

'til the End of the World

Year One

Episode VII

Go Down in Flames

Opening

November 2005

The night air outside the truck was cold, but at least it was fresh. Gary's truck – the one from the farm – always carried that smell for her. He probably got used to it, having grown up working for his dad all his life, but she still thought she could smell pig. Maybe horse. And then the sweet scent of hay.

But she couldn't roll down the window, even though he kept the heater on full blast (it's only other setting). Outside, the forest rolled past as they took the trail out of town, and an old Cher song played on the radio. It had been a good night so far, with them having gone to see a film at the Odeon in Bury. They were now maybe ten minutes from her house. Which was good, considering it was a school night and all.

Her dad could be such a hardarse at times, especially when it came to Gary. The two had never quite seen eye to eye.

But she loved him, in that way seventeen-year-olds fell in love. She knew it might not last forever; it would depend on how he felt about her. And she was sure he loved her. Sometimes, very sure. Even when...

She shifted slightly in her seat, instinctively pulling her sleeve down again.

"...and then we went to see that Sandra Bullock movie, utter shit," she continued, regaling him with her adventures with her friends the other week. He liked hearing about what she did and where she went; it was sweet. He was interested, unlike the other guys who glaze over when you talk to them. "And then Mike said..."

"Mike?" his ears pricked up, though his eyes never moved from the road.

Shit, she thought. She shouldn't have mentioned Mike.

"Yeah," she answered quietly. She didn't understand why he had such an issue with the guy. There was like six of them who went to the cinema.

"I thought I told you not to hang around with him," he reminded her. Yeah, they'd had that conversation. Gary didn't like Mike, and even though she didn't really understand why, she'd agreed not to hang out with him anymore. Again, not that they ever hung out alone. Not that, even in her wildest dreams, Mike would ever find her attractive.

But Betty didn't tell her boyfriend any of that, because sometimes silence was better.

"There were a bunch of us there," she weakly protested, knowing it was a weak argument. It wouldn't matter to Gary if he'd been there either – he had taken against the guy. And even though she'd known him since Primary School, again, it didn't matter. Not when Gary got into one of his ways.

"Did you sit next to him?" he asked. She sensed the anger building beneath him now, could see it in the way his hands gripped the steering wheel even tighter. But even then, she couldn't quite believe it.

"What?" she asked in surprise, before she could help herself.

"Did he make a move?" he asked.

"No," she answered quickly, but something inside her pushed harder, annoyed even by the question, "don't be stupid."

"You think I'm stupid?"

He was looking straight ahead, his voice incredibly smooth and quiet. He was good-looking, even handsome, her mum would say. He had that kind of all-round nice face – most of the time. A look that butter wouldn't melt. But when his mouth tightened like that, and he would stare straight ahead, it was like a thunderstorm rolling in on a blue sky.

"No, but..." she began to protest, but her voice was cut off by the sudden swerve of the car. He pulled over in a small layby. She could see the twinkling lights of home nearby; they were perhaps half a mile from the streetlights of her road. He still did not look at her, his hands gripping the wheel. The engine continued to rumble, and he had put on the handbrake.

"You're gonna want to shut up now, Betty," he told her.

"Gary, don't be like that..." she tried to soothe, to placate, to calm. But there was no calming a thunderstorm, she knew that. To even try...

The blow came backhanded, a thick smack that cut through the crooning of the old bat on the radio. Her head snapped back with the force, the pain sharp and unmistakable. She felt blood pooling at the back of her nose. Oh shit, oh no, not a nosebleed. Not in his car.

"You're gonna want to get out of the car now," he told her.

"But..." she began to protest, thinking how dangerous it would be to walk even half a mile along this unlit road at night. Not to mention the cold. She wasn't thinking clearly; her brain was still rocking from what had happened. What he swore wouldn't happen again.

He turned to look at her. His beautiful blue eyes were so angry, so full of hatred. She shouldn't have made him angry, she shouldn't have done that. It was a stupid film with friends, for God's sake, but saying that would only make it worse.

She scrambled for the door handle and hurried outside, the wet, tall weeds by the side of the road scratching her ankles. She expected him to peel away, to leave her standing there as he had done before. It would be alright; it would give her time to think, for him to cool down. Then they could talk tomorrow.

But it wasn't like that. She heard the clunk of his door and realised he'd come out of his truck.

"I told you not to hang around with Mike," he reminded her. Of course, he'd said it enough times. She was too stupid not to listen. Always forgetting what he'd said. It was right what he said about her.

He came around the front of the truck, in front of the headlights, and she tried to walk slowly towards him, holding her hands up to placate.

"I'm sorry, Gary," she told him, fighting back sobs that would come anyway. "I'm sorry, I'll never..."

"No, you won't," he snapped at her, grabbing her hard by the back of her hair and tossing her to the ground in front of his headlights. She was blinded, unable to see by their bright glare as she felt pain from where he had torn a bit out by the roots. "Because I'm going to teach you a lesson."

Shit, she shouldn't have...

"You stupid bitch!" he called her. "I'm everything to you, and you will do what I tell you to do!"

She did nothing to defend herself; every word he said was true. She forgot – oh, why did she always forget? Why couldn't she be a good girlfriend? Why couldn't she listen to him? Then maybe it wouldn't hurt so much.

When it ended, she was dazed and confused, with her mind all muddled. She still couldn't see; the headlights were too bright. But she heard... screams. Gary. Oh God, Gary, screaming as though he was taking all the pain of the world into himself. He couldn't make that sound; it was an inhuman scream.

It was suddenly, incredibly brightly hot, and she could smell... burning?

The next thing she saw, and the last for that night since Betty passed out immediately after, was a blackened and charred lump smoking on the ground in front of her, in the glare of the headlights. His beautiful blue eyes still brimming with hatred and fear.

Only now they were vacant.

'til the End of the World

Episode 7 – Go Down in Flames

Starring:

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

Act I

Heat bristled and burned beneath his skin like it was part of him. It licked and touched every bit of bare flesh, it ate him hungrily, alive and from within and from without. He screamed, but his mouth couldn't form the sounds; it was everywhere, all encompassing.

No, it wasn't him; he was outside of it. He was standing, cold and alone, amidst complete darkness. In the distance, there were twinkling lights, bright and burning with a much colder fire. So far away.

There was crying. Crying and screaming and the sound of crackling flesh. Like bacon fat spitting in the pain. There was crunching and crushing of gravel. There was the sound of a tricking engine and... was that Cher on the radio?

Cobwebs clung to him, grasping his legs as he struggled to move, to run away from this place that echoed with death in the darkness.

Two bright beams of light slammed into him with the force of a thousand exploding suns. It washed over him, like cold fire, burning his skin – but no, he wasn't burning. He was standing, not cold, not hot, in his boxers. He could see his bare feet on the tarmac beneath him. The scent of dirt filled the air. He looked up.

The weeping, screaming – it was coming from a shape on the ground that once might have been a girl but was now a ball of banshee. Above her, a man stood. He was recognised only by his shape, with no features visible. She reached for him, one hand outstretched. Was it pointing? Was it accusing? Or was it merely reaching for him?

It's mouth, his mouth, open in silent agony as blackened teeth pressed from receding and blistering lips that split across an undulating skin of fire.

He wanted to scream himself, but he couldn't. Because his mouth was filled with... cotton?

The sudden jolt was like a slap to the face. But it wasn't a slap; it was the unexpected appearance of his pillow in front of him. He pushed himself upwards with both hands as the springs

beneath his mattress pressed back. Then he became aware – he was awake – there was nothing in front of him but recently changed sheets now soaked with cold sweat.

He heard the trickle of water as his room's radiator came on, with dawn just beginning outside his window.

He was home, alone in bed, not on some roadside while a burning man shouted at him. The relief he felt washed over him, the memories of what he had seen so vivid. He got out of his bed and crossed the short distance to his window, flinging it open. Cold pre-dawn air flooded into his room, making the goosebumps rise on his skin.

Luke had never felt such relief in his life, even as the clammy sensation of his skin still clung to him like a grim reminder of his nightmare. He closed his eyes and steadied his breath, reminding himself it was only a dream. Just a dream and nothing more.

The alarm clock on his bedside table flicked to the next hour, and the sounds of Take That and Lulu flooded into his room through the tinny speakers on the side, signalling it was time to wake up.

Somewhere out there, in the world, though Luke didn't know it – the same song on the same radio station played across their mornings. Some, like Sara and Amy, danced in their pyjamas while brushing their teeth – having been up for a few minutes already. Others, like Mark and Ricky, fought the urge to smash their clocks in the library and last night's clothes respectively.

But Luke? Good old, plain Luke – shrugged off the nightmare, however deceptively real it had seemed, and got on with his morning.

Nothing could beat away the cobwebs of a nightmare more than a greater evil. First period PE.

* * *

Sara couldn't help but hum to herself, the bloody song on the radio having lodged in her psyche like a chunk of apple stuck in her throat. Not a whole apple, mind you, she wasn't Julie Winters after all – just a wedge. Still, it was catchy. And, as she made a mental note to remind Amy shortly, Gary Barlow could get it. Way better than what's his face, the mad one with the tiger briefs.

She hoisted her backpack onto her shoulders, begrudging its weight, and closed her front door behind her. She prepared a smile for Amy, who would be standing at the end of her short path, which quickly clouded into a frown.

"Amy... my how you've changed."

"Amy and I swapped escort duty this morning," Ricky told her, "She had something else she wanted to do."

"And neither of you informed me?"

"Nope."

"I feel so left out."

"Come on, just move your arse," he nodded, as he rolled his eyes. She made a mental note to make a mental note to tell Amy about Gary Barlow later – she knew Ricky well enough to know he wouldn't be interested in that – she'd seen the way he looked at girls. Like so many teenage boys did, with a kind of bewildered fear and longing, the same she had for the occasional Krispy Kreme.

"Amy says please and gives me a cookie when she tells me to move my arse," she pouted, as she reluctantly joined him in walking down the street. She would remain sullen until he was nicer.

"She's nicer like that."

"And I have slept a grand total of ten minutes," he explained. She could sense it. Even without crazy psych-ops guys injecting you with CIA chemicals (or whatever the Covenant had used), he was still struggling to get into his normal routine. Bags under his eyes and ruffled hair that would have killed if he were a boyband member. She would have to go easier on him.

"But you're gonna sleep during RS, right?" she pointed out, "I don't think Mr Plank can keep time without your rhythmic snoring in the background."

"Like you're any better," he scoffed.

"Actually, I am," she answered him proudly, "I don't snore."

She sighed as the sun rose on the horizon, beginning its journey into the sky. At least it was dry that morning, which was something. And Ricky wasn't terribly bad company; she loved him, of course. But she would have to have a little word with Amy about her communication skills, or lack thereof. She needed a completely different mental attitude to deal with boys this early in the morning.

"So, what is Amy doing that's saddled you with me?" she enquired.

"Like I said, I have no idea," he shrugged, "Saving the rainforest or something."

That did sound remarkably like Amy, despite the nearest rainforest being a fourteen-hour flight away. Oh, and Amy hated mosquitoes almost as much as she did.

"It's so like her to do this to me," she continued to moan.

Of course, there was also another reason why she preferred to spend mornings with Amy. Boys were so menstrual before they'd had their morning Red Bull – he wasn't even listening to her, instead tilting his head and frowning to the right where the woods stretched. She tried to follow his line of sight, but saw nothing, then suddenly heard the wail of the siren and was quickly brought up to speed.

"See, and now you're ignoring me," she pouted, "Amy would never ignore me."

"Come on, I wanna check this out," he told her before crossing the street towards the woods, heading in the direction of the sirens. He hopped onto the low stone wall and then landed among the trees on the other side. She wasn't wearing the bloody pumps for this either; girls' PE had been cancelled due to Miss Katana's meth habit (or something). She sighed and began to follow him, calling out as she did.

"Amy never dragged me to crime scenes!"

* * *

Ricky could hear the grumbling behind him, but his mind was mostly elsewhere – specifically ahead. As they walked down the street and Sara was rambling on about something or other, he heard the distant wail of sirens. Just a brief bleat from the ambulance, but it was enough.

The sounds of sirens, especially ambulances, weren't exactly that unusual. Most of the time they were for some old person who'd had a fall or something – Calendar wasn't a bustling metropolis but it did have its fair share of accidents and injuries. It was the place.

The street they were on cut through a little bit of the Witches' Woods, which ran from behind the School, up the Old Man and pretty much across the border until you were nearing the town limits – and the big wide 'world' beyond. The direction of the sirens wasn't further towards the town centre; it was away, and there were none of the usual estates.

Besides, if it were some old guy, the retirement home was clear on the other side of town. And the social housing was back the way he'd come from.

So, on instinct more than anything else, he led them on a shortcut through the bit of woods, towards the road that ran around the upper part of the hill and dropped down to the neighbouring town of Summers about five miles away. It was a common shortcut for people travelling to and from the larger main roads in the region, such as Rawtenstall, and to bigger towns like Bury and Blackburn beyond.

Or was it a city now? He wasn't that good at Geography.

Behind him, branches cracked as Sara moved quietly behind him until they reached the small wooden fence marking the edge of this section of the woods from the road. Out of breath, Sara appeared beside him.

What they saw was a little way up the road: two police cars, an ambulance, and a crowd of onlookers. Beyond where they stood, he noticed another van he didn't recognise and an orange truck that seemed somewhat familiar. Perhaps he'd seen it around town; they did have a few farms nearby, and jeeps weren't exactly rare.

Stepping over the low fence, he made his way onto the tarmac, Sara coming with him.

A shot of the man in the white suit, adjusting his facemask's straps, and he knew—fatality. They didn't have a forensic team in Calendar's force, which was quite surprising given the number of unusual deaths even during his time there, so the evidence must have come from another direction. This was explained by the black van, where more of his companions were disembarking. It also clarified another point.

"Oh, great, where you lead, death happens to be," Sara joked.

"Right," he muttered distractedly. He didn't have to look at Sara to know she was rolling his eyes.

