

'til the End of the World

Year One

Episode VIII

Solo

Opening

November 2005

The masses huddled in exquisite darkness, while she shone in the brightest light – a jewel amongst... well, let's face it, pebbles. She needed no equal to shine brightly; she just needed the dullness around her to elevate her even more.

Lights swirling, reflected across crystals and sequins scattered over the decoration. The world was her stage; it didn't matter who else was on it. She stood, head held high and eyes blinded by the brightness, as people out there talked about her. And why wouldn't they?

"Here we have all our contestants, aren't they wonderful?" came the voice of the presenter. She, the queen, the one who ruled them all – she was being adored and would soon be given her rightful place. After all the work she'd put in, after all the hours spent watching what she ate and who she hung out with – carefully cultivating votes before they even began, she would have her dues.

On the edge of seventeen, she was about to fall into legend.

"Well, it's time to reveal the winner of the first Miss Calendar Teen Beauty competition!" the announcer called out from nearby, dressed in his finest tuxedo. Everyone there would be dressed to the nines, including her mother and father. None could rival her shimmering dress of silken silver that draped across her figure like a second skin and flowed onto the confetti-strewn stage.

"And the winner is..."

She held her breath.

"Kimberly Kitty!"

Rapturous applause thundered through the auditorium, a standing ovation that would rival anything they had seen before. No wonder they had never done this competition before. They had no need, for there had never been a beauty with the talent and the brains that she had in this tinpot little town ever before. They had simply been waiting for her. For their queen.

She had rehearsed her actions a million times in the mirror before the competition, knowing, even then, she would win. She had a moment's hesitation before she met her competition – but once she learned Sam wasn't competing, she knew she didn't have any threat. The entire sixth form was the genetic equivalent of a punctured lilo of the gene pool. Some of the girls didn't even wear makeup to school.

Animals.

She nailed the shock, the awe, and the single tear rolling down her cheek as more confetti rained down upon her. The crowd, were they wild? Were they wild enough? She didn't care; it didn't matter – she had won herself a good chunk towards her university bills next year, that would do. And she had the unquestioning knowledge that she was, as she believed, the best bitch in the place.

A trundle of flowers was bundled into her hands, as she waved towards the crowd, she still could not see. Some of them were already beginning to leave, the clapping dying down, but she kept her smile on regardless. Well, some people just couldn't handle it.

She waved, and she waved as she made her way backstage, past her competition, who looked suitably disappointed with themselves, as they should. She smiled for herself, she smiled for them – and the moment she passed beyond the black curtain and into the auditorium's backstage, she allowed her mask to drop.

Fucking hell, could the announcer have been any less enthusiastic? He's just some DJ from the local station, so he should have respected that he's got a proper job to do for once. Not remixing the Spice Girls to death as if they still mattered. What a dork. Ah well.

She glanced down at the flowers in her hands and made a face of disgust to herself, "Ugh, chrysanthemums," she muttered, and tossed them aside onto a plastic chair as she made her way back to the changing rooms. The school and sixth form were so bloody cheap they hadn't even bothered to kit out the arts department with proper changing rooms or a backstage area. This was glorified storage – which connected through to the same changing rooms as PE shared. But at least during that time of day, she was alone, so she could pretend it was her own personal starlet's retreat.

She removed the pins from her hair as she walked, letting her blonde tresses cascade once more over her bare shoulders as she entered the changing rooms and approached the mirrors. There she was – Miss Calendar Teen. The first. A title she would always hold, even when the time came to pass the torch to the next, clearly inferior, contender next year. She would always, always be the first.

She smiled, puckering her lips. Kimberly regarded herself for a moment.

"God, I *am* beautiful," she muttered to herself, still taken aback by it. Given her mother had pretty much let go around the time she had her, there wasn't exactly a great base to go off. But it didn't matter; maybe she got her affinity for makeup from her father's side. She didn't know; she'd never met him.

She frowned. Something was wrong.

She peered closer to the mirror, her eyes drawn to the side of her nose. Oh shit, oh no. She stepped closer to her own reflection, mirroring herself. Was that a spot?

She reached for her makeup bag nearby, drawing from it a small pad with which to wipe. She did gently, but as the soft white pad came away, she saw it was streaked with her foundation – and with red. She frowned; it was bright red.

Blood red.

When she looked up again into the mirror, she realised the spot was no longer deniable. It was *huge*. And... was it growing? Her heart began to hammer in her chest as she prodded it with the pad once more. Blood, more of it, spurted from the end, mixed in with some vile yellow substance she realised was pus.

She screamed as the entire side of her nose started to slough off exactly where she had wiped. It sagged, the skin wrinkling like that of an old woman's. As if setting off some chain reaction, the same thing began to occur across her face.

She blinked, and the teen beauty queen of Calendar – the first, realised she was staring into the face of an old woman. One whose skin was dissolving before her eyes.

And all she could do was scream.

'til the End of the World

Episode 8 – Solo

Starring:

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

Act I*Sixteen Hours Earlier...*

The sunlight filtered through the window without curtains and managed to find every hole in the blanket he held over his head. It would be of no use, for moments later his alarm went off, and Mark threw the blanket at it hard enough to knock it off the desk and send it scattering across the floor. But it was done, for better or worse, he was now awake.

Stretching, he sat up from the sofa, the cushions protesting beneath him and misshapen by a night of pressure. He was also similarly misshapen, it felt, as though he and the sofa had decided on mutually assured destruction. Still, it was better than falling asleep in his chair as he had done several times before, the one behind his desk. He could have sworn he still had the impression of his own pen lid emblazoned on his forehead.

He sighed, feeling far too many bumps and grumps for an eighteen-year-old, and reached for the cup on the table. He knew it would be icy now, given the temperature in the office had only just started to thaw at whatever time the tight-fisted Drake would let the janitor get the school's heating going. But it was caffeine. He swilled. He drank. He grimaced.

"My kingdom for a coffee," he muttered to himself.

Rather than empty out the final remains, he stood and stuck the coffee under the spout of the small – but effective – coffee machine on the filing cabinet behind him. The coffee machine about which Drake knew nothing (for it was bought with his own money), and allowed it to whirr to life. Now steaming, now doubly caffeinated, he yawned and prepared himself to go about his day.

Exiting the office, he did a double-take, realising instantly he was not alone. Miss Drake, the school's headmistress, although 'BDSM supervisor' was more in keeping with her tone (and lipstick), stood in the empty room. Her eyes were narrowed, her lips were pursed, and in her hands she held a copy of the Calendar Free Press, today's by the look of the date.

"Someone kidnap you?" he joked. She did not lighten her mood; instead, she tossed the paper onto the counter and folded her arms. "Well, there goes proof of life. What can I do for you?"

Instead of answering immediately, she moved closer to him and peered into the office. Her eyes took in several details at once, probably the crumpled blanket and alarm clock on the floor, the musty scent of human occupation, and the coffee machine. Perhaps more – who knew what her beady eyes could perceive, if they weren't – as he suspected – limited by the human visual spectrum. A joke, of course, he thought; snakes hunt by scent.

"Perhaps you can tell me why when I called home to see what's going on with you right now, I got told, 'he made his choice, don't call again'?" she asked, turning her gaze back to him. "Then, I was hung up on. I don't like being hung up on. It makes me cranky. So, why'd it happen?"

"Because your phone voice doesn't match your usual in-person sunny demeanour?" he answered quickly, dryly, and began to move away from her to the table. She bristled, but instead of a sarcastic barb in reply, simply asked with a sigh,

"Level with me, Mark, did you sleep here last night?"

He half-shrugged, back to her, as he sat down at the table.

"More than last night?" she probed further.

"Two weeks," he scoffed, trying to suppress a grin, "Can't believe I got away with it this long."

Another sigh, as she came around the table to regard him from the other side, though she did not sit down. He wondered if she even could with how tight her pencil skirt seemed to be.

Wasn't appropriate for a marathon. Or a high school, come to think of it.

"Is this something that can be fixed?" she asked him.

"Not likely," he answered, deciding not to tell his Headteacher and, oddly, employer, that his Aunt and Uncle were part of a morally grey, complacent para-military supernatural organisation. Some things were private matters, after all. "Besides, I'm eighteen, they have no legal obligation to look after me, even if either of us wanted them to. Best let it alone."

"Well, as a representative of the school, I have to inform you that you can't sleep here," she told him, getting to the core of the matter. He didn't mention that it was actually Miss Code, as the Head of Sixth Form, who should be there reprimanding him from a welfare concern perspective. But probably Miss Code was sleeping off a hangover and wouldn't be in until the first bell rang for class.

"That's it?" he asked, "You're kicking me out of the Library."

"Yep," she agreed, brightly. "I'll give you one week to find yourself somewhere else to live. Otherwise... I'll landmine the Library office, 'kay? And don't think I won't, I did it with the snack cupboard in the teacher's office. It's why Miss Rowe is missing half her pinky. And you are marginally less useful to me than a Geography Teacher." She made a face in her own private reminiscence, "Very marginally."

With that breath of vile air, she turned and began to walk out of the library.

"Right, but most people who rent have jobs, not slave labour..." he called after her, finally voicing the quiet part of his Library job aloud. He had, after all, asked no questions about being given control of the Library – their taciturn agreement when his brother left that he would do so as long as it didn't interfere with his studies. She paused at the double doors to the Library, turning back to him.

"Use your savings for the deposit, you'll get your wages on the first of each month," she told him, with a rare smile, adding, "Enjoy."

With that, she backed out, disappearing to do whatever grim morning rituals most wicked beings performed before first lesson. He, meanwhile, reeled from the implications. Still, the morning had to go on, so he took a sip of his coffee and risked a look at the copy of the Free Press she had left on the table.

With a wry smile, he realised the page to which it had been turned.

The property page.

* * *

"You know, we've been friends for a long time," Amy explained, the decaffeinated coffee (ugh) steaming between them. Sara sat on the other side of the bench in the dining hall, where it was only slightly less cold than outside. Plus, there was a thin frost on the benches that the janitors refused to salt. "And...well...we've been fighting demons and stuff for a while now...and you must have noticed something between us."

Sara looked at her, captivated, her eyes wide. She rested her chin on her hand, which was slightly tricky as she slowly chewed the piece of buttery, sodden toast in her mouth. The crumbs remained in her other hand, but she was too absorbed in the moment.

"I want to go on a date," she continued, "...with you and me. We can go for coffee, maybe dinner. Maybe even a movie."

"Can we French in the back row?" Sara asked her.

"What do you think?"

"Sure, I love Frenching."

"I mean, do you think it'll be good enough to woo Mark?" Amy pressed her friend further, rolling her eyes as she went. Sara's enraptured look, into which Amy tried not to read too much sarcasm, dropped. Ever the performer. She took another bite of her somehow too dry and too moist toast, then put it back on the plate. The fact that it both flopped and clanked made Amy less enthused about trying her own piece, which rapidly cooled in front of her.

"I think anyone who uses the phrase 'woo' needs shooting," Sara pointed out, while wiping the gross toast sweat off her fingers. "But yes, I think there's no way he can resist your womanly charms."

"It certainly had you swooning," she joked, braving the moment and trying to nibble at the edge. It tasted like cardboard with butter on it. She quickly decided it was fifty pence worth throwing away and pushed the plate away from her.

"Please, I already have Sam half-thinking I'm a lesbian," Sara sighed, "Don't heighten the rumour. I swear someone wrote 'dyke' on my locker."

"They could be politely swearing," she joked, to the blank stares from her friend. Sheepishly, and knowing it was pointless, she decided to explain, "Dyke, dam. Dam, damn."

"Witty..." Sara answered dryly, bundling their remaining toast together and wrapping them in the napkins. All the better to fling in the bin later. Amy stacked the plates, their ritual behaviour practised and easy. Besides, Sara had already become distracted.

Walter Black was wandering past. Sure, Amy had heard of him; everyone had. He was the head of the School Newspaper even though he was only in Lower Sixth. She had to admit dreamy blue eyes, long black hair that fell elegantly around his face in that kind of DiCaprio way. A kind of Peter Andre boy band good looks. But she'd also heard he was a stuck-up prick.

Of course, none of that mattered to Sara, who was quite brazenly dreamily staring at the man, sighing the sigh of the love-lorn, following his progression towards the breakfast cue. Knowing they didn't have all day, Amy gently turned Sara's face, via the chin, back towards her.

"Okay, whoever says you're a lesbian hasn't noticed how man-hungry you are," she pointed out, "You have a crush on Walter."

"I have a crush on lots of people," Sara bristled, as though the spell had been broken along with her line-of-sight. "Gerard Butler, for instance. Doesn't mean I'm gonna jump him. Hard."

"So let me get this straight..." she began, realising even as she said it, "I'm asking you for relationship advice when you're too chicken to ask out one guy, who you'd dump in five minutes anyway when he said he didn't like *How I Met Your Mother*?"

"I have issues."

"Sure, you bonked a demon," Amy shrugged, "But that shouldn't make you take yourself off the market. Who hasn't?"

"You?"

"Oh, I'm a prude, you know me," she sighed, "But plenty of other people have, I bet...."

“Okay, so I’ll make you a deal,” Sara suggested, “We have two days to ask out the men of our dreams. Whoever doesn’t, receives a slap or pinch of indeterminant strength from the other.

Agreed?”

She held out one hand, which Amy shook, knowing full well that this would likely lead to mutually assured destruction.

“Agreed.”

Her head and her eyes spun around once more as she searched for her prey with the cold determination of a Terminator. A horny, teenage Terminator. Amy couldn’t help but smile. Walter had already disappeared into the throng of people, about to be greatly disappointed by toast. Not surprised, just... disappointed. Sara, meanwhile, was muttering to herself.

“This means war...”

* * *

The chaos of breaktime was everywhere as Amy huddled by her locker, trying to work her way through the various books she had stored. She was looking for the chemistry textbook, which she knew Sara would not have bothered to steal. Now, the biology book, that was a different story – until she ended up coming across the section on birthing and swore off men. For two days.

Shapes and shadows moved around her, and she paid very little mind, even as one moved up next to her and began to dig into his own locker. Then something struck her, a subtle scent of something spicy, and she frowned.

“Is that Sandlewood?” she muttered, more to herself than to anyone else. Of course, she must have said it louder than she thought because her locker neighbour, Jackson, looked at her with an unreadable expression.

She knew Jackson Wells in passing, since he was part of 11C and she was part of 11D. She heard some of the others call him a geek, but considering she was geek incarnate – and did not

honestly know the taxonomic difference between a geek and a nerd – wouldn't have said so. He always seemed a little bit scruffy, kept himself to himself, and sometimes got told off for wearing death metal band t-shirts under his school uniform. In fact, as she glanced over at him that morning, she could see some logo barely visible through his white shirt, which she believed looked like a naked lady riding an apple bleeding worms. Charming.

"You have a good nose," he told her.

"Thanks, I grew it myself," she answered.

Another small but strange interaction in a day filled with them, he grabbed whatever it was he needed from his locker and shut it, walking off without another word. She sighed; it seemed all boys did the same thing – even the ones she had zero interest in. Perhaps because she didn't like to ride apples and had an aversion to helminths.

Ooh, there was her chemistry book. She grabbed the thick, well-worn spine and tried to prise it from her locker.

Jackson's sandlewood-y scent was replaced with the floral scent of something way too expensive for a year eleven from a backwards high school to be wearing – but that was Sam Summers and Julie Winters for you. How the two of them had never seen the nominative deterministic irony in their friendship, she never knew – and wouldn't want to point out either.

"Oh, please, this pageant is so beneath me," Sam muttered to Julie as the two began to paw through their own lockers. Oh God, yes, Calendar High School's latest attempt to further westernise and become little America. She would be giving the Beauty Contest a hard pass and elect for homework instead.

Regardless of what Sara said textbook paper does to your pores.

