

'til the End of the World

Year One

Episode X

Suffer the Children

Opening

December 2005

Bank Street – the main high street of Calendar – ran from east to west, half cobbled and half tarmacked. Narrow pavements slicked with snow made navigation difficult, as did the incredible number of numpties who had managed to mill their way into her path at every possible turn. Bloody idiots.

Judy muttered something to herself, something her mother would have clipped her round the ear for had she still been alive, and shifted the packages she was holding under one arm, while clinging tightly to her little son Tyler's mittened hand. All she needed to do was get down to the car park at the far end, the one opposite the main cemetery, if you could believe it, and get Tyler in the car, without dropping her husband's novelty shot glasses and the Secret Santa's box of wine. Christmas bloody cheer, alright.

Why did it have to snow on the side of Christmas? It almost never snowed on Christmas itself; she didn't know what Dickensian dick had first thought that was a good image. Most of the time, she got up on Christmas morning to a grey sky of clouds and a few drops of rain. When she took the dog out for a walk, her husband still farting out the Christmas Eve indulgences in bed, she would be treated to either a bit of drizzle or a disappointing mildness.

Icicles dangled in her face as Tyler squirmed and the shot glasses began to slip. She rebalanced, faster than that nice Tobey Maguire Spider-Man and a dinner tray, and managed not to garrotte herself on the string of bright lights adorning what used to be the Woolworths and was now a generic pound store where everything was priced over a pound. Which reminded her that she still needed a gift for her sister.

"Judy!" a voice called out from in front of her. Oh, thank God, a friendly face in the milling crowds and among the yobs throwing snowballs at each other across the street. Idiots. She hoped they got frostbite of the youth. "Hey Judy!"

She saw the snowflake-flecked pink North Face polyester jacket emerging from between two people arguing over which pub to go into next, and smiled to herself. Yeah, it was cold. Yeah, Tyler was still squirming. Yeah, she had to listen to the seventy-fifth tinny rendition of Let it Snow tinkling from the nearby shop speakers. But it was Cindy from work, and she'd been meaning to see Cindy forever.

"Oh my God, it's been ages," Cindy greeted her, looking either way as she crossed the street. "You Christmas shopping?"

Judy rolled her eyes at her from across the sparkly bow on top of the present.

"How could you tell?"

The package began to slip again, and this time she managed to correct it with both hands, holding them more firmly in her arms as Cindy looked on without interfering. Then the gossip began. She'd been meaning to tell Cindy for ages about what she'd overheard about Debra from the Rawtenstall office, who had one too many at the Christmas party (held on the seventeenth of November) and let slip about the area manager's terrible bacne.

Cindy had absolutely heard the same thing, but she'd also heard from Janet in Remortgaging that his trip to Thailand hadn't been for the sun and humidity, if you caught her meaning. And Judy always caught Janet's meaning, especially filtered through Cindy's unfiltered retelling of it. And then...

Something felt wrong. They were chatting away, her hands holding the packages in her arms, when she began to get a creeping sense that she was missing something. No, not something; the packages felt different in her hands. Then it hit her.

Her hands.

All thoughts of Debra and the manager of Bacne fell away as she looked down and realised that her little Tyler was no longer standing beside her. She'd let go of his hand, and even though he was a good boy, he hadn't stayed put. He wasn't there. She whipped her head around, left and right, her mouth drying in terror, as she realised he wasn't standing around them at all. Not at the shop front where those stupid robot puppies that flipped over were. Nowhere.

"Tyler?" she called out, "Tyler?!"

People were starting to notice now; Cindy was noticing, but she didn't care. She needed to find him. He couldn't have wandered far. He was three, for fuck's sake.

There... footprints. Little boot prints right beside her. The snow was coming down thick now, but she could see them fresh and bright. They were headed across the street. Oh God, what if there was a car coming? He knew better than that.

She barely heard the sound of breaking glass as she dropped the presents and fled across the street in blind panic. Cindy was behind her as they both began to call out his name, following the boots – hoping to see at any moment the bright green of his little furry parka jacket. There were people, but no one his size.

"Tyler!"

The prints led across the street, and she realised with a kind of dawning horror that they were heading towards the quieter end. The darker end, where all sorts of shadows lay. Oh God, what if someone had grabbed him? So far, he was alone, and no other prints were around his, but you never knew. How long since he'd slipped away?

She followed the prints to the cemetery, passing through the old iron gates and into the place where the snow hadn't been disturbed and remained thick. His booties had walked straight along the main path, then veered off and started to weave between the graves.

She came up a rise, beneath a tree, its bare, cold branches laden with snow. She felt bile rise in her throat as she screamed her son's name, hoarse into the wind. From somewhere distant, she heard Cindy on the phone; she didn't even care who she was calling. The police, fucking Dean Martin himself, it didn't matter. Only Tyler mattered.

The prints rose up to the open area, barren of headstones, and stopped. Around them, nothing. As if Tyler had walked himself right up to the middle of the square and then disappeared into nothing.