He moved a little forward, towards the back of the crowd, as a woman was returning to her car, having been forced to turn around by the blocking off of the road. The police officer facing them seemed a little bored, perhaps uninterested. Obviously had been on the force enough to see a few 'sudden neck ruptures' in her time.

"Hey, what happened?" he asked the lady, who looked to be texting something distractedly on her phone.

"The police have closed the sodding road," she sighed, clearly annoyed by having to find a different route and by someone trying to talk to her. But, the human instinct for gossip took over as she looked up from her phone and added, "Apparently, they've found a body and a young girl who was badly beaten. It's like... gross."

"Do they know who did it?" he pressed further.

"Apparently..." she began, stretching out the word to emphasise how much it meant, "The girl had gone a bit bonkers. They had to take her away five minutes ago in the other ambulance, screaming about something that came out of the woods. Like, proper nutso."

Ricky turned to look at Sara and saw she was thinking the same thing. And from the way her 'captive audience' seemed to have lost interest in what she was saying, Mrs Busybody headed off

towards her car and her day. The two of them moved together closer to the crowd. It never ceased to amaze him how much people liked to gather.

It didn't take him long to glimpse through a brief gap in the crowd and see a body lying on the ground. Although the man in the white clean suit kneeling nearby blocked his view, he could spot one blackened, charred hand. Clearly, Sara saw it too, for she made a face before the two of them turned and started to move back down the road.

After all, didn't want to get his face seen at too many crime scenes just yet.

"So, something beats up that girl and then turns on her boyfriend?" Sara surmised when they were safely back in the woods.

"And drives the girl crazy in the process?" he shrugged. Hearing it out loud, it sounded quite daft, but then again – they had very little to go on. "Either she did it herself, or something did it for her. And you can't beat yourself up."

"You've obviously never watched *Liar Liar*," she deduced.

"We need to tell Mark," he summed up. She nodded in agreement, and with that, they continued their journey to school.

* * *

Luke frowned into the black, gaping maw of his locker and struggled to remember what the hell he'd come for. The horror of his nightmare clung to him more than he'd liked, or than any dream had lingered for quite some time. Sure, when he was a kid and he saw *Jaws* for the first time, he'd had nightmares about sharks bursting up through his floorboards for six months – and they'd always stuck around even in the daytime. The fact they were like a hundred miles inland and his room was on the second floor meant very little.

Since then, like most people, his dreams quickly faded with the morning light and the routine of school. But something about this one kept flickering into his mind whenever he was trying to do

something else, like figuring out what he needed from his locker before the bell for the next period rang.

A sudden thump beside him made him jump, his nerves frayed and on the edge of an edge. But it was just Justin, his idiot grin spreading as he leaned against the row of lockers. He couldn't stop himself; he'd already jumped – and of course Justin would have noticed. Like he could let anything slide.

"Hey, you jumpy?" his friend teased.

"You want a thump?" was Luke's friendly reply. It was without venom; it always was.

"Someone grouchy?" Justin asked him, "Did someone deny someone else a little summat-summat last night?"

Subtle, as ever.

"Whoever you went on a date with, I'm sure."

The big mistake made a spectacle of being shot through the heart with that one, though Luke could pretty much have assured that's what had happened to him. Unless, of course, he'd gone out with Julie again. That girl's reputation was bigger than... he decided to stop there.

"Ah, so true," Justin sighed, his eyes drifting off into some other where and when. Likely last night in the McDonald's (a classy hangout spot for a date, he'd once told him). "So, tonight, booze, whores, boxing match, whaddya say?"

"Not so much."

"Okay, we'll leave off the whores, they tend to grate on me anyway," Justin sighed. His mate talked a good game, knew more dirty words than a Swedish sailor, but Luke had a sneaking suspicion that if the guy ever actually saw a hooker, he'd run in the opposite direction. Or go red-faced and strangely mute. "But booze and boxing?"

"Still no."

"Oh come on, grouchy," Justin teased with his pouty face. "The other six dwarves need some fun once in a while, y'know?"

"Look, my better half is at her nan's doing her community service, and I've got enough homework to keep me busy until the next millennium," Luke sighed to his mate, fairly certain he was never going to get the headspace to remember exactly what it was he'd come to his locker for in the first place. "So, not really a lot of time for the fight tonight. Go figure."

"You can't mix maths and Malibu?" Justin shrugged, "Baileys and Biology? Heiniken and History?"

"No, thank you," Luke softly declined, "But you should buy the pay-per-view yourself and enjoy it. And tell the other dwarves to get a life too."

"Oh, how you drive a spear through my heart," his mate teased as his parting shot. Turning away from him, Luke decided to try his luck with just taking his notepad to class. That worked for about ninety per cent of his curriculum anyway. 'Less it was Food Tech, he'd have to take his chances. He heard his friend mutter from behind him, "Oh, how you forget to lock your locker."

He caught the fellow peering into the darkness that was his private space, and slammed the door shut an inch from his nose.

He knew he was being a little harsh; his mate was just horsing around, but he couldn't help it. The feeling from the night before just wouldn't shift from his skin. It made him feel less like himself.

It would shake away, in time. Surely.

* * *

Mark rubbed the bridge of his nose where his headache had been building since he woke up. It was really the sensation radiating up from the crick in his neck, a result of a night of heavy sleep on his office couch that had twisted it into an odd angle. Usually he would have shifted positions several times during the night, but after recent events, he found himself in greater need of a deeper sleep than usual.

And thus, he was paying the price for it. He cricked his neck, once to the left, once to the right, and kept his eyes closed as he wondered whether he needed another cup of coffee or a few paracetamol. Or perhaps a nice, friendly lobotomy to undo the pain.

The last thing he needed was...

"Does it smell funky in here to you?"

Exactly that.

"Ah, Cruella, good morning," he sighed, opening his eyes to see Miss Drake leaning against the counter. He wondered which teacher's or governor's meeting she was avoiding that morning, fully aware that he was not her favourite person, nor was she exactly his. She frowned behind him, her eyes sharp and eagle-like more than he would have liked.

"You brought a coffee machine to the library?"

It was true, he had. More than the small pot of filter coffee he'd had before. Because he'd needed it, and because he was very low on other options at that moment in time.

"Yes, I like coffee," he agreed, before taking a moment to add his two pennies' worth, "and the stuff you have in the staff room tastes like warmed urine."

"One strange celebrity, and that'll be the next craze," she prophesised. She stood fully upright and regarded him with a look he didn't quite like. Piercing, perhaps a little perceptive. "You know, Janitor-man told me you were here after he left last night, and you were here in the morning before he got in."

"How interesting," he muttered, dryly.

"Were you here all night?"

Mark, who was reluctant to answer questions about his dubious living arrangements or about nightly activities she was not privy to, chose to handle things the old-fashioned way — with a lie.

"I went home for a few hours last night," he answered, "But I couldn't sleep, so I got in early.

Any more questions?"

He sincerely hoped there weren't, as he was not his usual playful self that morning. Perhaps he needed a stronger blend or more likely, a proper bed. Miss Drake, meanwhile, studied him with her beady eyes, as if examining a particularly puzzling insect specimen. He couldn't tell which side of the fence she was on – belief or disbelief, as she slowly remarked,

“No need to get bent out of shape.”

With some relief, he observed her heading for the door as he tried to keep an aloof distance by pretending to study a book returned to the library. One of the History teacher's copies of Horrible Histories – he hoped it wasn't due to a lack of a textbook or a degree.

“Did you like your present?” she asked, eyebrow half-cocked. Mark, who had used it very well to help him sleep the first couple of nights, replied with a half-smile.

“You're right, it helps.”

Thankfully, she left, and as she walked out through the double doors, a breath of fresh air entered. Amy Donaldson was perhaps the only person in the school he would make an effort for that morning.

“She seems to like you,” she commented brightly, as she made her way over to the counter.

“I'm one of the few people she can't intimidate,” he explained, fairly certain that his assessment of their headteacher was quite accurate. “But I think we both remain certain of our animosity.”

“Hate is a thing best left for enemies?” she asked, putting down the piles of books in her arms. Ah, the second person who actually checked things out from his library.

“Exactly, what can I do for you?” he enquired.

“Oh, you don't know?”

“My psychic powers are unfortunately on sabbatical,” he quipped, picking up one of the books she'd returned.

“Sara called me,” Amy explained, “Said she and Ricky had something. Apparently, it's time for Scoobies to Assemble.”

As he processed her returned books, she made her way to the table and set her bag down.

"So, I suppose the question is, what do we do until they arrive?" she asked in a tone quite unlike her. He wondered if acting out of character was a general sign of being unwell, or simply the world hurtling towards the apocalypse faster than usual. He offered her a casual smile before returning to his duties, missing the look of dashed hopes on her young face.

Had he thought back, he might have noticed something about her tone.

But, alas, he continued with the obliviousness afforded to teenage boys and the overtired.

And he was both.

* * *

"We're here, put your clothes back on," Sara called out into the library as Ricky and she walked in through the double doors. He figured that since it was about nine in the morning, even if Mark had been sleeping in the library, he would have had the dignity to put his trousers back on. Well, they had to hope. Times were strange for them all.

They entered to find Mark glaring at Sara with her breath of intrusive air, and Amy glaring at her with a kind of muted horror. Both of them were sitting at the table, fully clothed, drinking some mud that Ricky took to be the elixir of the gods.

"Oh, sorry, Amy," Sara sighed, "I thought you were Miss Drake."

"I'm supposed to be *less* offended?"

"Well, boys and girls, we have a fun case today," Sara clasped her hands as the two of them made their way over to their friends. With a quick glance at Mark and the coffee machine, he was given a small nod and then headed over to pick it up. He needed it that morning, and by the looks of things, so did his mate.

"You're ignoring that, aren't you?" Amy wasn't about to let it go, "I'll get you and your little dog too..."

"We found a body!" Sara declared with a little too much glee.

"Well, we didn't really find the body," he corrected, as he joined the other three at the table.

"We sort of stumbled across the crime scene in full swing. I suppose some other bloke probably found the body first."

"Oh, sure, Gary Halverson and Betty Davies," Amy piped up, "It was on the radio this morning." Seeing the expressions of the other three, she added, "Did no one hear the radio this morning?" Her frown deepened and seemed to turn inward as she asked, "Am I the only one who listens to the radio?"

"For the news, yes," Sara assured her friend, taking a sniff of her cup, undoubtedly to check Mark hadn't breached the decaff-only-to-Amy cardinal rule. "I like to stumble across dead bodies in person, it's just so much more authentic, y'know?"

"My radio is broken," Mark pointed out, though Ricky remembered buying him that alarm clock for his birthday. "What about them?"

"The police said that both were attacked, and that Gary was killed," she finished explaining.

"Did they mention how?" Sara asked, but Amy shook her head firmly. "Krispy Kreme. Someone burnt his body and I'm guessing that, knowing this town, probably alive."

"Betty survived, but was pretty badly beaten," he supplied.

A kind of silence hovered over them for a moment as Mark stood and moved to the counter. Something flashed in Ricky's mind, a look that seemed to cloud Mark's face briefly, but he dismissed it.

"Something that can burn a guy alive," Amy repeated, "That definitely sounds like one of our kind of things. I mean, I think it's one of our kind of things."

"Definitely time for an investigation," Sara agreed, "Mark?"

Mark looked back up at them with a 'hmmm?' of mumbled disinterest. Ricky frowned but decided to keep it to himself.

"Yes?"

"Well, we're all waiting for your explanation as to what the hell is going on?"

"Not sure."

"No theories?"

"None come to mind."

"What's up with you?"

"Nothing."

With that, Mark walked into the office and out of their sight for a moment. Sara made a face, but before she could go too far down her bash-Mark rabbit hole, Ricky knew he had to steer things back in a more productive direction. Amy had been right; this was their kind of thing, and despite the fact that it seemed only yesterday they had been figuring out what evil-CIA-shit the Covenant had been up to, he knew they would have to look into it quickly.

"Okay, whatever, we need to get on this," he decided, catching Amy's eye. "Amy, can you help me get back into the morgue? Get a look at the body, maybe some lovely colour photos of our own?"

"Sure, I'll pull up some floor plans," she quipped – despite knowing full well they simply needed to walk in when no one was looking.

"Sara, do you wanna talk to Gary and Betty's friends?" he offered, "I think they were part of the popular crowd."

Which in turn, he, Mark, and Amy were not; it was well known. He was fairly certain he'd seen the two of them hanging around as couple friends with Luke and Sam – and you didn't get much more Prom King and Queen than those two. Even if Calendar High had yet to hold a proper Prom for its leavers.

The committee was apparently already up in arms.

"I'll speak with Mike Patterson," Sara confirmed, "I've seen him and Betty hanging out, and I believe Luke was on the rugby team at some point with Gary." She paused for a moment before adding in her most condescending tone, "And calling them popular is a big mistake... no one is 'cool' any more, they're just... not dorks."

"Success is a lack of failure?" he summed up.

"Something like that."

He shifted slightly in his chair to call out an assignment for Mark – surprise, surprise, involving books – only to find the door of his office closed sometime between his abrupt departure and now. He frowned to himself, unsure of how to interpret his friend's latest mood.

"And I guess Mark'll sit and brood," he sighed.

"It's what boys do best," Sara confirmed.

With that said and the job finished, Sara headed towards the doors and her assignment, while Amy packed away her belongings. Before he moved on with his day, he paused for a moment to look at the closed door, the silhouette of his friend only briefly visible through the frosted glass.

They'd all been through a lot over the past year, to be honest. He was worried about him. Mark didn't seem to be coping very well. He decided then to have a chat with him, to make sure he was alright.

But first, another day, another dead body.

* * *

Sara bit the end of her ice lolly as she scanned the courtyard with her eyes, all Terminator-like. It was the usual lunchtime crowd for a typically dry November day. The benches resembled a natural history museum tableau of the social pecking order. The central tables, the ones with the most space around them, the least dented wooden surfaces and under the semi-permanent gazebo-awning, were occupied by the elite.