"That's why I'm entering?" Julie asked, sounding confused by default.

"Sure, I don't need to know I'm beautiful," Sam answered her friend.

"And I do?"

"Sure."

"You are so totally wise."

Amy frowned to herself, but elected to ignore the rest of their conversation and head to class with her book in hand. It seemed everyone had a touch of the bonkers that morning. Men may be from Mars, and women may be from Venus, but to her, it just sounded like everyone was from somewhere other than Earth.

It was going to be a long day.

* * *

Sam brushed lightly and delicately, while Julie sat in front of her, eyes closed and head perched forward. She frowned, blew on the end of the brush, and a small cloud appeared around them.

"Right, what we do is we lightly brush on the eye shadow," she narrated, gently and condescendingly, to her friend. Oh, Julie, bless her. Pretty as a peach, Sam thought, with half the intelligence. But she was lovely in her own way, if horrifyingly earnestly vapid. A perfect friend.

"I've done this thousands of times, Sam," Julie reminded her, but still not moving for fear of being not so gently poked in the eye with a makeup brush. It had already happened twice – once while doing the mascara to make her eyelashes pop. They sat backstage, the people setting up out front causing bangs and clanks that were very likely to disturb her concentration.

"Yes, but when you do it yourself, you look like a whore," Sam reminded her. They had the exact same conversation every time they went out to Clarus together.

"I thought that was the point?" Julie asked, frowning even with her eyes closed. Sam rolled her eyes and dabbed at the sudden swish of midnight blue in the wrong direction, using the cloth she brought with her. Of course, with a friend like Julie, all conversations are new again.

"Men don't like loose women," she scalded her, before shooting a look over at their companion. "Do they, Luke?"

Luke was slumped in one of the nearby chairs. He'd already helped them move some of the key podiums around out front and also make sure to clean up the seating bank, and now he was rewarding himself by reading a magazine. Or at least pretending to read the magazine, he usually just looked at the pictures in the rugby magazine, *Trying Times*. Lord knew what they actually bothered with in the articles.

She thought he was pretending because he had become very good at that. Tension had continued to simmer between them, and even though they were going through the motions, she knew he was not happy with her. They still hadn't talked about the fire at the club, the lies she'd told – and in turn she'd never asked him about the bandage on his arm. They'd become very good at not talking about things, it seemed.

Yeah, unhealthy, but she didn't have the energy to deal with it right now.

"Hey, Luke, you here with us?" she called over, trying to get something of a reaction. He looked up at her, coolly.

"What was the question?"

"Do men like whores?"

"As much as they like liars," he shrugged, and went back to pretending to read. He did it so quickly and smoothly that he didn't have a chance to see her pointed glare. But it was fine, right now he could hang around all he wanted without any of that shit. She sighed and went back to her duty, happy to see a much friendlier face come through the door.

Sara was bringing a box which she hoped was full of good things. She glanced over at Luke on her way in, who gave her an actual smile. So the moodiness *was* directed in a single direction. Great, that was gonna work out well later.

"I bring fake corsages!" she announced brightly, placing the box down on one of the tables nearby. After a blast of the speakers playing Shakira at a hundred times normal volume, followed by its immediate cutting off and some swearing from the Tech Club's members, Sara frowned at them, sensing the tone. "Everything okay here?"

"Just doing Julie's face makeup," she explained, wondering whether she should mix in a little silver glitter at the same time.

"But the pageant isn't for another hour," Sara pointed out, glancing at her watch.

"I am aware, I did suggest the people who organised it," she reminded her.

"Fine."

"Tell me what you think."

She spun Julie around in her spinny chair, her eyes flinging open. Sara could not help her reaction, which told her everything she needed to know, as horror flooded her friend's expression. Julie sat there, docile and completely unaware.

"Oh God, it's like *Rosie & Jim* and a hooker in a menage a trois."

Sam sighed to herself, realising it probably wasn't the best look for a Beauty Competition. Not unless the judges were all men, anyway.

"It's my first attempt," she defended, "And it's easier to do this in a mirror rather than on a squirming person." She placed the brush back and considered the wipes. Did they have time for her to do another take, or should she let go of the reins and let Julie do it herself? Perhaps it would be for the best...

"Ew, get out of my way, you freak!" a voice came from nearby. The three of them, and even Luke, popped their heads over to see what was happening. Sashaying through the blackened curtain that demarcated front stage from back stage, Kimberly Kitty had arrived. She was not yet in her outfit, having arrived in her My Little Pony x Gucci tracksuit instead, with a huge gown poking out from beneath her dressing bag laid over her shoulder.

Her look, which was one of utter disgust, was for the guy next to her. One of the tech guys Sam only vaguely recognised. The one with greasy black hair and a *Death Apple* t-shirt poking out from under his school shirt. He'd obviously been doing something to one of the amps unnoticed when Kimberly had promptly walked into him.

Bless him, the lad seemed terrified, and scurried away like a good little nerd, while Kimberly surveyed the backstage land with all the same level of disgust.

"What a sicko," Kimberly shuddered, as though trying to physically slough off the memory of having interacted with a lower life form. "Perving and all." She threw a glance over to where Luke was sitting. "Is that what *you're* here for?"

"I'm a one woman man," he retorted, and Sam felt an old familiar flutter in her heart, "Sometimes to a fault."

He went back to his magazine, while Sam tried to fight her second round of glare. Kimberly, a girl two years above her whom Sam had never warmed to, looked around the three year eleven girls and asked, as though they were her personal valets,

"Where's a dressing room?"

"We have another makeup bay just over there," Sam indicated with her brush at the table and chair set about two metres from them. Calendar High didn't exactly have the greatest budget, and when she'd asked the same question of Drake, she politely pointed out the girls' changing rooms were nearby, and sometimes the sinks worked.

"I'm so above this crap," Kimberly sighed to herself, telling no one in particular of her own self-worth, as she regarded the table. "What are they doing to me?"

Sara held up the parcel and, with all the sarcasm she could muster, proudly asked,

"Fake corsage?"

Kimberly simply made a 'ugh' sound and stormed away in the direction of the changing rooms. Sam sighed and dismissed her from her mind. Sure, Kimberly was going to win the damn thing and be a remarkably big pain in the arse for the remainder of her time at the sixth form. But the blissful truth was she'd be gone very soon.

Little did Sam know how right she was.

* * *

Mark stood in the entryway to the apartment, the closest one to the school. The landlord's rental agent hadn't even bothered to come up the stairs with them to the place. In his nose, scents both named and unnamed lingered. In front of him, the grey décor was peeling from the walls. And that was the tiles he could see in the kitchen-slash-living-room-slash-bedroom-slash... was that a toilet?

"Is that smell the drains or something dying?" he asked aloud. Ricky, his companion, stood next to him with a look of strange amusement on his face.

"I think it's what your body will smell like when it's found three weeks after you're last seen," Ricky added helpfully.

"It has to get better."

As they turned away from the door, letting the unlocked and unwashed world behind them be closed off by its natural portal – were those fingernail marks on the outside? – he sighed and reiterated the mantra in his mind – it *had* to get better.

"You could always just keep sleeping in a different room of the school every night," Ricky suggested. "She'll never be able to pin you down."

"No, I said I'd do this," Mark said, "so I'm doing this. Just... grudgingly."

He relished as they stepped back into the sunshine and into the relatively fresh, cool afternoon air.

"Next!"

Well, 'next' didn't turn out so great either. Twenty minutes later, two streets away, they were led down the stairs of an old Victorian three-storey building into the basement. The landlord showed them round at that one, down into the self-contained flat which was sunk below street level. Faint afternoon light streamed greyly through the admittedly washed windows, creating a dim atmosphere.

"Here's your apartment," the landlord, whose delightful grey (possibly once upon a time white) string vest only held two food stains. Well, he hoped they were food. "It's in the basement. It's just a room, though there is a shower over in the curtain."

Mark and Ricky surveyed the space. As Mark frowned at the room, which did indeed seem to have everything in it at once – the bed was projecting from the stairs with no railing after all, he caught sight of the tiled area that looked more like a set from a horror movie set in an abandoned asylum. The shower head, rusted and cranky, held over a drain which seemed remarkably over-rusted. Well... crusted with reddish stains...

"There's no curtain for the shower," he pointed out, also noting in his mind that there were no curtains for the windows either. Thus, anyone on the street walking past who happened to look down would find out what a naked librarian looked like.

"Yeah..." the landlord agreed, an apologetic tone to his voice. He scratched errantly at the dried egg on the front of his bulbous belly. "... sorry 'bout that." He then indicated something Mark hadn't noticed before. "But they'll make sure you're safe."

"They being?" Ricky asked the question next to him, his eyes drawn up by the end of the man's dirty finger towards the ceiling.

"Well... me..."

Mark quickly decided that having this lovely gentleman in charge of the in-apartment CCTV was probably not the kind of environment he wanted to find himself in. Ricky summed it up perfectly.

"Is 'run' too strong a reaction?"

The third and final stop of the day was paradise by comparison. Third floor, a few streets further west. Ricky pointed out that it was the same building where Claire's apartment had been, and it seemed nice. The grounds were well-manicured, and the hallway was kept clean and fresh. People had little welcome mats outside their apartments, and the place seemed pretty bright and freshly painted.

As they were led into the flat by what looked like a very normal estate agent – one whose blouse and suit were of complementary shades, with clean hands and a warm, inviting smile, Mark began to wonder if they had found the one. In fact, as the door opened and she led them into the living room, which was open-plan with the kitchen, Mark realised he could see neither shower, toilet, nor bed, and was quickly taken on a tour of the separate rooms. Like a real flat.

“This looks perfect,” Ricky muttered to himself as they stood around the breakfast island. An actual breakfast island. Clean, white quartz. Stylish.

“Oh, it is, it’s only recently been vacated,” the estate agent commented brightly. She placed down her clipboard and drummed a finger against it.

“I don’t see why the previous tenant would want to leave,” Mark half-joked, realising suddenly how prime real estate was hard to come by in such a small town. They’d already been through half the property adverts within his budget – and these were the ones without the spelling mistakes. He knew he’d said something wrong the moment her look clouded and she frowned.

“Well, he didn’t exactly *leave*,” she muttered, before adding with a shrug. “Just punched his own ticket.” She looked suddenly nervous as she added, “They cleaned up all the blood, though, don’t worry.”

Mark shared a look with Ricky, who didn’t know whether they were being had. Mark’s leg felt distinctly unpulled.

“Seriously?”

“Afraid so,” the agent sighed.

“Anything else we should know about?” Mark interjected, hoping that they’d passed the worst of it.

“Not much,” she nodded brightly, before thoughts began to occur to her, “Someone lost an eye in the kitchen, they still haven’t found it. Um... one tenant was brutally murdered, strangled with the shower cord in the bathroom, if you can believe it. We had to replace the whole thing...” Her eyes had drifted into space, until suddenly she glanced down at the breakfast bar they were standing

at, "Oh, and there used to be a wall between the living room and the kitchen, but when they went open-plan, they found a body when they tore it down. Never did find out who it was."

Inside, Mark felt his last hope die. Ricky clasped his shoulder in solidarity.

* * *

Oh, the boys did not look happy as they wandered back into the Library. School was over, the Beauty Competition was in full swing back in the auditorium – even in the relative sanctuary of the Library, Amy could hear the thumping beats of some Britney tune. Or at least, she thought it was Britney, could have been Christina. One of those people Sara was always going on about.

"So how goes the hunt, pip pip?" Sara, sitting next to her at the table, brightly asked in her God-awful Jeeves accent. Either she couldn't tell from the dejected look on Mark's face and the warning look in Ricky's eyes, or she was attempting to use her humour to elevate. Amy could have told her neither would land.

"A dump, a pervert or a boneyard," Mark supplied, "Those are my choices."

"Welcome to a really disturbing episode of *Through the Keyhole*," Sara answered.

"Whatever hole those places were through was not a key," Ricky sighed as he went to take his place at the table next to her. Mark, as always, wandered behind the counter and began hanging his jacket on the hatstand.

"Ricky?!" Sara cried suddenly, "What are you doing?"

"I'm sitting down, why?"

"You can't do that."

"Can to."

"We have to go watch the Interview portion of the Beauty Contest."

"Have they already skipped the swimsuit portion?"

She gave him a not-so-gentle slap on the arm for that one, told him not to be a pervert and threw a knowing look over at her. Amy tried her best to glare back, her cheeks going bright red, as she immediately saw through what Sara was doing. 'Best friend', her bottom, springing it on her like this. She dragged him up by the same arm she'd slapped, and Amy had to feel for Ricky as he glanced across at Mark, confusion over his features.

"I guess we're going," he offered, glancing at Sara, "You're insane."

He got a kick in the shin for that one, as Sara began to drag the boy who fought monsters out of the Library like a brow-beaten husband from some seventies comedy show. Her final cheeky grin and wink in Amy's direction did not help the blushing situation, so she glared quickly and then looked down at her laptop for emotional balance.

And just like that, they were alone. The silence of unspoken words hung in the air. Mark, oblivious to it all, had already started to resume his daily work, cataloguing the new shipment of books that had come in while he and Ricky had been flat hunting. She typed away without much gusto at her laptop, hoping that a few moments of homework would steel her.

Of course, she realised quite quickly that she was procrastinating. She could feel it, and it only hummed beneath her consciousness like a trapped fly against a window. She had to do something, had to say something, or she never would. And Sara's slaps would hurt if she forfeited the bet.

"Mark..." she began, but as she did, she heard a squeak in her voice she didn't like.

"Amy."

"Great, just checking you remembered."

Okay, so given her face was purely on fire, she was most definitely not being as suave as she'd practised. What the hell had she said afterwards? It was so much easier practising on a caffeinated Sara in the dining hall. There were distractions there, not oppressive silence.

"Mark... you know we've been friends for a long time," she suddenly blurted out, the words coming out in a rush. To his credit, he didn't seem phased; he simply looked up from the book he was gently smooshing that Library stampy-label into and smiled at her.

"Three months, yes," he agreed.

His abrupt agreement threw her off again, and she found herself struggling to remember what the next words were. What was she supposed to say? How was that supposed to lead on from his agreement? Was he supposed to agree with her at that point? Again, she'd been allowed in practice to get all words out in one go; pauses were not in the plan. Oh God, it had been way too long, and she'd said nothing, just stared.

She went to open her mouth, but the opening of the double doors interrupted her. This time, instead of Ricky, Sara or even the vague humanoid shape that was their Headmistress, a young woman walked in.

"Either this is a really big classroom, or am I in the Library?" the woman asked. Amy had to say woman because she was dressed like one. Sure, she looked no older than them, but she definitely had to be in sixth form because she wore her own clothes. A simple dark purple dress with a woollen jumper that seemed to dangle with various things. Across her shoulder was slung a satchel bag with all manner of badges, not the dumpy backpack that Amy had to use to carry all her books.

She was also gorgeous, Amy could tell that right away. Her hair was thick and brown, cascading in gentle curls down to her shoulders. She wore makeup that worked so easily, but didn't seem intrusive. A similar tone to her dress, but many shades lighter. How did people know how to do that?

"You've been to one of these before, haven't you?" Mark smiled at the woman. Amy's eyes narrowed as she glanced between the intruder and Mark. She laughed a little, nodded, and walked over to him, while Amy suddenly felt like the most invisible person in the entire room.

"My name's Nikki," she introduced. Oh God, even her name was casual and cool. "I, uh, just transferred to do my A-Levels here, and y'know, they want me to have books for lessons? How mean is that?"

"Of course, what are you studying?" Mark asked back with a gentle and easy smile. Amy found herself wondering whether that was the same smile he gave everyone, or whether it had a different tone. Was he always that warm with her? Not Sara, she knew that, but with her and Ricky?