She screamed his name into the rising wind, but received no answer.

'til the End of the World

Episode 10 – Suffer the Children

Starring:

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

Act I

"Well, first for me was the Alliance Stone," Amy answered, ticking off on her fingers even though they were wrapped in warm mittens that negated the effect she was going for. "That was this big hunk of rock that's supposedly a source of greater power. We were attacked by weird balls of electrical energy that were like a security system."

"Sounds like fun," Luke nodded beside her as they made their way slowly down Bank Street towards the cemetery. The sun wasn't visible through the thick grey clouds above, but light still diffused and spread around them. For once, even the streetlights hadn't come on.

She shook off the weirdness of walking down the main street on a Monday and had to remind herself every few moments that school had broken up for the Christmas holidays.

"Oh and then Sara made out with an incubus who tried to get her to commit a murder-suicide," she casually reeled off. "And then there was that immortal vampyr, Sundune, with the black eyes. He was a git."

"Heard about that one," he reminded her, dryly. Yeah, considering he'd nearly had his head ripped off by one of his lieutenants, Amy figured he probably had.

"Ricky was also being injected with a paranoia-inducing agent by some creepy black-ops people known as the Covenant," she added brightly. "Headed by no less than Mark's uncle, who sounds... well, also git-ish." She struggled to think, wondering if perhaps they needed some kind of collective journal or diary so they didn't forget, "Uh, the pyrokinetic you know about..." Then it came to her, "Oh, and there was that untrained wiccan who was using magickal energy on himself and caused people's faces to melt off and things."

"You know it's like there's a whole 'nother world," he mused. She couldn't tell if he was joking; his face was completely deadpan.

"More than one, actually," she agreed. But of course, going into the metaphysics of the universe with Luke, when he had struggled with quadratics, might have to wait until another time.

They had reached the main gates of Crawford Cemetery, and somehow naming the monsters they'd come across seemed to lose a little bit of its charm. Even if nearby someone was playing that Dean Martin song. She thought it was the Specsavers.

He indicated for her to go first, and she stepped across the threshold and onto the fresh snow. It had been quite heavy over the past few days. Out by the street, it had begun to turn brown with traffic, dirt tracked in. But here, in the cemetery, no one ever seemed to visit, it looked pristine and untouched.

Which, she shuddered, was an unfortunate point.

"My actual question was, what are we doing here?" he pointed out. Oh, yeah, that had started the conversation, and somehow she'd segued into a brief history of the time with the team before them. Again, she considered perhaps some kind of pamphlet if they were ever going to recruit anyone else.

"Well, you heard about the kid who went missing, right?" she reminded him. Of course he had; the entire town had been talking about it for three days. They'd run his photo on the front of the local free press every day – and the broken police tape fluttering at the entrance to the cemetery had been clear. Even if now, there was no one around.

"Sure, wandered off and got lost in the snow," he summarised.

"Sure, you'd think that," she countered, "But then it turns out his prints just vanish from the snow. First, they're as clear as day – and then suddenly – poof, gone. Sounds kinda like our thing, doesn't it?"

"Someone could have picked him up," Luke pointed out.

"Sure..." she agreed with a nod, as they made their way slowly through the headstones. "But someone who doesn't leave adult-sized prints on fresh snow?" She raised an eyebrow as Luke regarded her stone-faced. "Definitely ranks on the spooky meter for me."

"Spooky meter?" he asked. She didn't answer, instead raising her eyebrow further at him, waiting for him to process it. "Okay, so spooky meter. But instead of sleeping in during half term, I'm here in a cemetery... because... we can do what?"

"Mark's going on his trip, Ricky's tired, and Sara said she's got an allergic reaction to cemeteries," she said. "Plus, you need a training wheels mission, and I think this qualifies."

"I killed two vamps," he pointed out, pausing to turn to her. She smiled at him in response.

"So you can hit things," she countered. "But you can't punch everything supernatural. So, keep an open mind, yeah? Otherwise, I'll have to return to tutoring you in quadratics instead."

"You're kinda bossy," he muttered. "I like it."

With that, she turned on her heel and wandered closer to the mausoleum. According to the police reports she'd managed to access, the prints had led straight up the little rise to the west side of the cemetery. Here, there were a few more of the larger crypts, but they ended midway along both a little plateau and a more sparsely populated area.

Wait, was 'populated' the right phrase in a graveyard?

Wait, what was the difference between a cemetery and a graveyard?

"Are they sure the kid didn't wander off in another direction?" Luke wondered, as he moved up next to her.

"That's what we call closed-minded."

"That's what I call practical thinking."

She knelt at the spot she recognised from the crime scene photos, but noted that, thanks to two more days of snow, there was nothing to see. She sighed; this wasn't exactly going to plan. But she also knew there was another reason she'd wanted to get Luke down there by himself for once.

"So, how are things with your dad?" she asked, trying to sound casual as she reached down a mitten towards the cold ground.