The rugby team, the cheerleaders for the rugby team (another dreadful American import Sara couldn't stand – ever since she was rejected during tryouts), and the girls with more boobs than sense. Honestly, you develop your funbags early, and it opened the keys to the kingdom. A lactate-archy, if you will.

Then there were the tables out from under the awning, with their slightly more chipped sides and the scattering of leaves fallen from the nearby oak tree. Those were taken by the arty types. The ones who always did the school play every year – and she swore this year they were doing some kind of revival of *Chicago*. The last thing they needed in their school was a mobster with a gun. Or worse, a Richard Gere performance.

And then the rest of those allowed to grab a table – your tech geeks, your scientists, your quirky friends with a stamp collection and anoraks – had to make do with the tables under the old oak tree. The same one from where pigeons like to launch their lunch, like some dark version of the Dambusters.

But she was searching for one man, one person amid the crowd. The first person she wanted to talk to. Mike Patterson. She wondered how best to extract the information from him. Perhaps sit him on a chair with a spotlight on his face and speak all private eye like. She could pull off a Humphrey Bogart fedora and a cigar – as long as she didn't inhale.

Shit, there he was, she realised she had no time for a plan, so she did the next best thing.

"Hi, Mike, can I talk to you?" she asked, after having rushed up to him.

The guy, who somehow had managed to pimp out his school blazer with a few bedazzled crystals, turned to her with a look of absolutely no recognition on his face.

"Who are you?"

Okay, so she'd be offended another time.

"I'm Sara," she answered, as if that would explain anything. "I was in Textiles with Betty."

An absolute lie; she had never sewn a damn thing in her life and looked at textiles the way a suffragette radical feminist might view men's football.

"Oh, right."

"Look, I heard about what happened..." she began.

"You and the rest of the school," he snapped, his look returning to irritation as he presumed the rest of the conversation ahead of her. "Leave me alone." He shuffled the bag on his shoulder and made to leave, but she persisted.

"I heard you knew them both," she probed.

"I knew Betty," he agreed, "Gary was an asshole."

"How so?"

"Didn't like me hanging around with her," he answered, with a shrug, "She did it, then he'd get mad. Fucking neanderthal."

He brushed his quiff out of his eye, as Sara sceptically found herself asking,

"He thought something was going on?"

Mike pursed his lips, clearly irritated with the line of questioning and her persistence, but couldn't help himself nonetheless. She got the sense he likely wanted to say something for a while, but now, with Gary a broken Final-Destination-sunbed-victim, he had no one to unleash his frustration and anger upon.

"I'm in a relationship with a guy from Crawford Private, five miles from here," he told her, folding his arms and challenging her to disagree or comment with an eyebrow. She didn't mind his defensiveness; she got the sense he often had to. "I wouldn't look at Betty that way if my life depended on it. It wasn't about the potential of anything happening, it's about the fact that she was his. And no other guy, gay or not, is gonna talk to her. It's the kind of primitive, cave man crap that has me glad I'm battin' for a different team."

During his outpouring, a sense started to emerge within her, something that nagged at her deep down as she asked a question she wasn't certain she wanted to ask.

"Exactly how jealous could he get?"

He told her. And it was as bad as she thought.

"Y'know, a couple of times, she'd come into school with a black eye," Sam affirmed, a few minutes later as she cornered her and Luke at one of the central tables. Luckily, by that time, it was

just the three of them, the bell having rung for fifth period. Sam continued to chew on her sandwich as she thought back, "She kept saying she'd walked into a door. Cliché and a half."

"I tried to get her to talk about it once," Luke offered, "But she snapped at me and ran off. I told our form tutor, and then I never heard about it again."

"Total drama queen," Sam sighed.

Sara dug her hands into the crook of her elbow, trying to suppress the rage flowing through her. She knew Sam didn't really understand what she was saying, knew she was just talking rubbish because that's what she did. Because she didn't get it. How could she?

"You're saying that Gary was violent?" Sara asked, her teeth gritted.

"I'm saying that when he got angry, he probably got fisty," Sam agreed, taking another swallow of tuna mayonnaise on rye.

"He was always the first to start a fight when we lost a game," Luke added, more implying than explicitly stating. Thoughts spun around Sara's mind as the possibilities dawned on her, but Sam got there before her.

"So, my clue? She did it to herself," her tactless friend continued, "He tried to hit her one too many times, and she snapped. Put the bastard in the ground once and for all."

"Good."

It slipped out before she could stop herself, an involuntary action. But once it was out there, Sam frowned at her.

"Oh, please, she's not the victim here," Sam countered.

"What would you call her?"

"An idiot," she shrugged, "Look, if Luke tried to hit me he'd end up with his own first up his arse. If I tried to hit him, I'd guess the same. The only reason everyone is up in arms about abuse is because women get more press about it and men suffer in silence. So we see these girls as helpless victims of the evil, bad men. But they're not; whoever is doing the hitting is just a dickhead, and no

strong person with half a brain in their head is going to stand for it. And if you stick around, it's only because you're too thick to realise love doesn't come with 999 calls."

Sara stared at her friend with pure shock – as if she was someone she didn't recognise. It was, of course, so easy for her, so easy for all of them, to judge. She had never expected her friend to spout so much nonsense about things she didn't understand. But it would serve no purpose. She saw an argument she would never win, and an ignorance she hoped Luke and life would never shatter for her.

"Right," she answered, dripping with sarcasm, "It's their fault."

Knowing that if she stayed any longer, she would say or do something she could not undo, she stood, preparing to remove herself from the table.

"Hey, Sara, one question," Luke said.

She didn't feel like sticking around, but answered with a quick, "Shoot."

"How did Gary die?" he asked.

"Someone burnt him to death."

With that, she turned and hurried away from them as fast as her feet could carry her. Had she stayed a moment longer, she would have seen the look on Luke's face – one of complete, profound, pale-faced shock.

Act II

The strangest part about being in the morgue – again and with only a few weeks between visits – apart from the obvious, was the fluorescent lights overhead. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew the day was just out there. It had been cold and bright when they left it and entered the hospital – and now it could be any time of day or night. Twilight, sunrise, and everything in between.

Weirder still, it could be any year, for all he knew. The hospital didn't seem to have been updated since the seventies, with light sand-coloured walls in the main areas, which settled into a sickly eggshell green in the ward areas – reminding him of the Green Mile. Down in the basement, where the morgue was rightly situated, it gave way to cold, sterile blue.

The lights were dimmed, coming on automatically as they entered the gloom. A cost-saving measure? Their last visit had been in the middle of the night, so perhaps they had actually switched them off back then. However, this felt wrong in a different way, although Amy insisted it was the perfect time.

"How can this place be abandoned in the middle of the day?" he asked, as they peered around the quiet, empty room in front of them. No one was at the desk, in the office, or, by the sounds of it, beyond in the crypt where the bodies were kept.

"Well, ironically, the grave shift must be busier than during the day," Amy replied, wrinkling her nose in concentration. "Most people seem to die or be found in the twilight hours, anyway. Heck, a third of all natural deaths are found in the bedroom."

He tried to restrain himself from shuddering at the word 'natural death'. He, apart from one grandparent when he was ten – the last surviving one – had yet to lose anyone to death that could be called natural.

"You know, this is the second time I've been here, but the security has been rubbish on both occasions," he remarked as he made his way to the office. It was now brightly lit with the automatic

lighting, casting a much harsher fluorescent glow than before. White bulbs, as opposed to the soft desk light.

"Yeah, until we get caught," Amy added gloomily. It was clear, based on her recent experience, that she wasn't too eager to be there either. Or perhaps it was just her inner good girl not wanting to be caught doing anything wrong. "Find out which one the body's in."

"I'm not going through every cabinet here," he answered, but she gave him a very Amy-like glare. One that conveyed that he was being an idiot and testing her patience. He would have felt condescended, but she was very much correct in assuming she was smarter than he. And anyone at their school, to be fair.

"It'll be on the report," she explained, "The report which will be near the top of the pile."

She tutted, a sound that reminded him far too much of teachers, so he distracted himself by following the instructions.

"Are we sure we're safe?" he asked her, flipping through a car accident and a heart attack, while she kept an eye on the door.

"We have around twenty minutes before the guys arrive to begin the internal autopsy," she replied.

"So what answers will we get?"

As much as he disliked the idea of looking inside a body, he wasn't sure what they could glean just from examining the man. Maybe only how not to overcook his meat. His stomach rumbled loudly.

"The preliminary external stuff."

"Got it," he replied twice, pulling out the report just below a guy whose eyeballs were still missing. He flicked through it quickly and frowned, "Drawer 98. We have 98 body drawers? How many people die in this town?"

The large pile of reports – all of them dated within the last few days – should have been enough to tell him.

"You of all people should know that," Amy reminded him as she headed towards the doors of the crypt. Tucking the file under his arm, he followed her, thinking that his plan to make them redundant might someday succeed, and caught up with her in the vast, cold room where she was already pulling out the drawer without hesitation.

As he approached, he heard her muttering low, beneath her breath.

"Nice corpse, you're not gonna attack me, are you?"

Remembering the last time she was grabbed by a practically nude, newly transformed black-eyed vampyr, he figured she was holding it together rather well. She hesitated only briefly before pulling back the crisp white sheet covering the man's face to reveal the blackened husk beneath. The smell hit him hard, making him wrinkle his nose in disgust.

"Smells like he's still burning."

To distract himself from the bone-white grimace he could see – bright teeth in the middle of a twisted form that barely resembled humanity – he decided to turn to the file instead. At least there he could hide the colour photos behind the reports and writing, safely away from the site, while Amy continued her examination nearby. Nothing he could do about the smell, mind you, but it would have to do.

"According to this, there are burn marks on the inside of the mouth and throat," Ricky read aloud, "meaning he was alive when he was set on fire."

"I think it's safe to say that's COD," Amy agreed, in that distracted way of someone examining something of interest. It took a moment for him to realise she meant cause of death, not call of duty, but a moment quicker than he'd have expected. He was getting too used to this stuff.

"Right," he agreed, "but apparently they took a swab and it seems no accelerant was used."

"That doesn't mean anything on its own," she explained, "Once the human body starts to burn, human fat tissue functions like its own accelerant. There's this phenomenon called the 'wick effect' ..."

Knowing she was about to launch into full, biologically – and probably graphically – descriptive mode, Ricky interrupted.

“I’ll believe you.”

“Do you see this?” she asked him with a frown.

“I see a burnt corpse, yes,” he agreed, but then noticed she was pointing to a particular spot.

“No, on his chest.”

Like a magic eye poster, the longer he looked, the more he convinced himself he could see it, amongst the cracks and the blisters.

“That’s... that’s a handprint,” he pointed out.

“Right, a different section in the shape of a hand,” she agreed.

“Someone human did this?”

“I guess we have to consider the sick possibility.”

Before they could continue their line of thought, they heard sounds coming from the corridor – the squeak of a thankfully ungreased wheel. Sharing a quick look, Ricky placed the file onto the nearest desk, Amy wheeled the corpse back into the drawer and closed it quietly – and the pair waited until the coast was clear to slip out.

All the while, at the back of his mind, his thoughts whirled. Demons, vamps, sure he was used to. But a human killer? Somehow, it made it worse. Because how could they deal with a human killer without becoming the same thing themselves?

* * *

The silence in the study room was oppressive. There, for an hour, they sat in silence, most of them pretending to revise. No study leave with mocks approaching; instead, they filled any free time on their timetables with this – this monotonous drone of the day. And it was warm. Way too warm for a November day.

Why was it the school that usually let them freeze to death, somehow managed to weaponise the radiators?

Luke's eyes struggled to follow along in the textbook he had open. Maths. Why wasn't Amy there? She helped the numbers stop dancing on the page for him by explaining it using her not-so-big words. Or was it something else? Could have been Business Studies, sure, maybe it was on invoices. But why couldn't he concentrate?

Tick, tick

The clock on the wall was oppressively loud in the silence. Every sound was amplified, from the shuffle of someone's shoe on the floor to the scrape of pencils on paper. He should be pencilling on the paper, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. What did he even write? He'd done the usual – his name and the date – but even that felt hollow and empty.

Tick, tick

Some kids to his left began to whisper. He didn't recognise them – the 'free' (now supervised study) periods were a free-for-all – they were probably from a different part of the year group. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but anything was better than nothing.

"No talking," came the stern voice from the front of the classroom. The new teacher. Science, he thought. Chemistry. She was sat at the desk, her face full of the kind of adult annoyance that comes with having to do something beyond one's duty. Miss Serif, he thought someone called her. She did sixth form, and upper set, so no wonder he hadn't come across her. She only started that September.

He took his eyes away from his book and looked down, but it was doing him no good. He noticed a smudge on his page and frowned. There was something on his arm, a fleck of grey. It landed like a soft, delicate snowflake he couldn't feel. When he reached for it and touched it, it smeared a grey streak across the fine blonde fuzz on his arm.

It was ash.

He looked up, feeling the delicate flecks landing on his cheeks as his eyes were drawn upwards. There was no sound, but the entire ceiling of the room was aflame. Yellows, oranges, and reds danced and licked across the surface, moving with a mesmerising grace. Flecks of ash rained down, but no one moved.

“Fire!” he yelled, but no sound escaped. He looked down to realise it wasn’t just the roof. The teacher, her eyes bright and emerald amid the blackened husk that used to be her face, was aflame. Its flickering matched her red curls, but it undulated with the same flame. She didn’t seem bothered; instead, she smiled.

One by one, each row approaching him, they set alight. But no one moved, no one screamed. They were there one moment, then still there – only blackened, charred, and flicking the pages of their textbooks, as fire lapped at the air around them. Second row, third.

In the row in front of him, Sara turned around and grinned in the same shitty way as the teacher. Then she burst into flames and shrugged as if to say, ‘What can you do?’

Then the flames came for him, and he screamed without sound.

And yawned his way back into life in his darkened room, tasting... paper? He sat bolt upright, ready to pat himself down, but realised he was not on fire. He wasn’t in a classroom – he had been doing homework in his room. His desk, with the notepad now sporting a lovely drool pattern, sat untouched in front of him. And there was no one – no friend, and thankfully no sodding teachers—in his room. There was just him.