"Well, my Chemistry and English Lit are the same spec," she answered, "But in Psych they're studying Psychoanalysis at the moment, and I don't have any Freud."

"I won't tell him, he'd read too much into it," Mark joked. The woman, 'Nikki', laughed. It was a flirty and easy laugh, and Mark laughed back, the woman's hand brushing against Mark's arm lightly on the counter. Amy's eyes widened from her vantage point, then she remembered her facial expression was public, so pulled it back. Not that it would matter, she was fairly certain she'd become invisible.

"Could you get it for me?" she asked.

"We have a million copies of the introductory lectures," he assured her.

Oh, good, pushing back with the good ol' Mark indifference.

"Yes, but I might get lost in the stacks," 'Nikki' joked.

"Then I shall escort you," he smiled, coming around the counter. The two of them walked off deep into the stacks as she heard them continuing to talk.

She didn't know what to say, or what to think, or what to feel. She only knew she wanted to go, so Amy quickly gathered her things into her backpack and slipped out through the double doors. By the time they got back, she'd already be well on her way home, just away. Somewhere she could think. And then, maybe then, she'd be able to process what had just happened.

She was *not*, absolutely *not*, going to cry.

* * *

So, there it was, despite Ricky's jokes, there was no Swimsuit competition. Since it was taking place in a high school, this would constitute a level of disgustingness that Sara was sure even Miss Drake was not tone-deaf to. She could see their Headmistress sitting now, arms folded and slouched back in her judge's chair with a look of thunder on her face, like she wanted to be anywhere else. Next to her was the Head of the Governor's – a guy she didn't know by name but had a sneaking suspicion he owned the biggest butchers in South Lancashire or something. Probably lived somewhere else, like Edenfield or one of those other swanky areas.

And then on his other side was Miss Code, clapping away at the thundering music, which pronounced that everyone wished their girlfriends were attractive like Nicole Chez-lounger or whatever her name was. *Pussycat dolls, my arse*, Sara thought to herself. Still, at least she seemed interested and non-lecherous, unlike the other two judges, respectively.

By now, they were having their final parade, the girls walking back and forth in a kind of gentle rhythm while their lighting department swung the rig around at a dizzying speed, creating a multicoloured strobe-like effect that was giving her a headache. The girls were strutting, Julie's makeup actually looking not half bad under the strangely surreal lighting. I mean, it was obvious from the talent portion of the competition, the way she was dressed, and her interview answers that Kimberly Kitty was going to win.

The Kimberly Kittys of the world *always* won in situations like those, even Sara knew it at her tender young age of fifteen. Blonde, boobs and bitchy ambition meant you were God's gift to pageant judges. And even if Miss Drake did go rogue and vote for the one confused-looking girl who had been entered by mistake (an exchange student, still dressed in her school uniform), she would be outvoted by the two nincompoops next to her. Thus was democracy.

Ricky, however, seemed to have been hypnotised as he sat next to her – whether by the Pussycat Dolls or by the shiny lights, or – and she suspected this most strongly – by the women

displaying themselves like they were at a livestock market. She elbowed him, but only got a grunt in reply, and his eyes never tore from the stage. Bloody hormones.

"I'll be back in a minute," she tried to yell into his ear. She got a thumbs up, but wasn't entirely sure it was for her, as she slipped out of the seat next to him and made her way to the darkened edges of the wings.

She needed a minute, and the deranged radio guy who was running the shop was annoying her with his phoned-in performance. Ironical, for a radio host.

"Here we have all our contestants!" he cried into the microphone, as if it wasn't patently obvious. "Aren't they beautiful?"

She rolled her eyes as she slipped through the edge of the big black curtain at the side of the stage and found herself transported to a whole other world. She couldn't quite escape the women's booty song coming through the thin fabric, but she could at least pretend all the noise and chaos was from a different land. She instead focused on finding Sam, whom she'd not come across in some time. She would normally be front and centre for this kind of shit.

She was nowhere to be seen at the makeup station (which she had to admit was obviously just a table stolen from the nearby English classroom and hard-backed plastic chairs), and so she pushed on to the girls' changing room. When she turned left and saw the sinks and the mirrors, she frowned.

Sam was there, alright; her raven-black hair fell around her face as she huddled over the sink. The sound, thankfully, was a bit more muffled in there, by the grace of the changing rooms' fire doors, and she could actually call out,

"Hey, Sam!"

Her friend stood up, one hand to her mouth, swallowing something, and in the other, the obviously dark-brown plastic of a pill bottle, which shook like a rattle in her hand. Her eyes locked with hers in the mirror, as she finally saw Sara behind her, and Sara felt herself overcome with a sudden sensation of having walked in on something she didn't want to.

“This isn’t what it looks like.”

Act II

"This isn't what it looks like," Sam tried to tell her, momentarily unsure of what else she could say. From the distance she was at, there was no way Sara could see the label. No way she could know what they were (even the label didn't match the contents). There was no way she could see that the name on them was not her own. There was no way she could see every event leading to that exact moment.

But also in that moment, Sam realised she was exposed. She felt it. Deep within her bones, it was as though everything that had led her from those first days in Dr Dailey's office, all the way through to then, was exposed and utterly readable like a bad novel. Sara's eyes pierced her in a way no one had in such a long time. And all she felt was fear.

Fear and a need to disappear.

Shit, she'd need to up her dose.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Sara snapped at her, breaking the momentary stunned calm that stole over her. She knew enough then, or had assumed enough. She stormed forward, grabbing her by the arm and trying to get a look at the pill bottle.

"Leave me alone," Sam snapped back at her friend, her own anger momentarily pushing through the shock of discovery. She slipped the bottle back into her purse and shook off her friend's grip.

"What are you taking?" Sara pushed further as she made her way past her and back in the direction of the backstage. Out of the changing rooms. Away from her. Away from her eyes, those accusatory eyes, and back to the real world again. One where she could slip away and hide like she wanted to. Like she needed to. "Drugs? You remember PSHE, right? 'Just say no' ring a bell?"

Anger welled up bright inside her at Sara's sarcastic tone, bubbling away beneath the surface. Oh yeah, that one hadn't had time to work on her anxiety yet; she was nowhere near fucking mellow. As she brushed out of the door to the changing rooms, barely noticing Kimberly

passing back in the same direction, adorned by flowers and trailed by confetti, Sara kept pace with her the entire way.

"I'm your friend!" Sara yelled at her. She had to shout because now they were out of the changing rooms and in the backstage area, cordoned off only by a thin curtain billowing in front of them. Somewhere beyond Madonna in her post-menopausal comeback phase screamed about being well hung or something.

"Then, as my friend, you'll fuck off," Sam snapped back.

"How can I, when you've turned into Pablo-bloody-Picasso?!"

"You mean Pablo Escobar!"

"That's a hand soap!"

Sam was the first one to start it. She flipped, she snapped, she did the thing she was trying not to do and lost control. She slapped Sara so hard across the face that it left a bright red mark immediately welling up in the same shape. Granted, it wasn't the hand which had the ring on it, but it did the sodding job.

Sara looked at her in pure horror, but her face screwed up in anger in return, and she kicked her in the shin hard. Hopping, the fight began to turn feral as Sam shrieked and grabbed her by the hair. In a tangle of hair, uniform and confusion, the two of them scrapped and tried to shove each other around backstage.

No doubt the misogynists of the world would call it a catfight, but the only link it had to such things was that kind of surreal quality of venom and claws flying. Mostly, it was a lot of pulling, shrieking, and attempted shoving that was incredibly ugly, even from the inside. She did feel a sense of motion, though, like they were moving.

After a moment, Sam felt herself let go, and her own momentum caused her to fall onto the stairs. She hit with her ribs and momentarily air threw itself from her lungs in one go as Sara scrambled up the steps next to her.

"You bitch!" she shrieked at her, clawing for her ankle as she went, but succeeding only in breaking a nail on her trainer. After a second, she recovered and scrambled up after her as Sara stuck out her tongue.

"Same to you!"

She didn't register the billowing blackness around them as Sam grabbed Sara by the back of her hair and continued to try to pull it out by the roots. She knew she'd lost it, she knew Sara had lost it – but in their fury neither of them could stop. There was only the moment, the pain that came with it, and all of a sudden it was like Sara was the face of everything she was holding back. Everything the pills kept away.

Neither of them noticed the moment that it tipped, that in their scrap they misjudged what the billowing meant, meaning they fell straight through the curtain, pulling down the flimsy rod holding it up and removing the barrier between front and back of the stage. The music stopped with a needle scratch, which Sam would later find strange, since it was on a CD. She didn't even realise they were in full view of the waiting audience until she found herself suddenly and inexplicably drawn back from the crouching tiger attempting to bite her arm, which was her friend – former friend – Sara.

"There will be a *world* of pain if you don't both STOP IT!" roared Miss Drake above them, as she held both of the girls, whose adrenaline was beginning to wane, at arm's length away from one another.

She wanted to move forward, but Drake had a vice-like grip of her hair, and she could see the same from Sara. So instead, both girls settled on glaring at one another, ignoring the crowd awkwardly standing there.

Before another breath could be taken, there came an almighty scream from the direction they'd just come, as a girl neither of them knew screamed at the top of her lungs,

"She's dead! Kimberly's dead!"

* * *

Drake could not see the two girls in her office from where she sat, and for that she was glad. That they were in front of her, both of them sat back in their chairs, pouting with the most sullen of expressions on their faces, she knew. That their cheeks were still ruddy from the expended energy – more than she'd seen from most teenagers since the Year-7-sugar-rainbow-dust-black-market incident. And to top it all off, at the end of a very long and very annoying day in charge, there was the sixth former.

Ms Kitty was found in such a state in the girls' changing rooms that her Head of Sixth Form, Miss Code, had to call the police... but not the ambulance. After it was quickly established that whatever had happened had happened after the fighting girls left the changing rooms, and began their kung-fu bollocks backstage, Miss Code had taken over the liaison with the police and coroner – and she had to deal with this... shit.

She knew some days were going to be horrible in this job, in this town. But this time, the kind of stuff was the worst.

"I have a young woman with a dissolved face," she began, from where her head rested in her hands. She heard the shuffle, uncomfortable as it was, but other than that, neither of those young charges moved. "I have distraught parents, who wish to whip their children out of school before they too dissolve... I don't want to have to deal with... *this*."

She emphasised the 'this' with a snarl she hoped was as vicious as intended, looking up finally into Ms Carpenter and Ms Summers, who sat there, as sullen as she had pictured. Well, Ms Carpenter was, and Ms Summers looked at her with a kind of defiant 'am I bovvered' attitude, like a better-dressed Vicki Pollard.

"Then don't," Ms Summers suggested. Drake shot her a vile look.

"There is no fighting in my school," she reminded the two of them, "And why is there no fighting in my school?"

Ms Carpenter was about to say something, but Drake cut her off with a wave of her hand.

"That was rhetorical. There's no fighting in my school because I have a habit of expelling students who start fighting in my school. So... ladies... do I have to expel you?"

They actually sat there in silence, and Drake had to remind herself once again that she was not built for this life. But of course, if wishes were horses, she'd have made a lot of different decisions in the long run.

"That *wasn't* rhetorical."

"Suspend, expel, do the Macarena, who cares?" Ms Summers replied with a shrug. Drake smiled inwardly. She had to admit a small part of her liked Ms Summers. She was as much of a young bitch when she was sixteen, too. Far too many years ago.

"Okay, I'll settle for an explanation."

"None of your business..."

"What she means is, I kissed Luke," Ms Carpenter blurred out from next to her. Her 'friend' shot her a sharp look, while Drake sighed and leaned back in her chair. But Ms Carpenter was not done. "Right on the mouth, at her birthday party. When I was a little bit tipsy on... White Lightning. And when Sam found out... grand slam."

Oh, for God's sake, she had to admit she was a little bit disappointed. To find out that all this catty fighting was over a boy was just so pedestrian. Not that she knew what would be any better, but still. It had her head throb in even more pain as she sighed.

"Men should be wiped off the face of the planet," she muttered, more for herself.

"Totally, anyway, I've told her he was a horrible kisser, so it's so never gonna happen again," Ms Carpenter continued, emboldened by her sudden uncaring of the tongue.

"Um, unos momento..." Ms Summers tried to interject.

"I know, you're probably the better kisser, which is why you don't notice," Ms Carpenter shrugged at her.

"Oh, I'm so going to hit you," Ms Summers replied, showing learning was very much not in progress that evening.

"Enough!" Drake snapped. The two girls looked back at her, suitably chastised. She regarded them; her look could curdle concrete, as she mused over what to do. "So I have two options, thanks to this little pathetic love triangle. I can kick you both out, but then I would have a lot of paperwork to fill out. Or I kill both of you, but again, I would also have a lot of paperwork to fill out."

She leaned back in her chair and regarded the two of them, who looked at her as if she were genuinely considering both options. Maybe a part of her was.

"The best option for all of us is that you settle this sad little feud outside of the Thunderdome – or at least off of school premises – and I go back to my normal quiet life dealing with teenage face dissolving instead. Does that sound workable?"

"Do you kill all your students or just the special ones?" Ms Carpenter wondered.

Drake simply pointed at the door, and with one more fire put out for the evening, went back to fielding emails from concerned parents. She noted, with some dismay, that ones from parents who hadn't even been attending the Beauty Pageant were about to come in. She groaned. The governors were going to call a special meeting, weren't they?

The two girls left her office and her thoughts, while Drake opened up the rabbit hole and wondered what she had done in a past life to deserve this purgatory. Then started to remember, and quietly closed that door once more.

* * *

Her head was throbbing with it all. She knew it was the comedown from the adrenaline, the rush of the fight, and probably more than a little because of the hair pulling. She would have to have a thorough check in the mirror when she got home, but she was just done for the day. Sara didn't even want to look at Sam as the two of them headed out of the office and into the corridor.

"Thanks for covering," Sam said to her, her voice low and sounding just as tired as Sara felt. Sure, a lie to get out of it, to cover up the truth. But something in the way that Sam said it, the thankful, relieved way, just made Sara feel all the more scared inside.

"Didn't do it for you," she muttered back, as the two of them walked straight for the front entrance.

"Then, what...?" Sam began, but Sara didn't let her finish.

As they stepped out into the night, she stopped and turned to her friend. Her fists were lowered, but her blood was up. It seemed not all the adrenaline, not all the anger had gone away. What she had seen, the things running through her head before and after, none of it was helping.

"I did it for Luke," she told her, honestly. "If I told Drake what I saw you doing in the changing rooms, I'd be in the clear, but you'd be exposed. You do you, Sam. You always have and you always will, and if you don't want to talk to me as your friend, then don't."

"But Luke doesn't have to find out your grubby little secret that way. He's a decent guy, so do the right thing and tell him about it yourself."

Rather than look angry, Sam just looked afraid. Her arms were wrapped, not folded. She was not defiant; she looked scared, but somehow that only seemed to piss Sara off even more.

"I don't have to tell him anything," she almost pouted.

"That's your problem."

"I don't wanna lose him, Sara."

"Take your damn chances."

With that, Sara spun on her heel and headed off for home, wanting to sleep the whole night away and forget any of this ever existed. Behind her, she knew Sam stood there, on the steps in the coldness of the night.

Alone.

* * *

Mark stood in the Library in the morning air, far too early for the kids to be in, although some of the teachers' cars were beginning to pile up in the car park. It would need to be soon, otherwise they would miss their window to check out the crime scene. And, as usual, Ricky was late. Well, actually, not that usual – but he was more prone to be tardy than many others. Amy, for example, was always extremely punctual.

He'd already run into Drake that morning on her way in, bristling as she was in an extra delightful mood. She had apparently been around until the early hours of the morning, when the police and coroner had finally taken Kimberly Kitty's body away. They kept the entire auditorium and changing rooms cordoned off, meaning PE and Performing Arts were both cancelled for the foreseeable.

