if it was only yesterday, instead of last week.

“As I recall, I was friendly and calm the entire time,” she reminded him.

“Your ring left a mark,” he foolishly decided to point out.

“Calmly,” she agreed.

She slowed their pace, as they walked hand in hand, and turned to face him, that warm and bright and beautiful face. He looked a little confused, as she guided his hand up and held it between her own and she looked him in the eye.

“As much as I love you, where I’m going you can’t follow,” she told him.

“Are you sure?” he asked, “I’m very tolerant to stressful situations. Unless they involve balloons.”

She indicated with her head behind her, and when his eyes grasped the image of the small woman in a skirt – really more of a symbol – he realised they had stopped in front of the girls’ bathroom.

“Ah, the mysterious land,” he relented.

“Wait here?”

“I’m not a puppy,” he pouted, puppyly.

“Then where do you want me to meet up with you?”

“Right here.”

She rolled her eyes, smiling as warmly as she could, and headed into the bathroom. As the door swung shut behind her, she heard the sound of voices and people outside begin to dim, returning her to the quiet centre-of-the-building shared bathroom.

The lights were low, because half of them didn’t work – something to do with maintenance budget. A quick check under the stalls and she saw she was alone, she had the place to herself. So, she walked over to the sink, ran the faucet and stared into the mirror. The sound was her white noise, it helped her to focus and so she listened to it with her breaths for a few moments.

A mask was so hard to take off once it had begun to fuse to one's skin, whether a real or a literal one. She knew it was wearing off, so she did the only thing she could do – she put it back on. Fishing around in her purse she brought out the small innocuous brown bottle, the little rattling sound deafening to her ears, and tapped out two of the small round yellow tablets. Using a scooped hand of water from the sink she swallowed them down, replaced her little secret deep in her bag, and spent a few seconds drying her face and readjusting her lipstick.

In minutes they would work, and her beast would go away once more. For a while, which was all she would need. There were other ways to silence it.

As she emerged from the bathroom, she saw Luke speaking to his friend Justin the corridor, embroiled in some boy talk about the rugby team no doubt.

“Hey, are we back off to Chemistry?” she asked Luke as she slid up beside him and put her hand in his. He smiled at her, so bright, and she returned the love with genuine warmth.

“Sure,” he assured her, before turning back to Justin and finishing his conversation, “And Justin, if you want Halloween off, you're going to have to talk to Drake.”

Justin made a face at that suggestion, as she figured any of them would, and then she and Luke were back off into the crowd of people milling about before fourth Period. Maybe this next one would not be so bad. Time would tell.

* * *

Ricky slouched in his chair, feeling utterly deflated. Though he tried not to dwell on it, the way he spoke to Sara had replayed in his mind. Interspersed with the memory, bloody and vicious of the night before. The feeling of blood on his hands and the heat of the flames, the dying of the night.

The sound of the sirens as they came to find the boy's body, him hidden in the woods beyond the cemetery waiting, ensuring. An endless loop.

"I don't know what's happening to me," he said quietly, putting out there the rhythmic beat that had kept pace in his thoughts.

Mark, who was sat opposite him, across the oaken table more long than wide. In the silent confessional of the Library, where only the books had ears and they never listened anyway. Outside, beyond the deep wooden doors there was another world. One of lessons, of people, of normality. But there, deep within their shared sanctuary of painful truth, they could talk.

"It's understandable," Mark answered him, leaning forward over the book he'd stopped reading upon seeing his friend's true face.

"No, it's not," Ricky answered him quickly, "It's not excusable."

"What you saw, a child killed, brutalised by a soulless being..." Mark corrected him, hesitating to find the words as he finally sighed, "It would drive anyone into madness."

"It wasn't madness," he confessed, the words dirty in the warm sunlit air between them. "I felt perfectly calm, and yet at the same time, it was like I was in a storm. And I just reacted. I just took out my anger on the vampyr...and his face afterwards..."

The bloody pulpy mess, seconds before combustion, intruded into his mind's eye and he had to turn his head away in disgust. But the picture wouldn't go. And it would come back. Always back.

"You're wrong," Mark challenged, though softly. "It's not 'his' face. It's 'it's'. It was a vampyr. An evil vampyr. It slaughtered the child you found and would have slaughtered more, had you not killed it."

"What I did was beyond killing it," Ricky answered him, "I didn't kill it – I destroyed it." He felt his chest begin to rise and a shake to his voice, but he couldn't help, it was like the panic was

beginning to take on a life of it's own, "I smashed it to pieces with my bare hands, Mark! What if that wasn't a vamp? What if I'd done that to a human being?"

"But you didn't," Mark corrected him, "And there's no reason to wonder." He sighed, leaning back from the table and beginning his ritual polishing of his glasses. He always did that when he was frustrated, and Ricky knew he was undoubtedly frustrating him. But he didn't have the same blood on his hands, "We can guess a thousand ways from Sunday about what you, as the Guide, are meant to do – but we won't know until we know. So, in the meantime, don't let it consume you, this horror, because that will just lead down darker paths than you need to walk."

"Then what?"

"Then, nothing," Mark shrugged. "Wait and see."

"Wait and see?" he returned, feeling angry now, "If there's something dark inside of me, something evil, I wanna know. I wanna stop it."

"Ricky...."

"I want to know what the Guide is," Ricky snapped at him, cutting him off before he could get going. "No more vague wonders, no more cryptic clues from half-mad chicks. I want the truth – cold, hard fact."

The thought was already forming true in his mind, as if the urgency driven by his actions was giving life to what he should have been pushing for all along. He felt powerless, despite all his enhanced strength and speed and flexibility. Despite everything that told him he was special, he had never felt less special in his life.

"I've checked through all the volumes I have," Mark reminded him, "Made contact with everyone I know...people around the world are asking this question on your behalf."

"Well maybe they don't have quite the urgency I'm feeling right now," Ricky answered.

“So, you want me to contact them again?”

“For starters, yeah,” Ricky told him. “I want you to track down anyone you can who might have knowledge – start with a seer. They’re the people who see the future right? Maybe they can’t tell me what I am, but they can tell me what I’m gonna be.”

“You said Claire first found knowledge of you from a wise woman?” Mark asked.

“Minus the Blackadder-speak, yeah.”

“It would make sense to start with her,” Mark suggested, “What about Claire herself? Might she know more than she’s saying?”

“We should track her down,” Ricky agreed.

Mark stood, walking over to the library counter and picking up a small, thick, leatherbound diary. Ricky recognised it as his book of contacts.

“This is going to take some time,” Mark reminded him, before a look came into his eye, and he glanced back at Ricky, “There is another way...”

“How? Anything.”

“The Hall of the Guide,” Mark reminded him, “It might not be completely buried after Satana’s attack, we might still be able to get some answers there.”

“And then a cave in buries us alive – no,” he snapped back, absolutely refusing to put them or anyone else in danger for this. “We’re not going there unless all other leads go cold, okay?”

“Very well.”

They had a plan. Ricky didn’t feel a hundred percent reassured by the plan, but it was one none-the-less. Ricky would find Claire, the woman who had first hinted at the term ‘Guide’ to explain

whatever Ricky was beginning to become. Mark would track down a seer, perhaps someone who would be able to see his future. And together they'd find an answer.

He was sure of it. And if nothing else, it would distract him from seeing the same images on repeat.

At least, that was the plan.

* * *

Clarus was lame. But in a barren desert like Calendar, beggars could not be choosers of their watering holes. Or maybe, in a land of the blind, the person who could see was just depressed. Sam didn't know which cliché felt righter. Or were they idioms? It didn't matter, this wasn't English Lang.

"Isn't this music great?" Julie half-shrieked over the pounding Cascada baseline. She wavered slightly, her second alcopop of the night going a bit funny on her. Naturally, being sixteen she was nowhere near old enough to drink, but it wasn't like any of the bartenders checked for IDs. If you can pay, you can have it.

"Yep," Sam agreed, from where she sat next to Luke, the sofas overly stuffed and thankfully free of any spilled drinks that night. She'd had one vodka and coke, a drink that tasted bitter and sweet at the same time and was feeling slightly warm but little else. She didn't dare drink too much, not with her father's kind of bloodhound nose.

"It's just like...so deep, y'know?" Julie continued, clutching her blue coloured bottle to her chest as she pondered the deep and meaningful of the screeching German synth-pop band. "It's like...the night really does belong to lovers...because who had sex in the day time anyway?"

With that philosophical insight espoused, she moved over to the second – and thankfully empty – sofa and sat down with a resplendent pouf of cushion, before collapsing sideways and ending up with her head somewhere in the sofa's armpit.

"Should we help her?" Luke wondered to her, out loud, removing his arm around her and leaning forward as if he was going to attempt to get up. Good luck, the sofas were invented by some kind of mad Tibetan protestor, she was sure.

"Please, every perv in this place is getting a great view of her arse," she dismissed, "It's funny."

"Sam..."

She rolled her eyes, begrudging her sweet boyfriend of his need to be the good guy, and managed to stand with more ease and finesse than he could have. She moved over to her friend, pulled her copse of blonde hair out of the sofa's armpit and slumped her back on the couch in a more normal seated position. As she did, she noticed a surprise approaching from across the club.

"Hey," Sara greeted as she joined them. Okay, so jeans and a band t-shirt were not exactly high fashion, but at least she wasn't in sweatpants like she was on the case of the Royle Family. It was a start, and for a brief moment, she began to remind herself that they were indeed friends and hoped they could get back to that place pretty quickly.

"I never expected you to come," she blurted out before she meant to, a moment of surprising vulnerability.

"Well, it's like you said, gotta live a little or die bored," Sara reminded her, putting her hands into her pockets and shrugging.

"I didn't actually say that," Sam corrected, "But nice para-phrase."

“Where’d you get one of those?” Sara asked, pointing to the drinks they were having. Hers in a glass, Luke’s in a coke bottle.

“Are you honestly asking that question?” she challenged, realising that she may be dealing with a person who had never ventured out of her house on a Thursday night before.

“Since when do you drink?” Luke asked her.

“Since when were you such a tight arse?” Sara threw back. He chuckled, as she reached forward and plucked his bottle from his hands – giving it a decent swig in the process. She looked impressed with herself, not catching onto Sam’s look. “Not bad. Tastes just like normal coke.”

“It is normal coke,” she explained, “Luke has to go back to work when his break has finished.”

Looking sheepish, Sara returned the bottle back to Luke, who didn’t even bother wiping before he took another swig. Some boys were animals, Sam thought to herself, as she gently took her friend by the arm and led her over to the bar. Some disinterested old woman, must have been like thirty, gave her a glance up and down and then slid something fluorescent across at them. It was going to be a fun night.

Luke left after his break was finished, around 8, promising he’d return again at 10 when his shift was done and they’d locked up the petrol station for the night. He’d been switched ever since his shelf stacking days facing the customers were not particularly well received, and they figured sticking him up in the supermarket’s petrol station behind the store would be more in keeping.

Meanwhile, Sara decided to actually loosen up a little. She had herself two of the blue alco things which she complained about being too sweet but did not actually bother to not drink the stuff and life resumed. The music continued to torment and Cascada relented to Corona – which was so dated – and a chipmunk-sounding remix of Avril Lavigne – things grew ever more complicated.

It was around nine thirty when she spotted him. An older boy, maybe all of around 18. The kind that might still be in upper sixth or might have just gone off to uni. He looks unmistakably hot and smouldering, which was the key, leaning against one of the posts and generally looking around like he was having a good time. Minus the ear worms, of course.

Oh God, here came Shaggy.

“Hey, cute and interested, ten o’clock,” Sam pointed out, nudging Sara in the side to get her attention. She’d been bopping to the proclamation that it was indeed not him. Sara looked at her, confused but surprisingly clear eyed for someone who ‘didn’t drink’. She’d dive into that later.

“What o’clock?” she asked. Sam grasped her oblivious friend by the shoulder, and pointed her towards tall, dark and handsome.

“Mush,” she told her, with a pat to the behind. “Go get him.”

“I don’t think...” Sara began hesitantly. But Sam could see in her eyes the hesitation was touched with more than a hint of temptation. She found the guy cute, of course, maybe even hot if she was honest with herself. But Sam needed to be the honest one for her she found.

“No, you shouldn’t think,” she agreed. “Just go get your freak on.”

Sara shot her one last look before reluctantly heading through the crowd. Sam, knowing that her friend was likely so rusty with flirting it was going to be a car crash, did the polite thing and instead focused on some obscure detail – like how light number 3 on the lighting bank appeared to be flashing instead of moving.

By the time Luke rejoined them all, around 10 o’clock, slipping his arms around her and greeting her with a kiss, she was warm and pleasantly happy and buzzed. Even by then she’d begun to forgive the music, with Chester Bennington of Linkin Park sounding remarkably happy that in the end nothing even mattered – remixed with a chipper SmashMouth.

“She having fun?” Luke asked her. Of course, Sam had not lost complete track of Sara but was instead remarkably surprised by her progress. In fact, by the time he asked, Sara and the unnamed handsome boy were making out in the shadows just off the dance floor – oblivious to the all-star rap battle playing over the speakers.

“Please, with my therapy? She’s having oodles of fun!” Sam responded, before adding with a sly smirk, “I’m almost jealous.”

“Almost?” he took the bait and leaned in for a kiss. Yes, indeed, life was good.

* * *

It was almost too easy, which naturally made his instincts feel uneasy. Ricky waited in the shadows for Claire, and surprisingly she arrived. They had not had contact since those first few days against Satana. She’d drifted back off to whatever woodwork she drifted out from in the first place. Several weeks had gone by, to the point where he’d begun to wonder whether she’d left town altogether – and would become just another loose end and unanswered mystery for the ages.

Instead, he’d come to suspect that if she was still around, she would have to have somewhere to stay. When he’d met her, she was well groomed, wore clothes that were clean, and did not give off the scent of someone living on the streets. That suggested wherever she was staying was an actual place, four walls and washing facilities. There was one hostel in town, and a few apartment blocks which did short-term rentals, so it was merely a case of scouting around.

It hadn’t even reached midnight by the time that he saw a familiarly dressed young woman coming out of the shops with a carrier bag. She wore the same black ensemble, a long coat, only this time had her hair tied back behind her. He was able to move through the back alleys and shadows

long enough to realise she wasn't heading for the hostel – she was heading for one of the apartment blocks.