He glanced at the clock, barely six in the evening. He’d fallen asleep doing his homework.

Shit, he thought to himself. He needed to sleep properly, but now he was crashing out. What was it with these bloody dreams?

He glanced at his arm, which showed no streaks of grey. Yet, beneath his skin, it still felt hot, as if the residual effect of the dream stayed with him even in waking life. In its strange, peculiar way, it suggested that perhaps they weren’t dreams at all.

But that was a stupid thought.

Wasn't it?

* * *

"Oh, for God's sake, Sara, you're not listening."

"And you seem to have a bookmark up your arse that reads, 'poor little women'!"

Ricky held his head in his hands as the headache, which had been threatening since their near-miss in the morgue, began its campaign of terror once more. Since their return and regrouping, the two of them had been arguing like it was going out of fashion. At least Amy, typing away next to him, was able to drown them out through action; he, however, had somehow unofficially taken on the role of referee.

They stood nearby, with Mark facing away from the counter and Sara unable to stay still, instead pacing around.

"Not everyone is capable of bashing their loved ones' brains in, Sara," Mark returned, dripping with sarcasm, "Maybe you could, but not everyone's a bitch."

"Up yours, Mark," Sara snapped back at him. "You like to think of women as poor, helpless little creatures who can't take on a man if they want to. He went one step too far – she burned the bastard to death and now... well, now he's an extra in a James Bond music video."

"I think no such thing," he bristled.

"Oh please, you tried to stop me and Amy from helping out in this fight because you thought we were too frail and doting," she reminded him.

"No, it was simply because I can't stand you," he retorted, "and because I didn't want to see Amy get hurt. Whereas you're so gung ho you think every woman with a hint of independence needs to kill her boyfriend and burn her bloody bra."

"Well, it looks like Betty got it the other way round!"

"Shut. Up."

His two words were enough to end the ongoing argument they'd been having since they returned from the morgue. He looked up at them as they glared back, and enough was enough.

"Look, it's a possibility that Betty did someone burn the crap out of Gary for what he did to her," he admitted; revenge is always a good motive. A smug look crossed Sara's face, he soon dashed by adding in her direction, "But it is also possible that she didn't. That someone else stepped in and did the vigilante-ing."

"Oh, a big strong man?" she asked him, sarcastically folding her arms. He recognised the look; when her blood was up, she was prone to turn on anything that moved, like the T-Rex in *Jurassic Park*. He'd been through it enough times to know, but he wouldn't back down.

"The shape of the handprint does suggest a woman," Amy piped up, perhaps unhelpfully, from nearby. Sara's smug expression returned; she thought she'd gained some more points. "But it could just be a womanly bloke. You know, political correctness and all."

Sara rolled her eyes, clearly not getting what she wanted out of the conversation, and started to head for the door.

"Where are you storming off to?" he asked her.

"I'm not storming, I'm gracefully exiting," she snapped back at him, ungracefully, before relenting and adding, "I am going to dig through old newspaper records for anything similar. If you guys are so convinced Betty didn't do it, we might want to know who did."

With that, she spun around and stormed straight through the doors. At the same time, Mark stepped into his office, huffing and puffing, then slammed the door behind him. Not great for his headache in the short term, but at least the endless squawking had ceased. He sighed and turned to Amy, who gave him her best 'what can ya do?' look amidst her typing.

He knew they had their moments; the two of them bickered like an old married couple at times. But Mark and Sara were both acting out of character – and at the worst possible moment. Sara had returned, convinced that Betty had killed her boyfriend because he was abusive and was fully determined that the case was closed. Mark, however, believed she did not, and thought they

were dealing with something else. A disagreement escalated so quickly that even looking back, Ricky couldn't tell at what point it had changed.

"if this was a TV show, they'd be doing it," he joked, feebly trying to lighten the mood.

"Nah," Amy answered lightly, "Sara hates a cliché. Perhaps a trope?"

"I don't get the difference."

"No one does, Ricky," she sighed, "No one does."

* * *

Outside, the thumping bass was something Sam didn't recognise, but no one did these days. There were so many remixes, often sped-up versions (what her stepmother would undoubtedly call a 'disco version'), that remixes seemed more popular than the original songs. She wouldn't be surprised if Whitney Houston's 'I Will Always Love You' had been sped up to the point it sounded like Alvin and the Chipmunks singing, with a baseline ripped from a German techno fetish club.

She wouldn't have been surprised to find out she wasn't far off.

She glanced into the mirror, looking dim and horrible under the bright blue fluorescent lighting Clarus had chosen to install in the girls' bathroom. Her lipstick was fine; she'd only had one drink from a bottle, so it remained mostly untouched. A quick touch-up and she was back to herself. She smiled, then soon lost it.

Behind her, standing with his back against one of the dividers between stalls, was Drazen. Still looking as sleazy as ever, with the complete confidence of someone who didn't care he was in the girls' bathroom. He was grinning, examining the dirt under his fingernails, which remained unsurprisingly tidy except for one.

"We have to stop meeting like this," he joked when he noticed she'd noticed him. She sighed, rolling her eyes as she turned and screwed her lipstick shut.

"Please, the sleaze doesn't work on me," she reminded him. But at least he'd shown up earlier in the night than she thought he would. Maybe there was no football on the television that night. It wasn't like the man did much for a living. Aside from what she used him for, anyway, "But you know what does."

"This isn't a free lunch," he reminded her, some of the humour draining from his sneaky eyes. Not that there was ever much real humour there. Lads like Drazen never truly allowed themselves to feel. She had no doubt who she was dealing with – someone on the edge of being a sociopath, if not the full psycho. But he was still a useful one, as long as you knew how to play the game. "You need to pay, you know the rules."

And this was how you played the game. You had the cash, and you showed no weakness. Pretty simple really. Same rules as being in high school.

"All of it," she told him, as she reached into her purse and pulled out the notes. In turn, she heard the little rustle as he produced the medicine packet. They swapped places, as Drazen – ever the twat – decided to count the bills to make sure, even as she headed for the door.

"You know, I've been thinking of creating a loyalty card," he joked, satisfied that she'd given him the right number of twenties. "Would you be interested?"

"I don't think the Clubcard scheme covers what you're selling," she reminded him. He smiled slightly at that, more than enough to settle him for the evening. She reached for the door handle, but he moved to her side – uncomfortably close as he sidled up alongside her.

"So, did you sort out your little tiff with your boyfriend?" he asked. Luke's bruises had healed easily enough, but she knew time would tell whether they were on shaky ground. Not that she was going to say anything to this weasel about it.

"And what makes you think any of that is your business?" she challenged.

"Any one of my customers gets a problem, I get a problem," he told her seriously. "And I don't like problems, so either it's sorted out... or I might have to sort it out for you."

She fought against a reaction, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of seeing her discomfort – or the fear she harboured deep within if Luke ever found out what was really going on. What he would think of her. What it would mean for them. She shut it down, just like that.

“It’s done, no more questions.”

He leant forward, closing the gap between them further. She could smell the scent of his Lynx aftershave filling her nose, as he took a deep breath of his own.

“You smell like raspberries.”

She opened the door and stormed out into the club. For a Wednesday night, it was pretty well packed, wall to wall with people, and once she found herself in the din of the crowd, she felt a bit safer. She didn’t see him exit the bathroom behind her, but he must have. Remembering the one rule of the jungle – that she needed to project confidence – she strode through the crowd to the bar.

Past the small group of teachers having welcome drinks for the new one, past the other underage kids like her who were already completely intoxicated, past the lonely sad individuals with nothing better to do on a midweek. Past them all and over to her friend Julie, who sat by the bar amusing herself with a cocktail umbrella.

It only took a few moments for her to pop one of the pills into her mouth, allow the bitter crunch to be swallowed with her spit, and wait for its effects.

She needed it then more than ever.

* * *

Amy felt herself drawn into the rhythm. It had a sort of poetic beauty to it. Adjust, check, readjust, recheck. Pixel by pixel, moment by moment, variation by variation. It was the kind of work she enjoyed. Her mum used one of those little sandbox kits with a tiny little pitchfork to draw lines. She called it zen, and it helped her relax. Amy guessed her version of zen was anything involving school and computers.

The night had long since waned – they were nearing the point where she would have to decide whether there was nothing more to find but darkness and head home, or call her mum to say she was staying at Sara's again. Honestly, it always worked, and Amy only felt the faintest twinge of guilt. It wasn't as if she was lying for evil, quite the opposite, in fact. But maybe one day she'd be able to tell her mum the truth.

Of course, she was a clever girl; she knew that was highly unlikely anyway.

Still, she never thought it might be because there wouldn't be a someday. That was too hard to believe.

"How's that print coming?" Ricky asked her, having finished his homework. Mark's office door remained stubbornly closed, and he was not going to try researching without the master general. She almost didn't notice until he was right next to her, peering at her screen. She smiled to herself, wondering if it seemed as unintelligible to him as she thought it might be. Okay, so smaller words than in her head.

"Well, first I need to touch up the image," she explained, having snuck a photograph of the handprint on her phone before they escaped. "That should hopefully give us a usable handprint. Then I'll hack into the police servers and run it through their database."

"You say that so casually," he remarked, with a smile.

"Well, I do have it bookmarked," she grinned.

He returned to his seat next to her and appeared to be considering picking up another book. Clearly, his mind was elsewhere, as he set the textbook down again and sighed, glancing once more at the closed door in front of them beyond which lay hormones.

"Do you know what's wrong with them?"

"Well, Sara's not due for another two weeks," she overshared, "but I can't speak for the librarian. Either way, I doubt it's hormones."

She caught Ricky wrinkle his nose out of the corner of her eye and had to smile to herself. Boys could be so prudish about things sometimes. If they knew what girls like her had to endure day after day, they'd count themselves lucky. And maybe stop with all that misogynistic nonsense.

"I think last week might be getting to him," he sighed. She understood what he meant; she had been worried the same – for all of them. Sara had hardly joked about getting shot – very unlike her – Ricky was saying nothing about shooting her, and Mark's homelessness loomed over them like an unresolved issue. She wished the three of them would just be a little more open and talk about how they were feeling. But, and she could see this very clearly, they all shared similar traits in that way, carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders alone.

Stupidly, not even realising none of them was alone.

"He still not talking?" she asked gently. He shook his head, not taking the hint beneath her voice. Sure, *he* was the one who needed to talk about it.

"I just don't get it," he sighed again, "this is a case like any other."

"You're not that naïve, are you?" she asked him, more suddenly and abruptly than she'd intended. He frowned at her.

"Did you honestly just ask me that?"

She shook her head. *Sometimes*, she thought to herself, did none of them realise they were hardly old enough to claim they had all the answers? Sure, they'd been through more than most people their age, but trauma was not exactly something anyone had a handle on. It just... was. Even she knew that, even if she was fully aware of how privileged her life had been so far.

"Abuse isn't exactly a safe topic, Ricky," she gently reminded him, "It divides all people, great and small. Pushes buttons sometimes we don't know we have – and leads people to talk about things about which they know very little. Because no two situations are alike."

"How come it doesn't seem to bother you?" he asked her. At first, she wondered if he was trying to push her buttons, but she sensed the earnestness beneath his voice, so she answered honestly.

"I don't claim to know much about it," she answered, "I guess I'm incredibly lucky that way. I feel... empathy for the victims, but I don't claim to understand how Betty was feeling or think I know what she should have done. But in the end, I have to remind myself that Gary has also become a victim in all of this. Violence begets violence and all that. So I suppose, yeah, trying to figure this out in the end, I think that's all that matters."

He nodded slowly as she spoke, and she could see he was thinking – even if he didn't fully agree with her. He didn't have to, which she hoped he understood was the point. Before they could continue, though, she thought that part of their conversation was over, the doors swung open and Sara swept back into the room with a newspaper in her hand and a triumphant look on her face.

"My theory has been lent credence," she declared, holding up what looked like a copy of the *Calendar Free Press*. "Thanks to a *real* library, I've searched backwards in time for the past ten years, no cases matching this criteria."

Amy chose not to ask how Sara had searched the entire newspaper archive at Calendar's public library, which, checking her watch, had also closed half an hour earlier, as Sara thought a microfilm was something a double-oh agent would search for. So she didn't ask.

"So Betty is looking more like a suspect?" Ricky offered.

"Yeah," she agreed as she realised the target of her previous argument wasn't there, and she began to walk towards the table. She jutted her head towards the closed office door, "You tell him, I might just gloat."

She sat down opposite him, watching her two friends with a look that was at least calmer. Maybe it was feeling vindicated, or simply having taken a walk in the cold air, but at least it meant he wouldn't have to take another ibuprofen.

"So what?" Ricky wondered out loud, "We're thinking she wore rubber gloves and held him down while she set fire to him?"

"I reckon she knew he'd do it again sooner or later," Sara offered, "So she put a trap in place for him."

"I'm not an expert, but I don't think anyone thinks it's gonna happen again," Ricky suggested.

"The rubber hand thing is out," she supplied, with a sheepish look to her friend. "There's definitely ridge detail in this handprint, which means whoever did the burning – they weren't wearing gloves."

"And the report on Betty doesn't mention burns to the hands," Sara finished, slumping back into the chair with some of her triumph evaporating. "So what the hell could do something like this?"

"Well, for one, a pyrokinetic."

The voice belonged to Mark as the three of them turned to look and saw the office door wide open. Like old faithful, Mark had appeared – clearly having overheard their entire conversation – with a thick leather-bound tome in one hand. Seriously, did every book he owned come in leather, or did he re-skin them himself or something?

"That's like a stage effects guy?" Ricky wondered.

"Not a pyrotechnic," Mark corrected him gently as he moved closer to the table, "A pyrokinetic. A person who can use their mind to control and conduct fire. They've been documented throughout history, usually thought to be magicians and fakes."

"You think we have a genuine one on our hands?" she asked, feeling a little brighter now he'd returned to them. It felt right somehow, like they were on their way to becoming more complete again.