Since he had been attempting to bed down once more for the night in the Library, he found himself overhearing more than his fair share of gossip. Apparently, the police thought it was a freak accident. Possibly something caused by chemicals in her make-up, if you could believe it. Mark obviously couldn't, but what he could believe was the Calendar PD's penchant for ignoring obvious facts.

Like, young women's faces don't spontaneously melt due to makeup.

Of course, now he was having to take a moment away from apartment hunting – something he was not relishing now they were into the lower half of the potential candidates – and was seriously beginning to wonder if he could take the apartment of grisly deaths. It would need a heavy sage-ing, mind you, or perhaps he could speak to the local pastor about a strong exorcism.

When his phone rang, he jumped; the silence in the library, though comforting, was suddenly broken. He answered it to find, to his very much annoyance, Ricky was not going to be able to join him in breaking into the crime scene backstage and see if there were any clues as to the supernatural origin of said death. Because he found out that morning, he had a test. Which he didn't know about and now needed to study for.

After all, it was only a little light trespassing on a crime scene, and wouldn't that just be better off done by a brainy person anyway?

Mark had to sigh and remind himself that he was still dealing with people younger than him, who had yet to mature into the blossoming young adult he'd been since he was five. But, considering he was also a team player, he gave Ricky the stark, sarcastic response he expected and told him not to fail the test. Then, resolved, he headed out into the early morning corridor by himself.

He was used to being around the school when it was quiet, or almost completely abandoned. Though it was most definitely a little spooky, with doors that were normally swinging open silently shut. Halls that normally echoed with the chaotic voices of a few hundred students and staff were completely devoid of sound and life. It was why he often preferred to roam around the Library by himself, his own little private oasis of light in the middle of the dark liminality that surrounded him.

That morning, with street light and soft morning light hand in hand drifting through the windows and the corridors, it was much the same. He could see better, and there were a few tired-looking adults he glimpsed from the corners of his eye, like hungry teacher ghosts in the classrooms – trying to get a head start on an impossible workload for the day. But it was essentially still the same space that should have been filled, but wasn't.

A school as old as Calendar High School had a building that was as warrenous as Hogwarts. This is how he knew, for example, that the boys' and the girls' changing rooms were right next to one another and had two main entrances and exits. The corridor, which had become the 'backstage' of the auditorium and the exits which led directly out to the school field and the netball courts. But what few people realised was that the toilets, which are adjacent to the auditorium and mainly used by English students, also had two entrances. One which led back to the English department that everyone used – and the one which most people assumed was a supply cupboard, but which actually was a second door into the backstage area.

Thus, when he headed into the English toilets – the ladies, of course, it had to bloody be, and made his way to the other side, using his staff key to unlock the door that everyone assumed was a supply cupboard, and slipped into the darkened space behind the stage. He hadn't ventured to the Pageant the night before, but he could hear it from the Library. Now, however, all the cacophony was gone, and it was simply another unlit, darkened space.

Checking carefully that there was no one around, he slipped quietly across to the door to the girls' changing rooms. With a last look at the double doors leading to the corridor on the other side of the backstage, he saw the criss-crossed patterns of the crime scene tape and steeled himself. The descriptions had not been pleasant, but he knew he had a strong stomach.

After everything they had faced so far, who wouldn't?

For the first time in his life, Mark stepped inside a girls-only space, finding himself in the changing rooms and realising, with something like anticlimactic lack of surprise, that it was the mirror opposite of the boys'. It still smelled faintly of human odour and sweat, but other than the fact that there were no wads of tissue paper thrown on the ceiling, it was exactly the same as being in the boys'.

Who knew?

It was not hard to spot the place where it had happened. Though the police had not bothered to do a chalk outline, and the body had long since been taken away to the morgue, a large pool of what he assumed to be blood, and with some discomfort, possibly other bodily fluids, adorned the tiles in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror on one side of the open area. He paused, wondering if there was anything further to be gained.

She was looking into the mirror when it happened, it seemed. Perhaps they were dealing with some kind of entity which could use mirrors? There were plenty of urban legends about them – Bloody Mary being one of the most famous and probably least folkloric. He moved closer, feeling as though eyes were watching him. He tried to dismiss it as paranoia, but then, as he took two steps closer to the mirror, he heard it.

A shuffle, a scuff.

He frowned to himself, wondering if he was hearing some kind of echo. So he stood in place, waiting, listening and breathing through his nose as quietly as he could. The whole place was still; there was nothing and no one around save for whatever spirit still lingered from the events. He couldn't discount the possibility that it had been an echo, or worse, that the school had a rodent problem, but neither rang true.

Then, again. A scuff of a shoe. To his right.

He took two steps forward, hoping against hope that he was wrong, imagining things. Hoping it was not a guard left behind, or somehow worse, a police officer. He'd even take Miss Drake, at least then he could talk circles around her and come up with some excuse for being there – even if she'd probably put it down to him being a rubber-necking danger junkie or something equally vile as fit her world view of young people.

But as he pushed open the door to one of the side rooms – the ones where inner benches lined for smaller groups to change more privately to the open middle area – he frowned. Standing on the other side of the door was an unexpected sight. It was a person, but it wasn't who he expected.

Nikki, the young woman he'd had a very pleasant conversation with the day before in the Library, stood in the changing room. She, too, was not meant to be there – and her shoulders shifted defiantly when she saw him with the resignation of someone who's been caught up to no good. But rather than run, or shout, or excuse, she simply folded her arms and raised an eyebrow in his direction.

"You know this is the ladies' room, right?"

He frowned back at her, a multitude of thoughts running through his mind. Though only a single clear path forward.

"I take it we need to talk?"

* * *

Ricky surveyed the destruction around him and whistled through his teeth. No one had found this one yet; June & Dutton was a small real estate agency after all. In fact, it was a one-woman band, the real estate agent who'd shown them the murder flat the day before – June Dutton – simply splitting up the names because it seemed more professional.

So when, sometime overnight or that morning, she'd been horribly torn apart by something unknown, no one had stumbled in to find her in the morning. Meaning, rather than entering a crime scene sanitised to some effect by the Calendar PD, Ricky found himself standing in a full-blown horror show, replete with things he'd rather not quantify dripping off of the fluorescent lights above.

And all he'd wanted was a brochure for Mark. Something to say sorry for skipping out on crime scene duty.

Was that poetic irony? He'd have to ask Sara.

"Mark, sorry to say, but I have another crime scene," he spoke into his mobile. He moved out of the way of another drip as he tried not to look too closely at the body. Well... parts.

"Decided to skip the test after all?" his friend lightly mocked.

"You know me, between algebra and bloody murder, I'll choose the murder," he shrugged, "Are you gonna listen?"

"Go on..."

"I have some bad news, turns out last night there was a grisly murder on top of the pageant thing," he explained with a sigh, glad suddenly that the blinds of the place had been shut. He'd locked the door, but even so, he had horrible images of some random stranger wandering in and finding him there in the middle of... well, that... "It's your letting agent."

He heard Mark groan on the other side of the phone.

"Bloody perfect," Mark muttered, unaware of how apt his exclamation was. "I'll never find an apartment at this rate. Same as Kimberly?"

"No, there's no dissolving of this one," he answered, taking a quick peek through the blinds. The main street was still quiet, with very few cars passing along. You could hear them coming for ages because of the cobbled section that bounced and made a hell of a racket as it did. Not many people ended up liking to drive it. "Just good old-fashioned ripping apart. There's... bits everywhere."

Oh God, was that an entrail? What even was an entrail? Wasn't that just intestines? He wished he had listened more in biology. Or, actually, probably not.

"I don't like the timing, though," he added.

"You're right, two supernatural occurrences in one day seem more than a coincidence," Mark agreed. He could hear his friend sigh and, strangely, heard the sound of clanking in the background. But he didn't want to get distracted by where his friend was at that moment. "I guess we divide and conquer? I'll continue on the Kimberly trail. Do you think you're able to find whoever might have killed Miss Dutton?"

Ricky cast his eyes over to the back door, where a clawed handprint in blood indicated that they were very likely not dealing with a 'who' but rather a 'what'. And if it left such a bloody handprint and was as monstrous as this... he figured they were likely dealing with something more bestial.

"I think this thing is gonna leave a trail like breadcrumbs," he sighed, "Did you find anything backstage?"

"I'm... well..." his friend sounded almost embarrassed, "I'm about to talk to a source of information."

They agreed to keep each other posted, as Ricky figured it was strange to hear Mark in a café and with a 'source' of information. But he was the brains, and Ricky was the brawn, so between the two of them, it made sense for him to track down the monster.

He glanced down at what he saw was a femur. Now *that* he knew, basic skeletal structure was important when demons were trying to break your bones. But he frowned at its hollowness as he realised, with a growing horror, that something must have sucked the marrow out, like a yoghurt

tube. He grimaced, found the only landline not covered with viscera and dialled in an anonymous tip to the police.

Then, job done, he stepped out of the back door and followed the trail.

Sometimes it sucked to be him.

* * *

Luke sat on the edge of the fountain, the sunlight above him cold with it being winter and all, but not unwelcoming. He didn't want to be inside that afternoon; it would be too stuffy. So for lunchtime, they sat. Sam was next to him, and silence was the only thing passing between them.

"Drake chew you out?" he asked. He had witnessed the fight, and in fact, it had not been so talked about around the school because it had been overshadowed by the death.

"Yeah."

"You and Sara not talking?" he continued.

"Talking, but not nice words."

The silence resumed between them, a pretty recurring theme, he thought. A kind of constant reminder that the two of them were not okay. That the world wasn't okay. His arm was itching in the place where he had been grabbed a few weeks earlier. That meant it was healing – but the image of seeing a woman who could set herself on fire hadn't.

"Do we need to talk?" she asked him.

"Thought we were."

"I meant about us. About me."

"That depends," he shrugged, "You ready to tell?"

He finally turned to look at her, her face framed in the soft sunlight, but she wouldn't return his gaze. So he looked back down at his sandwich, unsure if he wanted to take another bite or if the taste would just be too bitter. Too bland.

"Not yet," she answered quietly, "But I'm getting there. Can you hang on a little longer?"

"How much longer?" he asked. He didn't know how long it had been already. He was like the frog in the water that sat there while it slowly boiled. How hot had it gotten? How close to the end were they?

He kept his own secrets, he knew, but he told himself they weren't his to tell. Still, his bandage itched.

"Not much longer," she sighed.

"I love you, Sam."

He turned to look at her again. The girl he loved. She still could not look him in the face – she instead stared out across the courtyard, her thoughts wholly private and wholly her own.

"And the longer this takes, the more I think that's my problem."

He could see the flicker of hurt in her features, but the only thing she didn't do was disagree.

* * *

Gina's was a café on the edge of the river, just right at the very end of the main street. Beyond the cobbles, thankfully, so they didn't have to listen to that every time a car or truck went past. The nice thing is that the backroom, where Mark and Nikki sat, was south-facing, received a bit of sun, overlooked the river, and was thankfully never too busy.

They ordered a pot of tea between them. It felt civilised, right, even if Nikki did refuse the milk and went for a little lemon and honey instead. He, however, needed some milk, some sugar and time to digest. The nice lady who ran the place – Gina, presumably – brought them the pot, the ceramic cups and left them to it, while outside the river gurgled past.

Neutral ground, he supposed. He poured for both of them, each doing it just the way they liked it, and then sat back – allowing the remaining tea to stew between them. Each of them were

waiting for the other to begin. Each of them were waiting for the other side of the story. A few moments passed, as a small smile played over her features.

Both of them knew the other was waiting, and who would go first.

"So..." he began, "I take it you know more about what's going on than I do. Tell me."

"It's all relative, Mark," she lightly teased. "You know things I don't."

She lifted her cup to her lips and blew gently, the smoke wafting in his direction. She took a sip, ever so slightly, and placed the cup back down. After a moment more of silence, she relented and sat back a little in her chair.

"What do you know about Magick?" she asked him.

"Are we talking pointy hats and brooms? Or ergot poisoning a la LSD?" he answered.

"So that's nothing," she summed up with a playful smirk, "What I'm talking about isn't witches riding broomsticks, I'm talking about Magick Users. Wielders."

Of course, he knew something of Magick, though mostly it was vague references in texts. But he was not about to give that game away fully just yet, not until she laid a few more of her cards on the table.

"Look, there's a war that rages on well beyond your limited scope," she explained, "A supernatural war."

"I'm aware."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

She took another sip of her drink, he did of his, and the two of them took a breath, a pause in their dance. He felt himself smiling inside; this did feel very much like a dance. He didn't feel afraid of her, per se; he didn't sense any ill intent. But there was a playfulness to her answers, to her eyes, and to her mannerisms that was so much different from anyone else he'd ever spoken to about the supernatural. Ricky and the others, as clueless as he had been in the beginning, his Aunt and Uncle, with fear and authoritarianism. Nikki... with ease.

"I'm a Magick User," she admitted. "The Council isn't part of the war, per se. We're sort of pacifists. We don't believe in fighting evil in the world. There are those who do, but if you're part of Council rule – and most Magick Users are – then you don't interfere."

Mark, who had heard the same tune before, felt his guard begin to slip further. Non-interference. Just like the Covenant.

"A wiccan council?" he raised an eyebrow as he took another sip.

"The *Magick* council," she corrected, "The actual Council themselves convene at the Sanctuary, but most of us live in Covens. Throughout the world. Places where those born with magickal ability are raised after we're identified. Those of us born outside of magickal families, anyway."

"How very Hogwarts," Mark commented, using one of the few cultural references he knew. "I performed a spell recently, or an incantation, does that mean I have Magick blood?"

Nikki rolled her eyes, clearly having heard such comments before. He knew damn well he had no magick in his blood, but he needed to know the extent of her truthfulness with him. Otherwise, how else could he know if she lied?

"Any idiot can do spells," she challenged him, picking her words carefully, and with a slight smile, "Assuming they have a powerful enough catalyst to divert the flow of magick anyway. But, incantations will never be as powerful as a native magick user. Those with the blood...and will the training from a skilful tutor, of course."

"Is the blood reserved to Magickal dynasties?"

"Often Magick lineages do share the blood, but there are plenty of those who are born from non-Coven families," she agreed, nodding along, "We try to identify them and help them when they come of age, and their magick begins to manifest." She added with a grin, "Although we don't call them mudbloods."

He sighed, leaning back in his chair and taking another gulp of his tea.

"You know, I think I read a story like this once," he commented, dryly. He saw the first hint of impatience on her face, as her tone began to shift.

"Look, there's a lot to go through, but the basics are Magick is real," she summarised, "I'm a Magick User – please avoid witch, sorceress and especially wiccan, ugh – and I could use your help."

"Why me?" he challenged.

"Aside from the fact you were also found wandering around a crime scene?" she pointed out. "We have seers, rune casters, keep our ear to the ground. We know about the Guide. We know about you. You're working together, right? To fight some of the nasties around your town?"

"Sure, but there's not just us..."

"Well, our records aren't always that accurate," she shrugged. "But I've got a feeling out of the people helping, you're the brains of the operation. Which is kinda why I needed to feel you out the other day."

"You know what's going on?"

"Sure, you don't let out the kind of raw nuclear magicks this guy's doing without tipping us off," she answered.

"So we're talking about a Magick User, right?" he clarified, "But one of these outside of your covens. One who hasn't been trained to use his Magick?"

"Probably doesn't even know what he or she is," she nodded. She lifted her napkin from the side of her teacup and placed it down on the table between them. With her other hand, she lifted the pen he didn't even realise he had from his shirt pocket and began to draw. She started with a circle, with a dot in the middle. "Okay, so the guy is the dot. All magickal energy gives off a signature, right? It kinda influences the area around it on the micro-level but without causing harm."

"The way a microwave still has a radioactive trace area without actually causing any damage?" he asked. She nodded, momentarily impressed.