With no sense she knew he was there, she entered the code and slipped into the building, past the cars parked in the bays out front. As soon as she was through, he moved, having not the eyesight to catch the code as she entered it, and caught the edge of the door just before closing. He held back a wince as the metal bit into his fingers, but then he was through and allowed it to naturally close behind him. Thankfully the ground was not carpeted in the hallway or the stairs, so he heard her receding footsteps above.

He counted, three flights. There were only two apartments on each floor in this particular block, so he followed up as quietly as he could, entered onto the third floor, and saw in the corridor an obvious choice. One had a string of Diwali lights across the door, as the scents of cooking flooded into the corridor. The other, a door standing slightly ajar and leading into a darkened apartment. The choice was obvious and though moving cautiously, move forward he did.

The pain was sharp on his temple as something hard broke across his head. The sound of shattering ceramics came with it, stinging his ears as he fell forward to the ground and the lights in the apartments blazed on – hurting his eyes after the dim corridor lighting. He turned, seeing her standing above him, the broken remnants of a lamp in her hands.

“You could have given me time to get to my weapons cabinet at least,” she scalded him, “I liked this lamp.”

“Surprise?” he joked lamely, the light in his eyes stinging just as much as the slight blow to his head. But at least his vision was beginning to adjust, and she did not seem like she was coming in for a second swing. She sighed and tossed the broken remnants of the lamp onto the nearby coffee table.

“What do you want?” she asked him.

“Right now, not to have lamp shards in my hair?” he suggested. She gave him a roll of her eyes and reached out a hand to help him back to his feet, before allowing him to sit in her armchair. As he looked around the apartment, he began to see how spartan it really was. Side table by the door, on which he presumed the lamp had sat, a coffee table, two armchairs. Not even a Tv. The living room was open plan with a small kitchenette, a tired and dated fridge freezer. She’d placed her bag of shopping on the side.

“I sensed someone following me since the Tesco,” she pointed out.

“I guess I shouldn’t mention I’ve been following you well before Tesco?” he lied. He didn’t know why, but since his ego had taken a bruising with the shiner she’d given him, he figured he was within his rights to dig.

“It might bruise my ego a little bit,” she answered, “Why didn’t you just let me know you were there?”

“Needed to find your home base,” he explained, honestly, gingerly seeing if there were any cuts – but thankfully his fingers came back from angry scalp free of blood. “Makes it easier if I ever need your help again.”

“I’ll be moved by the end of the week.”

She regarded him with a look, and crossed her arms, waiting for him to speak.

“Why do you keep yourself so well hidden?” he asked her.

“Because if you know, others can know,” she answered, “And I can’t have that. So, please get to the point, what do you want?”

“I want answers,” he explained, “About being the Guide. What it means. I want to know what you know, I want to know who told you – and I want to know anyone who so much as ‘might’ know something. I’m betting you, having clearly been at this longer than either me or Mark, might be able

to help me with that. Sorry for following you and all, but after you helped us save the world and then disappeared again, I guess I just don't know where you stand."

"Succinct."

"I try."

She softened a little, moving over towards the window and looking out at the night beyond. All was still and quiet, the moon only half full, and most of the monsters they knew about – and more than a few they likely didn't – not yet out to play. It was one of those quiet nights, not even a stray cat prowling. Her voice grew reflective, contemplative, as she explained,

"You know, the game I play is why I live this life. I only keep my ear close to the ground, so I know when to run away, when to hide. I can't guarantee the path to the answers you want won't literally rip itself up from the ground and strangle us to death. It's that kind of world you're asking for."

"You're a cheerful person, aren't you?" he couldn't help but dryly ask.

"This is serious," she snapped at him, "Hitting the streets involves real dangers."

"As opposed to the make-believe ones I face on other nights?" he threw back.

She turned to look at him for a long moment, perhaps seeing the truth of that on his face. She glanced once more around the apartment, then nodded for the door.

"Point taken."

Together, they went out for answers.

* * *

Sam felt him pressed against her, wrapped in his arms as they swayed to the final song. Okay, so it was sappy, it was DJ Sammy, but it was as if in that moment they were singing to her. Reminding her that it was okay to feel warm, to relax, to feel safe in his arms. He wasn't like the others, he was the single soul she loved. That protected her.

She hid her tear, the only one she shed – as she promised herself, she wouldn't drink again for a while because it made her too sappy. The small dark blotch on the edge of his uniform would disappear before he would notice it, as she leaned back and they headed together, hand in hand, to the edge of the dancefloor, ready to call it a night.

They both frowned in unison at the sofa, where Julie had continued to snore the remainder of the night, despite the thumping baselines to which she'd been exposed. She was now well and truly asleep, having slumped even further off to the side. She would wake up, Sam was used to it by now and be completely fine to be walked home.

"Should we call someone?" Luke asked, a bit unsure.

"If she doesn't come outside with us, I'll call her father," she assured him.

"Isn't that mean?"

"Under the circumstances? No, it's not as cruel as it seems," she pointed out, before correctly assessing, "But I'd be in for some moaning tomorrow, I'm sure."

She reached down and picked up her thin jacket from under Julie's bum. The movement stirred the girl, who stretched and groaned and began to get herself back into more of a seated position. Sam felt relieved, she really didn't want to open up the can of worms of calling Julie's father. Even if Mr Winters was so oblivious, he'd probably think it was her antihistamine medication acting up again.

"Where's Sara?" she realised, the same revelation coming to Luke at the same time. He turned and scoured the dance floor, but there was no sign of the little blonde chaos.

"She's gone," he answered, before darkly adding, "You don't think..."

"She'll be fine," she dismissed with a wave of her hand, before she began to slip on her jacket and help Julie to her feet. "She'll have gone home and decide to pine over Ricky after all, there's no way she sustained more conversation with that guy."

"Are you sure?" Luke asked. Bless him, he was worried, but she knew from past experience what they were like – and so did he – he was just a worrier.

"This isn't the first time she's vanished without a trace," she joked, knowing she was a little close to the bone. Julie was compliant as she helped her to get on her jacket, even letting out a little burp. They'd get her out into the cold air, and she'd be making dumb observations in no time.

"Although, you never know, she might be getting some from tall, dark and handsome."

Luke moved to the other side of Julie with practised ease and the two of them escorted her towards the door, as around them people continued to dance the Thursday night blues away. She came willingly, as they headed outside and onto the streetlamp lit pavement beyond. Outside, the sounds were muted and the air, though with a chill, felt fresh after their confinement indoors.

"But what if he's a psycho killer?" Luke pushed again, as Julie began to look around them in wonder and awe. It was the streetlights.

"Fine, I'll call her if that'll make you feel better, okay?" she offered.

"Please."

Reluctantly, and as Julie began to mutter something about was it morning yet, Sam fished her phone out of her pocket and dialled. It rang, and rang, and rang...

"This is the Vodaphone messaging service for..."

* * *

The night was the hottest one of her life. She felt the buzz of Sam's phone in her pocket, but she removed her jacket and flung it over the pew. Paul's suggestion had been well received, the club was too stuffy anyway. Here was quiet, here was a bit more private, and here she felt the butterflies in her stomach becoming something more.

She also felt herself pushing away her unease and enjoying his presence. He was eighteen, he'd told her. He was from the local university, just started doing a history course. History, who knew? Her absolute favourite subject – which it absolutely had not been. She'd had to keep their conversation about it brief, especially after she said that she really loved the music of Franz Ferdinand, but it was sad that he started World War II.

Still, he hadn't seemed to be that bothered when they started dancing. He was especially not bothered when she told him she was sixteen and just starting sixth form – a white lie. He was definitely into it when their dancing grew closer and they started snogging. No little peck on the cheek either, like this was proper making out.

When he suggested they go somewhere quiet, she at first felt nervous. Like, did he mean to do more, or just like more making out? She didn't know, and a part of her questioned. But as she looked up into his deep blue eyes, a look of such desire and hunger for her, she had to admit her better and more sensible nature did not win out.

The idea of the church, in the little graveyard on the section of hill, round the corner from club, was inspired. There'd be no-one there that time of night, it was small and warm and when they got inside it was like they were magnetised together. Their lips, back and forth, their tongues enjoying one another.

It was the first time in her life she'd ever made out with a boy, and it was...well, definitely something she could get used to.

What she didn't see, so enraptured as she was in her moment of passion, was Paul's look differ slightly when she was kissing his neck, there in the small vestibule between the main body of the church and the outside front door.

His eyes flickered, ever so slightly as they looked up towards the hanging crucifix above the entrance. The sallow eyes of a screaming, pained incarnate God upon the cross, stirred something deeper in him. He smirked, his eyes went back to their pale blue, and he resumed kissing her.

She was none the wiser.

Act II

While the burnt out remains of a car likely wasn't the best place to do a stakeout from, it was the only spot of any kind of cover in the vicinity. Claire had led him over to the industrial part of the South Side, where it turned out there were several bars – one of which was in an actual shipping container – that people tended to frequent. The kind of people she said he needed to know about – and who may have some of the answers he needed. Deliberately vague, but he was beginning to grow more used to her way of working.

"Who burnt this car out?" he wondered out loud.

"Not my kind of underworld, sorry." Her tone was clipped, on edge. Probably still pissed at him for the intrusion. But of course, it would be, he'd have probably been the same if she'd wandered in where Rob lived. Not that he thought anybody lived with her – the place seemed too

small for that. But yet, he still didn't know how to say sorry for inviting himself into her private space. He made a mental note to.

"Kind of weird that not just demons, but people have a knack for destruction," he mused.

"Not really," she answered, "People and demons not all that different."

"So, it's okay to kill people as well as demons?" he teased, raising an eyebrow. Okay, so he wasn't completely above poking a bit.

"I didn't say that."

"You implied it."

She sighed, shuffling a little in her seat and bringing the faint aroma of car long since passed into the night air breezing through the windows.

"This is war," she explained, "In war one side fights against another. Whether it's other people or a whole other demonic species entirely, that's the point of it. You kill the other side."

"And the violence?" he probed, finding his initial teasing turning into something more serious. He sensed in her tone the kinds of thoughts he'd been having himself. Of course, what else could he expect. He knew she hunted, and perhaps she had even been pushed to the same place at him. Perhaps, it was almost a rite of passage.

But did that negate it? Did that mean he wasn't destined to be evil? Or did that make it worse, that perhaps he simply could be – and the choice would be his?

"You deal with the violence," she answered quietly, "It builds up inside of you, you kill something, and it releases it. It's what makes the war a war and not a bickering session."

"You don't think it's wrong?"

“Of course it’s wrong,” she answered. Not the answer he wanted to hear, “But war’s not about right, it’s not about wrong...”

“I’m not fighting a war,” he protested, but he got a bitter little chuckle from her at that. He heard it, the childish naivete in his voice.

“That’s naïve,” she said, as if to confirm what he was thinking. “This isn’t a war that was declared. There was no starting pistol, no finish line. It’s a struggle from dusk ‘til dawn, a struggle to find your own personal end game and keep your own power and agency in place.”

“Deep.”

“And yet, totally meaningless.”

They shared a smile. Small, but there at least. He had to admit, a part of him liked her. As infuriating as she was with information, as guarded and paranoid and distrustful as she seemed – she was there. She was sat with him in that broken down hunk of nothing and trying to help him find some answers. A guy she barely knew. It told him more about her character than anything else did.

“Here we go,” she half-whispered, as she noticed movement. He joined her, as they slipped from the car and followed the huddled shape of a mid-thirties man. He was short and gangly, with hair that hang limply about his face and mousey features.

When Claire appeared in front of him, as if born out of the shadows themselves, he stopped dead in his tracks and tried to run. He turned right into a waiting Ricky, who blocked of his escape and grabbed him by the front of his sports direct jacket. He weighed next to nothing as Ricky held him back against the nearby corrugated metal wall of the warehouse.

“Hey Mickey,” she greeted the man, who’s eyes darted between the two of them.

“What the hell do you want?” ‘Mickey’ snapped at her.

“A little talk.”

"I didn't do anything."

"That's a bit of an understatement. That's all you do."

Ricky watched the exchange carefully but had to admit himself completely lost.

"Is there some history I'm not getting here?" he asked.

"Little bit," Claire confirmed, "Mickey, show him."

Mickey's eyes turned to him briefly. He blinked, his eyes becoming a milky, dead and pale white. The eyes of a corpse with all iris and pupil removed. Then he blinked again and his eyes went back to normal. It was always the eyes, wasn't it? Well, if he was some kind of demon, Ricky was not impressed.

"What are you?" he asked the man.

"Me? I'm just passing through town," Mickey tried to answer, with an attempt at a shrug which didn't really work with Ricky continuing to keep him held against the wall.

"Because if you stay in one area, people will get suspicious," Claire confirmed, holding her arms crossed in a similar challenge she posed to Ricky's intrusion earlier. "Especially when they realise you don't grow old."

"True, I am eternally my youthful good-looking self," Micky assured, grinning and revealing at least one gold tooth and a few molars missing.

"Please don't exaggerate," Claire had a disgusted look on her face. Ricky had to agree, the guy didn't exude charm.

"And again, what are you?"

"Rude, y'know," Mickey bristled, before again attempting another shrug as though he wasn't being held against his will and added, "I'm a guy with his ear to the ground."

“Now I see where you get it from,” he threw at Claire.

“He’s a Fencer,” she answered, her eyes trained still on Mickey. She was on high alert. How could she be? This guy was tiny, scruffy and not exactly giving demonic powerful being vibes – despite the dead eyes.

“That’s racist,” Mickey told her.

“He and others like him have assimilated into human culture,” she explained, ignoring his comment completely, “But they’re neither on our side or the other, and because of the rules put down they can’t do anything – or they claim they can’t anyway. Usually, they have a hell of a lot of information.”

“You flatter me,” Micky commented.

“Well, that can soon turn to violence,” she assured him. “Now, we need information. What do you know about the Guide?”

Mickey’s flickered back over to him. He seemed to look through him for a moment, then returned his gaze back to her.

“You’re standing next to him,” he threw back, “Surely he knows more than I could ever tell you.”

“All I know is the name,” Ricky answered, “What do I do?”