"It's a definite possibility," he admitted. "There are countless demons with the power to burn people alive, but none of them leave behind human handprints. So it's my best... rather well-educated... guess."

"How do we stop them?" Ricky asked the practical question.

"Well, you can't fight fire with fire."

They lapsed into a moment of uncomfortable silence, which, to her credit, Sara was the first to break.

"If Betty had any history of this pyrokinesis, we'd know, wouldn't we?" Sara offered, "She'd be setting fires all over the place."

"I already checked, there's no unusual fire or arson reports connected to her," she confirmed, "Not all the way back to childhood."

"What about Mike Patterson?"

"What about him?"

"Well, he was friends with Betty and definitely didn't like Gary," Sara explained, "Perhaps he was standing up for her, or something."

Grateful to have a possible way forward, Amy dutifully went back to her laptop and began to run the same search. Maybe Sara's second theory would pan out a little better than the first. The other three sat or stood awkwardly around her in silence as she did, and she hoped that one of them would break the silence again.

Sara wouldn't meet his gaze, but she did glance over at Ricky and, after a moment, admit quietly,

"Okay, I might have been wrong... "

"As might I, Sara," Mark sighed, "We'll have to wait and see."

Amy hoped the lead would turn out to be promising, even though she didn't like to consider anyone doing what had happened to Gary. Mainly because a darker thought lurked beneath her veneer of calm. If neither Betty nor Mike was responsible for killing Gary, then who else could have the motive? And if there was no motive against Gary, what if... what if this was only the start?

* * *

Shit, shit, shit

She burst through the metal door and into the alleyway. The sudden, dizzying switch from a smoke-filled din to the cool, empty night air was like plunging into a pool. But it didn't stop the urges; they were coming, and she was going to have to do it.

Wasn't this shit meant to happen in the morning?

Janice managed to reach the dumpster, the bags piled up beside it reeking of rotten food, and she finally let loose. Acrid, terrible bile filled her throat as she emptied her dinner all over the black plastic bags.

Which just made it worse.

Standing, she steadied herself against the metal of the dumpster as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. It was disgusting, but it was all she had.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Dale shouted behind her, the club door banging shut once more. It hit like a shotgun and she doubled over again. This time, with no more food left, it was only gastric juices. Her body strained as if trying to force more out. God, she hated throwing up.

"Go back inside," she snapped at him, unthinking, as she stood back up. She spat, a thick wad of yellowish spit that landed hard amongst the rubble.

"What did you say?" he asked, incredulous. She heard the drunken waver in his voice, the register growing higher. She knew what that meant. She'd been scoffing virgin Cokes all night while pretending it wasn't. He'd have thought her as pissed as he was. And it always ended like this, didn't it?

But it was too much now. Too fucking much.

She looked over at him, the sorry excuse of a man she married, and glared. She hated his face, hated what he'd done to her – and what he'd left behind now. Hated him for his stupid, unshaven face, his piggy little drunk eyes, and that shitty tracksuit.

"I'm throwing the fuck up, leave me alone," she told him, but the way her stomach began to settle once more made her think she was done. For now.

He looked momentarily stunned, like a boy puzzled when faced with something he doesn't understand. And of course, he didn't understand her – because this wasn't their script. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. This wasn't what Janice had given him.

"You don't talk to me like that," he warned her, flicking a fat, dirty finger in her face. Probably been scratching himself in his little boy places with it. Hey, who knew, she could probably throw up again right now. "Clean yourself up and get back inside."

He started to turn half-way as if to return inside the club. He didn't care why she was vomiting, and to his credit, they'd had many drunken nights together, so it wasn't a surprise. But he was mistaken this time. Something had shifted between them, and she was tense and annoyed. It could have been left there; she could have been spared.

But sometimes a line is crossed that cannot be uncrossed. And sometimes it was done willingly.

"Go fuck yourself," she snapped at him.

He thumped her. A full punch. Not some weak slap, nor a hesitant sudden act he would pretend to be surprised at afterwards. That wasn't Dale's style. And if she hadn't been in the way, still swooning from the sudden blood rush of the vomiting, she'd have given him it right back. Maybe add some extra scratches to that face that haunted their marriage.

"Bitch!" he yelled as she fell to the floor. The coppery taste of blood mingled with the acidic, vile taste in her mouth as she struggled to think.

"What are you going to do?" she screamed at him, "Beat the shit out of me right here?"

Of course he was.

"Damn fucking right I am."

He went to go for her again, a scuffed and shoddy trainer lifted to give her a kick. But before he could, she felt it rise in her throat again and spun around to unload the latest offering to the rubbish bag gods. This time, blood mixed with bile, and she felt as though her entire stomach was about to come up with it. Oh God, it was disgusting. It smelled horrible. This whole place was...

Suddenly, she was alight. The world around her was illuminated by a sudden orange glow. The roaring of an ignition, a burst of light, and a flash of heat behind her. She screamed, feeling as if she was on fire, but as she turned around, all fight had vanished from her, replaced by fear. With some relief, she realised she wasn't.

But her husband, the man who had shown up two hours late to the town hall right after her first pregnancy – even then doomed to fail – was now a burning wick, screaming and thrashing in the alleyway.

Her mind drifted in that moment, a temporary madness that overtook her, so we instead follow Dale. Back into the club as he ran screaming for help, every nerve ending sharply awakened to the pain they endured. He ran for assistance, but each step brought only fire, only agony.

People didn't help; they screamed, ran, and parted before him like a sea, unable to drown him. Smoke filled the club as his fire spread. He couldn't see; everything was fire, flame, and darkness. All was movement, screams, and pain.

By the time the body that once belonged to Dale landed on the ground in the middle of the club, the building had taken its flame from him like the Olympic torch. The pain, the panic, and the screaming he ignited burned bright even as his died out.

And all was chaos.

Act III

Two boys arrived at the crime scene, each driven by different motives. Each possessed a different understanding. Yet both would encounter something that would change them. Ricky had heard about the fire on the radio, where people were advised to stay away from the area. Naturally, he would have obeyed – he wasn't a police officer or a firefighter, after all. What could he do?

But of course, the mention of a fire made him realise he had to investigate. They had agreed to return to the investigation in the morning, with Sara, Amy, and Ricky heading home to bed. He had offered for Mark to take their sofa – they'd find an excuse for his older brother – but Mark politely declined. And then Ricky had heard the radio, while convincing himself he should turn it off and sleep.

The fire was contained, and so far only one person had died. But one was enough, more than enough. So he put his coat back on and headed out into the night.

The streets were quiet as he slipped through the ginnels and alleyways, heading down to the seedy borderland between the tidy and the less tidy parts of town. He heard and smelled it well before he arrived. The flashing lights of multiple emergency vehicles, the controlled chaos of the scene.

Busy for a Wednesday night.

Trying to appear casual, he lingered in the shadows along one of the side streets leading to the club's car park. Wearing black on black helped, and no one seemed to notice him. Several ambulances were parked across multiple bays at the far end, away from the nearby single-storey building which was still billowing with smoke and flames. It was difficult to hear over the roar of the hoses, but he was far enough away to barely make out the shouts of the firefighters at work.

The ambulance closest to him was open on one side and at the rear. He sidled up beside it, catching sight out of the corner of his eye of an older woman, perhaps in her thirties, with a mask

pulled down around her face. She did not seem to be covered in smoke, and he was about to move on when he heard the police officer with her speak.

"He, uh, well he was drunk..." she said, sounding remarkably sober for someone at Clarus on a Wednesday night. Well, now Thursday, he supposed.

"Is that how you got that bruise?" the officer asked her, scepticism in his voice. He heard the woman sigh from where he was, ducking a little further out of sight as his intuition told him he needed to stay.

"Yeah, sometimes he gets angry when he drinks, but it's nothing..." He heard the desperate plea in her voice, shaken by events so horrific. He'd heard that in a voice before. Trauma recognises trauma, after all. She sighed, a deep and bone-weary sigh, as she admitted to the officer with the notepad, "Yes, the bastard was abusive."

His eyes widened, he recognised the significance, how couldn't he?

"But either way... he's still the father of my baby," she moaned, "Or was..."

"You're pregnant?" the officer asked, as if he was enquiring about the weather.

"Yeah," she muttered softly, "He never even knew." Ricky couldn't even process. His head was thundering with it already, but then she continued – because she didn't even know he was there. "But then... all I know is... he suddenly burst into flames. Something... I don't know what... something killed the father of my child." He sensed the bitterness in her voice, the resentment, the anger. "I want them stopped."

He stepped away as the disinterested officer made her go over her movements throughout the day, and Ricky sensed he had found what he needed to know. As he stepped away from the ambulance and started back towards the darkness, he nearly crossed paths with the other boy to come to the scene that night.

Luke, however, was filled with confusion, horror, and who knew what else. He had been sleeping properly and dreamlessly when the call had come. He searched relentlessly through the

scene in front of him, horrible scenarios playing out in his mind. Emergency contact. Not her dad, not her stepmother. Him.

But why was she even there?

"I don't need to be in this damn thing," he heard a familiar voice snap from one of the further ambulances. He veered to the left, away from the flames of the club, as another officer glared at him and was about to ask what he was doing. Then a drunken woman threw up next to him, and Luke was free to carry on his way unimpeded.

"We need to check you out, Miss Summers," a patient voice returned as Luke rounded the back of the ambulance and saw Sam, dressed to the nines in her little red number, seated on the gurney and looking incredibly uncomfortable with the whole situation. The paramedic next to her, a portly but kindly-looking woman in her thirties, was patiently trying to keep her relaxed in her seat. "You may be suffering from smoke inhalation."

"I'm not..." Sam started to snap at her, but her body betrayed her at that moment. She began to cough violently. It sounded like she was hacking up her lungs, and Luke's face drained. He didn't care about the confusion or why she was there in the first place; he just needed to know she was going to be okay. His world was on that gurney.

"Sam, I'm here!" he called out, rushing into the back of the ambulance up the ramp. The paramedic initially looked surprised but quickly regained composure as she tried to pass him the small face mask.

"Who the hell called you?" Sam snapped at him, her face contorted into a mask of surprise and indignation rather than warmth and relief.

"Mr Cross here is your emergency contact," the paramedic, the voice now more recognisable to him as the one on the other end of the phone, "It's on the card in your purse."

Yeah, the one she'd clearly forgotten about by the look on her face.

"Oh, there better still be money in there you..."

"Sam, what are you doing here?" he interrupted, sternly. Now he could see her, now he knew she was alive, even if she was in the back of an ambulance; he felt some of the confusion harden into something else. "You were meant to be staying over at your nans."

"Maybe not the best time, Luke," she scalded him. He couldn't believe it. She had the cheek to say that to him?

"Sam?!"

"Can someone get him out of here, please?" Sam snapped at the paramedic beside her. Agitated, she tried to get off the gurney again, while adding, "And don't ever go in my bloody purse again."

"Sam!"

She was ignoring him now, plain and simple. His mind spun with confusion about what was really happening, as the kindly paramedic from before took a moment to gently guide him back down the ramp and into the car park. She explained that she hadn't realised he was so young when she'd spoken to him, assuming he was a close relative. He said he was her boyfriend, while her partner began to pack up the back and Sam refused to meet his gaze.

She told him that when she was calmer, in the morning, he should come to see her at the hospital so they could talk. However, she also needed Miss Summers' parents' details. Luke provided them. All very polite and such.

But once it was over, and the ambulance was pulling away into the early hours towards the hospital, Luke didn't know what more he could do. He stood there, a rock among the chaos, against which confusion and hurt continued to crash. And when he was moved aside, he didn't protest.

He just didn't know what else to do.

* * *

Sara hadn't slept much the night before, even before waking to the text about the club fire. I mean, she wasn't surprised at first; she'd long suspected that one bad WKD could turn the place into a tinderbox – but Ricky's follow-up message, saying it was related, sent a chill through her. During some of her tossing and turning, running through thoughts she didn't want to face, she made a decision.

She woke up earlier than usual, much to her mother's surprise, and told her she had an errand to run before school. Her mum, about to head out for work, offered to drop her off. She accepted the offer, which is how, at seven o'clock on that Thursday morning, Sara found herself standing in the hallway of B Ward, on the second floor of Calendar Memorial Hospital – a building she was beginning to know all too well over the past few weeks.

"Hey," she waved slightly as she stood in the doorway of the room. Betty wasn't looking at her at first, instead staring out of the window, lying there in the hospital bed of her private room. Fancy, to have herself a room by her lonesome. Perhaps on some level, people felt sorry for her.

When she turned at the sound of Sara's voice, she didn't look much like the monster, and Sara felt a pang of shame for thinking her capable of murder. Sure, she knew never to judge people by their looks, but Betty just didn't fit the murderous type. Even if the ageing bruises on her face, the swollen lip, and her bloodshot eyes showed how much pain she'd endured.

And she knew they were only the freshest bruises.

"Sara, what are you doing here?"

She was surprised she remembered her. They hadn't been the closest of acquaintances, after all. She had lied to Mike about knowing her from Textiles, but they had shared Year 9 Food Tech under Miss Fiore's guidance.

"Well, I bribed one of the nurses to let me in," she joked, as she laid the flowers in her hands on Betty's side table. Her smile was warm, brief, and perfunctory. "These are from me and some of the girls from school."

The flowers, which had been bought solely by her, were only a pretext, as well Betty probably knew. But she thanked her nonetheless, and indicated for her to take a seat in a large green-upholstered visitor's chair by her bed.

Honestly, Sara didn't know how long she could bear being in such a room. Hospital rooms unsettled her at the best of times, partly due to the sterile, cold atmosphere. And those sickly green eggshell walls – they definitely needed a better interior decorator.

"So is the jelly as bad as I remember?" she asked, lightly, unsure of how to continue any kind of conversation.

"You even get roast chicken flavour now," Betty replied, and honestly Sara wasn't sure if she was joking. "They have menus and everything."

"Sounds fun."

"It's not."