"Just like that," she agreed, "But whatever he's doing, it's spiked it somehow. He's using his powers without any training, showed up to our seers like a Christmas tree, right here in Calendar.

And because he's obviously untrained and not taking any care, he isn't containing it. It's causing ripples in the world around him. An unstable, undisciplined magickal field can cause all manner of things to happen."

"Such as a beauty queen's face melting off?" he finished the inevitable thought.

"Exactly."

"So how do we know who's next?"

"Therein lies the problem..." she sighed, leaning back from her makeshift drawing. He studied it for a moment, wondering about the implications of everything she'd just told him. Something else was niggling at him, not sitting quite right.

"Why the subterfuge?" he asked. Her eyes widened a little, though she didn't seem offended by the question. "You obviously know who Ricky and I are, what we're doing. Why not reach out to us first? Why the textbooks?"

"Well, I actually *am* a new starter at the sixth form; they have a better curriculum offer than the one more local to my coven," she admitted with a shrug. A playful look returned to her face as she eyed him flirtatiously, "And I also suppose it's a little like why you pretended to play dumb and had me explain all the magick stuff to you."

"I was checking you out."

* * *

Hot blooded, check it and see...

The two of them ignored the radio blaring in the background, driving away their sense of isolation as they tried to keep the darkness at bay. Or some shit like that. Cindy liked her poetry. Jack, meanwhile, figured what they were doing was poetry. Especially since his blood was up, in more ways than one, and he'd finally managed to convince her to get to second base.

"Jack, I don't know," she muttered, pulling away from him and back into the passenger seat.

"Oh come on...."

He hated the whine to his voice, but he couldn't help it. Was she doing this now? Parking up at the end of the road to her dad's farm was *her* idea. She wanted to have a bit of fun; she was the one who took off her top. And *now* she was going to tell him it was too much. And that pout she put on... for God's sake...

"You said you wouldn't pressure me," she reminded him of their conversation the week before. When he'd have said anything just for a snog.

"I'm not, it's just..." he tried to say, but she was already not listening. He could tell by the way she was putting her top back on over her head, hiding what she had previously decided to show to him.

"Hey, come on, don't leave like this..." he begged of her, but Cindy was already on her way out. The door was open, the cold night air rushing in, and he realised how hot the inside of the car had gotten. Yeah, they'd been going pretty heavy on it, even the windows had begun to fog. Dammit.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she told him, now fully dressed and looking once more like a good girl for her father. The great illusion.

Meanwhile, as the door was shut, he was left alone with his raging... well, hormones. He thumped the steering wheel with one hand, overwhelmed with a kind of frustration he couldn't name. Hormones were flooding through his system, and though she didn't owe him anything, it felt like they were finally getting their relationship going. Taking the next step. He knew it was wrong; he didn't want to feel like this. But there was a big difference between what his head knew and what his hormones were screaming.

And the fucking song was getting on his nerves. He slapped at the button with his hand, only to accidentally knock it and turn it higher. In the dashboard light, he saw that his hand was lobster red and frowned. He managed to click on the light above, the door light, and realised it wasn't his imagination or the glow of the dashboard lights.

His hand looked as if he had gotten out of a hot bath, one way too hot and on the edge of a scald. Then it hit him, the sudden pain, that he wasn't cooling down. It was as if the car itself were a microwave, and he were on the turntable.

As his hand bubbled and boiled, steam escaping from inside his arm outstretched, he finally began to scream.

Act III

Mark stepped beneath the tape, thanking the officer. They were lucky Officer Harris had been on duty; they had already chatted a few times. Granted, she thought he was simply a true crime buff and harmless, but still. As he stepped away from the scene, red and blue lights behind them, the whirl of the parked ambulance that was sadly too late, and the car's headlights still shining out into the darkness, he had to take a moment for himself. Even from the distance he was allowed, the heat still radiated from the metal like embers.

"It's him, I can feel it," Nikki muttered as he rejoined her towards the back of the crowd of people gathered. Together they rejoined the main road, walking side by side on the pavement, heading back towards the rows of streetlights of the town. They weren't far, perhaps half a mile, and in the brisk November air it felt refreshing.

Granted, in Calendar, a simple stroll in the dark could be deadly. Yet, he reckoned if everything Nikki had been saying about Magick Users was true, she was perhaps the safest person to go for an evening stroll with.

"His name was Jack Conley," he explained the brief ID he'd gotten from Officer Harris, "He's in the year below you, Captain of the Rugby Team."

"Any connection to the other girl?"

"Beauty pageant queen and ruby team Captain, you'd think so," Mark agreed, but then shook his head, "Other than we all went to the same school..."

"In a one-school town..." she pointed out.

"I admit my understanding of school's hierarchy, but different social circles, different year groups, different classes," he continued, "I can check with Sara, she's like our own Seer for pop culture references and social butterflies."

She paused, shivering a little in the cool night air. He took off his jacket and offered it to her, and with a small smile, she placed it around her shoulders. After the heat near the car, he still had yet to cool down, and didn't mind it. She gave him a grateful smile.

"The ripples aren't random," she pointed out, "It feels... specific, somehow."

"Even though he doesn't realise he's doing it?"

"Sure," she agreed. "I mean, if he's not using his magick on a conscious level, then it makes sense he's subconsciously choosing the people affected. Perhaps focuses of his love or rage... or God only knows. That's if it even is a 'he', though somehow again that feels right."

He frowned, realising as she said it that he'd also picked up the pronoun without facts. He sighed, thinking for a moment how useful it would be if he did have some understanding of the social world of the school. It could potentially have helped.

"I guess I could message Sara," he offered, "And in the meantime, I could check the school records. We could try to look through them, shared classes that kind of thing. See if there's any connections my admittedly limited social knowledge missed." He paused, as something else occurred to him, "That is, of course, unless you have anywhere you need to be?"

She shook her head, smiled, and linked her arm through his. Together, they continued on back to the school, and Mark found himself staying warm, despite the chill in the air. Simple companionship felt nice, even if at the end of their road may have lain more terror.

Life was funny.

* * *

The door slammed behind him, but it didn't matter. It never did. His mum was too far gone, probably in one of her stupors. She'd have gotten home from work at three, opened up the bottle – vodka was her current drink of choice, although really it was whatever was strongest and cheapest.

Sure enough, as Jackson passed the front room, the tellie was on – the signal blurring in and out through their old shitty ariel and the form slumped in the sofa stunk of a medicinal smell.

She was already asleep, and he could hear the snoring. And it was only eight o'clock.

She'd be like that until six in the morning, when she'd wake, take two aspirin and then head back off to the supermarket. Rinse and repeat, and don't ever tell the Job Centre. Fine, let her do that; it wasn't like Dad was going to bring the money in anyway. He'd fucked off around the same time Jackson turned five.

He checked she was sitting up enough in the chair not to choke on her own vomit, then headed up to his room. Their house was small, but it was theirs – his dad's last act was to get rid of the mortgage before they were gone. The place was damp; they couldn't afford to maintain it pretty well with most of his mum's paycheck going on the poison in her hands and the food, but it was theirs.

And some day, when she finally drank herself to death, it would be his. Then would it be his turn?

Well, he didn't plan on having any kids to screw up, so perhaps that would be fine. And, of course, his little secret.

He felt elated inside, despite the night. He rushed up to his attic room, a converted space that was all his – his mother never bothered to climb up the stairs as they were too steep and she was too unsteady on her feet most times she got home. So it really was an unspoiled land, just for him. A place where he could just *be*.

It had started several weeks ago. At first, when he felt the energy pulsing through his fingers, he didn't know what it was. Only that it felt nice, tingly, like when you get into a hot bath on a cold day – on a day when the electricity card still had money on it, mind you, and therefore the water heater could be used.

And the sense that came with it. The sense of something no one else knew about, the sense of something powerful. Something his. Something special. Something so much better than this shitty little town he was sure he would die in.

When he got into his room, he cranked up the stereo, putting on one of his favourite Disturbed CDs. The great thing about his mother passing out so heavily was that she was never bothered by his music. He liked it heavy, he liked it metal, and he liked it loud. Covered up the sounds.

He never stopped to think about what his mother would say if she saw him doing what he was doing. Would she be proud of how powerful her son had become? How special? Or would she be repulsed by it? Would she think him unnatural?

It didn't matter. When he did it, *he* was the one in control. And it felt good. How could that be bad?

He cranked up the music further until he could feel it thudding in his chest, the screaming vocals, the discordant beat. The drums.

So eager was he that he barely reached his bed by the time he touched his hand to his chest. The soft arcs of grey-green light began to slip from the ends of his fingers like lightning and alight on his skin. He didn't even need physical contact anymore; the power, when he relaxed, simply flowed. It was like it *wanted* to flow.

But to anyone looking from the outside of the house, they would simply see an otherworldly light, spilling through the cracks.

* * *

This... thing, was not subtle. And it was a slimer, Ricky had realised that pretty quickly. The blood had trailed out quickly – hadn't gone much beyond the alleyway behind the real estate offices, just a few drops on the floor and another smear on a bin. One of those clawed hands.

After that, it had been a case of follow the drool. At least, he hoped it was drool. He did not nearly know enough about the biology of demonic entities to really know what he was looking at. But it was thick, like half-melted jelly, and mostly clear (save for the unthinkable streaks of pinkish blood still remaining). This thing, whatever it was, must need to stay hydrated.

After its morning breakfast, which still made him shudder to think about, he'd tracked it back into the woods surrounding town. Here, between the dew-covered trees and bushes, he caught occasional glimpses of the slime, but it became a little bit harder to track by that alone. Footprints were clear – well, claw prints – and he realised the thing walked on all fours.

This, again, was something new for him. He'd yet to come across a beast-like creature, and hoped he wasn't having to deal with some kind of mutated bear or something. He'd made a mental note to ask Mark if such a thing was even possible.

Still, his hunch was right, and he had tracked it to a water source; the mud on the banks of the small pond was clear enough, and it didn't seem to mind that the stagnant water was covered with a thick slime of algae. Slime begets slime, he supposed.

By the time the sun was setting in the sky, it was clear it was headed back into town, drawn by something he couldn't quite grasp just yet. It didn't like populated centres, which seemed strange given its intrusion into the real estate office. An anomaly? A mistake? Was it interested in owning a time share in Whaley Bridge? Who knew?

By the time full dark came, he'd seen the thing had blasted through a few backyards, the ones which backed up onto the denser patches of woodland, and given one particularly harrowing rabbit hutch, had himself a little snack between meals. Then it turned back towards the South Side, thankfully towards the more abandoned buildings, and Ricky sighed to himself.

On the one hand, it was a good sign that it was on the South Side. Only criminals – and he supposed other less-than-human monsters – dared to go into the South Side. The creature would be safe. But it also meant the hunt would become quieter, there would be fewer places for him to hide

as well – and he still hadn't glimpsed the thing in full and gauged its threat level. It gave him a sense of nervousness and, strangely, a sense of isolation.

And within that came thoughts of Claire, his fellow hunter. And guilt, though he did everything he could to shake it off and focus.

The thing had headed into an abandoned mill. The red brick façade rose five vaulted storeys above him, the main tower with gaping holes that were once windows, now sore with broken and rotten glass like teeth. The door nearest to him showed more of the slime trail, and so, quietly and cautiously, he entered.

He stood in the pitch black on the other side of the door, in complete silence and stillness, for the longest moment he could muster, reaching out with his mind and senses into the corridor beyond. There was light, pooling through broken windows in some of the side rooms, but in the main corridor where he stood, there was nothing. And therefore, there could be anything.

Sure, Ricky, wander through a dark mill in the middle of the night after the marrow-bix monster, he thought to himself, scalding actually. *Idiot.*

Without him moving, there was a shuffle, almost imperceptible. Of course, a building open to the elements would probably have all sorts of creepy crawlies nesting in it, or rats scuttering around – but this sounded bigger, heavier. From the room to his right. Then it stopped.

Whoever invented creepy noises needs shooting, he thought.

He stepped slowly and carefully across to the edge of the doorway, where moonlight and streetlight made love and became a sickly pale orange. There, again, a drip. Drool? Was the thing watching him? Hungry? He suppressed a shudder and unsheathed his dagger, looking for movement or shadow in the room beyond. There was none.

The movement, when it came, was from his left, on the opposite side of the door. A slow scraping sound, as something against the wall began to slide from where it had been propped. He tried to move, only to find his foot making an awfully loud scraping sound of its own, as the body fell towards him.

A human body, a large man, dressed in a security uniform. His glazed eyes told him what had happened, as did the blood strewn across the man's neck. His body fell from where it had been propped and knocked into Ricky, who felt warm fluid gush onto him from the recent kill. He cried out wordlessly, more from the surprise of the moment (and admittedly a bit of disgust) as he tried to pull himself out from under the man.

But the thing had been waiting, the low growl signifying how close it was. In the darkness of the corridor, there was a sense of sudden rush, of movement, as the thing came for him. He couldn't see it, it was far too black for that, but he felt something large and hairy leap at him, catching one bone-sharp claw into the nape of his jacket and dragging him along the floor. Thankfully, he was free of the weight of the dead security guard, but he was also now completely at the mercy of this thing.

The creature seemed to invert gravity, scaling up the nearby wall with incredible speed and dexterity. *Must be the claws*, Ricky thought to himself, as he struggled to ram home the dagger in his hands. At first, air, then hair or fur, and with the third attempt, he hit something solid. Something like the beast's flesh. It shrieked an unnatural shriek directly into his ear, and dropped him like he was a hot pan, and the thing didn't wear oven gloves.

Ricky felt suspended for a moment, then landed hard on the dirty ground, the wind knocked out of him and bits of broken rubble and brick stinging into his back and legs in different places. He lay there for a moment, as movement indicated the creature running off, further into the mill, coughing and attempting to regain his breath amongst the dust that had been kicked up.

"Sure, Mark," he muttered out loud to himself, sarcastically, "I'll find the Godzilla monster. You investigate the nice, comfortable melting..."

Knowing he had to move before the creature got away, he pushed himself up on his hands into a seated position, only now able to see his school uniform pants in that horrid moonlight – now covered with that same horrible drooly slime. A thought occurred to him then about what would happen when his older brother and guardian learned that he had ruined *another* pair of school trousers.

"I need a new dry cleaner."

* * *

Nikki's fingers hovered over the keyboard, while nearby Mark paged through the files she had already managed to print. Class timetables – it turned out Kimberly was retaking her GCSE English – and other bits from their personal files. She hoped they would find a connection soon. She liked Mark, liked the way he thought, and honestly, even more. So, spending time with him wasn't a problem.

In fact, since arriving in Calendar, she had finally found someone she could talk to, which was nice. Even if she didn't fully understand him yet, it was clear he still didn't fully trust her. That was cool, that's just the way it was.

But she was also feeling anxious, blossoming in the centre of her chest and making her worry about what was coming next.

"This is taking too long," she muttered to herself as she clicked through a few more pages. The school's computer system was remarkably archaic, and it was clear the librarian wasn't going to be helpful in figuring out how to quicken the process. He'd already said he was at the limit of his knowledge when he suggested Drake's office was the place to access it.

She had asked him why Drake didn't lock her office, and he simply pointed out she took care of what was valuable – pointing to the large padlock on the nearby bureau. Student files? Nah, probably her liquor cabinet.

"I don't suppose your Coven's seers could give us a street address?" he half-joked next to her.

"Oh, please, half of 'em don't even know what MSN Messenger is," she replied, with a smile. It was a shared smile, and she found her thoughts drifting off to him again. He was enraptured with scanning the sheets, while she let her thoughts go elsewhere. He really was quite handsome, she

determined, and the fact that he obviously didn't know or care – the jumper with elbow patches kind of gave that away – kind of made him even cuter.