"As peachy as they can be without him home," he shrugged, sounding deceptively light on the surface. She'd heard that tone before. Usually, it meant he was absolutely getting what she was saying about circle theorems.

"They still can't find anything wrong?" she pushed a little further.

"No, they can find things wrong," he admitted. "They just don't know what's causing it. He just... collapsed."

"I'm sure it's nothing big."

"If it was nothing big, he'd be better by now," he answered. She heard the bitterness creeping into his voice. "I'm just... y'know... taking it day by day."

"Smart," she offered, as she stood and headed back over to him.

Across the cemetery, she spotted the memorial by the central statue. The two of them began to wander over in sync, as Luke decided to deflect and change the subject with her. And she'd allow it, for now.

"I forgot to ask, how's the job?" he asked her. "You started last week, right?"

"Decidedly creepy," she admitted. She had neglected to mention on her application form for the internship that the last time she'd been in the morgue, she'd been attacked by a black-eyed vampyr whose corpse had reanimated from one of their drawers. Well, the next to last time. But she did outline her proficiency with the Microsoft Office suite. "And everyone keeps looking at me like I shouldn't be there."

"Please, you're probably smarter than all of them put together," he joked.

"Yeah, but most people see a sixteen-year-old in a morgue and think... who dat?" she smiled. "Still, Dr Williams has been real nice. She used to work with my dad at Calendar Memorial."

"Ah, it's good to know people in low basements."

The smiles faltered as they reached the small memorial. Suddenly, there it was, at the base of the statue. Assorted flowers, photos, messages. Some burnt candles, all there on the steps now freshly dusted with snow. A little photo of the boy. But something shuddered through her, with a

kind of creeping sadness. The boy had disappeared... yet the memorial itself suggested people already thought something else had happened.

"It's nice to know people care," she tried to say brightly, but Luke's look remained odd.

"Even if it doesn't really do a thing," he muttered. She looked at him for a long moment, concerned, but he didn't seem to notice.

His mind was elsewhere.

* * *

"I like hot chocolate."

Ricky frowned at his friend across the Library table, who was clutching her mug for dear life, wearing a look of contented bliss. She wore her ritual jumper, the one her stepfather had bought her the year before – as was the custom – the whole week before Christmas. Only now it made her look like a large bundle of Rudolph's nose. To be fair, though, she was right about the chocolate, as he sipped his own.

"Not as much as I like cold chocolate," she considered, deeply examining the issue of chocolate internally. "Or dark chocolate. Or double chocolate chips..."

"How has your arse managed to stay in shape?" he wondered out loud. He didn't think he'd ever seen Sara do something that could be considered exercise. Except maybe behead a vampyr with a shovel, but it wasn't exactly a full routine.

"Sheer willpower," she confirmed, before brightly adding, "And butt crunches."

"Butt crunches?"

"Like sit-ups for your bottom," she explained, "I saw them on my mum's Rosemary Connelly tapes."

"That sounds sick."

"It's so not," she protested. "Here, I'll show you."

She placed her mug down, stood and went to the end of the table, where she began a manoeuvre that Ricky could only describe as 'bending over' and grabbed her ankles. As he tried to contemplate how to tell her she looked exactly how she was sometimes described on the bathroom walls, Mark decided to wander in from the office with his suitcase.

"Sara, this is hardly the place."

"I'm showing him an exercise," Sara corrected him, her upturned face looking at their grumpy librarian from between her legs, as he slid his surprisingly bulky suitcase onto the counter.

"Ricky, just type Kegel into the internet," Mark suggested, "I'm sure you'll find plenty of sites with instructions and... well, visual aids."

Sara's eyes narrowed as she stood up, a little woozy from the sudden change of blood pressure. She regarded Mark with the same level of venom she often reserved for him, as though he was an older authority figure she needed to challenge rather than the eighteen-going-on-eighty-year-old he truly was.

"Are you saying my bottom is not a visual aid?" she challenged him.

"Backpedal," he coughed behind his hand.

"Sara, I'm sure your backside is one of nature's finer creations," Mark sighed at her, likely tired from her constant need for reassurance. "God knows you make the same declaration about your chest often enough. But it is an inappropriate focus of attention in my library, and if your garments so much as slide one iota down over your supposedly well-proportioned rear before or after I get back, the defilement of my library will be the last thing you will have to worry about."

"He always talk like that?" she asked him, ignoring the grumpy librarian.

"He's saying if you shake your booty in the library, he'll be pissed," he translated for her.

"And he couldn't just say that because...?"

"He watches too much *Frasier*?"

Mark sighed, glancing once more at his watch, as he had been doing since they'd arrived about nine that morning.

"I suppose I had best prepare to head off," Mark thought out loud to himself.

"You've been 'preparing' all day," Sara reminded him, as though it wasn't only now eleven in the morning. "Honestly, you pack like me."

"This is all necessary equipment," Mark corrected her. "The roads can be dangerous in Scotland."

"And you wouldn't want to be without something to read while you're freezing to death?" he supplied brightly.

"Precisely."