“Well, you’re Bluetooth capable and can download games faster than a normal computer,” Mickey answered sarcastically, “But your battery life is a lot shorter. Price of the technological age.” Ricky shook him a little, trying to make a point, so he rolled his eyes, “Well it was a daft question. Look, no one knows what you do or what you are. Except the others like you. Of which there are none anymore. I think the last one was born sometime before the last millennium.” Mickey frowned for a moment, as if suddenly remembering something, “The ‘other’ last millennium.”

“But I’m on the right side?” he asked the demon. Mickey’s grin grew sly,

“You’re on the side you choose,” the Fencer evaded, “Destiny’s another matter entirely.”

“There has to be someone who knows something,” Ricky fought the urge to shake him again, frustrated that this was turning into another dead end.

“Look, all I know is there’s a place,” Mickey began, “Where you can probably find some answers. It’s called the Hall of the Guide...”

Ricky let go of the small man, allowing him to land back on his feet as he turned away in frustration. He felt like kicking something but there was nothing to kick, so he savoured it for muttering under his breath instead. Claire sighed, as she pointed out to Mickey,

“We’ve already been there. Satana blew it up three weeks ago.”

“Then I’m sorry, but I’m all tapped out,” the little demon apologised, while straightening out the collar on his jacket again.

“This was a waste of time,” Ricky muttered to himself. His urge to go took over him and he began to walk away. He half expected Claire to come after him, to tell him they weren’t done. But he found himself frustrated, because they were. It wasn’t her fault. But they were done.

And he had no more answers than he started with. The realisation felt bitter. He didn’t feel angry, he just felt hollow. Just like that burnt out car.

* * *

“Hello?”

The bell above the door tinkled gently as he stepped through. Mark found himself in a bazaar, a bizarre bazaar to be sure. From the outside it was a simple shop front, grey paint wooden façade framing windows that were ever so slightly frosted – with a slight decal behind them no doubt. The sign above swayed a little in the wind, and the sign on the door, lit from underneath by a thin strip of purple light, read 'open'.

A Magickal Place, it was called. In the window, behind the frost, shapes suggested dreamcatchers and nick knacks. Antiques, perhaps? Or maybe some kind of herbal tea shop? The scents flooding him now appeared to be both, even if the description in the yellow pages was that of a haberdashery. Of course, no antique store or haberdashery in it's right mind would stay open much beyond 9 – and it was now nearing midnight.

Of course, there was another reason that the place would remain open beyond the normal store trading hours – and it was the sign that adorned the little alcove in which the door sat – just to the right as he'd arrived. It stated, simply, 'Readings by Appointment Only', beneath which were several alchemical symbols and a list of the types of readings available. Crystal. Tarot. Tea Leaves. He shuddered to think what other appointments the person had had throughout the day.

There was also the fact that this shop was not in Calendar itself, but in the neighbouring town of Rawtenstall, where things tended to be a little busier than Calendar's high street mainly allowed.

Only two things told him that he was not about to be fleeced, and he was in the right place – Madame Lourdes came recommended to him from one of his most trusted contacts, Cornelius. And the K in Magickal Place told him he was either dealing with a particularly big fan of Alistair Crowley, famed early 20th century occultist, or knew the preferences of the day amongst the magick community.

“In the back,” floated a voice from somewhere beyond the clutter of the front room. To call it a shop would be generous – it was more like a garage sale after the death of a hoarder. Things peered at him from in the shadows, with eyes which were glassy and some were merely reflections of shadows on shiny objects.

He moved through a beaded curtain and found himself face to face with the most stereotypical woman he'd ever seen in his life. She was older, but not necessarily old. Over her head she wore a shawl, hiding shocks of greying hair. Her dress was spangly, and as her hands toyed with a deck of tarot cards in her hands, he noticed a gluttony of rings – some simple, some garish over every finger. She looked up as he walked in, her necklaces jangling as she moved – hoop earrings catching the reflected candlelight.

“You look a little lost,” Madame Lourdes greeted him, though it was she who'd agreed to such a late meeting and reading.

“I realise I don't look a lot like your resident wicca wannabe or love potion user,” he admitted, “It's some advice and knowledge that I seek. My name is...”

She waved her hand, to cut him off, of course she already knew his name – unless she had another customer that would want a reading that late at night.

“I know,” she answered, “But you come not for yourself?”

“No, I come for a friend.”

“Is it the future you seek?” she asked, as she indicated he take a seat opposite her on the table. With some trepidation he noticed a crystal ball nearby and once again had to remind himself that Cornelius had never led him astray or down an obviously charlatan path before. But the scent of potpourri was enough to make him question.

“The present,” he explained, “He’s the Guide. I want to know what that means, and I was told you could help me.”

“I’ve not heard this term,” she admitted, and for a moment his respect for her went up a notch. Despite appearances, which perhaps were more for the usual type of routine customer than for him, she was not attempting to sell him a line of mystical bullshit.

“Perhaps you can contract someone who would know?” he suggested. Though her sign said ‘mediumship’ he knew true mediums were extremely rare. Even if she possessed seer-like abilities or was good at reading signs, the chances he was sitting across from a genuine medium, or psychic, was slim to none – regardless of what Cornelius said.

“It is not what we are, but what we do that matters,” she explained, “I can tell you what your friend is in terms of what he may be. But that is all. No more or less information can I offer you, and interpretation must be your own.”

“Anything is better than nothing at this point, I think,” he tried to keep his voice chipper, his nose overfilled with the scents giving him a slight headache. “Is there anything I need to do?”

“Sit there and be quiet,” she said, a trace of a school ma’am in her voice, “Do you have anything of your friend’s?”

“Only I as his friend,” he answered.

“How many times have *you* consulted the spirit world?” she asked him, with the gall to sound sceptical, and a raised eyebrow. The candle flickered gently in front of her, as she asked.

“Never, really.”

“Well, we’ll just have to make do with what we have,” she muttered, then indicating with one crooked finger for him to fall silent. “Focus all your thoughts on your friend. Although, I will point

out, this may not be sufficient." He closed his eyes and pictured Ricky in his mind's eyes, as she decided to add, "Closing your eyes is not necessary."

Feeling a little foolish, he opened them and observed as she herself put away the deck of cards and instead picked out a small bag of what looked like runestones. She clasped them in both hands, knocking against the touch of her rings, and began to hover them over the small table between them. He kept Ricky at the forefront of his mind, as the shadows in the room seemed to deepen in contrast.

Suddenly, her hands flew apart and the runes clattering to the ground, breaking his concentration. The world was definitely sharper, the shadows more clearly defined, as she moved her hands over them, with flicks and motions that seemed ritualistic in their purpose.

"We call to the spirits..." she whispered quietly, "To the souls of the lost...the fallen..."

Her eyes began to cloud, as her breathing came ragged. Something felt off, wrong, as the candlelight beneath her flickered violently in a wind he couldn't feel. He stood, unsure whether he was breaking any kind of unseen magickal rule and rushed over to her side.

Madame Lourdes shrieked, violently and suddenly throwing her head back. Thick, globulous red lines of blood streamed from both of her eyes as she looked up at him without seeing. Her voice, which was not her voice – it sounded more like a graverobbers hands caressing her vocal chords, came to him then, as his hand alighted on her shoulder.

"Beware..." came the voice, "...the Darkest Soul."

With those words said, she collapsed like a puppet with the strings cut and slumped off of her chair and onto the ground, knocking him back in the process. He didn't know what to feel, or how to think, only that his mind was racing with the horror of it. He grabbed his small mobile phone and dialled a number every person in the UK would recognise. It took seconds before he got a response.

“Ambulance, please.”

* * *

The morning light was harsh and bright as she brushed past her folks eating breakfast and straight up to her room. She didn't want them to see, didn't want them to question. She just wanted to get upstairs, to get clean. She went straight into the bathroom.

She had woken in the church, her mind a fog of confusion. She was not harmed, she knew that. She was whole. Well, she felt whole in some ways. In others she felt like there was a blank. Things kind of getting blurry. But she was okay. She knew that.

But then why did her head hurt so much? Why did the bright light of an early morning make her eyes sting like she'd spent the whole night in darkness? And where had Paul gone, when the sunlight had come up and she recognised herself finally once more?

She knocked on the shower and threw off her clothes. Nothing was broken, nothing was torn, she had awoken exactly as she gone out that night. The clothes weren't even dirty, a little crumpled, as she'd found herself slumped in one of the pews, her head banging and the scent of pine polish filling her nose.

“Sara, honey, is that you?” her mom's voice floated through the door, as steam began to fill the room. She stood in front of the mirror, her face slowly disappearing through the fog of condensation. She was alright, her eyes were fine, she was not bruised or battered or broken. She just...she just couldn't remember everything after kissing that hot guy.

“Yeah, mum,” she fought to keep her voice normal, her tone completely neutral.

“Did you have a nice night at Sam’s?” her mum asked, again nothing indicating she was worried by her daughter’s grumpy teenage behaviour. That was good. It would have to be good, she didn’t want the questions her mother would ask. Not because the answer would be something she wouldn’t like – *nothing* like that had happened – but because she didn’t want her to have to ask it.

“Sure,” she agreed.

“Fountain of information,” she heard her mother mutter, before she heard the footsteps receding away from the landing, with the squish of her mum’s slippers.

Sara clambered into the tub, sitting down beneath the hot stream of shower water – which she turned as high as it would go – and sat, drawing her knees to her chest. No, nothing of that nature had happened, she knew. But what had happened she wasn’t entirely sure. There was the kissing, the making out, the hot times. And then...then it was not a complete blank. There were images.

Violence, shrieks, pain. Anger, frustration, hurt. She saw Ricky’s face swarming in hers, telling her she was nothing. She saw Sam laughing at her. She saw herself, doing things she normally wouldn’t. She heard the pounding in her head, the pounding of the music. Her eyes, hollow. Her voice, scratching and strained. The scent of wood polish and forgotten incense.

And beneath it all, a cold sense of satisfaction.

What the hell was wrong with her?

* * *

The world around her was chaos. The lunch time in the cafeteria. People coming and going. People eating and scratching plates with dirty metal forks. Kids screaming with laughter about stupid

little innocuous things. And the smells. The unwashed year 7s from PE, the underlayer of cleaner still fresh on the table from the moist cloth swathed over them that morning by the cleaners. The food which was barely edible, baked-fucking-beans and all.

But she couldn't go anywhere quieter. She didn't want to. As much as the din and the senses were an assault on her, enough to draw what felt like real physical pain, if she was alone then it felt like the thoughts came back. The intrusive ones. The ones she didn't want. The ones scratching at the back of her brain.

"You look like hell," Sam told her as she slammed her food tray down on the table. In fact, it was a gentle laying down as her friend slipped onto the bench opposite her, but with her head on the table, Sara felt it more than she heard it. The collapsing of a building, so subtle.

"That's a cliché," she muttered back, before raising her head to look at her friend. She knew what she saw – she'd seen them in the mirror herself. Bags the size of Lancashire, dark circles underneath her eyes. Okay, so she was a cliché.

"Did you manage to grab some sleep?" Sam asked her, brightly. How was she so bright and happy this morning? She'd drank too. Or did Luke not mess with her head the way the church seemed to?

"No, I was around at yours," Sara told her, reminding her of the party line they had agreed to share with her parents.

"Ah, that old story," Sam agreed, as if remembering for the first time. Sam began to fettle her cutlery and did not look particularly appetized at the cafeteria's attempt to approximate mac and cheese. Sara's stomach roiled at the smell of it. Old cheese. "So, how is Mr. TDH? Does he have a great big grin on his face?"

"What?" she snapped, harshly. "No."

"Of course not," Sam agreed, dropping her the biggest and most sarcastic wink she'd ever seen.

"Just shut up, Sam," she snapped again, "I'm not in the mood."

"Clearly, he didn't bonk you, because obviously you're still under the influence of the cork up your arse," Sam answered, taking a bit of congealed cheese, with a look that said it tasted as good as it looked.

"I thought it was a bug?"

"I'm pro-life today," Sam explained, "It's a whole big thing." She sighed, "Although the veggie alternative is leaving a lot to be desired."

"Then save my life, and leave me the hell alone," she snapped at her.

"Whoa, are we back into grumpy mode now?" Sam mocked her, remaining calm. "Because Sara, it's always much better to be a bitch."

"Just fuck off!" Sara yelled at her, standing and pushing herself away from the table. Somehow, Sam's smug and insensitive look remained in her mind. The look of someone who genuinely didn't give a fuck about her and was in fact goading her. When she turned and whirled for the door, she didn't see the truth. She didn't see the look of hurt and surprise. Because she couldn't.

People were looking at her as she left through the door and even into the corridor. She knew how she looked, how she seemed and knew it was only a matter of time before someone would ask her what was wrong. Not a kid, they didn't care – but maybe a teacher. She didn't want to have to talk to them, didn't want to have to try and pretend to explain.

"Hey, Sara," Ricky called out to her, coming down the corridor in the opposite direction. The queue of people stretched next to them, people shuffling to get their swill from the cafeteria's trough. "I'm glad I caught you."

“What the hell do you want?” she snapped at him, causing him to stop in his tracks. The dickhead actually had the audacity to appear surprised, though he caught himself quickly and shuffled a little uncomfortably.

“Right, so you’re still mad,” he muttered. He took a deep breath and continued, “I want to apologise. Y’know, about making you mad. With the whole me yelling and being a general dickhead yesterday...”

“Not gonna argue there.”

“So... am I forgiven?”

He shuffled uncomfortably again in front of her, attempting to give her a pained and reproachful smile. But he wasn’t sorry, she knew it. He’d been a dick and now he was acting like it was all going to be better again, and frankly it pissed her off even more than before.

“No, Ricky, you’re not,” she snapped at him, relishing the hurt on his face. “Because I don’t want to forgive you.”

“Sara, I’m metaphorically on my knees here,” he pleaded, sounding vaguely pathetic.

“And I’m about ten shades past giving a shit,” she told him, before walking past him. But something in her stopped her then. It wasn’t right, and he wasn’t going to get off the hook that easily. So, she stopped, and turned on him once more, his face blank, angry. “You know, when I thought you were in trouble, I was worried. I thought my friend was in danger. But now I realise it’s not because you were in this nightly war, or because you were the big doomed hero, but simply because you’re a grumpy, self-centred son-of-a-bitch.”

He actually glanced around them. He was checking to see if anyone overheard her. He was more worried about keeping their little after-school activities a secret than he was about

acknowledging the hurt he'd done and how she was feeling. She felt the sick throb behind her eyes go a notch harder on her.