Jeez, what was happening to her? One day in a High School sixth form, and she was already fawning like some... well, okay, so she was a teenage girl, but that still didn't make it right. It was like hormones she thought she'd conquered were taking what she was feeling and...

Oh God, that was it.

"Are you feeling... funny?" she asked him, out of the blue. He looked up at her, frowning a little.

"Manslaughter doesn't bring out my inner comedian, no," he shrugged.

"No, like, funny – funny funny?"

He shook his head; clearly, he wasn't understanding what she meant.

"Look, Magick Users can sense it, right – because it's all the same energy field," she explained, "So, when we're close, or they're particularly powerful, you kind of get a bit of magickal bleed through. And I think, uh, well I think I'm starting to feel affected." The concern in his eyes was kind of sweet as she reassured him, "Not in a melty way, I'll be fine. But I think it's starting to amplify what's already there."

"And what is there?" he asked her. Innocently, of course, but it made her face flush red, and she had to stand and turn away all the same. How could she tell the boy she had just met, whom she kind of found sweet and attractive, that she had the irresistible urge to grab him and plant a kiss on him so deep it would make his head spin? And that it was all down to magick?

"That's not important," she dismissed, "But it kinda makes me think I know what he's doing. He's not doing spells against people, he's turning it back on himself." She managed to turn back, as if the exorcism of saying it out let some of her feelings dial down a little. "And because he's turning it back in on himself, it's like an arcing electricity box, it's... amplifying what's already there. And because he's unstable and untrained... "

"It's leaking out and affecting other people?" he finished for her. She nodded, but he was already deep into thought. "Maybe we're going at this the wrong way, then. Perhaps, instead of looking at the victims from a social proximity standpoint, we should look for who doesn't belong. Who's on the outside? Someone hanging around looking in, obsessing in some way, they'd be our prime suspect." His eyes lit up, "The yearbook."

He took her by the hand, a single touch that flared a kind of flutter in her that she quickly tried to push back down again. Magickal influence or not, she was not about to have her hormones dictate her actions. She was seventeen, damn it.

"So a sad loner addicted to Magickal doping?" she muttered, "Isn't this a lovely town."

* * *

Unlike previous times, he knew he was dreaming. He could feel the cold sweat on his brow, the sense of the blanket around his feet tangled as he lay on the sofa. He could even feel the fabric on his cheek. But he couldn't see any of it. He felt feverish, delusional, as if he were flying but still firmly touching the ground.

Luke looked around him, and even though he could hear himself moan in the real world, he also could not. He was standing in front of the school, Sam in front of him. She wore the same red dress from her birthday party, the same night they took the next step in their relationship. The last night he remembered feeling completely free of all the sadness and confusion that seemed to follow them since.

But there was something different. Underneath the strap of her dress, on her shoulder, was a tattoo that wasn't there before. Black, stark, some kind of a bird.

"Don't you want me?" she asked him, her voice resonating in his head, reverberating with an echo he wasn't entirely sure was there.

Her eyes turned a dark, complete black as he looked at them.

"Why don't you want me?" she asked again, this time in a deeper voice. One that was not her own, one that crept from ancient graveyards.

The raven tattoo turned its head, its blackened beak pushing out of the edges of her skin and turning to him. It bulged, and then it cawed, and then they were gone. Now they were standing in the graveyard. The mists were so thick he couldn't see beyond the next few graves, so he couldn't tell which they were in. Calendar, unsurprisingly, had many. He could still feel the couch cushion on his cheek, but he also couldn't. It was fresh air. It was raining. It was a cold and sad day in front of the grave he couldn't read.

He stood in black, a suit and tie. Nearby, Sam's dress was black, no raven tattoo. She was not looking at him; she was looking at the grave he couldn't read.

"It's not a dream," she told him, solemnly.

"I don't know what's eating me alive," he said.

"The same thing that eats us all."

She looked up at him, her eyes still jet black. Her voice is normal, that sweet – okay sometimes sharp – voice. She looked with love, but how could eyes of black project love? They were hollow pools of void.

"You know the Raven wants you, don't you?"

The bird was back, standing upon the gravestone in front of them, cawing loudly. Insistently. But its eyes, as black and bird-like as they were, seemed to be laughing at him.

"And what wants you?"

"I do. You do. It does. You're all the same."

He looked back down at the grave, suddenly convinced now he knew who was in there. There was still no inscription. Or was there? The vague outline of words. He knew the person who was in there, but he also didn't know them.

"He's dead because of me," he said, not knowing why he said it.

"You're dead because of you," Sam corrected him.

The rain intensified as thunder rumbled above and lightning flashed.

"Help me," he asked of her. She looked down at the grave again.

"Band of brothers, goin' round," she said, "out comes none, they all fall down."

He turned to look at her, only to be greeted by the cold sight of metal rushing towards him.

He was smacked in the face with the flat side of a shovel and felt himself careening down. How could it feel so soft like the cushion, but so hard and cold like the end of a shovel? Space and time moved around him as he fell and fell, and gravity dragged him down into the grave now open.

He landed on his back in the muddy water, grit flooding into his mouth. It all tasted so real. Sam stood above him, holding the shovel which she loaded up with a small mound of sodden graveyard dirt.

"Toy soldiers need winding up again," she told him. She dropped the first load.

He felt the sodden earth against his face, and there was no relenting.

* * *

The roadside café was supposed to close at nine, and it was already a quarter too, but Dale and his buddies weren't about to leave. This wasn't right. What happened to Jack, none of it was right.

"Who the hell would do something like this?" Dale muttered to himself. He hadn't even bothered to order another Coke, but the waitress, stupid woman that she was, brought it anyway. He told her he wasn't paying for it, and she eyed the door nervously. He knew she hated having the High School kids in there, but unless she was going to get herself bouncers, she'd have to fucking deal.

Tonight was not the night for any of this shit. His friend had died. And they were angry. So damn angry.

"One sick dickhead, that's who," Mikey said from his right.

Yeah, some sicko had done this. The police had said he was found dead, but the rumours were already starting to spread. Someone posted on their team's messenger that he was boiled alive, like someone had thrown boiling oil on him or something. First that hot chick Kimberly, he thought, and now this? Now his best mate in the whole world? Their captain?

"We find 'em, and we kill 'em," he said suddenly, out loud, feeling the calm red mist descend over him. It felt right to say, it felt like the truth.

"How?" Gaz, the youngest of them and the one who'd been on the team the least amount of time, asked. He'd best be careful; he'd get a slap if he didn't fall in line. "The police'll do that."

"Those slob's'll do jack shit," Mikey told him, solemnly. Good ol' Mikey, he got it alright.

"I'll bet you it was one of those fucking geeks," Dale muttered to the others.

"Jealous," Mickey agreed, nodding along.

They all knew it. Being on the Rugby team made you popular. Being hot made you popular. Being with them, their mates, and everyone around them made you popular. And then once you were popular, you decided who else was. But there was always that group of dorks who hung around. The ones on the edges of things, the ones who looked inwards and wished they could be popular. Wasn't his fault they couldn't get their shit together. Wasn't his fault; they did their homework, stayed at home and did whatever their mummy told them. That was their own shit, not his.

Not... not Jack's.

Oh God, the pain and the misery were too much. So he replaced it, he let something else take over. It felt like anger, like rage, but it was tinged with cold steel. He narrowed his eyes.

"Right, we find 'em," Dale nodded slowly. "And we bloody well kill 'em." As if it wasn't clear to his two amigos, he added, "For Jack."

"Hey, isn't that one of them over there?" Gaz mentioned, nodding his chin to the corner of the diner where indeed one of the geeky types sat with their laptop. Some nerd was doing his homework instead of going out there and making out with a girl like a proper lad. There were other

names for them, but right now, he didn't care. The guy didn't even notice them; he was looking at his science book instead.

Dale's eyes narrowed, as inside him, something flamed.

Or amplified.

* * *

The Yearbook Office was a grand title for a second-floor English classroom, where Mark and Nikki sat side by side at two tables they had pushed together – and on which the various printed photos were splayed. The negatives were still safely locked away, but at least for now, they could pour across the various unguarded shots of the school that had been taken throughout the year. And as Mark looked at them, he began to realise just how many of them actually had Kimberly Kitty and Jack Conley featured prominently.

"God, there are a lot of photos," he muttered, as Nikki obviously came to the same conclusion.

"Are you sure this is the right tactic?"

"I'm telling you, this is how we find the killer," he assured her, beginning to move some of the more obviously unrelated photos – a shot of Miss Drake glaring at some Year 7s on Sports Day, for example – out of the way.

"You do this a lot?" she asked him, casually, as she began to do the same.

"More than you might imagine," he sighed, "Just usually I'm looking in a good book for a horrible demon."

"You know, in the coven, we have the seers do this kind of work."

"And then I would be rendered obsolete," he joked, dryly, "Wouldn't want that."

He smiled at her, and she smiled back. She really did have a lovely smile; it kind of lit up her face and her eyes, batting back the darkness by more than a comfortable margin. He felt grateful for her company.

"Perhaps we should look at these..." she began, reaching her hand to the middle of the photos as he did the same. Their hands came together over a photo of the previous year's school performance (a disturbing rendition of The Iceman Cometh that seemed to include the X-Men). He felt sudden goosebumps along his arm, as though she were electric, and his breath was taken away.

Before he could say anything, she moved over to him and planted one tender kiss on his lips. He could taste a soft cherry from her lipstick, then pulled back, her look clouding as he did so, as realisation came to him. He felt embarrassed and knew the moment called for a delicate touch he had never believed he possessed.

"The Magick is only amplifying what's already there," she said quietly. He understood, he knew that, but he gently shook his head.

"For you, yes," he answered, "and, uh, if we are to be, uh, frank, I am also very attracted to you." He swallowed thickly and pushed himself to say the next part, "But as one of us is subject to some external influence, perhaps we should wait until that variable has been eliminated."

"Such a gentleman," she answered, though not with reproach, with a smile. "I am in control, but I get what you're saying." She dropped him a wink, "But that was magick in more ways than one."

He felt his cheeks flush with colour and had never been happier in his life than when his phone began to ring.

* * *

All was quiet in the abandoned mill, the rats went about their ratty business, and the bats nesting in the eaves were snuggling in with bellies full of insects. Heck, maybe even the ghosts were having a chill-out night watching the dead's version of *Friends*.

All that peaceful silence was shattered when one of the already rotten doors burst open, and a projectile-Ricky was flung backwards through them, landing halfway across a half-broken desk left behind by some pencil pusher in the thirties. It splintered a little beneath him, but not completely, as he turned it into a roll and landed on his feet.

He was angry, he was sweaty, he was pumped up on adrenaline, and he was getting ready to use all his super-powered Guide strength BS to take down this creature from another feature once and for all. Nearby, a curtain pole from who knew when lay discarded, so he grabbed it with one hand, raised it like a lance, and turned towards where the hairy, multi-armed and legged beast snarled at him from beyond the door it just threw him through.

This thing was nasty, fast and probably hopped up on bone marrow like a monkey on meth.

"For Sparta!" he cried, raising the curtain-pole lance and racing forward at the beast. He drove the end home towards its neck, but the thing didn't even flinch. And why didn't it flinch? It must have known it was not going to work. He drove the pole towards the hollow of what he assumed was a neck, considering this is where its mouth with too many teeth was attached to – and instead, the end of the wooden curtain pole shattered in his hands against a semi-visible shimmer.

This thing had a sodding force field?

Having thrown everything into his ineffectual killing blow, he had no chance to defend as one of the creature's gargantuan, clawed hands backhanded him. He felt the claws rake across his chest, slashing his last remaining good school tie – and likely a bit of his chest as well - and fell backwards. It snarled, and the damn thing had the audacity to turn and slink away further into the mill.

"Bloody bastard!" he shouted after it, scrambling in his pocket for his mobile. It took two rings before Mark answered.

"Ricky, what's up?" Mark asked, sounding casual and remarkably alert. Of course, he was; he was investigating a melting.

"What's up?!" he repeated, furious, "What's fricking up?! Monster Cujo won't bloody well die!"

"I take it you're not having luck, then?" Mark verbally shrugged through the phone.

"Oh, I've found it," he carried on, using his free hand to pull himself back up to standing. "But every time I make a killing blow, it seems to have itself a personal force bubble of protectiveness. Sure, I can nick it here and there, but when I go for the big finish... guess who can't finish!"

"Ask him if there was any shimmer," he heard a feminine voice, some way away from the phone, ask him. Ricky frowned. Was Mark there with a girl? Was he being serious right now?

"Nikki asks if there was a shimmer around it?" Mark repeated, unaware that he could clearly hear everything going on in their little love nest.

"Sure, that's what I mean by a force field," he snapped back, sarcastically. He knew he was being harsh, but he was also just reacting to understandable circumstances. He began to move back towards the door, "This isn't *Star Trek* after all. And who the hell is Nikki?"

There was a momentary pause as he heard the shuffling sound of a phone being handed over, and the voice that came through next was unfamiliar, young and female. But authoritative, so he listened.

"Hey, Ricky, I'm helping Mark, I'm from the Lancashire Magick Coven," she explained, "We think the deaths are from some kind of residue from an untrained magick user using his powers on himself."

"Is that like witches and stuff?" he frowned.

"We can get into the whole big explanation later," she dismissed, "For now, I think you just need to keep that thing occupied to keep it from killing anyone else."

"Killing *it* would really achieve that."

"I'm afraid you can't."

"Come again?"

He peered into the darkness beyond, hearing the thing moving around in the rooms further on. So far, it seemed relatively content to stay inside the mill, which he figured was good, well, except

if anyone came looking for the nightwatchman. But it was only a matter of time before it got tired of their little cat-and-angry-mouse routine and decided to wander for fresher game further in the town.

And now this 'Nikki' was saying they couldn't kill it? Great.

"There are some species of demonic parasites which feed on magickal energy," she told him, "The guy who's doing this might not even know it's happening, but it's likely latched itself onto the raw magickal energy he's emitting the way sharks are drawn to blood. It sort of acts as a familiar, kind of boosting the effects of the magick, but in return, the magick it siphons off also protects it."

"And in English?"

"The creature won't be killable until we stop this guy from using his powers," she summarised.

"And how the hell are you going to do that?"

"Look, it's too complicated to get into right now," she again dismissed, "But I need you to distract that creature and keep it from hurting anyone while we hunt down this guy and stop him. Can you do that?"

He got what she was saying, down on some deep level, but he really didn't have to like it. He was, after all, the one in the firing line. But he wasn't about to say that; he wasn't about to give it all up and quit.

"Sure, I can make sure the only person it maims and hurts is me," he answered brightly, if slightly sarcastically. Whether she got it or not, she signed off,

"Thanks, you'll know when we've succeeded."

They hung up at the same time, as Ricky slid the mobile back into his pocket. Okay, so the game had just switched from hunt to distraction, and though he wasn't entirely sure whether he was the Tom or the Jerry in this scenario, he was going to have to be creative.

The creature roared nearby, and Ricky silently prayed they would hurry the hell up.

* * *

Luke knelt on all fours in the puddle growing, the muddy water up beyond his wrists in the grave that wasn't a realm. In the dream he knew was a dream but couldn't escape. It continued to lash against his back, his back, which was really in his living room. Above him, the shadow of Sam had gone, and he was alone.

Alone in a filling grave, alone with the possibility of drowning in cemetery mud. His strength left him, and he fell to his side, pain shooting through him. He couldn't pull himself up; he was stuck, and all he could do was float.

He heard the flutter of wings and saw the shadow above. It descended, the Raven, its beak glistening and wet and curved. Sharp.

He felt tiny scratchy feet land on his chest. Its talons, sharp, dug into the flesh and tore through his shirt. His funeral shirt. It pecked for his chin, drawing a dribble of blood from the end of it. Sharp, real pain bit in deep. Pain, unlike anything he'd ever felt in a dream. He tried to reach for it, to bat it away, to get rid of it – but his hands fell off the slickened blackened feathers of its body.