"Oh come on, Mark, it's a book dealer," she pointed out. "How anal can he be about your timekeeping?" The librarian threw her a withering glance which said everything. "Right, infer through example."

"Now, I have a favour to ask of both of you," Mark began, pulling the suitcase off of the counter and placing it next to him.

"It's okay, her arse is covered," he assured him.

"More than that," he continued, "I'm hopefully only going to be gone until tomorrow night, but that still encompasses a whole day and night..."

"You want us to take good care of your Library"?

"Oh God, no, I want you to preserve exactly the status quo," Mark corrected. "Granted, it's the holidays, but sixth form students might still wander in from time to time, and if they do so... find some way to scare them out."

"Ah, somebody *needs* my bottom now," Sara pointed out.

"If need be," he agreed, "Under no circumstances do I want you to attempt to process any orders that may come in unexpectedly. Nor reorganise any of the books, nor even try to check books out or in. I will know if you have so when I return."

"Again, such a drama queen," Sara sighed. "Trust us, Mark, we will take good, fully clothed care of your baby. You just try to have a good time in Scotland and come back, safe and sound and with souvenirs."

"Anything specific?"

"Good cheer and something tartan."

Mark rolled his eyes, and reluctantly turned to Ricky.

"Please, try not to get into too much trouble while I'm gone," he suggested. Ricky did his best to grin.

"I believe that 'oi' is appropriate," he answered. Mark smiled in response, then made his way to the door and left his library in their care. Ricky couldn't help but smile to himself; he was fairly certain this would be the longest amount of time he would have been away from the Library since its ownership had been transferred. He was probably feeling some kind of separation anxiety or something. Meanwhile, Ricky was just glad that he was doing normal human things. He should have gone for a dirty weekend with Nikki instead, like, but a leopard couldn't change his spots overnight.

"Want to hunt through his books for rude drawings?" Sara asked next to him.

"I'll grab the party mix."

* * *

Mark made his way carefully across the car park. Some of the snow had compressed the snow beneath it into a slicker, ice-like layer. He could feel his shoes struggling to grip on occasion, and with a heavy suitcase he had a fairly strong visual image of going arse over tit. But he made it to the car easily, and braced himself against it for a moment as he fished out the key.

The roads were fine – he could see they had been well gritted and travelled. But the car park, whose domain was the estate teams of the High School, under the direction of the tight-fisted Miss Drake, remained an ice rink. He would have to be careful with the borrowed car, even if he was fairly

certain the people who had supplied it would have an endless supply of them. It was, after all, not exactly easy for an eighteen-year-old to get a rental.

But he supposed things like that didn't matter to the Covenant.

He placed his suitcase on the back seat, grunting a little with the effort, then slipped into the driver's seat, thankfully out of the slight wind that had begun to pick up. It whistled around the car as he waited for the heaters to warm the air and clear the windscreen a little.

He hated keeping it from the others; he hated everything about the situation. But he also knew that if he told them, he would put them – and everyone – in danger. So he went along. He let them believe he was heading to meet a rare book dealer. He allowed them to believe they were in charge of the library while he was away, though Amy had assured him she'd check in on them when she was done in the cemetery.

Because he had to. That's what he circled back to, as he sat there in the gloomy day and completed his journey.

Because he had to.

He slipped the phone, the one given to him recently by his ally, out of his pocket and raised it to his ear. As instructed, it would only lead to an answering machine. He left his message.

"I'm on my way. I'll call you when it's done."

With that done, he hung up, started the car, and began his journey north. Alone.

* * *

It seemed just as soon as the sun got up into the sky, it began to descend again. Not that it ever got so high in the first place. By the early afternoon, the world began to appear gloomy. Not dark; it wasn't night, but the greyness seemed bleaker, like one of those awful Charles Darwin novels. Like the one about the old woman in the wedding dress.

Wait, no, Dickens.

As Ricky slipped through his front door, he found his brother already up and in his uniform. At least that was one thing about being a night watchman: the practically 'bomber-jacket' style they made them wear at least kept away the chill in winter. The company logo embroidered on the chest stood out brightly against the black.

"I suppose it's good morning," Ricky called out to him. His brother, Rob, sat in the chair and tucked away the thing he was reading into one of those many zippered pockets. Yeah, the night shift was definitely becoming him – Rob actually looked awake this time as he sat in his armchair. His big work boots lay nearby, covered in snow.

"Uh, yeah, how was school?" Rob asked him.

He frowned, confused by his confusion.

"Big, square," Ricky reminded him before adding, "Closed last Friday for the holidays, so I annoyed Sara instead. You know the tune."

"Yeah."

Ricky frowned, feeling things were already a little off. Sure, his older brother was, what, 22? That was still not old enough to have dementia, but even for him the scatter-brain thing seemed profound. He wasn't always the most attentive, which he often put down to working nights, but he at least remembered the holidays. In fact, he'd already had the 'talk' about no Christmas parties around the house.

Ricky had refrained from telling him that he wouldn't exactly be bringing vamps back to the house for fun.