"Look, I know I probably deserve some of that but..." he began, but she cut him off.

"But nothing, Ricky," she snapped. "You know, Sam told me not to skirt around this whole thing, just to forget about the very notion of you and me..." She completely missed the look of confusion on his face as she continued, "...and last night I finally did that. I put you behind me, as a friend and as anything else. I met someone who actually saw I was there – who actually wanted me back. And we made out 'til his goddamn balls were blue, and it was good."

She walked a little closer to him, taking a moment to relish a look of confused hurt on his face as she added, out of pure malice,

"He was really damn good."

Feeling the adrenaline spike beginning to drop, she turned and walked away from him as fast as she could, not caring about the stares of the people left behind. Including the one she had just hurt the most.

That was okay. Now he knew how it felt.

* * *

Mark rubbed the bridge of his nose as he replaced the phone handle into the receiver once more. He'd left another message for another old friend, who once again was not available to take his call. Well, it was likely approaching tea time in Hong Kong, perhaps tomorrow he would try earlier. But he was thrown off, his whole night askew from sleeping on the couch rather than at home in bed.

By the time they had gotten the ambulance to them, and taken her away, it was well after one in the morning, so rather than disturb his Aunt and Uncle, he'd once more gone back into the library and attempted to get some sleep. With the image of her face and her shriek in mind, sleep had continued to evade him. Perhaps only a few stolen hours before the pre-dawn light began. And then, at that time, he could feel it.

He sighed, turning around to the small shelf behind him as he stood behind the counter, and clicked on the little kettle. Of course he was not supposed to have one, but what Drake didn't know wouldn't hurt her. Behind him, the Library doors swung open and after a quick check and seeing it was Ricky rather than their Principal Diabolo, he returned to making a cup of tea.

"Ricky, this isn't..." he began, but then as he realised that the Library was deserted, and that he'd exhausted his final phone call of the day, he relented, "actually this is probably the best time."

"You find anything out?" Ricky asked him, dropping his school bag onto the floor beside the end of the table. As Mark busied about making a cup of tea, offering a mug in Ricky's direction to a slight shake, he began to realise that his friend looked tired. Perhaps more even so than he. Then again, they had both been nocturnally active.

"Not a sausage," Mark sighed, "Apparently, the Guide isn't exactly a well known term. Or, at the very least the term itself is known, but not much more. Like any topic in Geography. How did tracking down Claire go?"

"Track I did," Rick explained, "Confront, I did. Helpful, was not. Although, did you know about 'Fencers'?"

The hot steam swirled as the kettle clicked and he set about steeping his teabag, the fresh scent drifting up to him in a soothing manner. Green tea at this time of day and with his nerves so freshly on the edge, was exactly what was needed.

"Supernatural beings assimilated into every day life as normal humans, yes," he answered.

“Why am I always the last one to know?” Ricky joked, though he seemed too tired for putting much effort into the attempt at humour.

“You don’t spend most evenings reading everything you can about the situation on the forces of darkness front,” Mark reminded him, as he tucked the next volume he was hoping to read under his arm, plucked up his steaming mug and came around the counter to join his friend. “Or about the history of it, anyway.”

“No, I read the TV,” Ricky agreed, as he took one of the seats at the table and Mark placed himself in the other. “Things always seem way so much simpler on Tv. Must be damn well nice.”

There was something about his tone, something in the slump of his shoulders that went beyond the usual Year 11 malaise or the simple fatigue of fighting monsters. Something which pricked up Mark’s empathetic radar enough for him to ask sincerely,

“Is everything okay?”

“Fine,” Ricky answered with a shrug.

“Ricky...” he began, in a tone that was gentle as it was probative.

“It’s Sara,” Ricky answered him quietly, “She just...uh...well, yesterday I spoke to her when I was in something of an upset and...well, annoyed mood.”

“You yelled at her,” he summarised. Understandable, even without knowing what Ricky had been through the night before.

“Strict translation, yes,” Ricky agreed. “And now, she apparently decided to act out by partying last night in like what I think is a Girls Gone Wild MTV move.”

“She slept with someone?” he tried to extrapolate, furrowing his brow in confusion. Not unheard of, but still, that did surprise him a little.

“No, I mean, I don’t know how far they went, but please stop translating out loud,” Ricky bristled. He shifted in his chair uncomfortably, as though words were an ill fitting jacket. “It’s bad enough hearing it once.”

“And you’re worried, because...?” he asked then, instead. Of course, he had his own theories about why Ricky was so upset, and he doubted they had little to do with consensual ages.

“Well, she’s young and...”

“And no fifteen year old has ever had a rendezvous with someone?” Mark asked, trying to keep too much challenge out of his voice.

It was amazing how much distance even the two years between them made. Many of Mark’s own classmates had begun experimenting with their sexuality, with the boys and the girls and the boys and boys and girls and girls. Even he had had an errant tongue-twister with a young woman on a residential trip when he was fourteen. It was normal, and with perspective, was part of growing up. He forgot sometimes, perhaps because the burdens placed on Ricky were so much greater than other people of his age, how young he was in other ways.

“It’s not that,” Ricky tried to defend, “It’s that I worry about her because she’s my friend and...”

“You care about her.”

“Yeah.”

“More than a friend?”

“Oh, don’t you start,” Ricky challenged him. “We’re just friends.”

“Not another word,” Mark agreed, holding his hands up to show surrender. He saw the looks that passed between them sometimes, he knew how close they were. He may not exactly be

Casanova himself, nor was half his life pursuits thrust forward by his hormones, but he was not completely oblivious.

“Really!” Ricky protested, perhaps too much, “We’re friends, nothing more.”

Mark looked at his friend a moment longer.

“Really...”

* * *

In the almost empty classroom, Luke found himself frowning once more at a stack of books, the pages of which were written in some arcane language that it seemed only prophets would be able to read. The language of the Gods? Or the language of the nerds? He had yet to decide. From nearby, in the quiet study room, someone errantly tapped their pencil against the pages of their revision book.

Oh wait, that was him.

“Once again...to solve the equation with respect to y , we can use x ,” Amy explained, running her finger across the bizarre coded language. Nerds then. “Now, since we know x , we can use it. So, the answer then becomes...”

She trailed off, as if he was suddenly able to speak Mandarin, and so he looked up at her, as blank as he was helpless. It was not that she was a bad teacher, far from it, but it was as though the characters and symbols flying through his head were blocked by something. Maybe there was a word for it, when numbers jumbled around like madness every time you looked at them. Like cartoon birds if his brain was Wile E Coyote.

"Luke, we keep putting quadratics off," Amy reminded him, tapping her finger against the equation.

"I was thinking we could put them off until..." he began, "...maybe after the exam, and then everything will be fine?"

"Not if they come up in the exam," she reminded him, "And they will come up in the exam."

"That's only hypothetical," he answered.

"Well, at least the vocab lessons are working," she joked with a smile. She sat back a little in her chair, and he could sense her frustration. He didn't know how to articulate that she was doing a great job, he just wasn't the best clay to mould. "Come on, Luke, these are important parts of Maths."

"A subject in which I must only get a C," he reminded her.

"You mean, you aren't driven to reach higher academic heights for your own personal glory?" she asked him. He thought she was joking, but the slight quiver to her voice along with the raised eyebrow had him worried that maybe she was actually serious. Like, did she think he actually liked Maths? Or academics? Or saw himself as like Professor Luke some day?

"Not recently, no," he admitted.

"Guess it's just me then."

"True," he agreed, "Some people like to have a social life."

She'd begun to close her maths book but admittedly looked a little shocked and hurt as he'd said that. He immediately backpaddled, knowing no offense was intended,

“I mean, a social life in place of an academic life, or even the great balance you strike,” he tried to correct himself, “You’re social, you’re a social butterfly. I just meant...well, like Sara. No balance there.”

Her manner changed in that moment, her eyes sharpening as she asked him,

“What about Sara?”

Of course he hadn’t been present, he’d heard through Sam and other sources who were adjacent to Sam. And the people he overheard talking about in History afterwards – who had used the word whacko far more often than he would have.

“Oh, she had a whole blow up with Sam,” he tried to dismiss, “After going out on the piss last night, so I figured that was a prime example of the lack of academic-social balance thing.”

“She yelled at Sam?” Amy asked.

“Told her to f off,” he summarised, “And then I heard from Justin she yelled at Ricky as soon as she got out of the cafeteria as well. Told him she’d gotten hot and heavy with some guy, because he was never gonna try it on with her. Very Dawson’s Creek, with swear words.”

“Is this Justin reliable as a source of information?” Amy asked.

“He has no particular allegiances, he’s objective,” he confirmed.

A look came over her face then, one he’d seen before when she was hacking the heck out of the school computers – or the phone network – or whatever it was she did to find Sara’s missing mobile phone. He still wasn’t quite clear on it to this day. It was a look which said she was figuring something out, tinged with that undercurrent of empathetic concern. He sympathised, it definitely sounded like Sara was having a Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas moment – and he barely understood that movie.

“Do you mind if we pick this up tomorrow?” she asked him, suddenly, packing up her books as though it was a done deal. With little other choice, he elected to maybe try and continue the study session on his own. Though he might go for something nicer. Like fractions.

“Sure.”

With that done, and the same look on her face, she rushed for the door, forgetting to say goodbye. Luke smiled to himself before going back to his fractions, feeling pretty glad Sara had people like that looking out for her. In this world, he was already beginning to realise, sometimes people like that were the best people to have.

* * *

Something was wrong, she knew it in her gut. At first, she had dismissed it, had tried to bury her head in the sand like Mark wanted her too, but she couldn't. She'd been feeling on high alert since everything had happened down in that cavern. A whole week passing by, with thoughts occasionally trying to intrude.

How could you live a normal life, after finding out that at night demons walked the streets? It kinda changed your whole perspective on things like circle theorems. I mean, not completely, maths was still great, but enough to make you realise that some things mattered more. And as much as she really liked Luke, and wanted him to do well in his exams, her alarm bells had begun to ring.

She and Sara had continued to hang out over the previous week, but there was a strangeness between them. Sara had been distracted, and Amy had known why. Sara thought she was lying to her, but Amy was also lying to her. It was feeding into a cycle that was making her sick, feeling as

though a stranger was walking around in her best friend's clothing. But more importantly, she was the mirror to those feelings – she was doing the exact same thing.

She didn't even know Sara had been out the night before, but it now finally explained why she'd not shown up to walk to school that morning – and had ignored her friendly text message. Something was wrong. And maybe it was supernaturally wrong. And maybe...maybe the boys would just have to like it and lump it.

Or maybe her friend just needed someone to talk to. Either way, she was there.

"Sara!" she called out, seeing her down the end of the corridor, her back to it.

"What is it, Amy?" Sara responded, flatly, without turning around and continuing in her direction, "I'm busy."

"Sure, storming around and all," Amy pushed, lightly. Her friend turned, her eyes blazing and Amy immediately saw the look on her face, the one which was not her friend. Her brows were furrowed, there were dark round circles under her eyes which themselves were bloodshot. She'd not slept, she was tired and angry and frustrated, and Amy could see it on her face in one go. Stood there in the corridor, she slowed down her response, going softer, but more resolute. "What's going on, Sara? Luke told me about you going out last night and now you're acting like...did something happen?"

"Cut the shit, Amy," her friend hissed at her uncharacteristically, "Luke told you what happened. The gossip, the rumours. I started to live a little."

"And in living, did you forget who your friends are?" she asked her, holding her books to her chest a little tighter. Something had to feel safe, because the person in front of her, the edge to her voice, the anger in her eyes – there was nothing safe about them.

“Sure, ‘friend’,” Sara snarled, “A knobhead who uses me as an emotional punch-bag; and a puppy dog who follows me around because she doesn’t have a life of her own.” Sara turned, going to swagger away, and parting with a snarky, “Get yourself some, Amy, you’ll be a whole hell of a lot better for it.”

No, she wasn’t going to let her go like that. She wasn’t going to let her walk away and pretend that she was fine when things so obviously weren’t.

“Sara...” she began, moving to reach her, her hand touching lightly upon her shoulder. The moment she touched, it was like electricity. Sara shrieked, whirling on her,

“Don’t touch me!” she yelled.

Sara gave her a hard shove with both hands, pushing Amy back against the corridor wall. It was so sudden, so violent, that Amy’s head connected hard with the wall as she struck and she found herself momentarily stunned, falling on her backside more out of expectation. She didn’t pass out, but a sick feeling rose in the pit of her stomach and her vision blurred.

Around her, confusing but just about discernible, Sara disappeared, running off down the corridor. Someone came up to her, she felt the unmistakable shadow of them, and when her eyes began to shake clear a little more, she saw Mark, knelt over her, carefully checking the back of her head.

She felt sick.

That was not her friend.

Act III

Her head throbbed where the cold compress lay. She didn't even mind the slight tickle of water as it ran into her collar, the relief was too beneficial. There was no blood, but a lump had formed – and she would be sore in the morning.

Mark had acted quickly, bringing her into the Library where he sat her in the chair and administered first aid. Apparently, it was a requirement for all staff – a fact she completely forgot given he was on seventeen. But his touch was gentle.

Of course, she had very little time to think about the fact that the guy she kinda had a crush on was gently tending to her, given her best friend had thrown her against a wall and run off in some kind of mental breakdown. Jeez, that didn't even sound like a thing – was it a thing? Her head said no, but then again, maybe her head was compromised.

"She was insane," Amy repeated, wincing as Mark moved the compress to a slightly different spot. "Like totally wild."

"You're going to have a bit of a lump," Mark informed her, as he moved the compress and she felt the slight parting of her hair. "But otherwise, you should be fine." He placed the compress off to one side, then began to remove his latex gloves and reassemble the first aid kit on the table besides them. How professional. "Now, I'll avoid wrapping a bandage around your head. But you should watch out for the signs of concussion, or better yet – have someone with you all times. The going to sleep thing is a myth, unless you feel sleepy before your normal bed time."

"I don't have a bed time," she protested, testing out her neck and realising moving made the blurry come back for a second. Okay, so maybe she might have to stick to a bed time that night. But not before they did something. In fact, "We have to do something, Mark."

"I'm not sure there's anything we can do," Mark shrugged, snapping the clasps back on the kit and casually tossing the gloves into the nearby bin.