She didn't know what else to say, so she finally decided to go to it. To make some kind of offer.

"You know, Betty, if you wanna talk... " she tried to begin, but the girl was already several steps ahead of her.

"I know what everyone thinks."

She spoke simply and clearly, her eyes looking past Sara once more and out of the window. Outside, the grey sky was beginning to lighten into a dull November morning. There was the threat of rain, but only a small amount.

"You do?" she swallowed thickly.

"They think that I killed Gary because..." Betty began, but her voice betrayed her. She swallowed hard and tried again, stumbling as if walking on legs that had already gone to sleep.

"Because..."

"He was hitting you?" Sara finished quietly.

"Please don't judge him," Betty begged her. Her voice was pleading, and Sara felt something different grow in her chest.

"I *won't*, if you *will*."

"I loved him, Sara," Betty frowned at her. "What he did, he did because he loved me so much...and he just couldn't handle that. And now that he's gone, I grieve for him."

Sara couldn't believe what she was hearing; her mind reeled with everything she'd said. How could she, after all of that? Surely...

"But what he did to you..." she began, but Betty cut her off.

"You don't know, Sara," she told her, her tone firm but with a touch of condescension. "I take it you've never been in love?"

"I didn't know love and pain had to go hand in hand," Sara returned, but her tone felt clipped, unnatural.

"Yeah, well, sometimes they do," Betty answered. She shifted back in her bed, turning her bruised and swollen face once more away from her, as she finished, firmly, "I'd... I'd like to be alone now."

Her thoughts whirling, confused, and pained, Sara reluctantly stood and walked towards the door. As she left, she turned once more to glance at the girl she now realised she still barely understood. She wasn't actually looking; her focus was on some other world. A different world Sara thought she knew, but now understood she never truly could.

* * *

The tinny radio on the counter delivered the news that none of them wanted to hear.

"More news on the tragic fire, cause still unknown, that swept through the Clarus nightclub last night," the announcer explained. It was the top of the hour, the ten minutes of local news that sometimes seemed remarkably banal (Mark remembered fondly their ten-minute news story about a

prize-winning cucumber last May), but which now was incredibly bleak. "Apparently, the damage done to the building is minimal at best, but three people are confirmed dead and at least twenty more are being treated for smoke inhalation at Memorial Hospital. We'll continue to update..."

"Oh God," Amy whispered softly from beside him. Like him, she was hearing the full details for the first time, as neither Ricky nor Sara had joined them yet that morning. He stood, crossed the distance to the counter, and switched off the dial as Ricky arrived.

"The kill count is up," Mark sighed.

"Three people," Amy repeated.

"And I think two of them are collateral," Ricky answered. Mark closed his eyes, unable to express himself – and the underlying relief which was knotted up with his guilt. His friend joined him as he continued, "I think the main target was the guy out back. Something set him on fire, and when he ran back into the club trying to get help... well... I suppose you guys have heard the rest."

"Any similarities besides pyrotechnics?" Amy asked him.

It was then he uttered the words Mark had been dreading, yet also hoping for at the same time. A kind of cruel vindication of everything he had feared to be true and now believably a pattern that extended beyond its beginning.

"Just before he died, the victim was beating the crap out of his girlfriend," he told him.

Shit, Mark thought to himself. Why did it feel so wrong? They dealt with monsters all the time, creatures that happily would send the whole world to hell and feast on their bones. And most of them had yet to take their GCSEs. Then why, somehow, was this so much harder to bear? The realisation that sometimes humans are nasty to each other, especially to those they love most of all.

Why did it feel more real?

"On the plus side, this clears Betty," Amy said the only bright part aloud. Of course it would be her to say it, and she was absolutely right. He just could not quite articulate the relief it made him feel. Or the horror beneath it.

"We have our MO," he deduced, "Whoever is doing this is going after abusive partners."

"Not just any partners," Ricky corrected him, "Guys."

"Two points don't make a line."

"Our killer is female, I'm telling you," Ricky insisted. "I don't know how she has these gifts, but it feels too much like vengeance. Like... some kind of warped sense of justice."

"I don't exactly know how warped it is," he mused. Not the thing to say; he got shot a dirty look from Ricky for that one. Of course, he did; he forgot how easy it was to think in black and white terms for some. The good people, particularly.

"Look, guys, we'll know more when I finish running the print," Amy pointed out, indicating towards the laptop she'd resumed working on the moment she'd arrived at the library that morning with a bacon sarnie.

"How's it coming?" Ricky asked, moving over to the table and seeming relieved to have something else to think about.

"I'm searching the database now, it's all automatic," she explained to them both, "Could be five minutes, could be five hours, I don't know. Just don't touch the laptop." She began to pack up her things, as Ricky sat down in Mark's now vacant seat. He frowned at her.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"I've had a tutor session with Luke scheduled for before class this morning," she explained, "Tutoring and all, y'know how it is. Well, no, neither of you do – but you can imagine."

"I think this case is a little more urgent..." he gently urged, but she shook her head at both of them.

"If I don't show, he's going to get suspicious," she pointed out. "We don't need to draw more attention to ourselves with everyone wondering why I'm suddenly hanging around you two so much. A girl can get a reputation. Like Sara's." She offered a thin smile at her own small joke before directing her gaze back to the laptop. "Besides, just call me when the computer beeps. It means it's found a match. And no touching it in the meantime."

Mark, who had no desire whatsoever to go anywhere near the infernal box, simply nodded his agreement. With that, she slung her bag over her shoulder and headed for the door – ready to return to the real world where life still carried on. Inside the Library, normally his sanctuary and his home, things remained oppressive and still – Ricky lost in his own thoughts.

With a sigh, he made both of them a cup of coffee and settled into the quiet with him to wait for a new direction.

It would not be long.

* * *

Amy weaved her way through the light early-morning traffic of the school corridors, her mind burdened with many thoughts. Emotions, all of them, were heightened, and she could sense the tension continued to simmer beneath the surface of others – but also felt somewhat helpless about what she could do. It wasn't just the case, which was horrifying and laden with landmines as it was, but also the undercurrent of everything they were bringing to the table.

If there were three different people with enough trauma between them to be affected by their current case – it was those three – and she was just doing her bit to keep them together. She only wished they could step back and see it for themselves – they were friends for a reason, after all.

As she reached the bank of lockers near the science block, she caught sight of Luke – the shock of blonde hair remarkably untidy even for his usual casual look. When she caught up to him, a group of Year 8s moving away, bustling over some Pokémon cards, she was a little shocked.

He wasn't himself, that much was clear. His hair was the least of it. His eyes were bloodshot, and although he was dressed in his school uniform, the flap of his shirt was untucked in a way that suggested he'd hurriedly got ready. And not just in the way that normal teenage boys did – he'd never been like that – but in a distracted manner, as if he was not quite himself.

Was trauma contagious or something?

"Hey, Luke, are you alright?" she asked, quietly and kindly.

He turned to her, his eyes finally registering her presence. It wasn't just tiredness, she could see, the way his eyes puffed slightly – he'd been crying. A day for another thing she never thought she'd see.

"Sorry, Amy, um, I'm kinda..." he tried to begin, but his tired voice sounded like he didn't know where he was going with the sentence.

"Did you forget about our catch-up?"

"Oh, God, I did. Sorry... I'm..."

"Is everything alright?"

Why did that always sound like such a stupid question? It was perfectly reasonable, even if everything wasn't alright, you weren't exactly going to ask 'hey, what's up, d-bag?'. She wasn't as blunt as Sara, after all.

"No..." he answered, taking a moment to fiddle with the strap of his bag. Something, anything to do in his restless figetyness. "You heard about the fire?"

She steeled herself for whatever news he was about to say. Oh God, please don't say... no, he wouldn't be here if that was the case. But something had to have.

"Sure."

"Sam was there," he told her bluntly, "She wasn't meant to be, but she was. She's in the hospital, being treated for smoke."

She couldn't express the relief she felt. As much as Sam was sometimes a pain to her, she didn't wish her harm. Occasionally, a mild case of dermatitis, but never genuine scars. Nor would she wish ill on her friend, as Luke now was to her.

"Hey, no, you go, we can meet up another time to revise," she told him, giving him a reassuring hand on the arm.

"Thanks."

He shut his locker door more forcefully than he likely intended but struggled with the key. She sensed his tension building and his frustration, so gently plucked the key from his hand and quickly dealt with it for him. He looked at her with genuine gratitude as she paused to ask him something else.

"Is everything okay besides that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you've been a little jumpy for a while now. Just wanted to check you were okay."

"I, uh, haven't been sleeping well," he explained, shrugging it off in a much more typical boy way she was used to. "Bad dreams and stuff." He scoffed, sniffing a little, "Bout fire, if you can believe it."

He laughed weakly and a little nervously, while Amy tried to keep her face straight and not show the confusion she felt.

"Sure."

* * *

"False alarm," Amy declared as she returned to the library. Ricky looked up at her, feeling a little better now he'd had a coffee and a sit down. He didn't realise how tired he was – running on fumes had begun to feel more like standard operating level – until he'd had a coffee and a bacon bap.

"Ah, and I thought you just had enough of us," he joked. It wasn't much, but it was enough to earn a good-natured roll of her eyes and a smile. He offered the final breakfast sandwich, now mostly cold, to Mark, who shook his head.

Amy, to her credit, began unpacking her bag once more and returning to the laptop, ready to carry on with the day's work. He had to admire how dedicated she was; she could have easily taken an hour for herself – and given the emotional tension that had been littering the place recently, he wouldn't have blamed her.

"Hey, Mark, what do you know about prophetic dreams?" she asked.

"Seeing the future while you're sleeping?" Mark asked her, peering over the top of his book with a look that Ricky thought unfairly sceptical. Especially coming from someone who'd just been describing humans who could control fire to them the night before.

"That's the general idea," she agreed.

"Well, it's nonsense for the most part," Mark shrugged off, "What have you predicted?"

"Oh, no, I just overheard someone talking about a dream they had," she replied quickly, a little too quickly in Ricky's opinion. She shifted slightly in her seat as she added, "About fire... or something like that. Before all this started happening. Wonder if it was connected."

"Well, fire in and of itself isn't an uncommon dream subject," Mark mused, although he could see a look of thoughtfulness come over his face. "But I suppose the person could be sensitive."

"Huh?" Ricky asked, momentarily confused.

"Sensitives," Mark reiterated. "Some people do have a natural sensitivity to the...well, supernatural around us. They don't necessarily know anything about them, but are more susceptible to empathic intuitions or often very symbolic, abstract dreams, around the same time as some supernatural presences."

"Do they know what's going on?" Amy asked.

"No, and a lot of the time they don't need to," Mark assured her. "Everyone has weird dreams from time to time; they usually chalk it up to that. Why so interested?"

"Dunno," Amy shrugged, turning her face back to her laptop with that little redness to the edges of her cheeks she sometimes got. Ricky was only just getting to know her super-well, and he was fairly certain that was Amy's glimpse of subterfuge. He'd remember to pry a little later, "Thought it would be cool to know a psychic."

"They're not psychic," Mark responded, a little condescendingly, "Amy, they're just a little more... awake."

With the topic finished for now, they prepared to go back to work, but it was Sara's entrance that pulled them out of their thoughts. Ricky was pleased; he would have to start his science homework otherwise, and he couldn't stand the new teacher.

"We need to find this guy," she declared.

"Um, kinda obvious, working on it," he pointed out.

She stopped where she was and shook her head, agitated and on the point of pacing again. He began to feel more emotional whiplash coming.

"No, we need to find them now, and we need to help them."

"You know you don't mean that," he snapped more harshly than he intended, a sudden burst of anger.

"Oh yeah, I do," she challenged, "These mother-fuckers need stopping. They're... they're twisting people's bloody minds."

"What happened?" Amy pushed her, her tone quiet and pausing quietly at her computer for a second.

"I went to see Betty," Sara replied, "And she *loves* the bastard. He used her as a punching bag, and now she's grieving him. Grieving!" She held out her hands, expectantly, seeking people to join her in her outrage. "So we help them, or we leave them to do what they need to do."

"Leave them alone?" he reiterated, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Let them go on killing people."

"Killing scum," she spat.

"And the two other people who died in that club?" he challenged her, standing to face her. "The twenty who are in the hospital? Did they deserve it as well?"

"That was..."

"No, no rationalisations," he cut her off, feeling his blood boiling again. "Whoever's doing this is just killing because they like it. Does the kid who's never gonna know his father deserve it? Just who does? And who decides?"

"That's not..."

"It's not us," he snapped at her, "We don't decide who lives and who dies. But this thing is deciding it for us. So they need to be stopped."

Sara glared up at him for a moment, her face a mixture of anger, hurt, defiance, sarcasm, and everything else swirling in her expression. He didn't understand what was happening with her, but he was growing increasingly tired of her self-righteous volatility. If she was genuinely suggesting they help a murderer, he wasn't sure if this was the girl he'd known since they were born.

"Full charge, right?" she whispered to him, her voice dripping with venom. "Man gonna put the woman in her place?"

With that, she turned and walked out, her words failing her. Filled with a sort of impotent frustration, Ricky kicked the nearest thing to him, which happened to be his chair. Mark raised an eyebrow at him, and after a moment, with his hands on his hips, he sighed and gave him an apologetic look.

He got the point. Sometimes, violence felt easy.

And part of him worried Sara had a point.

* * *

Lunchtime came, and finally he was allowed out. He was practically humming with it by that point; his skin felt like it was crawling on his skin. Luke just wanted to be free from lessons and able to head over to the hospital. To see her, to talk to her, to figure out what the hell was going on. More lies, more deceit, more untruth – whatever you wanted to call it.

And he had given her space. He had given her time. She said she was going to her grandmother's, and he had believed her. He had not kept texting her; he let her simply enjoy her time with her family. By controlling himself, his own behaviour, and the words at the back of his mind

that whispered he was being lied to once again, that he couldn't trust her, that she was doing something.

He'd done everything to improve himself, and she wasn't accepting that. She was treating him like some kind of... what, some sort of dope?