He decided to sit on the sofa and put his feet up on the coffee table. Granted, he'd already kicked his shoes off, so it was only his socks, but it was still a line. And Rob didn't even blink at the socks being danced all over.

"Everythin' alright?" he asked him.

"Yeah, sure, why wouldn't it be?" his brother answered, distractedly.

"You didn't start tutting the moment I put my feet on the coffee table," he pointed out.

"Well, I'll just smack you one on the way out."

Ricky kept staring at his brother and noticed dark circles under his eyes. Perhaps he hadn't been able to sleep. Their neighbours did have a new baby, after all, and Ricky couldn't imagine what it was like to try to sleep during the day. He only slept for an hour or two before dawn.

"Stop giving me that look, or I'll poke your eyes out," Rob told him.

"Sophisticated."

Rob gave him the obligatory eye-roll and stood, heading into the kitchen to grab his backpack and the packed lunch he'd made himself. Ricky could probably have guessed it was tuna, his brother's only favourite sandwich filling, but he frowned when he saw he hadn't packed any at all.

"You leaving so soon?" he frowned, sure his brother's shift didn't start for another few hours.

"Work," Rob told him. "You might want to learn the word."

"Everyone's full of stings today," Ricky muttered to himself.

"Look, get yourself to school tomorrow, okay?" Rob reminded him, completely forgetting their conversation of two minutes prior. Ricky filed it away and wondered if there was a name for that Dory-fish condition he was displaying. "I'm gonna be late in the morning."

"Hot milk maid?" he tried to lighten the mood with a bit of cheek.

"Just do it," Rob told him curtly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Ricky frowned to himself; this wasn't like his brother. Sure, he could be a grumpy sod, but it felt a little more than...

He felt the swat to the back of his head and dutifully took his feet off the coffee table, watching his brother step out into the frosty afternoon and go about his business. Maybe that's all it was; maybe it was just boring adult work stuff. He didn't know what it was like to do the nine-to-five, especially the night-watch version; maybe it was workplace problems.

Unless his brother was also secretly fighting a nightly war against demons he hadn't told Ricky about. He sighed.

"And I'm supposed to be the moody one."

He decided to push it away and got about fixing himself a snack.

* * *

Investigating wasn't exactly easy work, Luke thought. They'd come to the cemetery late in the morning, had a wander around, and hadn't seen much. After a break for a bit of lunch at Gina's nearby, they'd come back and decided to take a more methodical approach, sweeping through the cemetery from opposite sides and meeting in the middle.

He'd never really been in one before, and he'd never spent this much time in one. Not even at his nan's funeral, which seemed to drag on for a hundred years. Apparently, all the kids – five brothers and sisters on his dad's side – had argued over which song to play to close the service at the crematorium. So each of them had been made to give their picks – leading to the slowest closing of the curtains there ever was. He found himself thinking he should have brought his Gameboy. *Chicago* had had fewer musical numbers.

He pushed away thoughts of his dad. His mum had texted, but he'd left it for now.

She'd call.

He wandered from the north side of the old cemetery, where the stone wall backed onto a small stream that ran past and round down to run under the end of Bank Street. This was one of... what was it, four or five cemeteries in town? He probably should ask Amy why there were so many, but he was sure the answer would be long and complicated.

It seemed a mixture of the flat gravestones that were laid into the ground, most of which were covered in snow, and those standing. There were a few taller gravestones, adorned with cherubs and all those kinds of things, but only a couple of statues. The one in the centre looked more like a Roman fountain than anything else, and there were five mausoleums. The one he stood next to, as the wind bit into his face, made him frown.

"Hey, Amy, look at this," he called out. She had already made it back to the middle and was looking once more down at the little memorial. She joined him quickly and saw what he was looking at. A statue of a man, it looked like, carved into the mausoleum wall. Luke had never seen anything quite like it. The guy didn't look like an angel – they were everywhere around the cemetery – but he also didn't look quite right either. He wore robes almost like he was one of the fancy figures, but his face was carved into a right scowl.

"What's up?" she asked.

"I think it's the town founder guy," he pointed out, vaguely remembering something about the guy's face from local history textbooks. Their Year 8 history teacher had insisted on going local, even though very little interesting had ever happened there. Well... as he was learning, perhaps just not in the history books.

"Calendar?"

"No, the other one."

"Ah... the co-founder," she nodded, "Louis Crawford."

That was it; he'd completely forgotten the name, but then again, when he realised they were standing in Crawford Cemetery, it kind of made sense.

"I read something about him once," he continued. "He founded the South Side, right?"

"Yeah, he and Eric Calendar fell out over land ownership or something," Amy supplied. Of course she'd remember the history in more detail. He'd only remembered the fact that the guy's face looked like he was permanently about to rip you a new arsehole. "So Calendar settled on the North Side of the River and Crawford on the South."

"And it turned into such a lovely place," he joked, remembering well the few recent experiences they'd had there. People driving past on the bypass probably saw only the ruined, abandoned buildings and thought they were passing through Silent Hill. At least until they got to the top of the hill and could see the town proper.