"She's my friend," she protested again, "And I think...she's not behaving like herself."

"That's clear," Mark agreed, "But people change their behaviour for all sorts of reasons. Stress for example...or after events that might not have seemed traumatic on the surface, but they may have not been ready to handle."

Amy flicked her eyes over to him, ignoring the slight throb as she did so and shot him daggers. If someone had said several days ago, she would be throwing daggers at the guy, she'd have told them there was more chance of neutrinos evolving – but then again, if she'd been told she'd find out vampires were real she'd have also called them troglodytes.

"I know, Mark," she reprimanded, "But thank you for veiling that sufficiently."

"Look, frankly, I don't claim to know much about Sara's romantic life," he answered, she thought rather condescendingly. "And so, I don't know how she would normally react to such a situation – and if this is any indication, then it seems it's not well."

"It's more than that Mark," she insisted, as he busied about returning the First Aid Kit under the counter, "I've seen her stressed before, I've seen her, I've seen plenty. But she has never, ever reacted with violence."

"She's also never, ever 'gotten with' with a boy before, I assume?" he queried. Clearly the conversation, given his euphemistic approach, was just as uncomfortable as she was. But he was right, to Amy's knowledge, Sara had not made out with a guy before. Or anything else. Despite her grand gestures of nonsense dating advice.

"Oh, and I suppose your wild and vivid lifestyle makes you the expert?" she asked, knowing it was harsh but being unable to help herself. Maybe it was the pain. She probably just needed

paracetamol. Or a snickers. Mark didn't retort, merely raised his eyebrows. "I'm sorry, I'm just worried."

"And you lashed out," he pointed out, "That could be all this is as well. I saw it plenty of times in my year group. Growing up changes people, and not always for the better."

"She's possessed Mark," she determined, realising how right it sounded as she said it. "Something evil is controlling her. For what purpose, I don't know, but we have to do something about it. We have to find out what's doing it." She hesitated a second, realising she was about to broach a subject he likely thought closed, a conversation they'd never quite finished, "For that to happen, Ricky need to know I know. We need his help."

Mark's look dropped. His arm may no longer be in a sling, but the scars of their encounter down in the cavern of the stone was still lingering. The way he'd looked at her, as he told her she couldn't help – that she needed to stay safe – it played across his face once more. But it seemed sad, resigned.

"I've already explained..."

"Mark, with all due respect, I don't care," she interrupted him. "I think something has happened to my friend, and there's no reason in the world good enough to stop me from helping her."

Before Mark could protest further, the Library doors swung open and like summoned from the ether Ricky walked in. He hesitated at the entrance, looking a little confused. Amy, her hair wild around her and half-wet, the cold compress on the table, Mark standing by the counter looking uncomfortable. His eyes took in the scene, as Amy stood and tried to ignore the lightness to her head.

"Um...is everything okay?" he asked.

"No, Ricky, it's not," she answered.

"Amy..." Mark tried to warn. His voice was low, the fight gone, an inevitability reached.

"Sorry, Mark," she told him, before she turned back to Ricky and in one breath answered, "Ricky, I know the truth. I know you're the Guide, I know the truth about the supernatural, and now...I think Sara's in danger."

Ricky's eyes flicked from her, to Mark, back to her and then finally into a head shake.

"Uh, what?"

* * *

She thought the ringing in her ears was just the headache, but it felt like more than that. It felt like a throbbing, a pulsating, a call. She knew without knowing that only in motion could she make it slow down, could she make the brightness of the light stop hurting so much. It's why, as she pushed out of her mind what had happened to Amy, she knew she needed to go home. She needed to be out of that place, to be away.

"Sara? Everything alright, luv?"

Her mother's voice came to her from a distance as she stormed through her house. She'd been in the kitchen, likely surprised when she'd heard the door go. Shocked when Sara, who should have been at school, came in and started stomping up the stairs. The day was barely half done. Sara ignored her, it didn't matter now. She wouldn't understand.

She took the stairs two a time, knowing she didn't need much. Inside her room, her bright and...shit room...she realised how silly it all was. The Boyzone posters weren't only last sodding

century now, they were redundant. The covers on her bed had flowers on them. Her CDs were stacked on the corner of her desk.

This was the room of a child. She was not a child. She'd never be a child again.

"Sara? Honey...what's..." Her mother's voice grew closer as she heard the soft creaks of her coming up the steps. Knowing she didn't have long, and the pressing in of her mother's concern beginning to increase the ringing sense of wrongness, like her mother's love was making it harder to think, she set about grabbing a bag and throwing some of her clothes into it almost at random.

"...what are you doing?"

She felt her mother's presence, cloying and unnecessary behind her – filling the door to her room.

"I'm going."

"Is something wrong?"

Fucking observant, mum, she thought.

"Yeah, something's wrong," she snapped, zipping up the bag and knocking the stack of CDs over. She wanted to throw the duvet, wanted to rip the posters off the walls, wanted to gouge holes into the stupid pink wallpaper. She wanted to destroy it, but she also knew she didn't have time. There was no time, she needed the ringing to ease. She needed motion. "Something's wrong with this whole fucking place."

"Watch your language," her mum scolded her, still drying her hands on the tea towel she'd been doing dishes with. "Tell me what's going on..."

"I'm going," she told her simply, and began to move towards the door. Her mother reached for her, but she flinched from her touch.

"Sara? What's happened? Has someone upset you?"

“Just leave me the fuck alone!” she yelled.

Something in her look, her voice, perhaps her eyes, made her mother recoil. There was only the distant sense of shame at the back of her mind, as she used the opening to move past her and back down the stairs. Her mother called after her, she ignored it – she’d probably be on the phone to her stepdad the moment the door slammed, shocking the frame.

It didn’t matter. Nothing else mattered.

As the ringing in her head reminded her, that was before.

* * *

“Okay, so to be clear, ‘uh, what?’ was a call for an explanation,” Ricky reminded the both of them. Since he’d walked into the Library and Amy had said...well, what she’d said...they had both simply stood there looking awkward and embarrassed and whatever else went along with lying to him for like a week. Or was it longer?

“I knew this would happen,” Mark sighed.

“We’ll deal with your psychic stuff later,” he answered with sarcastic flair, “For now...you told me she knew nothing.”

“I know a lot,” Amy defended, looking surprisingly offended, “I mean, not about supernatural stuff, but like advanced mathematics, the sciences...”

“Not the time...” he warned her.

“Look, we were trapped in a life or death situation,” Mark pointed out, rationalising Ricky knew but it was at least beginning to explain it, “And I really figured lying about the supernatural was

perhaps not the best option. I mean, I get the 'keep the secret' idea keeps people safe, but not enough to lay my life down."

"But we agreed that the more people we bring into this, the worse it gets," Ricky reminded him, feeling the anger beginning to grow. It wasn't once now, it was twice – and they were supposed to be in this together. After everything that happened in the beginning, after...well, just after. He could feel the memories of their first encounter threatening to resurface and pushed them away. It wasn't the time. "It was bad enough when Sara found out."

"Guys..." Amy tried to interject, but he was too focused on Mark to continue.

"We did what we had to do there as well," Mark snapped back at him, his own frustration and anger rising to the surface.

"Right and look how well that one turned out," he yelled back, "Three weeks and she's what? Amy said she's in danger, what is it? Demon, vampyr? Ghost shit? Tell me, what kind of darkness is she threatened by now? I think we're setting a world turnover record for turning her into Daphne, oh how fucking proud I am."

"She knew what she was getting into," Mark reminded him.

"How could she?!" Ricky cried, "How can any of them? I didn't, I have no idea if you did, but none of them fucking know until something rips their throat out, how bad it can get."

"I told her not to tell you," Mark answered, bringing his voice down to just above a whisper. He looked ashamed, and Ricky ignored the guilt, he knew he was right – and they both knew the cost. "I told her she couldn't help."

"Oh, another brilliant plan that's worked out," he snapped, sarcastically.

"Everybody shut up!" Amy snapped at the both of them. Her sudden cry, and the way she pinched both of their elbows, was absurd enough to pierce the bubble of their escalating argument.

She frowned at the both of them, a determined look on her face. "Our friend Sara is in grave danger. For now, you're both going to shut up and help save her. We'll talk about you boys' chauvinistic protective instincts afterwards, 'kay?"

Ricky had to admit she was right, a little flare of shame coming to his cheeks. As he flicked his eyes over to Mark he could tell he felt the same. He also had to admit he felt a little proud and perhaps felt a little more like he could understand Mark may not have had the final say on what Amy did or didn't do.

"Okay, so now we need to know what's possessing her, and how to get it out of her without doing an Exorcist and killing everybody," Amy told them both, "I mean, I read the book, Sara tried to make me watch the movie, but I hate pea soup."

"Look, like I said before, it could simply be the trauma of her first intimate experience expressing itself through extreme behaviour," Mark tried to interject again, "It's not unheard of, lashing out like that."

"It's more than that," Amy insisted, indicating to her head.

"She hurt you?" Ricky realised. Amy nodded, wincing a little as she did so. He glanced back at Mark, "She's right, no matter how angry Sara is, she's never violent. She like cries and eats Ben & Jerry's and shit, but she doesn't hit stuff."

"This isn't Sara we're dealing with," Mark challenged.

"Exactly."

"No, you don't get it," Mark insisted, "She's changed. She's not the person we knew."

"Snogging a guy is not powerful enough to cause a personality transplant," Amy argued, "Bloody hell, you boys really don't understand girls, do you?"

“She let herself be vulnerable to someone,” Mark reminded them, “Now she’s trying to show the world the exact opposite – she’s tough and she doesn’t need anybody. She’s strong, not weak.”

“It’s a demon, Mark,” he insisted, shaking his head, “It has to be.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, not everything is supernatural.”

“When you find a friend you know as well as I know Sara, then tell me it’s not always supernatural,” he snapped. Immediately, he regretted it, seeing the brief flash of hurt on Mark’s face. He knew his loneliness, even long before they met. And as they’d gotten to know each other over the past six months, he realised how deep that isolation went. He hadn’t meant to push the button, but he’d gone and barged his way into it anyway. He wanted to apologise, wanted to take it back, but before he could Mark simply nodded.

“I’ll check the lore,” Mark agreed quietly, turning his back and heading for the stacks. The moment for an apology was gone, but Ricky reminded himself to try again later.

“Come on,” he said to Amy, “We’ve got some investigating to do.”

“Where are we going?” she asked him, picking up her backpack.

“To find out who the hell possessed our friend,” he explained, before adding, “And what the hell she did last night.”

* * *

Amy stood on the steps, blinking in the daylight. After the fluorescence of the school, it felt nice to be outside, even if the air was beginning to cool earlier and earlier. There was no Indian summer for sure, they were in for a cold October. Still, it brought clarity and made her head feel a

little better. Ricky joined her on the steps, having finished his phone call. She'd only been half-listening in, keep her eye as she was on their next step.

"Mrs Carpenter?" she clarified, he nodded.

"She said Sara came home upset," he explained, "Packed a bag. She thinks she's run away from home. She was two seconds away from calling the police."

"Finding her is going to be harder," she realised.

"Let's hope not," he commented, "For now we just need to know what she did. Trace her tracks from last night."

"But she could be anywhere by now, anything could happen to her," she protested, feeling the worry rising even further in her chest.

"Having seen her decapitate an ancient vampyr with a shovel, she'll be okay for a bit," he answered. Her eyes went wide, but he clarified, "Long story, tell you after."

He indicated back to their quarry and raised an eyebrow. She nodded. She was not exactly looking forward to it. Sure, Luke would be helpful – she liked him, but Sam always seemed to be a wildcard in her opinion. Like, sure she was beautiful and rich and popular and everything, but she could also be kind of a bitch. And with Amy's head throbbing the way it was, she didn't know if she'd be able to play nice, even for Sara's sake.

"Hey guys," Ricky announced their presence as the two of them walked up to the bench in front of the school where the couple were sitting. Luke was playing Snake by the looks of it on his phone, while Sam looked up at them from a copy of Cosmopolitan. Amy kept her face straight, she hated that kind of reading. Who needed a quiz about what your zodiac says about your love life, anyway?

“Unusual pairing,” Sam commented, squinting her eyes at them against the sunlight. “You running out of dating options, Ricky?”

“Sam, this is important,” Amy told her.

“Oh, please, everything’s life or death these days,” Sam dismissed, “Be calm, adopt a more Buddhist philosophy.”

“You freak out about shoes...” Amy reminded her.

“Your questions?”

“Well, ‘why’ would be a start...”

“We want to know about Sara,” Ricky interrupted before they went too far down a path into the psychology of an ‘it’ girl. Amy figured they’d circle back to it later. “What she did last night, where she went, who she hooked up with.”

“I don’t think she’d appreciate the stalker routine,” Sam pursed her lips together, “Especially coming from the two of you.”

“She’s run away, Sam,” Ricky explained. It was at this point Luke’s ears pricked up and he turned away from his phone.

“Again?”

“What? Of course, not...” Ricky began. She drove her elbow subtly into his side, and he suddenly remembered, “Oh, shit yeah, the mugging. Yeah, she ran off again. Look, anything you know...”

“It’s a pretty dark club, guys,” Luke shrugged, “Lots of idiots prancing about. All we know for sure is that it was a guy we saw her dancing with and then she wasn’t there. I’d assume that’d be the guy she left with.”

“What did he look like?” she pressed further.

“Like, eighteen, stubble,” Luke continued, “Kind of dark in that whole swarth-let-me-take-you-to-my-den kind of way.”

“Jeez, Luke, you’d think you’d danced with him,” Sam commented.

“You let her go off with an older guy, and you didn’t try to stop her?” she asked. She found her frustration and anger rising once more. The idea that *this* is what people their age were doing all the time kind of got to her in a way. It seemed completely reckless, and the fact that they weren’t looking out for each other, made it even worse. She felt...disappointed.

“She’s her own person,” Luke reminded them.

“And she’s still underage,” Ricky interjected.

“You’re not her parents,” Luke answered, “And neither am I. Can’t stop her doing what she wants to do. When you do find her what do you think you can even do? Drag her back kicking and screaming?”

“We’re her friends,” Amy told him, “We care about her. That’s enough.”