And he'd *believed* her.

He had to do everything he could to suppress it. To keep it down. To try to stay calm and rational and let her come to him. Tackling it head-on would only provoke her and then they would just devolve into an argument. He took a walk around the block and avoided caffeine. He did everything he thought he needed to do.

And then he'd gone to the hospital.

By the time he reached the C Ward, where inpatients from the night before were already being discharged, she was already a step ahead of him. She'd changed back into her dress, her parents were away in Bali and unable to pick her up or bring her a change of clothes – and since he'd been unable to contact her – he'd brought some in a bag.

She halted abruptly when she saw him, purse tucked under her arm and her face cleaner and less streaked with soot than he last remembered. She looked at him cautiously as they stood in the corridor outside the ward, with people passing behind them.

"Hey," he greeted. She said nothing. "I, uh, brought you some clothes."

"I've been released," she told him, her voice still gravelly, her eyes still wary, "I don't want to see you right now."

"Hey, I'm not asking questions," he tried to reassure her, bridging the gap between them. She didn't move, her arms still folded, her body language unwelcoming. "I'm just here to see you. And I suppose I can walk you home."

"Leave me alone," she snapped at him.

He felt the anger rise in him again, along with the helplessness. He was trying to reach out, offering an olive branch, and she was not only snatching it away but hitting him with it. And she was the one lying. She was the one treating him like an idiot. What the hell else did she want?

"What's going on?" he asked her, his tone hardening. She glared at him, but said nothing. So it was like that, was it? "You're hiding something from me, and I want to know what it is."

"I don't have to tell you everything," she bristled.

"How about anything?" he snapped back. "I'm sick of this, Sam. For fuck's sake, every other day I find out some new lie you've told me. Do you want out of this relationship? Is that it? You want to be done."

"I want out of this bloody conversation," she told him, going to walk past him. He reached out, grabbing her by the elbow. He regretted it the moment he did.

"Don't walk off, Sam."

She shook his hand off; he let it go freely and glared at him. But she said nothing and walked off instead.

Luke stood there, alone once more, feeling as if his world was continuing to shatter around him. Piece by piece, shard by shard, everything fell apart.

What he didn't see, what neither of them did, was that he was not alone. Their back and forth, and especially the grabbing of her arm – as small and innocuous as they both had thought it was – had caught attention. A pair of eyes, which had stared at scenes all too similar a hundred times in the past, had seen and noticed them.

They saw a pattern. They saw a beginning.

They saw inevitability.

Act IV

Sara sat on the steps, gazing out at the world before her. The sun was dipping low on the horizon as the final lesson was drawing to a close. She couldn't face it, so she had skipped school and spent the time outside instead. It was cooler out here, in the autumnal air. There she could think, there she could spend some time with herself.

But she couldn't stop it.

The sound of screams, all too familiar to her. The ones that prompted 999 calls, pain, and the fear of whether everything would be alright. Sadness and confusion. They were her screams, her mother's screams, Betty's screams. They were the screams of every woman who had to know, who carried the burden of what people could do. And sometimes, what loved ones could do.

But something was mixed with those she couldn't believe. Other screams. Of pain, of hate, of rage. Of people. Men. Blackened bodies.

It was as if she could hear the screams of them all – and they rattled around in her head.

She didn't want to empathise with them. She didn't want to think of those monsters who could do what they did to the people they claimed they loved, the people they merely wanted to control, as human beings.

But her thoughts became stuck inside her head as she pondered. One thought overshadowed all others – what did they think? In the end, when their skin was burnt away and they had nothing left, did they think of regret? Did they reflect on their actions? Was there some kind of massive revelation that they had been perpetuating cycles of violence against women, continuing endlessly through the centuries?

No, she thought. They wouldn't have thought that. There was no lesson learned, no understanding gained. No big revelation.

There would have been pain. There would have been fear. Perhaps their last thought was for their mothers. Or for themselves. Maybe the fire simply stripped away everything that made them who they were, leaving behind only what they were at first.

Were they born monsters? Were they made?

And either way, did it make a difference? Did they deserve to die?

She didn't know, she didn't feel like she could ever know. She felt like the questions were too much for her. But she couldn't stop them, she couldn't hold them back. She looked up at the sky and wondered why such questions had to be asked in the first place. But the sky continued to be set aflame by the downing sun, and gave her none of the answers she sought.

* * *

Luke frowned as chaos reigned. He had to keep his mind focused on last period Chemistry, trying not to burn himself in the process. At the front, their cover teacher for the lesson, the new lady Miss Serif, was shouting orders about tidying up. And yet... in front of him was an idiot.

"Fire pretty," Julie Winters muttered as she stared down at the Bunsen burner's flickering yellow flame. He'd already tidied up most of the chemicals they'd been titrating (or whatever the hell they were supposed to do, Miss Serif had just lost her shit when Scott Feldman welded his thermometer to the side of his beaker), and all that was left was the Bunsen burner and the heatpad.

But Julie, as ever, the worst lab partner, was not helping. She was simply staring at the flame.

He frowned, then reached out and moved the Bunsen burner to the left. Her eyes tracked it, like a moth to a... wait, was that metaphor too on the nose? He moved it back, and her eyes continued with it.

Funny how it was to live inside the mind of a caveperson. He switched it off at the tap, and as if drawn out of hypnosis, she gave him a bright smile, picked up her bag, and wandered out of the classroom as the bell rang.

"Oh, yeah, it's okay, I'll clear up," he called after her. A part of him had to wonder if she was being all weird because she was one of Sam's closest friends. And he was only half-certain she wasn't playing dumb. He glanced around and saw, in the fading orange light of sunset, that the science classroom was nearly entirely deserted. Except for him and the new teacher, Miss Serif.

"Luke, would you give me a hand clearing the room, please?" she called out, clearly realising, like he did, that everyone who could make a quick escape and avoid responsibility had already gone. Reluctantly, he nodded, even though all he wanted to do after his un-cathartic argument with Sam that afternoon was to go home and lie on his bed. Listen to some music. Maybe some soul-crushingly depressing music.

Country. Or Spice Girls.

"Great, start putting the bunsens back in the cupboards, please."

He nodded and began to do so. Most people had thankfully at least turned off the gas taps but left the rubber hoses connected to the nozzles nonetheless. He worked his way around the room as he saw Serif pick up a cloth and start to wipe down the tables of flecks of debris that had somehow managed to spread everywhere.

He really ought to know what it was they were working with; Amy would surely be upset with him, but it was reaching the point where a C in Double Science was beyond him anyway. He might need to give up altogether and consider a bright future in the fast food industry.

"I saw you at the hospital at lunchtime," Miss Serif casually mentioned. "Is everything okay?"

He frowned. Aside from when she took the register at the start of the lesson, and the twice she had done so before during supervised study periods, she had never spoken more than his name back at him. The sudden shift in interest towards his personal wellbeing was unsettling. But then again, so was any time you had to interact with teachers.

Were they even human?

"Yeah...uh..." he fumbled for an answer, unsure how much he wanted to share with a virtual stranger. "Sam was in Clarus last night, I was taking her some clothes."

"Ah, right."

A thought came to him, and before he could think through whether it was a safe thing to ask a teacher or whether it would come across with typical Year 11 cheekiness, he asked,

"Why were you there?"

She didn't immediately scold him; instead, she seemed amused and raised an eyebrow.

"If I don't mind you asking?," she supplied.

"Right."

"I was there as well."

"Shouldn't you be resting?"

"Oh, I was close to the door, I was fine."

Alright, so he was definitely not going to inquire further about why a teacher was at a nightclub popular among nearly every underage kid in town on a work night – but again, that had more to do with the fact that teachers weren't real people, more like unlikely gremlins that existed outside the normal boundaries of time and space.

He had, in fact, been quite certain until he was twelve that teachers simply vanished when the lights went out in the High School – reappearing only with the janitor's round each morning. So instead, he nodded and moved towards the back row of benches.

"It looked like you were having quite the argument," she continued, "Is everything okay between you?"

"It's nothing," he shrugged, feeling more uneasy.

"I was young once too, y'know."

Of course she was, all teachers were 'people' too, he scoffed to himself. For a moment he made a mental note to tell Sam what a weirdo the new teacher was, until it hit him like a bullet as he remembered. It stabbed him like a knife, and he resolved to finish tidying quicker, picking up stool after stool and placing them upside down on the table tops for the cleaners.

"Are you always angry?" she asked.

He frowned and stopped what he was doing, turning to see Miss Serif was now looking at him, an unreadable – but not necessarily unfriendly – look on her face. She seemed curious, observing him the way they looked at dissection mice in Biology.

“What?”

“I saw you grab her,” she pushed further, “Do you have a problem with anger?”

“No, of course not,” he shot back, frowning. He heard her scoff.

“Right, that’s what they all say.”

His unease began to move into a tingle of something deeper.

Something like fear.

* * *

Ricky paced, his worry mounting as his fever rose. Sara had yet to return, Mark was busy with his books but muttering about pyrokinetics not being your typical powered beings, while Amy kept tapping at her computer. He sensed a clock ticking somewhere, at the back of his mind. Four people had already died, two innocent... but still, four was too many.

“Come on, Amy, you said it’d be done by now,” he insisted, but she looked at him with a patient expression – and he imagined he saw what Luke saw during their tutoring sessions.

“It’s not like searching on Google,” she reminded him, “We might be deep into the system now.” She cut him off before he could make a sarcastic comment, “No, not the Matrix either.”

“Any way we can speed it up?” he asked.

“Sure, fast forward time,” she replied. He shot her a look, which she returned effortlessly.

“Don’t give me that look, I’m working here.” The computer beeped once, and both Mark and Ricky turned their attention to her. She scowled at them, “That did not happen because of his impatience, I swear. Do not get a false positive.” She looked down at the screen, “But we are done, we have a match. 99% confidence intervals and everything.”

"Who's our handprint belong to?" he asked impatiently, but her eyes were already whizzing across the screen, taking in the information. After a moment, she spun the laptop around and both paused to peer at the screen.

The photo was black-and-white, not like a mug shot on the tellie, but similar. On a white background was a woman, somewhere in her thirties, with a shock of curly hair and a face that seemed weirdly familiar to him. Almost like... oh, shit, it was definitely younger, but it was her.

"That's my Chemistry teacher," he pointed out.

"Joanne Serif," Amy read out, "And yes, since September, she's been your Chemistry teacher."

"Why is she in the system?" Mark picked up, "Don't they do checks?"

"Well, she was never actually charged with anything," she explained, "Five years ago her husband died in a house fire. It was suspected arson, so she was arrested and run through the system, but when they investigated, they couldn't explain it, so they let her go. And you don't have to declare if you're not charged on a CRB, I don't think."

"And Miss Drake just loves paperwork," Mark added dryly. Ricky cursed, thinking that their headteacher could have hired a firebug just because she hated administration. "Is there anything else that fits the pattern?"

"A slough of 999 calls," Amy answered, turning the laptop back around and going through in more detail. "All over their ten-year marriage." Her eyes flicked back up to the two of them.

"Domestic violence calls."

"Oh God, now it all makes sense," Mark muttered beside him.

"I don't think sarcasm helps," he snapped.

"No, I mean it *actually* makes sense," Mark corrected him, "Some of the literature does refer to dormant psychic abilities being activated through, well, abusive situations."

Ricky frowned at both of them, confused, as Amy added helpfully,

"It's how Carrie got even at the Prom."

“So, she was abused by her husband and suddenly had power over fire?” he asked, confused, struggling to connect those two dots. “Why doesn’t every victim sprout fire from their hands?”

“I said it can trigger it, I did not say it was the cause,” Mark explained. “I’m willing to bet that the first time she realised she had this ability was the night he died. Probably an accident, one that burned down her house and her husband. And now it seems she’s been practising, enough to control it and kill people she sees as abusers.”

“She needs to be stopped.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

At this, none of them had an answer.

* * *

“I told you, I don’t have a problem with my anger,” Luke said firmly, moving slowly towards the furthest side of the bench between them. At the back of the room, she was between him and the door, and even though he thought he could perhaps take her, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to add assault on a teacher to his school record.

But still, not to sound like a kid, but she was starting it.

“That’s how it starts,” the supposed adult told him, moving in sync. “A grab here, maybe a slap there. Before you know it...” Her voice grew more bitter as her eyes misted, “... well, she just didn’t bring you your dinner fast enough.”

He decided to go for it. There were people in the building; he was a student and she was a teacher. This wasn’t supposed to be an uncomfortable social convention. He tried to move past her, but she was in his way, and her hand shot out, grabbing his arm tightly.

“Just a little grab like this,” she sneered.

Her hand felt hot against his skin. But then, it grew hotter and hotter. Her grip was like a vice as she looked him in the eyes, and suddenly the pressure and heat turned into pain. Clear, burning pain. He looked down, incredulous, as smoke started to pour from between her fingers and he heard the sound of his skin sizzling.

“And your whole life goes up in flames...” she whispered.

He shoved with his other hand, catching her momentarily off guard as she stumbled backwards. With no way to go but back, he shuffled around the end of the bench and started to run down the other side. He shouldn't have stopped to look at his arm, because when he did, he saw something that was impossible – the perfect imprint of a hand, where she had grabbed him, burned into his skin that was already reddening and blistering.

He stood perfectly still for a moment too long, and when he looked up, she was there. She was no longer the calm and sensible adult he'd known as a vague teacher-shaped figure. She moved like a liquid threat, fire flickering around either of her hands and a look of pure madness in her eye.

She thumped him in the face, and he felt the fist connect, a sudden scorch of flame following. The next thing he knew, he was hauled onto the bench beside them. He landed heavily, but even as she lunged at him again, he rolled and crashed onto the dusty linoleum floor. He tried to crawl away, but she was already behind him, advancing down the row with a slow, cold, serial killer-like determination.

“People like you make me sick,” she hissed at him.

He rolled onto his back, determined to face the bitch and saw her stalking slowly towards him. Her hands still burned as he cradled his injured arm to himself.