"Personally, I've found fun and parties there," Amy quipped. "Just most of them filled with death."

He stepped a little closer to the statue, feeling a bit more weirded out. It had a kind of painting-like quality, like when you're in a stately home and some of those old paintings have eyes that seem to follow you around. Nah, now he was verging into *Scooby-Doo* territory. But the guy had definitely had a look carved into his face that was a fuck-you to the world, and that definitely gave off certain vibes.

"Didn't he die?" he asked.

"The mausoleum is a giveaway," Amy pointed out, dryly.

"No, I mean like really violently," he corrected.

"Part of the reason the south side was deserted was because of the Crawford Massacre back in the thirties," she offered. "Can't get much more violent than that."

That was it, he thought. He remembered some parents sending in letters of complaint when their teacher had gone over those details. The specifics now evaded him, but he seemed to recall there had been some kind of decadent, Gatsby-esque party held in the old mansion on the South Side. Some said they were conducting black masses or satanic rituals; others simply said they were having an orgy – and honestly, he didn't know which was worse. What people did know was that every member of the town's elite ruling class had been found in pieces. And perhaps not all of the pieces either.

After that, the South Side had a bitter taste, which led to it being phased out faster than a crap cola.

"I'm cold now," Amy shuddered, looking around. It was true, the light was beginning to fade, and the wind was beginning to pick up.

"Sure, the wind's a bitch," he agreed, still transfixed by the carving.

"Look, I'm sorry I dragged you out there. I was hoping to find some clues," she apologised.

"But... well... snow hides all its secrets."

He pulled his gaze away from the statue, feeling a little like you do when you walk out of the cinema after a long film, a brief disorientation. He shook his head to clear it and gave her earnest face a warm smile.

"Don't worry about it," he assured her, knowing in fact that being out that day would have been better than sitting around at home. Or... or well, going back to the hospital. "Walk me home?"

"Love to," she grinned.

As they stepped away from the mausoleum, they began to make their way down between the stones towards the central path, but something gave him a moment's hesitation. It was small, low beneath the wind, yet high-pitched. It sounded like...

"Hello?"

He looked around, having definitely heard the sound of a child's laughter. Amy had walked a little further and stopped when she realised he'd fallen out of step.

"Luke?"

"Give me a minute."

He peered into the day's growing gloom, between the stones and back towards the mausoleum. There it was again, a sound. A brief giggle, a moment of laughter. It sounded like a child. A young child.

The snow was beginning to fall again as he moved back towards the mausoleum. The laughter had been close; he was sure of that, so he moved around behind the mausoleum and into the piles of fresh snow driven up against the side by the wind. There it was, the giggle; it sounded so close.

The snow grew deep enough to cover his shins as he realised he was clearly off the beaten track, and something struck his foot. Undignified, he tripped and landed hard on his knees in the snow, plunging into the cold. Behind him, Amy shouted.

"Luke?"

"I've found something," he called out, hearing the crunch as she moved closer. He had; he could see it in the snow – something bright. He parted it with his hands, like he was digging - something he never wanted to do in a cemetery – and pulled it free, drips of melting snow from his hands as he went. They were bright pink now, him having not bothered to mitten up, as Amy called it.

It was a mitten. A child's size. Bright red.

Something seized him, a knowledge, a certainty he couldn't describe. He dug further beyond the mitten, there next to the mausoleum, only needing to dig a few more inches into the white blanket before he stopped and called over to Amy.

"Call the police."

Amy frowned at him, peering over his shoulder as she reached him, then instantly turned away. He could see her holding back tears as she dialled her mobile and began to speak to the person on the other end. He, however, couldn't tear his eyes away from his discovery. Or from his horror.

* * *

Amy sat beneath tinsel and baubles, hung jauntily over the desk. Plastic mistletoe dangled from the office door, and nearby the radio crackled with that old tune. Was it Frank Sinatra? She knew Judy Garland had done a version, but by this point everyone had wished everyone else a merry little Christmas, so it could be anybody. But it sounded like a man, so it was probably Sinatra.

It was Dean Martin.

"The time is 21:33 hours, Dr Jenna Williams performing," her supervisor spoke into the Dictaphone. She was young, by doctor standards, perhaps only in her late twenties or early thirties. She wore her brunette hair tied back in a ponytail and rolled up the sleeves of her white coat, making the blue latex gloves stand out against her pale skin. They seemed to hover above the gurney on which... on which the body lay.

Amy had already seen several of their residents. She was not permitted to be near the autopsies themselves, in any physical sense, but she had been allowed to continue working in the office or at the nearby desk while they were conducted, and, as such, was able to overhear the narration. She heard the soft click of the tape recorder behind her and sensed eyes on her.

“For the record, you don’t have to be here,” Dr Williams reminded her, for perhaps the hundredth time. Amy knew she was only the intern. But the fact that Dr Williams suggested it might be better if she did her short shift from a different office, rather than making it mandatory, was an incredible testament to how well regarded she already was.