With that, she took Ricky’s elbow and turned them away. She didn’t even want to look at the both of them at that moment, she felt herself shaking with a kind of impotent rage. Yeah, sure it was all normal, right? It was all normal teenage stuff. Until it wasn’t.

And now, it really wasn’t.

* * *

Fighting monsters by night was not exactly something which led to a social life, but Ricky found himself wondering on their walk over just what Clarus might actually be like. He'd never been there – though it's reputation in town was bordering of infamous. It was supposed to be like some kind of right of passage or something, but when he stepped through the bright doorway and into the dimness beyond, he didn't see a cultural moment – he saw a pretty grotty club to be honest.

The floor, walls and pillars of the two-story club were all painted black. But it was a kind of faded, chipped and stained black that had come with years of scuffing feet, spilled drinks and bad bleach cleaning products. The air was stale, bits of glitter so deep embedded into surfaces they'd become part of the architecture. At one end, far off and lit by the now bright lights above was the bar.

"We're closed," the bartender called over to them as the door swung shut behind them. With the sunlight cut off from outside once more they were back into artificial light. The two of them began to walk across the empty club towards the bar, feeling almost cavernous now it's normal clientele were ghosts in the daylight.

"We're not here for a drink," Ricky told him, as they closed the distance.

"Can't serve it to you anyway," the bartender answered, with a hint of false apology. He was busying himself wiping down glasses and placing them back into the hanging rack above the bar. Of course, wasn't a particularly good job – Ricky could see the smears from the dishwasher and the dirty rag even as he went about it. Oh, how nightfall and the lights lowering must cover a multitude of sins.

Mental note to only ever ask for a bottle.

"Oh, you think we're plants," Amy commented. Both of them regarded her with a frown, though Ricky felt his was more confused than anything, "Not the green flowering kind, y'know the one where they put underage people in to trick people into...like illegal stuff."

Okay, noted, focus was going to be an issue in investigations.

“We need some information,” he told the bartender. “Were you working last night?”

“Yeah, and every other night of my life,” the guy responded sarcastically. To be fair he did look old, at least in his thirties, and had a general sense of world-weary beaten downness to him that was downright stereotypical. Hello adulthood my old friend.

“Did you see the blonde girl leave with an older guy?” he continued.

“Yeah, and every other night of my life.”

“Hey, she’s our friend and she’s run away,” Amy scalded him. Ricky had to admit his admiration for Amy was growing. She’d used the same tone with him and Mark as she used with full grown – if a little grotty – adults. “We’re just trying to find the guy she hooked up with last night and maybe find out where she is now. You can help us with that can’t you?”

“Look, about a thousand people come through here a week, more if you count repeat customers,” the guy defended, holding up his hands in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “I don’t remember all their faces, let alone their names.”

“Amy, he’s not going to help,” Ricky sighed, “Let’s go.”

Instead of turning with him, Amy instead stepped closer to the bar, even though it came up to her chest.

“How much do you like your minimum wage?” Amy asked the guy, narrowing her eyes.

“Kinda need it?”

“What?” The guy blinked twice, startled.

“Now, if this place turns out to be in gross violation of laws regarding alcohol misuse and underage kids...how long do you think you’d keep your job?” she continued, “Let alone how long do

you think you'd avoid prison? Now, all I'm asking for is a little information. And then, hopefully, no one makes an anonymous call to the po-po."

The bartender glanced at her, then back to Ricky, then back to Amy, obviously trying to decide if this five foot two of crazy girl was actually serious. Obviously, something in her eyes convinced him she was as his shoulders slumped,

"What's she look like?"

"Blonde, short, not a regular," Amy explained, "She was probably in here with a regular couple – like spikey blonde hair guy and a girl with long black hair and a fashion taste like every prom queen in a slasher movie."

"Right, yeah, I remember her," the guy admitted to their surprise, "She left with Paul about Eleven."

"Paul?" Ricky asked.

"Works as a bartender some nights," he continued, "Last night was his night off and yet he still decides to come up here, go figure. Probably just trying to hook up with someone, but at least it's something, right?"

"Yeah, he working tonight?" she continued.

"He should be in the locker room right now," he nodded.

She turned and began to walk to the employee only door at the side, but the guy called after her.

"Hey, can't let you go in there, wait until he comes on shift in a minute."

The two of them walked a little way away from the bar, their eyes fixed towards the employee only door. Again, he couldn't help but think how surprising the whole thing had gone. Had

Amy not been present he might have tried to rough the guy up a little, but she'd managed to get the job done with surprising finesse. Well, except...

“Po-po?”

“I watch CSI.”

The door to the back-stage area swung open, as someone began to walk into the room buttoning his black work shirt. His face raised, his stubbly-eighteen year old looking face. He stopped, the door swinging, looking up into the face of Ricky and Amy standing there, arms folded. The flare of the bartender's eyes and the sudden look of some strange recognition crossed over 'Paul's' face, and everyone knew what was going on. How he knew what was going on, and who they were, was a mystery for another time.

Because the door, he'd been walking through swinging back on it's hinges and nudging against him broke the moment's spell – and the guy turned and ran back into the backroom. Ignoring the protests of the bartender, Ricky took off in pursuit, and he heard Amy's steps behind him.

The guy raced through the locker room and straight for the fire exit, hitting the bar in front and bursting out into the cold sunshine. Ricky followed with him, his eyes quickly adjusting as he realised his mistake and ran into a solid arm. Clotheslined, he landed hard on the ground on the gravelly alleyway, as the guy took off again. Before he could get up, Amy came barrelling after him and went tripping over him.

Great, now they were turning to farcical comedy.

“Why do they always run?” Ricky muttered to himself, as he got to his feet and saw 'Paul' had gained some distance on him. He knew he had to make him stumble, the guy was fast, so he grabbed a bin lid and flung it – pulling back on some of his strength – like a giant frisbee. Okay, so it was becoming something of a signature move, but it worked.

As it hit the guy in his back he stumbled a few of his steps. Didn't quite go down, but it was enough of a distraction to give Ricky a moment to catch up. He grabbed the guy by his shirt, trying to get his hands onto his shoulders to spin him around.

Then, tables turned. Paul did spin around on his own, grabbed Ricky by the front of his blazer and dragged him up off his feet. The guy was strong...like...supernaturally strong. He tossed Ricky like he was nothing, sending him flying backwards ten feet and barrelling straight into Amy who didn't have any time to get away.

"I think I'm going to find a safer best friend," Amy grumbled from underneath him, as Ricky and she struggled to get untangled. By the time they got to their feet, they saw Paul had used the time to escape, and their only lead disappeared. Brushing the gravel off her clothes she added, "Seriously, would Sam be this dangerous to try and help?"

He doubted it.

* * *

"So, female hormones or demonic possession?" Mark asked, as he heard the door go and Ricky and Amy walked back in. He glanced up from his book, a tome on medieval demonic possession that was remarkably a page turner, to see the two of them looking a little dishevelled in their school uniforms. Amy even had a ladder in her tights, but she didn't look in the mood for him to point that out. "I sense the aftermath of a fight. Sara again?"

"No, this one had more of a Marvel vibe," Amy muttered, she shook her hair once more with a wince and a chunk of gravel landed on his floor.

"Translation?" he asked Ricky.

“Well, it turns out the bloke Sara snogged...well, he has some abilities she didn't mention,” Ricky explained, “Like the ability to throw me down an alleyway, arse first.”

“Like a Comedy Central projectile,” Amy agreed.

She and Ricky walked over to the table to join him, sat opposite and regarded him with a stare. He had to admit a twinge of guilt, he'd only been half-arsed in his attempts to read up on demonic possession, but he still found himself having to check,

“So, I take it then, it means something is happening to Sara beyond the hormones?” he asked. They continued to stare. “Okay, I admit it was stupid of me to presume that there was nothing going on here more than purely normal, but can we move on please?”

They blinked, but otherwise said nothing. He stood, deciding that he would have to get several more volumes for them to look through if they were going to narrow down exactly what was happening to Sara. But before he could begin his excavation of his archives, Ricky's eyes caught his.

“Say the words.”

“You were right, I was wrong,” he grudgingly recited.

“No, the other words,” Ricky pressed.

Oh, of course he was doing this now. Perhaps he was still pissed from the whole 'didn't tell him about Amy' thing, or perhaps this was just a small teenage sadistic streak, but both of them knew to what he was referring. He sighed, hoping Amy would let this one go and he wouldn't hear about it again, or worse have to explain himself.

“I is your bitch.”

“Don't ever forget it.”

* * *

The sun was setting over the town, the colour of blood orange. Diffusing through the soft October clouds, the coming of the night, the advancing of the darkness. It saw all it touched, dispassionately setting them aflame. Because the night belonged to others. Because the night belonged to them.

It touched the young woman storming down the street, backpack slung over her back. It didn't care her face was set and determined, in pain. The hurt was lessening, as thoughts of people she loved was slowly slipping from mind, as the humming in her ears was beginning to ease. Because she finally knew where she was going. She was walking towards something, and away from something. She was moving towards the place where it all began, and where it would all end.

The sunlight touched the young man sitting on his living room sofa, flitting in through the gossamer thin curtains as he watched the tellie. A completely normal and domestic scene, again about which it was indifferent. It didn't mind when he turned his face away, towards the 'powder room' (as his mother called it) where his girlfriend, untouched and unseen by the setting sunlight, could not reach. It could not understand, even if it wished to, what shadows he felt in his heart.

It flitted through the high eaves and into the school library, where the low lamps of the table were doing the heaviest illumination work. It was weakening by this point, but still managed to catch the young librarian, moving back to the table with further volumes. It touched the dust drifting off them, the scent of age hanging in it's shafts as it slowly moved up the wall. It touched, but could not feel, the anxiety of the young man by the window, looking out at it and thinking of his friend. The gentle connected between him and the young woman who placed her hand on his arm, an act of comfort, is meaningless to the sunlight.

Before it dies, withdrawing from the town of Calendar for one more night, the sunlight catches the young woman from before, the one storming through town, as she reaches the point of her final relief. She walks through the graveyard, and it loses her finally as she slips into the church.

What the sunlight doesn't see, is that the church is lit by candlelight. But what the candlelight sees now, is the same young woman arriving in the warm den, the heady scent of incense hanging in the air. Now the candlelight sees the young woman and a young man, who is only an illusion.

This thing of shadows repulses the candlelight's touch, as the two exchange words.

"I've been waiting for you," the shadows say.

"And here I am."

Act IV

“Still nothing?”

That had been the refrain of the late afternoon to early evening in the Library. A kind of riff that they had to keep repeating whenever one of them would come back from wherever they were. Mark was designated volume-grabber, Amy was designated computer person (despite Mark’s insistence that the internet was not a reliable source of demonic information) and Ricky was...well, attempting to read the most chicken scratch handwriting he’d ever seen.

Seriously, these guys took cursive as an extreme sport.

“Haven’t narrowed it down,” Mark admitted as he took a seat next to Ricky with a book that smelled mildly of mildew. The image on the cover was yet another line drawing of a demonic face. Seen one, seen ‘em all.

“How?” he challenged, “When you have billions of books, how the heck can the answer not be in one of them?”

“Not every topic is covered,” Mark reminded him, “Faeries, Spontaneous Human Combustion, synchronised swimming – to name a few.”

“Like that has relevance.”

“Depends on the demons, doesn’t it?” Mark glanced over at him, turning a page where something with several teats seemed to be suckling a creature that looked a little like an angry Tony Blair baby. “Besides, sorting out the fact from fiction when it comes to possession isn’t easy. You can thank the movies for that one.”

“Aren’t the exorcism rituals the same?” Amy asked from across the table, her face aglow in the light from her laptop. Her fingers had been working over the keys with a speed Ricky felt

supernatural – and realised it must be how others thought of him when they saw him fight. Perhaps they all had their own superpowers.

“Actually, they’re wildly different,” Mark answered, “Despite the fact Christians think they have the monopoly on the supernatural, there’s far more than is dreamt of in their philosophy. It depends upon the religion of the target and the demon, or at the very least it’s religious roots. Not to mention the circumstances of the possession, the connection between demon and victim, the...”

“We get it,” he interrupted, realising that being caught between two intellectuals could lead to a time delay, “It’s complicated.”

“That’s not even the biggest problem,” Mark continued, “We’re not even sure it’s possession.”

“It’s got to be,” he protested, “Or remote control.” He frowned, hearing it out loud, “The telepathic connection thing, not the thing that changes channels.”

Mark sighed, his frustrated sigh, and pushed the book away from him.

“How sure are you this man was a demon?” Mark challenged, with a shrug. “And not something else more super than natural?”

“Well, we only met the one,” Amy admitted, “But super-strength doesn’t come from eating Weetabix.”

“Really?” he asked, dryly, “Watch my world collapse.”

He looked down at his page once more. This particular book was getting him nowhere, it was a sixteenth century monk’s account of something which ate people’s eyeballs in a monastery in Newcastle. Or like, outside of Newcastle. Maybe it was his kidney. The language really was flowering and badly written. Not exactly Goosebumps.

"I think I have something," Amy interjected after a moment, indicating down to her laptop. He took a moment to take in Mark's slight displeased frown, probably feeling like whatever she was about to say would come from a Buffy forum or something – but he hoped Amy was not so easily fooled.

"The internet pulls through for once," he hoped.

"I'm not sure how useful it is, but I've found a pattern of girls about Sara's age running away from home before now," she explained. His heart deflated a little, as he pointed out,

"Uh, Amy, not exactly top of the hour news..." he pointed out.

"All of them were around the same age, all blonde and y'know, pretty," she continued. Before he could point it out, and before Mark's eyebrow raise reached its peak, she pushed on, "But then they've been found two days later, a victim of a murder-suicide. We're talking across the country, people matching Sara's exact description, with a coroner saying they snapped and killed someone they knew, and then themselves."

"Pleasant," he commented, but still, he had to ask, "But what makes you think..."

"Aside from the fact I'm not an idiot and it would take more time to talk you through my search technique than Sara likely has left?" she challenged, making him feel effectively put into place, "This all happens every thirteen years like clockwork, in October. The last one in October 1992, in Preston."

Something had shifted, Mark sat up a little more in his seat, his ears literally pricking up.

"Amy, tell me something, where were the bodies found?"

Amy glanced back at her screen, speed reading must have been another of her super powers.