“You killed those people,” he realised suddenly, hit by an overwhelming sense of inevitability. The realisation came to him abruptly. The how? The why? They remained beyond his grasp, but it was plain that she had murdered them. And a far deeper truth... he was next.

“They killed themselves,” she sneered, “as have you...”

She bent down towards him, her flaming hand reaching out as he tried to scramble away. Before she could make contact, her hand was pulled back as she was dragged backwards, tackled by another figure dressed in a school uniform.

He scrambled to his feet as he saw his rescuer jump across from the other side of the table where he and Miss Serif had fallen. Ricky... bugger, what was his last name? Kent? The bloke who always hung around with Sara?

Things had gone from weird to weirder.

"Didn't your mum tell you not to play with matches?" Ricky quipped, his attention caught by Miss Serif getting to her own feet. She grinned, seeming to enjoy the moment.

"Funny," she told him, "I've heard better, but funny."

She went to him with the same sort of deadly bear hug she'd tried with Luke moments earlier, but Ricky ducked her more easily and quickly than Luke expected, kicking her in the stomach and pulling back to create some distance.

"You're a murderer, don't much care about your opinion."

"You're the one hitting a woman."

"Three dead, you gonna play that card?" Ricky asked her, pausing momentarily to give her a frown.

He leapt onto the table in one big jump and almost seemed to dance over her attempts to grab him, kicking her in the face with one of his shoes. Throughout the whole altercation, Luke kept backing himself up, more towards the door. He didn't understand what was happening, but he wasn't about to leave anyone alone with Miss Psycho.

"Let's find a better way to settle our differences," Ricky suggested, "You like jail?"

"You think what I'm doing is wrong?" she mocked.

"The only moral here is that you're killing people," he retorted, "Other than that, I don't really care."

"You will."

It was all a distraction he wanted to shout, noticing the way she was circling him, the way he was nearing the edge. She was about to make her move, Luke could see it before she even did. She reached out one way, feinting, then grabbed one of Ricky's ankles with her other hand. Just like him, he heard the sound of sizzling and the roar of pain as cloth and flesh burned instantly.

With his good arm, he grabbed one of the heat pads and slammed it against the back of her head – he was beyond not hitting a teacher anymore. It distracted her long enough, but instead of letting go, she pulled hard, and Ricky slammed onto his back on the desk, while she turned and kicked Luke in the stomach.

He doubled over, feeling all the breath and more than a bit of bile expelled from his body, and felt the bite of the nearby table on his back. She continued her attack on Ricky, dragging him off the desk and slamming onto the floor, standing over him with both of her hands flaming.

"You should all die!" she hissed, her eyes blazing with fury.

The look of shock on her face was almost comical when she was hit in the face with something wet. It clumped to her hair for a moment, her clothes, and when the smell hit him, he realised – it was some kind of accelerant. He turned towards the source to see Sara – of course, who else? – standing there with a bottle of lighter fluid in her hands and a look of fury on her face.

"Ricky! Get the bitch!"

Ricky jumped to his feet, pointing over at Luke.

"Sara, get him out of here!" he yelled at her. By this point, the accelerant had ignited the flames on Miss Serif's hands, and her clothes and hair also caught fire, turning her into a giant walking candle that shrieked and laughed, not in pain but with fury and psychotic humour.

He heard her cackling, even as Sara grabbed him by his good shoulder and they ran for the door. There, they turned and saw the grim tableau of the burning woman, laughing and laughing.

"You can't fight fire with fire!" she shrieked.

Ricky, who by now had jumped back onto the bench nearest the windows, stood beside the closest inbuilt gas tap.

"Watch me."

He kicked the top off it, the hiss of the escaping gas audible even to them. Then he turned and hurled himself directly at the window, as Sara grabbed Luke by his collar once more and threw them both into the corridor.

Behind them, what felt like the world exploded.

And through it all, he heard the laughing.

* * *

The sun had fully set as Luke sat under soft lamp light. In the library, a room he hadn't entered in months, he held his arm out across the table, resting on a small towel, while Sara sat opposite him, a first aid kit nearby. They had already washed the wound on his arm under cold water, then gently dried it, and now she was about to apply a sterile dressing and bandage. He didn't think to ask how she'd acquired the skills... because the answer had become clear.

"So... demons are real?" he reiterated for about the fifth time during their conversation. "Vampyrs are real? And you lot play Buffy the Vampire Slayer and kill them?" He had to say it out loud again, and again, because the idea seemed so unbelievably insane that he just had to. Otherwise, he would think they were taking the micky. Even with a bare handprint burnt into his forearm.

"I kill 'em," Ricky explained from nearby. He had one leg cocked up on the table, as Amy worked to wrap the bandage around it. He looked like he was used to slouching, but having seen him in action, it didn't seem to have slowed him down. "These guys help to find 'em."

"Hey, I offed Satana," Sara reminded him.

"And sometimes decide to play hero," Ricky agreed. A smile passed between the friends, as Luke sensed the weight of the history behind it. Some private joke.

"Then what was Serif?" he asked aloud, "Some kind of... fire demon?"

"Actually, she's just a human," Mark explained, returning through the double doors where outside he could hear the shouts of Miss Drake from a distance. Amy had reassured him that neither of them was on the camera footage – they'd had a remarkable "CCTV" blackout. He was going to ask when she'd mentioned it, but he figured, given what he knew about her, he didn't need to know how the sausage was made. "The years of abuse at the hands of her husband triggered in her a latent ability to control and conduct fire. Which she put to her advantage to get revenge on people she thought were abusers. Regardless of the circumstances."

And there was the fourth of their quartet, the Librarian. It seemed so obvious that once again, Luke didn't know if it was all just an episode of *punked*. But then, as Sara gently rested his arm back on the towel and it twinged with fresh pain, he reckoned it probably wasn't.

"One question remains, Luke," Sara began softly, "Why did she go after you?"

He felt shame burn his cheeks. After they'd outlined the patterns and their investigation – as part of explaining about the demons and all that – Luke had quite clearly identified the moment. She'd as much as confirmed it when she saw him.

"Sam told me she was at her nan's last night," he explained, "but she was actually at Clarus. I went to talk to her at the hospital, and when I confronted her, she walked away. I grabbed her arm, not hard, but I suppose hard enough to make Serif think it was a habit. Which it isn't."

"I suppose I don't see you as the abuser type," Sara said.

"They don't wear hats, Sara," Mark reminded her, quietly, his look dark. She caught it, but then Amy added,

"What made you come after her anyway? I thought you were on the opposite side of the fence."

"They were scum," Sara answered her, "But I suppose no one deserves to die that way. And no one has the right to play judge. It's all just more pain."

"So it's done?" Luke asked, "She's gone?"

"Not quite," Mark piped up from his spot near the counter, "I just spoke to one of the policemen out there – in between Drake's screams of paperwork – one of those investigating the fire. He says they found a woman inside, alive, with no burns—just smoke inhalation. She's being treated at the Memorial Hospital right now. Miss Serif."

The thought filled Luke with a dawning horror as he looked over at the guy.

"Then she's just going to keep doing it, right?" he asked, "When she gets out."

Amy shook her head as she finished Ricky's bandage and began to pack up her First Aid kit once more.

"The police may just find themselves getting a little email of her handprint, and Gary's chest," she explained, "Just to make sure."

"It's odd to put them behind bars instead of in the ground," Sara mused. "But fulfilling." She began to pack up her own kit as she indicated to his own bandage, "There, good as almost new. Just don't show anyone until you're healed. It'll raise questions."

Luke tested out the bandage; it was good – tight but not too tight. And apart from having to wear long-sleeved shirts for a week or two, it wouldn't massively change his life. He thanked her and looked around.

All of what they were doing sounded insane. But as he observed how they interacted, the way they looked at each other, and how they moved in formation, he could see how it made sense. Why they needed each other.

"So... now you know," Ricky concluded, placing his own foot back on the ground and rolling what was left of his pants leg back down. He leaned back in his seat once he was done and looked Luke in the eye. "What do you wanna do?"

It took a moment to think. A longer moment than he would have liked to admit.

"Look, Ricky, I appreciate what you guys did for me," he began, "I'd be toast otherwise." He shook his head, "But what you guys do, I can't do too. Maybe that makes me a coward, maybe it just

makes me a dick, I don't know. But I've got a lot to lose, I can't drag my family or Sam into this. I just can't."

He stood, waiting for recriminations or a look of disappointment. To his surprise, there was none; instead, a kind of understanding flickered in their eyes. Ricky was also looking at him with genuine respect.

"I guess we can all understand and respect that," he spoke for his group.

"But just because I won't join you, doesn't mean I'll say anything," he offered, "What you're doing is good. I can do that for you guys, at least."

He headed for the door, paused briefly to look back at the four of them, and with a smile wished them all he could, given the circumstances.

"Good luck, guys."

* * *

Sara packed away the remains of the First Aid Kit and returned it to its rightful place behind the counter, taking Amy's off her since she was done as well. She felt tired, as though she'd been awake for ten days rather than ten hours. Or whatever time it was, she'd lost track of things. By the time she came back around, Amy was helping Ricky to his feet.

"There we go, all right as rain," Amy smiled at him, "Much cooler than fire." With them stood, she looked around at the others, "Anyway, I have a fabulous dinner with my Aunt that I'm late for."

"Aye, and I have to be out on the streets tonight," Ricky agreed, taking a step. He winced, his knee wobbling a little, as Amy swooped in next to him to brace ever so slightly. "Okay, I guess it's gonna have to be a movie marathon. Ah, well, we all have our cross to bear." He glanced across at Amy next to him, "Perhaps a lovely lady can help me home?"

She nodded, smiled, and hooked her arm through his, the two of them making a gradually slow journey across the library to the doors together.

"See you tomorrow guys," Ricky called out to them, as Mark and Sara watched their progress. Mark's smile was small, sad, and before they left, he turned and headed into his office. Sara watched him, considering for a moment walking away. But she knew, something inside told her she had to, and so she walked over to the office door to find him already seated.

He looked up, almost as if he expected her to come.

"I guess I owe you an apology," she began.

"I suppose I do as well," he agreed.

"Look, I don't know why I got so mad," she began to explain, only to catch herself in her lie. "Or I guess I do, but..."

She couldn't believe she was about to do this, but it felt... well, it felt right somehow. She walked over to the sofa, sat down, and found herself level with Mark, who watched her with his sad and weary eyes.

"I've never told you about my family, have I?" she asked, and he gently shook his head.

"I guess not."

"Well, my mum, she's great," she began, "And Dave... my stepfather... he loves her a lot. They're really good together. But it wasn't always like that." She looked down, choosing a spot on the floor where her eyes could rest and the burning in them could be allowed to simmer. "When I was, um, three or four, and there... there always used to be yelling... and screaming. Things would be broken, and there'd be blood. And my mum's face, well... the things my... well, my birth dad..." She trailed off, the screams still vivid in her mind. "I used to think that's how everybody lived. But it turned out it wasn't."

She looked back up at him, and bless him, it was not pity he watched her with. It was a sorrowful sadness. Her eyes were blurry with tears, as were his own.

"One night, he came at her with a knife. She'd burnt his tea or some shit like that, I don't know. And she fought him. She stabbed him with the knife. I can still remember the smell of iron in the air. It was thick. And the police cars... I was five."

She wiped them away before they could fall, the back of her blazer dampened with them. One fell anyway.

"They, uh, found her not guilty," she continued, "It went down as self-defence, and she's happy now. But I suppose, I overreact."

"I knew."

His voice when it came was soft, but powerful. It cut through her confession, her moment of vulnerability, as she looked at him, confused.

"What?"

He wasn't looking at her anymore, his eyes focused instead on a spot on his desk. But really, he was staring well beyond it, off into some other unknown world. One where his own tears wanted to fall, but he wouldn't let them. His eyes flickered over to her. He saw the pain, and beneath it, the guilt.

"I saw the bruises on her," Mark explained, "Before Gary died. Two weeks ago. We're in A Level Psych together. I asked her and... she confessed. She made me promise not to tell anyone. So I didn't... that's why I didn't want to believe it could be her. That's why I've been acting the way I've been acting."

"Because you feel guilty?" she asked.

"Because if I'd have told someone, Gary might still be alive," he answered, "And she might have a chance at being free."

She looked at him for a long time. He may have been two years older than the rest of them, but sometimes she forgot he was a boy. She didn't know what to say, didn't know what to do. Neither of them did. So she thought of the only thing she could do.

"Do you have any plans?"

"My world is this office. Why?"

"Because there's been a shitload of tension and it kinda gets on my tits. So we're going bowling."

He wiped away the tears that hadn't quite fallen from his eyes and managed a small smile.

"We are?"

"Sure," she agreed, "Bad shoes, heavy balls – and the requisite jokes. The whole shebang."

He nodded slowly in agreement before adding,

"Sure, there's just one thing I have to do first."

* * *

Betty's eyes were fixed on the darkness outside her window, although night never truly settled fully in the hospital. The lights were faint and dim, the moon outside was almost gone, and the clouds high above reflected the glow of the town lights. Yet, it was dark enough.

Rain started to patter against the window. For a moment, it felt as though they were falling onto her face, just like their shadows did. But then she realised it was her own tears, sliding down her cheeks and pulled by gravity. Caught in it, immersed in it. Like she had been.

The salt stung the healing wounds on her face, the cut on her lip. It hurt, but it was a different kind of pain. A different kind of stillness. She was processing, she wanted to process, but she did not want to accept. Things were moving, moving on, and she was still standing. She was here; she had to carry on. Like the trailing of raindrops.

A hand slid into her own on the top of the bed, and she turned to look. There was no fear; fear was gone now, replaced by a soft and longing ache. She turned her head, her neck stronger now, even as her mind grew wearier. She saw his hand and looked up into the face of her friend.

Mark smiled down at her. He was also streaked with raindrop shadows and tears, as he sat in the chair beside her, still holding her hand gently.

“Forgive me?” he whispered.

She allowed herself to cry. For yesterday, for today, for tomorrow. He allowed her by his own.

And she gave him a small, grateful nod.