“I’ll be fine,” Amy assured her, “I can put my headphones on if it gets too much.”

Again, she didn’t need to tell her that the morgue was like a second home by now in her supernatural career. Or that, even after only a few months, she was already becoming a little less surprised by the facts of mortality. She wasn't immune; she wasn't stone, but she could compartmentalise a little more.

Even if, as she turned back around, she could feel Dr Williams’ eyes on her for a few seconds longer. Even if, as her eyes popped up to the bobble-head Santa on the desk above the small but chunky computer screen she was inputting records into. Even as she did, she heard the shuffle of fabric behind her as Dr Williams returned to her job.

“Even the best of us have trouble when it comes to children,” Dr Williams explained quietly, though it felt like it was into the empty air. “If you at any time want to leave, I’ll understand.”

Amy did not reply, and after a few moments, she heard the recorder click as the observation continued.

“I will begin with an external examination of the victim,” Dr Williams’ voice had regained her previously clinical edge. “The victim is Tyler Everett, aged...” She paused, likely to confirm on the records next to her, “...three. His skin is discoloured, consistent with prolonged exposure to cold temperatures.” She paused again, and Amy knew she would slowly and methodically move her eyes along the body, leaning down to see every available patch. “The body shows no external signs of

trauma. There are no cuts or scratches or post-mortem bruising to indicate a struggle with an assailant."

The squeak of her shoes told Amy she'd turned to regard the wall of X-Rays on the wall, the light box that hummed a cold blue – and which at the moment held a string of Christmas lights in the shapes of chilli peppers.

"Likewise, the X-rays indicate no fractures or breaks indicative of any attempts to subdue him. It is... as if he had just gone to sleep."

The small squeak again, and she turned back to the table. The small rattle of clinking metal told her she'd moved the instrument tray across to her.

"I will begin an internal examination of the main organs."

Another click sounded as she switched off the tape.

"Last chance."

"I'm okay," Amy reassured her, though she kept herself turned away. She couldn't help but add, though already she was beginning to suspect she knew herself, "What do you think he died of?"

"If I had to bet at this point, I would say exposure," Dr Williams explained. "Poor kid got lost in the snow, died of hypothermia. I'll know more soon."

The click happened once more, and Amy remained silent as Dr Williams spoke the next words as clinically as possible.

"I will begin with a Y incision."

Amy found herself continuing with her work, inputting record after record as part of their digitisation project. She lost herself in the routine, detail after detail, in the complex database. At some point, she slipped her headphones on, her Now That's What I Call Christmas CD spinning in her Walkman as she went. It helped her focus on the task at hand.

It helped her to compartmentalise.

Act II

Luke tried to focus on the sandwich in front of him, but it was a little impossible. Not only was the cardboard- sorry, bread- dry as hell, he couldn't even tell if it was trying to be chicken salad or egg mayonnaise – or both. And the chewing wasn't helping either; it was simply moving it over his taste buds, which were telling him he was being somewhat sadistic to them.

"God, poor kid," Sam sighed, across from him. He had finished telling her the story of his and Amy's discovery, and she had listened carefully. He had expected perhaps it wouldn't be the best place to talk, considering how quiet he would have thought an evening in the hospital would be. He needn't have worried. There, under the fluorescent lights, it was just like it was in the day – just as grim – and a mixture of hospital staff, doctors, nurses and relatives all continued to be busy about like it was much earlier in the day.

He supposed sickness never sleeps.

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?" she asked him softly. "I mean, with finding him and everything?"

There was the question – was he okay? She hadn't asked why he and Amy were walking around a cemetery in daylight; after all, she likely assumed they'd just been doing their tutoring. And he hadn't told her they were actually looking for... well, something. He had seen what Serif had done to people and tried to do to him... but somehow – he hadn't expected his first dead body to be a kid.

"I'll be fine," he answered, not sure if it was actually a lie or the eventual truth. "It's his mother I feel sorry for."

"At least she knows now," Sam commented, quietly placing down her own sandwich, which he'd judged to be ham and cheese but which looked like neither.

"Like that's a comfort," he bit back, feeling sarcasm rise in his throat. A look of hurt flashed in her eyes, only briefly, and immediately he regretted his tone. Too easy to slip back into bad habits, eh? "I'm sorry, it's just... been a rough week."

He gave up on the sandwich, set it back on the small, chipped ceramic plate, and sat back in his hard-backed chair. The place was not designed for comfort. In any way, shape or form. He felt sallow under the lights, and even Sam's usually ethereally pale beauty seemed a little dimmer in the direct light. Everything just felt tired. A bit like him, he thought.

She quietly picked up the plates, slid them onto the tray, and went about returning it to the tray area before moving back over to him. Then it came, the question he'd dreaded since they'd driven there with his mum, her clenched hands on the wheel a sign of things she wanted to say but hadn't. Because here it was.

"Are you, uh, ready to go up there yet?" she asked him.