“Okay, the oldest one I could find was in 1966, when Susie Thompson disappeared in Salford,” she explained, “She showed up next to the body of John Watkins, her boyfriend of the time two days later. She’d shoved a knife into his eye socket and then thrown herself from the roof of a nearby building.”

“Lovely,” Ricky commented, but inside his stomach began to twist.

“Yeah, the guy was training to be a local priest,” she told them, “They were both found in the community church.”

“Then I think I know what’s going on,” Mark declared, standing and moving over to the far end of the table where piles of the books they’d already been through were stacked up. He began to hunt, his own Yahoo as Ricky would later call it.

“Sara’s going to go all Fatal Attraction on some bloke and poke his eyeballs out?” he called over, “Even I’m hoping you’re right about the hormones now.”

“The incident you discovered, in 1966, wasn’t the oldest one,” Mark explained, his mind working even as his hands and eyes were scanning for the reference. “In fact, it reminds me of a reference I saw to an ancient in 1839, in a small town just outside of Bath.” He stopped, as he found the tome he needed and began to skim read the page in his hands, “Here it is, the local vicar’s daughter, Emilie Eddington. She was...well...”

“What?” Amy pressed him when he struggled to find the words.

“Well, she was a virgin,” Mark explained, “Purest in town. But then a man came to the village. A man who supposedly had eyes that flickered, and who was said to bewitch people with his mind. People began to talk, saying that he had his eye on young Emilie.”

“Storytime is taking way too long...” he hurried him, feeling his mouth go dry.

"I believe this man corrupted her," Mark continued, "Stole her innocence, in a kind of psychic impression. Because the next thing you know young Emilie killed her father by impaling him on the fence of his church, before immolating herself on the steps."

"Oh God..." Amy whispered, horrified and covering her mouth.

"We've actually all heard of this," Mark finished.

He placed the book in his hands on the table in front of them and Ricky and Amy both leant forward. The image on the page was a visual he kind of recognised, like an old oil painting impression. There was a woman lying bare-chested in the throes of some madness on her bed, while a small impish creature sat upon her chest, one hand pressed down onto her.

"They're called Incubi," Mark explained, "The male form of a species of libidinous demons. Many people believe them to be simply manifestations of our own sexual desires. Like the dual nature of how we both need and revile intimacy. There is a strong precedent for their existence, including incidents such as this."

"You think this incubus has a specific MO?" Ricky asked.

"I think he plays out the same scenario, every thirteen years," Mark agreed, "Often sightings of specific incubi and succubae would be separated by spans of thirteen. Thirteen days, thirteen weeks, thirteen years and such. No one knows why, it may just be a quirk of this species."

"How do we kill it?" Amy asked suddenly. He glanced across at her for a moment, wondering if the blood lust was bravado, but he saw she meant. Once again, he began to wonder if she really was meant to do this all along. Something felt...oddly right.

"I'm not entirely sure," Mark admitted, "There are rules that govern certain classifications of demons. Silver for shape-shifting creatures, that kind of thing. But the lore never agrees whether an incubus is classed as a physical demon or a spirit, which increases the possibilities exponentially."

“Take a guess,” Amy told him.

“How about a bit more research?” Mark suggested.

Ricky settled his head into his hands, feeling the will to live, and his sickening worry for Sara reaching a peak. He didn't know how much more he could take – and if everything Mark was saying was true, time was short.

It was always too short.

* * *

The silence of the church was a blessing after the constant hum of her brain in the afternoon. Here it was dark, it was quiet, even the distant sounds of human traffic from the main road was dimmed. The sun had set and candlelight taken over, her eyes adjusting into the shadows as she sat upon the altar.

Paul's presence was the only thing she could count on. As soon as she's seen him, it was like a sigh collapsing into relief. He was calm, he was composed, and when she arrived his smile was warm and reassuring. Plus, easy on the eyes, in stylish black. This was right, this was the way.

“You smell sweet,” he commented, as he slipped out of the shadows around her. A slight nervousness had begun to rise in her when he'd disappeared off for a moment, but now he was back it was silenced, quashed. When he spoke to her, she felt the warmth touch her deep down, like those butterflies when first seeing his eyes across the crowded bar. She smiled at him, “Two of your friends came to find me today.”

“They don't mean anything,” she dismissed, not even stopping to think who he meant.

"You're right, they don't," he agreed, moving around her. He seemed to glide, like he was one with the world around her. She felt his lips suddenly close to her ear, felt herself responding to it, her heart quickening in her chest.

"My life is with you now," she reminded him, "We can go together."

"Wherever we go, you know they'll try to find us," he whispered. His soft lips brushed against her ear as he spoke, the hint of scratchy stubble so...mature.

"What can we do?" she asked him. He moved from her side, and came around to her front, his hands slipping over her own as his eyes bore into her. She felt they were like beautiful pools of warm light, like the stars above. They were endless, much older than his eighteen.

"Make sure they never follow us again," he said softly, almost sadly.

"How can I do that?" she asked. She began to realise, how much trouble they were in, what other people would think of them, "They won't stop at anything to break us up. To sever our connection."

"We send a message," he told her. "A very strong message."

"What kind of message?" she asked. She didn't want the answer. She wanted his lips again, wanted him to take her mouth with his own.

"One of them will come here," he told her, with the certainty of prophecy and the wisdom of ancients. "To try and find you. And when they do, they *will* find you. And you find them. And then...then there's only one way to stop them ever finding you again."

She felt her heart skip in a very different way, a flicker of something very wrong. Something, somewhere deep inside her screamed at her to stop. A voice that sounded so familiar. His hand brushed against her cheek, his fingers caressing her face. And that voice stopped, silenced, she

looked at him with a new idea dawning in her mind's eye. It was beautiful, it was necessary, and it was bloody.

"They'll never find me again."

* * *

Mark glanced over at the two of them, Ricky and Amy, his partners in research. Of course, Ricky had long since given up attempting to work through the books and had insisted on action, on movement. The idea that they had until morning before something horrible would happen to Sara – and the unspoken question neither of them had asked, of what would happen if she didn't find someone she cared for before the deadline, remained unasked. He hoped neither of them would.

As he saw Amy's face, so young and innocent, her eyes filled with concern for her friend he saw her as she was. Brilliant, brave and so painfully young in ways he wondered if he'd ever been. He admired her, and he felt the deep terrifying fear that came with the idea of what it might do to her being in this battle. Already he felt the weight upon his soul – the secrets he still had not shared with Ricky. And Ricky, the hero, the violence building inside of him. Sara, victim to a demon. Were any of them going to make it to adulthood unscathed?

"Okay, we have at least a dozen churches in the town of Calendar," Amy narrated, as Ricky stood looking at her screen over her shoulder. He raised his head to engage, "Not least including the South Side church which I'm sure we all remember and love."

"You knew about that?" Ricky asked her, surprised how far back it went.

“Oh, please, how do you think Sara got her smashed phone back for the police?” she returned, “Can’t believe I bought her cover story about muggers. I mean, why would they go to a church?”

“Those who need it, don’t want it?” Mark summed up.

“Amen.”

“Okay, so we need to narrow it down,” Ricky continued to push, the urgency in his voice clear. “What’s this guy going to want?”

“Well, one’s a Quaker House,” Amy pointed out, “Less of a church more of just a big youth club room.”

“This guy likes spectacle, right?” Ricky summarised, “I mean getting someone to throw themselves off of the roof of a church gets the job done and makes a statement. Full diva tilt, so what’s the play? Where’s that in Calendar?”

“He’d want the bodies to be found as quickly as possible,” he agreed, “Ideally so he could watch and get his demonic jollies off on the carnage he’s created. So, we can probably rule out any of the abandoned or out-of-the-way ones.”

“Boys and your ego,” Amy tutted.

“May I remind you which gender started this?” Ricky retorted.

“Okay, so we’re down to five,” Amy pointed out, ignoring his retort.

“Which is the Roman Catholic Church?” he asked, a thought beginning to occur to him.

“Uh, there’s only a small one, the big one in the town square is Anglican,” Amy answered him, checking the screen. “The Catholic one is the small one near Temperance Street, the Church of St Mary.” She shook her head, “Obviously put a lot of thought into that name.”

"That's the best bet," he pointed out.

"How so?" Ricky frowned, "Wouldn't he want the one in the town centre for spectacle?"

"Yes, but it's also the busiest as well," he pointed out, "This guy is about giving the finger to religion, seems like the bigger they are, the more fun it is for him. He'd go for the Catholics first. Besides, it's around the corner from Clarus so..."

The trust was back, Ricky nodded to him, taking immediate faith in his assessment of the situation. He stood straight and walked over to the glass-fronted cabinet with the magazines. Amy's gaze followed him, frowning when she saw him standing next to the case. Before she could ask, Mark supplied,

"Weapons."

Ricky punched in the code on the lock, and the doors swung open. At this point Amy's eyes went wide as the cabinet revealed itself that behind the glass façade of vacuous popular pulp articles, was actually a deeper closet filled with all kinds of barbarous looking steel. Of course, since most demons went medieval, there were mainly swords, daggers, a crossbow or two. A pretty nice black market collection, Mark had to admit.

"You don't put in the code, it's just books," Ricky pointed out, "Mark showed it to me. Thought it'd be great to hide p..." He caught himself, "Precious books."

"Very fancy," she agreed, before glancing back at Mark, "More than pocket money?"

"Let's just say Drake thought the budget went on new return stamps," he shrugged, "Let's hope she doesn't look them up in the catalogue."

Ricky smirked, any excuse to get one over on the headteacher, and picked out his favourite sword. The one just small enough to go under his long coat without being so long it'd look a bit

weird. They'd save the broadsword for fighting Friar Tuck. He turned toward the door but stopped when Amy began to stand.

"No," he told her.

"I can help," she reminded him, "I can...well, fight."

"Glad to hear it," Ricky answered in his tone which said he thought nothing of the sort, "But this is as far as you can go."

"I'm battle tested," she pushed.

"Yeah, but not willing to test that with your life," he answered, "Maybe next time."

"I'm not a kid with ice cream," she snapped, "I'm a person who wants to help save her friend's life." She put her hands on her hips, "You can't stop me."

Mark felt the horror rise in his chest again. He knew she was strong, she was fiercer than anybody he'd known – including Ricky. The way she'd survived under pressure in the caverns, it was the mark of a true hero. But she was also vulnerable. Human. Just like him, but better. He hoped Ricky would make the wise choice, and this time not bow to her pressure, her sheer force of will.

"At least grab a weapon from the cabinet," Ricky sighed, moving aside to allow her to walk towards it. Mark rose from his chair, determined to protest, but before he had to, Ricky had used the momentary distraction to pick her up.

He grabbed her around the waist, lifted her slightly from the ground and within seconds had barrelled her into Mark's office and closed the door behind her. On the other side she battered against the glass with her hands,

"Ricky! You can't do this! Ricky!"

Ignoring her, Ricky used the key in the lock and tossed it onto the floor before turning back to him.

“Do not let her out of there until I call you,” Ricky instructed. Mark nodded, as behind them, Amy continued to pound and demand to be let out. He would not, and neither would Ricky.

“Ricky,” he got his attention just before he was about to head for the door, “Iron. Some demons, some magicks, they’re vulnerable to iron.” He shrugged, “Might not be in this case, but it’s the best I can offer.”

Ricky nodded, and headed for the door, out to fight a fight that was not there’s. He found it hard to meet Amy’s look, but he had to, to see the hurt and the frustration and anger in her eyes. She would have to get used to being the B team, if she was to work with them, being the ones for whom danger was an anomaly, not something they thrust themselves into.

“I’m sorry,” he admitted.

But it was a lie.

* * *

The church was dim, flickering light from inside could only come from candlelight or firelight – and he doubted ‘Paul’ (such a ridiculous name for a sodding demon) would have stoked them just yet. Maybe after his and Sara’s corpses were found and he could go dancing gleefully like in one of those wood carvings Mark was always going on about in his books. So, he would have to move carefully.

There was only one way in and one way out, so he had no choice but to slip into the church through the ancient creaking front door, announcing his presence in a way he couldn’t hide. The

night air remained with him for a moment, then the cloying scent of old and dusty rooms took over, laden with the thick incense in the air, and he was enveloped.

“I was so hoping it would be you.”

The voice was Sara’s, clear and light. Even the tone, her normal bright and breezy tone. She could have been commenting on English Lit. But she wasn’t. There was something missing, something which told him everything he needed to know about where her head was at.

“Sara, you need to tell me where he is,” he called out, even though he couldn’t see her yet. He could sense her though, somewhere deeper into the space. He reached the end of the vestibule and peered around the corner.

There she sat, legs crossed on the altar, waiting for him, bathed in the flickering candlelight. Even though she was perfectly still, her face still moved as shadows danced. But of course, he could see no sign of the demon. He would be nearby, of course he would. Sick fucker liked to watch.

“I’m not telling you a thing,” she said back coolly.

“Look, Sara, you’re unsure some kind of demon mind-control,” he pointed out, eyes scanning the darkness beyond the pews, on either side, for some kind of movement. There was none, none save the candle flickers. They weren’t just atmosphere, they were sodding camouflage. He had to try to get through to her instead.

He stepped into the entryway completely, they were now on opposite ends of the long aisle, the red plush carpet stretched between them.

“Really?” Sara asked, mocking. The look on her face was a cold smile, her eyes furiously bright as they looked at him with something approximating hate. He had never seen that look in her eyes, but even so he knew it wasn’t her. “So, I probably shouldn’t do whatever I want right now? I

should probably do everything you tell me, like a good little girl." She uncrossed her legs and slipped herself off the altar and back onto the floor. "I'm not your bitch, Ricky, not anymore."

"You never were," he reminded her, taking several steps forward, steeling him for an attack from either side. Of course, perhaps there would be no attack. Maybe he needed his sick little play to play out more than Ricky thought.

"Oh, come on, I was always running after you like a little puppy dog," she continued, as he slowly made his way down the aisle, each step without attack raising his instincts even further. "Waiting for you to notice me, waiting for you to love me. But you never could. And now, I finally realise it's not a problem with me. It's a problem with you. You are incapable of love. Of affection. Of noticing anyone but yourself."

He tried to switch it off, her voice droning instead of reaching him. But he had to admit her words stung. Flashing in front of his eyes, the thing he did to that vampyr the night before. The blood on his hands. He was capable of so much, so much bloody violence, he knew it. Perhaps it did make him dark, perhaps it did make him incapable of love. Perhaps she was, despite being completely fucked up by a demon in that moment, speaking a truth she didn't even know she was speaking.