And what he couldn't see, only feel, was what was slowly beginning to appear on his body in the real world.

On his chest, thin streams of crimson, three on either side. And from his chin? A dribble of blood.

Act IV

Jackson lost all sense of time in his daze; he always did. As he sat on the end of his bed, the music thumping from song to song, even that didn't anchor him in the present. The power, the raw and untainted power which flew from his hands and turned inwards, fed on itself, and he felt lightheaded, elated. He had never done drugs or touched a drop of drink, unlike his mum, but he guessed this is what it would feel like. There was no pain, no troubles, nothing could touch him.

He could do anything. He could *be* anything. The world didn't matter.

The people who caused him pain didn't matter. They were small. Human. Powerless.

All of them.

A face contorts in pain, screaming, blood running down the boy's chin.

He stumbled, slightly, his light flickering. The image had come to him so suddenly, so swiftly, but like a blink had gone. Something was changing, though; his power flickered a little in his hands, strangely.

Screaming, screaming, the sounds of breaking glass. Someone cries a name, someone else cowers.

He felt himself frown, felt the pressure of the real world beginning to cave in. To become itself once more. His power fading, the light fading. Because he couldn't concentrate, it was too strong. He had to cut it off; something was happening. What he didn't like was the clarity it brought.

A loud thud, a slamming sound, pain.

It is him, he has fallen forward onto the ground, landing on his hands and feet on his uncarpeted floor. Solid wood, the light around him had faded and gone away. It was still there; he could feel it brimming all around him, the air charged with him. It felt... well, just like him. But he'd been knocked off course, he'd been distracted by...

By visions.

It came to him then with sudden clarity. His power, it made him so incredibly amazing and so incredibly untouchable... but had it touched others? The images, which, while he was in the middle of his session, were... disturbing and disjointed, but as his conscious mind began to process them, he realised what they meant.

Kimberly. Was that him?

The heat, the pain, the blood, was that him?

Suddenly, the final image came to him: the breaking class, the thud, the thumps, the screaming. Something else was happening now. He didn't know how he knew, but he felt it. He had to move, he had to... well, he had to *see*. To confirm what he believed to be happening was actually happening. Yet, as he pulled on his boots, he began to wonder.

What did it mean if it was?

* * *

Melanie Munroe was over this. She'd been waitressing for like five years, and in all that time, she had never gotten used to the kids in this town. They were usually loud and obnoxious, never tipped anything worth a damn, and hardly ever did what they were asked to do. The few times she managed to get Vince, the chef, to drag his intimidating arse out of the kitchen, the place pretty much had to be on fire.

She had an uneasy feeling that night was about to be an 'on fire' night.

She hadn't liked the looks of the lads when they came in. They seemed raw, angry, inward. They took a booth in the corner, ordered a Coke, and began to talk in conspiratorial whispers. She knew them, though not by name, regulars. Rugby Team, she thought – considering they brought in over a dozen of them every now and then, sometimes still in their team uniform and still streaked with mud from the field.

And it was always *she* who had to clean that up.

"Hey, dork, what are you doing?" she heard one of the lads ask. She turned from where she stood behind the counter and saw that the three boys had moved over to the fourth, the one who was reading from his science textbook and doing his homework. Vince's lad, who would stay until they were closed and locked up for the night and head home with his dad.

"Nothing," the kid said, looking up like a deer in headlights.

One of the follower boys, the taller one, sneered at him and picked up his textbook.

"You readin' something?" he asked, not bothering to ask politely. "Hey, smart shit. It tells you how to kill someone and get away with it?"

"What? No!"

Her stomach dropped. Things were going from bad to worse, and she didn't know what to do. There were a few other customers there, most of them sitting with their bills and preparing to pay, but they were pretending not to notice. For fucks sake, wasn't that what she'd been trying to do? But she realised she couldn't just stand there anymore.

"Hey, boys..." she called over and began to come around from behind the counter.

"Stay the fuck out of this," the lead boy, the one with the meanest face, snarled at her. Having 'put her in her place' (such a prick), he turned back to the kid they were ganging up on and said, "You're gonna confess, or we're gonna beat it out of you."

"Confess to what?" Vince's kid asked, scared and confused. Het let out a cry as the front of his t-shirt was seized, and the leader boy yanked him out of his booth and into the middle of the dinner. Even the wholly disinterested began to turn around at that point, drawn by the sound and the commotion and – she thought grimly – the spectacle of viewing violence.

"Killing our friend, you sicko!" his taller mate screamed in the boy's face.

She felt the reassuringly familiar bulk of Vince next to her, the sound having drawn him finally out of the kitchen he'd been shutting down for the night. Thank God she hadn't had to get him; she didn't want to leave the situation alone. It seemed... explosive.

"Vinnie, should I call the police?" she asked him.

"We're not going to have a problem here, are we, boys?" he asked them, his voice soft and low and deadly. She had heard him a few times like that before, and undoubtedly, the sight of his boy half-dangling from the hands of some uppity teen was making him consider crossing a few lines.

"Not if you mind your own business," the lad snarled.

"Hey," Vince told him gruffly, taking several steps towards them, "I think you'd better get out of here, right now."

She didn't quite know how the violence erupted, but it did. Vince's kid was shoved back, the jock jumped for Vince, and Vince went to hit him back. Others began to run, and the two other boys joined in. It was as if chaos suddenly broke out in the dinner that night, and Melanie began to scream.

And none of them noticed, out of the window, a figure in the shadows. A young man with a death metal t-shirt, watching the implosion of anger, with a slow smile beginning to creep across his face.

* * *

Mark stood at the doorway to the admittedly run-down house and knocked, without hope. The TV was on in the front room, and he could hear the televised voices from where he stood. The house, a triple-storey detached house on the corner of the bad part of town – or so they called it – was already frayed around the edges. The grass of the front lawn was untamed, with clear bits of detritus and rubbish that had been thrown from the street or blown in by the wind and never removed. The curtains were all closed, and the paint was flaking from the window frames and even the front door.

Nikki stood next to him as he knocked again.

This was the residence of Jackson Wells. As they scoured the photos, they realised the ones of Kimberly and Jack all had one thing in common – they were taken by one person. The

photographers catalogued who had done what by writing their initials on the pieces, so they could keep track of them – presumably to claim credit later. It was their strongest lead, and it hadn't taken long to find his address in the school system.

Drake never needed to know how he sometimes had to use his admin logon. If she even knew how much of the system she'd let the school librarian access. Thank God he was on the side of good.

He sighed and pointed to the door handle.

"Are you able to... y'know?"

"You want me to use magick to break and enter?" she asked him, raising an eyebrow.

"The house of a rogue and potentially dangerous magick user?" he mirrored, "I feel confident in my ethics."

She nodded in agreement, he stepped aside, and she waved her hand across the outside. He saw a flash of a pale blue, almost lilac energy, and heard the obvious click of the door. He was suitably impressed.

"What else can you do?"

"Tip of the iceberg, darlin'," she joked with a flirtatious wink – now he had seen it, he could no longer unsee it – and so Mark took the lead. He stepped through the door first, listening out for the sounds of movement – or recriminations. He started a little when Nikki patted him on the behind, and he shot her a sharp look. Time and place.

Of course, he had to remind herself that she was somewhat affected. But wait, did that mean she wanted to smack his backside? No, he decided to push that thought away and examine it in detail later. Or not. Perhaps introspection was not the answer at times.

"Hello?" he called out, as he rounded the corner and saw through the open door into the living room. It was clear here was where the sound was coming from – the TV he had heard from outside. It was also responsible for the flickering light as it moved from brightly coloured advertisement to brightly coloured advertisement.

But there was more, and it was Nikki who was the first one to comment on it.

"Oh God, do you smell that?"

He did. The strong scent of alcohol mingled with a kind of rotten smell. One he had, unfortunately, had the displeasure of coming across before. It was the scent of death.

As he approached the figure slouched in the chair, he knew. Even before coming around the front to gaze upon the face of the woman who had once been Mrs Wells, he was clear there was no hope. Her skin was pale, her eyelids half-closed, and the bottle of some cheap liquor spilt around her feet, responsible for the medicinal scent.

"She's dead," he confirmed. For a moment, he thought Nikki was going to stay in the corridor and was glad that she didn't need to see this. But she surprised him by entering the living room and coming around to join him.

"Has been for a while, I think," she said softly.

"How out of it do you have to be to not notice something like this?" he wondered aloud, "Unless... do you think he killed her on purpose?"

"I think she was the focus of some of his negative feelings," she answered, nodding towards the half-empty bottle of booze. "She was probably his first unintended victim."

"And he didn't know?" he asked sceptically.

"He's turning magick in on himself, self-anaesthetising, self-gratifying," she shrugged, "It isn't about the rest of the world, it's only about himself. I suppose he was so... 'high' for lack of a better word, he didn't notice, no."

Mark looked down at the body of the woman in front of him with compassion, with sorrow.

"I guess not every monster has horns," he muttered.

The rest of the house was dark for their grim journey, as they slowly made their way up the stairs and eventually discovered the attic room that was most like Jackson's bedroom. His personal sanctuary. The stairs were lowered, with no one there to violate his privacy; why wouldn't they be?

He went first, Nikki second, and they found the room empty. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or upset, only that it made things more complicated.

The room was like any other teenage boy's room, he assumed. It was personal, filled with the things he liked. Mark's own had been filled with books, a place to read and study. Jackson's was scruffy, filled with CDs, a massive stereo and posters of bands with incredibly disturbing names and visual logos. Were people aware that motorbikes didn't normally melt like that?

He frowned when he noticed the far wall – and there, their smoking gun. Pictures. Hundreds of them. Picture after picture of people from school. Some were obviously taken for school-sanctioned reasons, others were more casual, taken in between classes or from across the quad. So many of them, all of them. People he knew and recognised, and people he didn't. None were inappropriate, per se, and none had been marked or defaced in any way. But there they were, people.

The masses.

The ones to whom the boy did not belong.

"Look at the people he has here," Nikki whispered, the place seeming too heavy and laden with atmosphere to speak any louder. As if in doing so, they may invoke the dead sleeping below. "Kimberly, Jack. Look who's he's obsessed with – the beauty pageant queen and the jock." She crossed the distance of the attic and held one hand over them, as if she could feel the emotions of the people within them. "He has a fascination with them because he wants to be them. He wants to control their lives. I think he stalks them, thinks about them every waiting moment because he doesn't have what they have. But also, they don't have what he has. Power."

"All very fascinating," he answered quietly, "but it hardly changes our predicament – where is he?" She shrugged, clearly as unsure as he. He stared at the photos for a long moment, until a thought began to blossom. "He likes to watch. From a distance. Perhaps he's sensed what's happening and wants to... witness it?"

"But how do we know who's being affected next?" she asked him. He pointed to several of the photos, the ones of Jack Conley and his friends.

"Jack's friends," he explained. "He's there with them in pretty much all of the photos – they were inseparable." She didn't seem convinced, but he was beginning to piece it together. "All of the deaths – at least the ones we know about – they have happened when the subjects of his focus were going through periods of powerful emotion. You said yourself, his magicks amplify emotions in the targets of the people he's obsessed with..."

"And Magick Users and Sensitives, sure," she agreed.

"Right, Kimberly dies in front of a mirror, just after winning a beauty pageant, very likely filled with a kind of self-interested pride," he continued, "Jack boiled to death in his car when he was with his girlfriend. And I kind of got the sense from the Officer, they were in something of a lover's lane situation."

"And Jack's friends will be filled with grief and anger, right?" she finished for him, completing the investigative thought.

"It makes sense."

"But why them and none of the others?"

"Well, I recognise some of them," he agreed, "Luke Cross, Julie Winters and Sam Summers are there in a few, but I think we're best narrowing it down and taking a shot. I think it's Jack's friends, they're our best lead – and I think I know where they are."

He tapped his finger against a few of the photos, and saw her eyes widen as she realised. In quite a few of the photos of Jack and his friends, they weren't at the school. They were chilling out, after a game, burgers and fries – at the local roadside diner.

* * *

By the time they arrived at the diner, the chaos was evident from the inside. Shouts, screaming and commotion – along with the sound of breaking glass – was a cacophony from outside. And as Mark raced up to the front, Nikki keeping pace with him, he realised they needed to act quickly.

“Is this a diner or a wrestling ring?” she commented.

Mark’s eyes caught sight of Jackson, recognisable from his recent school records photo, standing off at the back of the car park. He pointed, though Jackson’s eyes were focused inside the diner, watching the chaos unfolding in front of him. And smiling.

“It’s him.”

“We should stop them in there before they hurt someone,” she reminded him.

“Or themselves,” he agreed.

“I’ll get Jackson.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” he asked her, sudden concern rising in his voice. She was already walking in Jackson’s direction, but as he asked, she turned and, while still walking backwards, smiled that beautiful, slightly cheeky smile at him. As she raised one hand, he was reminded of who she’d said she was in the first place, as the same blue-lilac coloured light danced around her fingertips.

“Trust me, I can hold my own,” she promised. She turned back to her quarry, “Hey, Jackson!”

He noticed her, and the chase was afoot, while Mark turned his attention back to the diner. As he rushed in through the door, he saw the place had descended into madness, but he took a second to take it all in before he could act. There were seven people in the diner. A man in a huge, greasy apron was on the floor with one of the jocks, attempting to badly pummel him with his fists. With the space between booths not being that great, he wasn’t getting big swings in. He was also hindered by the second boy on his back, clinging around his neck.

To one side, a young, somewhat geeky-looking boy was sitting atop a third jock in a rugby shirt with the Calendar High colours and wildly pouring tomato ketchup from a squeeze bottle all over the guy's face. From where he stood, two customers huddled under one of the tables.

"Hey, everybody, stop!" he shouted out, with very little hope that it would work.

"They've all gone mad," a woman screamed, and he realised the eighth figure, dressed in a waitress uniform, was huddled behind the counter, on the phone.

Of those fighting, none of them was paying any attention to anything else, and all of them were clearly determined to cause the maximum amount of harm. It didn't even appear to matter who was fighting whom anymore – judging by the two boys in the rugby tops who were leap-frogging one another while one tried to hit the chef.

He spied something in the spilt contents of the other customer's handbag and so rushed forward, with a plan finally in mind. Her eyes wild, she looked up at him from under the table as he apologised,

"I just need to borrow this."

With the spray can in hand, he ran over to the ketchup-drenched boy first, and when the geeky one finally noticed him, a look of feral anger in his eyes, Mark depressed the button on the top of the canister and sent a jet of pepper spray into his eyes. The boy screamed and went for his eyes as the pain took its immediate effect, but it did the job of disabling him, as he pushed the lad off of the other so he landed in a booth, now trapped between the chair and the table, trying to rub the liquid out of his eyes.

The lad on the ground was already incapacitated with red eyes – and likely with mustard, given the yellow streaks too.

Turning his attention to the other tableau, the waitress rushed over to him, handing him a cold frying pan as he frowned at her. He didn't have time to think, as the two boys were beginning to realise he was there. The one on the back of the other was flung off when the main guy, whom he recognised vaguely as maybe being a D name. Darryl, Dean, Dale? Whoever he was, he decided to

rush at him, so, feeling like a cartoon character, Mark bonked him on the top of the head with the flat part of the pan.

He needn't have worried about doing it too hard; the boy looked instantly dazed and sat down, while the one on the ground, who began to come for him, suddenly stopped and looked around him with confusion.

He chucked the frying pan away from him, and then the pepper spray back to the customer, who managed to catch it and looked breathlessly at the waitress, who stared at him wide-eyed with confusion and horror.

"I think it's over, but just in case, do you have any rope?" She looked at him blankly, "Yes, it's been a strange night."