"Okay, due to possession, I'm gonna let that slide," he brushed off, "But watch your mouth please."

"Fuck you," she spat at him, a literal glob landing on the floor in front of him. He finally stopped looking around them and focused on her, saw her in all her hating glory, "I've found someone who'll do everything you won't. Who'll notice me. Who'll love me."

"Who'll make you kill me, then yourself," he finished for her. "True love, I understand. It's like Coronation Street."

"Who said anything about killing?" she mocked, with a fake innocent tone. They were a hairs breadth from one another now, she looked up at him.

“He’s done this before,” Ricky told her. “Your new boyfriend is over a hundred and fifty years old. Probably older.”

“Maybe I needed a change from boys,” she told him.

The attack when it came was swift and in a manner he didn’t expect. He felt the sting first, then looked down to realise Sara’s hand was responsible. A knife, a switchblade by the looks of it. Driven into his side, lower abdomen, right side. It hurt, and not just in a physical way. He looked at her, their eyes connecting and he saw not even a shred of guilt.

“Sorry, but it had to be done,” she whispered, “You’re my past.” Her eyes moved beyond him, off to the darkened aisle to the right where something now moved, “He’s, my future.”

“Sara?” he asked her.

“What?”

He placed one bloodied hand softly against her cheek, as he spoke,

“I haven’t had a chance to tell you everything,” he admitted, before leaning in to whisper in her ear, “This isn’t the first time I’ve been stabbed. And you suck at anatomy.”

He drew back, her eyes going wide as he, with a small amount of regret and the pulling of his punch, knocked her out. As she slumped to the ground in front of the altar, he pulled the fucking little pokey knife and flung it through the air in the direction of her eyeline. As he turned around, he was in time to see the little blade embed itself into Paul’s hand, moved in front of his smug face.

The demon barely grimaced, as he pulled it from the back of his hand and flung it to the ground.

“Of course she picks a hunter to love,” the being snarled, his eyes turning from human blue to an unhuman shimmer.

“Just don’t ask me for my autograph,” Ricky commented, putting pressure on the wound even though he already knew it would barely need stitches. She really did suck at delivering a killing blow. But it could still distract him, if he wasn’t careful. “So come on, are you really an incubus? I mean, sure, swarthy but all sexy and stuff? Not really doing anything for me. I mean granted you’re not a woman.”

“God made you all wrong,” the incubus told him, as he began to circle around him, moving through the pews and bringing Ricky’s attention wherever he wanted it, to the aisle. Ricky, mindful of his surroundings, and the soft breathing of his unconscious best friend by his feet, traced him carefully. “Hell is overflowing, you know.”

“You know I was expecting something more,” Ricky sighed, “But you’re just your bog-standard religious psycho killer with a sexual fantasy complex. You’re like every episode of Criminal Minds.”

“She’s going to scream your name when I pull her skin off,” Paul snarled, furious. Good, he was angry, he was off guard.

“Oh, now I have to get all angry,” Ricky teased.

The incubus became the first to break the standoff, forgetting his strategy, forgetting his plan, and running down the aisle towards him. Ricky grabbed the stand on which the small candles of remembrance flickered and, with a minor flicker of regret, flung it at the charging beast. Flames snuffed out almost instantly, though molten wax dripped over exposed skin and his clothes, causing momentary confusion.

Paul shrieked, as Ricky grabbed the being by his coat tails and rained two punches down on it’s face, before throwing him over the altar.

“Enjoying a Brazilian?” he mocked, as he withdraw his sword. The demon rose once more, fury on it’s face, as he circled around. He didn’t wait for another pun, instead he drove the sword

home, straight into the creature's lower abdomen, until the two of them were face to snarling face.

"Has a poetry to it, don't you think?"

Blood poured from the demon's mouth, or what approximated a human visage, spitting a little as the thing chuckled,

"You stupid little dickhead," it hissed, "This isn't iron."

"Ah, iron it is then," Ricky summarised, letting go of his sword and pushing the creature to the ground.

He didn't need to worry about feeling cold in that moment. He didn't need to worry about the violence. There was only one outcome, only one way this would go. To save Sara. To save all of them that there would be. To avenge any of them that there had been. It would be violent, it would be brutal, and it would be necessary.

He ripped the nearest iron cage surrounding an unlit church candle dangling on its chain. The creature looked up at him as he wrapped the chain around his hand.

"She'll always be tainted now," it spat, knowing what was coming. "She'll never be innocent."

Ricky brought the cage down not once, nor twice. But until the blood stopped, within and without.

* * *

Her eyes flickered as she groaned, the pain in her cheek was something else. But it felt as if it was the first pain she was experiencing in a while. Like the local anaesthetic had worn off, like when she had her tooth out.

Things were still dark, candlelit. Ricky's face appeared above her, looking down at her with warmth.

"Hey, sleeping through the fight as always," he joked, warmly. He helped her to sit up, even as the world around her eyes swam. He felt a little wet, a little sticky, as she felt the arm of his jacket. Behind her back was the altar.

Suddenly, it all flooded to her, the memory of everything rushing in at once. Like watching a film of herself, the day after the surgery. Only she wasn't singing Katy Perry this time, she was doing and saying horrible things. And all of them were her. But also, weren't her. Her eyes went wide, as fear rose in her heart,

"Where..." she began.

Ricky shook his head, his eyes drifting over the altar.

"He's gone," he said simply. Then he smiled.

After all that, he smiled at her.

"Ricky?" she pleaded, "I'm so sorry."

She dissolved into sobs, everything she held in flooded out and she cried. She cried for a very long time. And through it all, he held her. The stickiness didn't matter. It really didn't matter. None of it mattered, except she was not alone.

That was the one thing that did.

* * *

The next day was grey as Mark walked into the entrance to Calendar Memorial Hospital. The visitor's entrance was low but wide, opening up into a large foyer that stretched in all directions. He slowly made his way through the hallways until he reached Ward B, where a nurse was typing away at the computer. It took some time, before she finally looked up at him.

"Hi, I'm looking for Mrs Chambers," he explained, having been told by the arriving paramedics the madame's real surname. It had been on her ID, which had been a surprisingly mundane driving licence for a seer. Or a medium. Or whoever she had been.

"Are you family?" she asked, distractedly.

"No, I'm the one who brought her in," he admitted, "She has no family, as far I know."

This was not an unfamiliar story to the nurse, it seemed. She nodded, grabbed a chart and indicated Mark follow her. The linoleum floor squeaked quietly under her shoes as she led him along. The whole place was clean, but aged and faded, the floor a mottled green and the walls a kind of off cream. Scents of disinfectant mingled with the ghosts of old patients in the old Victorian building in which they were housed.

"She's stable," the nurse explained, "That's about the most we can hope for, for now."

Mark's heart dropped another few moments, as he found himself standing in the entrance to a private room. It would be for now, anyway. The soft rhythms of the machines, the mechanical life-sustaining beeps of everything working. It was there, for now, while they tried to find her family. While they tried to get in touch with anybody who knew her.

For now, Mark was the only one who knew her. Her final customer, come once more to selfishly ask for questions. Questions that did...this. He swallowed, hard, and asked,

"Is she going to be okay?"

How could anyone, in such a tangle of tubes and wires and chaos ever be okay? How could life come back from such a brink?

“The brains a funny thing,” the nurse sighed, “If she wakes up from the coma, potentially. But the longer she’s under, the more likely brain damage will occur.” As if finally realising she may have overshared, she added, “Look, I don’t think she’ll be walking out of here, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” Mark muttered quietly, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to sit with her for a while.”

The nurse nodded and moved back to her routine day. Mark lingered a little longer in the doorway, then walked over to the woman. Her eyes were open, thick grey cataracts had completely overtaken her vision – even though she did not seem present enough to need it. Gnarled hands, adorned with life-saving cannulas, clutched at the bed spread.

If she sensed him, there was no sign. He sat down in the faded plastic-covered chair next to her and lingered in the quiet.

Her final words had haunted him ever since. No, he had not told Ricky what had happened in the shop. He had simply lied and said the lead had gone cold. Ricky had saved Sara. He had told them that she was fine, and that Paul was dead. The inflection in his voice, the crack in it, told Mark what he needed to know about the incubus’ demise. And the Madame’s voice, growling in his ear once more reminded him to beware.

Beware the Darkest Soul.

A message that may have cost her, her life.

* * *

“Okay, we have yet another problem now,” he pointed out. He sat in Mark’s office, on the sofa, looking over at his friend who’s dark circles were beginning to have dark circles. They were all of them shattered and Ricky hoped for the next few days the supernatural would take the night off.

“This is a worse kept secret than OJ Simpson,” Mark agreed.

“And bloodier,” he agreed. “Why did you let it happen?”

“I did not ‘let’ it happen,” Mark defended, “It happened. She was there, she’s smart. I couldn’t bullshit her. I suppose all I could do was tell her the truth and let her make up her own mind. Which is what you should do.”

“You think she’ll be able to help us?” he asked.

“I think you and Sara both owe your lives to her skills, yes,” Mark agreed, “Hell, even I do. She’ll be one hell of a useful asset. And God knows we could do with someone to shut Sara up once in a while.” He shrugged, “But at the end of the day, it’s up to her.”

Everything he said, was right. Ricky had to admit Amy had performed admirably in their time together. She was tough, she was smart and she cared. It mattered more than anything else. Perhaps he could let go a little of the need to control. Perhaps, even after everything that had happened, he could find a way to come to terms with it. To accept the help. To realise he and Mark could not do all of this alone.

He nodded, standing and prepared to head out into the Library proper. After all, Chemistry class did not care he’d had two hours sleep saving his best friend from a sex demon.

“And in other news, how are you?” Mark asked, leaning back in his chair, “I know we were a little sidetracked from the hunt for answers...”

“But there’ll always be more answers,” he finished for him. “We’ll get back to it. But...yeah, I’m okay. I think I reminded myself that we’re hunting evil killers. Not fluffy bunnies. So, I guess beating the utter living shit out of them is the best form of stress ball there is.”

“Eloquent,” Mark smiled, “You could have said ‘killing demons is a great outlet for venting the stresses of being an adolescent’. You said you needed to work on your vocabulary.”

“Only in English essays,” he smiled back, “Otherwise, I’d turn into you. And one I think is enough.” He went to go but another thought made him hesitate, “Does it ever end? Having to be a kid?”

“I’ll let you know on the other side,” Mark promised.

He walked out of the office, leaving his friend behind to his other duties. They’d be okay. He still wasn’t happy about the lies, or technically the omissions, but he had come to accept it. Things somethings happened the way they happened, and they needed to trust one another.

As he stepped into the quiet of the library, he saw the door swinging open and Amy made her entrance. She slowed when she saw him, as he felt his cheeks redden. He’d yet to speak to her since...

“Gonna lock me in another room?” she teased.

“I’m sorry about that,” he admitted.

“You could have least left me a little bowl of water and the latest National Geographic,” she scalded him.

“I’ll do that next time.”

“There’s a next time?”

She didn’t miss a beat, he noticed, but he smiled and nodded.

“That all depends,” he shrugged, “You know what’s out there now, you’ve seen it, you’ve kinda fought it. Although I can only promise possible death, definite injury and a deeply disturbing set of nightmares, there is some fun to be had.”

“Is there hazard pay?”

“Not really. Still wanna help?”

“I already am.”

He smiled, crossed the distance between him and offered her a hand. She reached out, shook his hand in a firm grip and gave him a cheeky salute.

“Welcome to the team.”

* * *

The light burned low in the church, as the last of the sunlight slipped over the hill. The shadows had long since come to this small pocket of life, a place where the oaks shaded the churchyard and played shadows over names long-forgotten engraved on headstones. The place was quiet, still, reflective.

Churches in Calendar were numerous, though many were really small chapels. This was one such, open most hours of the day and maintained by a rotating visitation of various chaplains. There was none in attendance that night, as a single solitary figure sat upon the polished pews, out of the cold of the night air.

The soft lingering scent of incense hung in the air, from small services done long in the past. Rows of candles, small red tealights, flickered to the left of the altar at the front. Far too many, one

would think, for such a small and out of the way chapel. It was set back from the road, deep amongst the graves.

But people liked to pay their respects. Tealights were lit every day by passersby, by the people who came to remember loved ones. So many loved ones were gone from Calendar, as if the place had more than it's fair share of loss and grief. But it was no different than anywhere else. It was simply that there, in Calendar, people would pay their respects. They would forget the horror, the pain, and the strangeness of losing their relative to sudden neck rupture. But they would remember the person.

It was as if the townsfolk would stare only long enough into the abyss to realise, they needed to knock on the light. Otherwise, they ignored the things watching back at them. It made it easier that way, to live in innocence unafraid of the sword dangling over their scalps.

The figure in the church as long since past that. They sat alone, having taken off their coat due to the slight stuffiness in the air. The chapel was warm, large stained glass windows having leant it a greenhouse effect during the day that the night was quickly whisking away. She shivered a little, as though a chill came through an open door.

She mused on innocence. It was something powerful, she knew, something so well-sought after and yet something that was often lost. She mused people tried to keep it, tried to hold onto the blissful ignorance they believed naively to be the essence of innocence. The gift of the youth.

Idiots, the young in town may be the only ones with eyes wide open.

She knew, had learned, how hard innocence truly is to find. She knew, as she stood, and began to make her way down the aisle, that innocence was not a possession. It was a moment. A point in your life when you realised that there is true evil in the world. Not only from monsters, but from men, and more importantly – from oneself.

As she made her way to the bank of candles, their lights flickering slightly at her arrival – the soft brush of wind from movement, she picked up one of the spare ones. She dropped a small amount of change into the donation box, before using the small click lighter to burst the wick into pungent smelling flame.

As Sara Carpenter placed the small red candle into the holder, amongst the other flickering remembers of things past, she knew, more than anyone else the truth of innocence. The bitter truth. Once it is lost, you can never get it back.

But she was not alone. Ricky stood beside her, his warmth and presence gave her what she needed in that moment.

“Who’s that for?” he asked her, quietly.

She didn’t look up at him, as the little candle flame flickered amongst all the others. All the sparks of life long since lost, and answered him quietly,

“Me.”