* * *

She raced along the alleyway with the boy only steps ahead of her. This was getting them nowhere, and despite her being in relatively good shape, she was already feeling a stitch. So she held out one hand, calmed her mind, and summoned a ball of magickal energy that glowed with the same blue-lilac as her frequency.

She aimed slightly to the right as the ball slammed into the nearby dumpster, sending it careening into the path of the fleeing boy. He didn't have time to stop, and with a resounding thunk, he banged hard into the dumpster and was sent falling backwards. He landed hard on his arse on the stoney ground and, thankfully, sat there while she caught up, both of them out of breath.

"Who the *hell* are you?" he asked, having the balls to sound indignant in that moment.

"I'm like you, Jackson," she told him, taking a moment between to try to slow her breathing, "I'm a Magick User."

"What?"

He rolled over on the floor, leaning up on his elbows to look at her, as she stood up straight and began to feel some of the breath returning. Her heart still thundered, and they weren't out of the woods yet, but he wasn't crackling with energy yet, so she figured she had some time to go down the placation route.

"You've always been able to do weird things, right?" she continued, "Sense things other people can't? It's because of the magick. And right now, you're using it on yourself, and people are dying because of it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he pouted, as he pushed himself back up and onto his knees. She saw the look, saw the little flicker in his eyes. Oh no, he didn't know *exactly* what he was, but he knew more than he was admitting to himself. On some level, he knew. "It's not my fault!"

"You're right, it's not," she sighed, knowing it was both true and not. But he didn't need the nuance at the moment; he needed simplicity. "It's an addiction. But it's time to go cold turkey."

"No!" he declared, his eyes blazing with anger once more. This time, he did begin to glow, his hands and eyes blazing with a grey-green aura that looked sickly. And it was, it was untrained, it was raw. His own frequency was sickly with his presence, with his mind, with his soul. It crackled the way hers didn't, and as much as she heightened her sense of defence, she was not afraid. She pitied him. "You're not taking it away from me."

"Don't you see what you're doing?" she challenged. "It's not right, surely you've got to see that."

Did he still not even know what he'd done to his mother?

"It's mine!" he cried, actual tears stinging his eyes. It was toddler-like; it was a child being told no in a world where he'd never gotten a yes. "It's all I have."

"I have to take it," she assured him. He took a step towards her, and she couldn't help herself; she took a step back. He smirked, some confidence beginning to rise in his tone, a cockiness that she had seen before.

"You're afraid of me," he commented, "I'm stronger than you are."

"Sure," she agreed, "But you don't know how to use it."

"Oh yeah?"

She could see his next move coming a mile off. The energy coursing around his hands and his body shot towards her in a pretty straight forward line – right for her. Had it hit her, she would have been flung far down the alleyway, probably with the same sensation as being hit by a few hundred Tasers. Might even knock her out.

Of course, she knew what he was about to do, and thankfully had what she needed nearby. Among the discarded detritus of the alleyway was a small cracked mirror. She dragged it to herself with her own energy and intercepted his beam. It reflected his own energy turning back onto itself once more, without any preparation – and it was he who was thrown back. She heard the thunk of his head as he hit the dumpster, and he collapsed to the ground, dazed.

"See?"

She walked over to him, still sparking and twitching with energy, but confusion had stolen over his features. She reached into her pocket and brought out the device she'd been given before she arrived, the one she'd been granted special permission to use. At first, it appeared to be a simple jewellery box, but as she touched the top, it expanded into something that glowed from within. All she needed to do was touch it to his chest, just over his heart.

She did, and as he cried, the sparking slowed and slowed until it stopped. She didn't know enough about how the Collector worked, but she knew its effect, alright. Every Magick User did. The Collector siphoned all the magickal ability from an individual and contained it in the box. The box she would now have to return to the Coven.

From there, it was up to the bosses to decide.

"Why did you take it?" he sobbed.

"Because you didn't deserve it," she told him, feeling an unfortunate bit of resentment.

"Nikki!"

She turned to look back in the direction they had come from, to see Mark rushing breathlessly down the alleyway. He looked okay for the most part, though she noticed some tomato ketchup on his shoes. The other thing she noticed was a familiar feeling inside of her. So it wasn't entirely amplified, after all.

"It's okay, it's over," she told him, as Jackson stood and stumbled away down the alleyway away from them. She let him go, "He can't use his energy any more, I took it from him." The box had shrunk back to its normal size, and she was able to fit it back into her pocket.

"You can do that?" he asked, catching his breath.

"Yeah, they thought it might come to this," she agreed, taking out her phone instead. "I'd best call this in; the Coven will probably want to send someone to work with Jackson. An Awakening can be a lot to go through. But we have good people, people who can help him." She gave him another glance, "You might want to go, I, uh... I wasn't exactly sanctioned to make contact with you guys."

Rather than look upset, the boy nodded.

"Well, I'm very glad you did," he answered, before giving her a last smile and heading back off down the alleyway. She watched him go before making her call.

Yeah, she thought to herself, *me too*.

* * *

Ricky half sat, half lay against the wall where he'd last been thrown, utterly exhausted and frankly more than a little pissed off. There was blood, slime or mucus or whatever the hell that snot was, and sweat, probably looking just as bad as he felt. He fished in his pocket as, around him, the creature's growling continued. While it seemed to hunt great through its senses, sight wasn't one of them, and in the dark, when he was still, it seemed to find it more difficult to find him.

He slipped a cigarette from his crumpled packet, though noted with annoyance that the last two were crushed, and sighed. In his other pocket, he felt for his lighter, only for a pinprick to hit his finger and realise he was now dealing with another fluid – lighter fluid.

“Oh, you bastard,” he muttered, as the creature snuffled and snarled. He heard a desk turn over nearby. Seemed the thing wasn’t good at sound either. Maybe movement was how it hunted. Or some hitherto unknown sense – one which was being masked by being covered in crap like he was some tiny Arnold Schwarzenegger. Well, tiny by comparison. “Always carry a backup, that’s what I say.”

He reached into his other pocket and fished out the matches, lighting one against the wall, and then bringing it to the end of the cigarette. He knew he shouldn’t, had in fact been trying to kick the habit since he’d first met Claire on that lovely evening, by the light of a vampyr-induced convenience store fire nearby. But some stresses just got to him.

“You know I shouldn’t be doing this!” he called out, checking the state of his dagger. It was still working, by the looks of it, wasn’t chipped – but was slick with blood from the ‘nicks’ he’d managed to make in its hide. It snuffled again, sniffing somewhere at the ground nearby. “I should be sitting at home right now. But because bastards like you exist, I have to be doing this. You know how much that pisses me off, mate?”

It growled in the distance as he saw movement somewhere off to his right. They were now in the largest main room, some kind of storage room, with boxes everywhere. He took another drag, the smoke stinging his eyes, and realised he wasn’t even getting any proper pleasure from it. He was too tired.

“I wouldn’t even be having to do it alone, but again, here I am,” he sighed, beginning to try and pull himself into a standing position. “Everyone else has, like, better things to do.” He paused, memories coming back to him, “Or they’re in hell.”

He didn’t know why he was unloading all his crap off onto a monster. One who couldn’t hear him was very likely going to try to rip him limb from limb, and on top of all that, clearly didn’t have a

psychoanalysis degree to boot. But hey, ho, unusual times. He scanned the room with his eyes, but so far, nothing penetrated the darkness.

“You know, there was a girl who could hold her own,” he continued, “Claire, she was. Got in a little over her head.”

He used the wall behind him for support as he took a final drag and chucked the cigarette on the ground.

“And because of a supernatural git like you, she’s gone,” he answered, “Trapped in hell somewhere. I’ll find her, you know, and tell her about every single one of you buggers I’ve decapitated since then. Sound good to you?”

He spat out a wad of something that was a bit too coppery to be healthy, and waited. He didn’t have to wait long; the shriek came from the darkness, and the thing rushed for him. Instead of diving straight at him, it stopped, dipped its claw and grabbed his foot instead – well out of the reach of his dagger.

He found himself dragged through the room at incredible speed as the thing used its other limbs to propel itself. He grabbed for anything he could, but everything rushed by so fast. His hand snagged on something that began to bang along with him, clanking and banging like metal.

He pulled it to his chest as he realised it was a fire extinguisher. He prayed to no one in particular as he yanked the pin out, held it up, and wondered how long it would take before they expired. It didn’t matter, even being dragged through the building and half-mad with exhaustion, he managed to point the hose, jam the handle and spray the thing with a whole load of white foam that made it starkly visible even in the near-blackout of the big room.

Well, it didn’t like foam; it shrieked and let go of him, clawing at the stuff on its body.

“Oh yeah, see how you like it, slimer!” he yelled at it, as he stumbled to his feet. The end, when it came, was rather anticlimactic. He took one last chance that the job had been done and drove his dagger down towards its approximate neck location (buried under stinking foam). It hit home, no magickal barrier, and the thing shrieked, convulsed and fell dead as a doornail.

Ricky collapsed backwards, feeling all of the aches of his body rushing to him at once, and for a longer time than he would ever admit, he lay there, alone in the dark, next to the monster. Covered head to toe in all manner of things, and wondering to himself whether he really wanted another cigarette or not.

* * *

Luke awoke, as simple as that, in a cold sweat on his sofa. He looked around him, at his very normal living room, with the tangle of sheets around his ankles. He pulled them off, sat up and listened out for the normal sounds – his mother and father’s TV in the bedroom upstairs.

It was vivid and disturbing, but he was okay.

He vaguely scratched at his chin where it itched, a thin spot of blood on the end of his finger. The next day, when he showered in the morning, he would notice a few thin red lines on his chest.

And he would tell no one.

* * *

“Mark...”

As he stepped through the doors two days later, giving himself a little leeway and with a croissant in hand, he just had a feeling she would emerge from the shadows, coiled like a viper. Miss Drake stood in the main reception, ready to fall into step beside him. It was, after all, deadline day – for the ultimatum she had given him.

“Today’s the day,” she greeted, without greeting. “So what’s it to be... violence or independence?”

“You don’t have to worry,” he assured her, pulling out the newspaper from under his arm and handing it to her. It was turned to the property pages, a big red circle around the one he had chosen.

He took a bite of his croissant. "A minuscule one-bedroom above a chip shop. No creepy landlord, no peeling walls, and no murder-suicides. Affordable and cosy. I move in on Monday."

Good God, was that a smile on her face?

"I'm proud of you," she admitted.

"Yeah, that's verging into weird again, sorry."

"At least now I can finally get the smell of Librarian out of the Library," she joked, as they rounded the corner and found themselves at the threshold of his domain. Almost instinctively, they both stopped and turned to one another.

"I'll still spend most of my waking hours here, Drake," he pointed out, "but I shall reserve my sleeping ones for my home." A thought occurred to him, since Miss Drake was not exactly well known for her love of paperwork, he did not already have an answer. "By the way, how much am I getting paid?"

"Minimum wage."

"Hey..."

She grinned a devilish grin and shrugged,

"Oh, please, I am still your worst nightmare, Mark," she admitted, turning and beginning to walk in the other direction. She continued her diatribe despite it, "Did Vader suddenly turn nice without an ulterior motive? Did Stalin hug puppies in his spare time?" She glanced back over her shoulder, "Know your enemy, Mark... children today, tsk."

With that, she disappeared around the corner and back out of the day, though, like all bad eggs, she would be back. He rolled his eyes and headed through the doors, back into his sanctuary, feeling a little different that morning.

Lighter, perhaps.

* * *

"Here... man... person..." Sara muttered to herself as she stood near the row of lockers. Okay, so technically it was past her deadline agreement with Amy, but since Amy had been mysteriously AWOL since they made their bet, she'd claim some loophole anyway. But it had to be done. After everything they'd been through, she needed to ask him out.

Heck, she'd beheaded a vamp queen with a shovel; she could ask out one cute boy from school, right?

Walter, his black hair shining in the fluorescent light, was doing something at his locker. She didn't know what, didn't matter. She was not going to let her best friend slap her or get one over on her when it came to boys. She had a reputation on the line here, one as a wise guru compared to Amy's geeky façade (which even Sara knew was a smokescreen for her deep inner freak – in a good way).

"Hey, Walter!" she greeted brightly, bouncing up beside him at his locker with a smile. He turned to look at her, surprised she would later tell herself was joyful.

"Uh, hi..." he answered, closing his locker next to him. That was good; he was clearly trying to pay her attention, which was polite. Almost gentlemanly, one might say, and likely interpreted as such, irrespective of other people's opinions.

"Listen, I know you probably have completely forgotten who I am," she began, and from the looks in his eyes, she could pretty much tell that to be the case, "So I will be kind and remind you. We had IT together last year before you changed sets."

Recognition flashed in his eyes, vague and distracted, boy-like.

"Were you the girl who got caught with porn?" he asked her. Oh God, of course he'd remember *that* misunderstanding.

"It was International Male, so technically a clothing brand," she answered quickly and defensively, "Which if the school systems want to block that... but... that's beside the point. I'll show you my protest letter another time." She switched away, trying to brighten her tone once more, "Uh,

I was wondering if you'd like, maybe, to go out sometime. For coffee or... kayaking... or something less dangerous... y'know..."

She fizzled off. The look of puzzlement and, frankly, concern on his face wasn't exactly giving her good vibes. She tried to remain hopeful, but the wrinkle of his nose told her this was not going to go well.

"Okay, you're kind of weird, so no," he told her. Brutally honest at least. That was something. "But if you ever like... become a human being... perhaps even remotely normal..." His face fell deadpan, "... still no."

With that, he walked past her and off down the corridor, the ringing of the bell signifying that she, too, was bound for class. She was angry, upset, hurt... and all because this boy said something mean.

She decided then and there that Walter was no longer her crush. He was, in fact, a prick. And she also decided she could not be arsed to go to first-period English Lit, either.

* * *

As Mark stepped into the Library that morning, lightness overtaking him, he finished the last of his croissants and frowned at the tableau before him. Three people, each very overdramatic in their usual fashion. Amy, Ricky and Sara were seated at the table, each orbiting things that seemed unknown.

Amy stared forward at her laptop, with science textbooks around her. Sara slumped a little in her chair, her face pulled into an annoyed look. And on the other side, Ricky slouched even further, still groaning like he'd gone three rounds with Mike Tyson. He had to admit they were all two years younger than him, but in that moment, they definitely seemed far more hormonal.

"Morning, guys," he greeted brightly, tossing his rubbish into the bin and having a quick check of the post on the counter. "Another supernatural force vanquished, eh?"

"Men are evil," Sara groaned.

"Seconded," Amy agreed with a nod.

"I don't think I can move my lungs anymore," Ricky supplied.

"Oh, hark and all the gloomy days to come," Sara crescendoed.

He regarded the three of them and had to admit that it had been quite a lot. Maybe they just needed some time to stew in their own misery, then realise that the big world out there continued to turn. That, despite the darkness, there was light. Of course, he knew well enough never to say that to someone who was going through the darkness.

"There's coffee in the machine, and cookies in the cupboard," he told them, "I will see you three later, should a giant pit of despair not swallow you whole."

The first movement, Sara, looking up at him with her eyes narrowing suspiciously. He knew it was unusual, but didn't think it warranted suspicion. Then again, he had long since given up trying to understand Sara.

"Where are you going?" she asked him. He gave her an answer in terms she could understand.

"Out."

Which is how, two minutes later, he was standing in the cool but fresh sunshine of the November morning. He made his way down the school steps, away from the reception and away from the responsibilities of the day, and towards the front gate.

And there at the gate stood Nikki, looking radiant and lovely in the morning. Her smile beamed when she saw him, and she tossed him a little wave. He crossed the distance between them and, as they stood face to face, leaned in and gave her a brief but warm kiss.

The two of them, hand in hand, walked off into the sunshine to see what else the day had to offer.

Together.