It had been a week. One long week since he'd come home to the phone call from his mum. The one that told him his dad was in hospital, that he'd collapsed at work. That they were running tests and didn't know what was wrong. And after that... the waiting. A week of waiting. And a week in which Luke had managed to come with his mother to the hospital every time, and wait in the waiting room, or in the cafeteria, or even in the car.

He couldn't go up.

"No."

"Look, Luke, it's been a week," she reminded him, though he didn't need reminding. She used her best gentle voice, and it got his back up even more. "I think he'd like to see you."

"I'm not going up there, alright?" he shot back. "Please, just... leave it be."

She didn't reply, but he saw her nod from the corner of his eye. He wondered why he had bothered pretending to finish his sandwich. He needed something to focus on, something to hold. Something that would distract him from thinking about it. But he wasn't going to be given that opportunity, because when he looked up, he could see his mother making her way over.

He heard the scrape of the chair against the tired linoleum floor beneath them, a kind of rubbery scratching sound, and then she was sat next to him. Sam made a small smile, but it was awkward. The whole damn thing was awkward.

"Luke, when you're done here, I want you to come upstairs and see your father," his mother, Helen, told him.

"And good evening to you too, Mum," he snapped back.

"I'm serious, it's been a week." Her voice was terse, but underneath it he could hear the sound of tears she'd already cried.

"I have a watch; I understand time."

"Dammit, Luke..."

"Helen, I've already tried," Sam tried to interject, but her mother sent her a weary yet sharp look.

"Sam, I don't mean to be rude, but can you please leave this to my son and me?"

His mother had never taken a tone with Sam before; the two had always got along for all the years they'd known one another. But there it was, in the open, in an offhand comment. His mother snapping at the girl he loved. Luke tried to keep his gaze straight ahead; he didn't want to look at her. He didn't want to see her worry, her anger, or how he was disappointing her. So he looked ahead instead; he looked at Sam.

"He's your father, and he's worried about you," his mum continued. "Don't you get that? While he should be thinking about getting better, he's worrying about you."

"Oh, so if he kicks it, it's my fault?" he snapped loudly, finally turning to look at her. His self-loathing was turning into frustration, which was turning itself into an ugly kind of anger he hated. But he couldn't divert it; he couldn't change the shape of what was already there.

"Don't you talk to me like that!"

"I'll talk any goddamn way I want."

He stood, feeling the sudden urge to just get away, to just get out. The dark circles under his mother's eyes, bloodshot red. He saw his mother, hurt, and he just couldn't talk it. So he stood, and he walked out. He felt their eyes follow him as he left the room, heard his mum call his name, but all he could think was that he needed out.

So out he went.

* * *

Sam didn't know what to do. Nor did she think she had to; she just knew she had to do something. She and Luke were barely reconciled, still learning to circle one another again after everything that had happened, and then... then this. She felt like a witness, like a bystander watching from the sidelines with nothing to do.

Helen didn't say much after Luke walked off; she sat there, looking far older than her true age. Lines Sam had never seen before had appeared on her face, which took on the sallow, empty look of someone afraid of losing everything. Then she made a half-fumbled excuse and left the table.

So she picked up her bag and slowly headed for the exit. By the time she reached the outside, a fresh, soft flurry of snow had begun to fall in the darkness beyond the ambulance bay – and there she saw him standing. Just standing, his breath frosting in the air around him. Not moving forward or back, just standing.

"You were a little harsh," she observed, sliding into place beside him. He must have heard her coming; her shoes crunched in the snow.

"I know."

"Care to share?"

His eyes flicked over to hers. The eyes of the man she loved, filled with a pain she knew.

"I just... I can't see him," he fumbled, his voice thick.

"Have you two fallen out?" she tried to pry gently.

"I mean, weak," he answered, "Helpless. I can't... I can't see him like that."

There was nothing more to say, so she slipped her arm around him and stood there with him in the gently falling snow. She felt his breath hitch as he held back tears. But eventually they came.

Eventually they always do.

* * *

Tears always left him tired, and after he finally brought himself together, all he wanted to do was sleep. Sam was sweet, and though she still had that look – the one that said she wanted to help but didn't know how – she simply walked him home. Once inside, he knew his mother would be at the hospital for most of the night. He wasn't hungry; the awful hospital sandwich sat heavy on his stomach. He tried to watch a little TV, but nothing was on but awful Christmas specials.

Instead, he headed back to his room, to the coolness of the room he had barely spent any time in. He realised he didn't know how to turn the heating on – that had always been his dad's job, and it brought a sudden flash of fresh tears that never seemed to abate. Instead, he let them fall, alone and curled up on his bed, as he fell asleep.

When he woke, his face was dry, but he felt tracks still there where they had been. His neck was stiff from lying awkwardly on his pillow, and his bladder was full. But none of that woke him. The feeling did. The feeling of being watched.

He cracked his neck as he turned to look at his clock. A little after ten. He'd been asleep for less than an hour. Then there it was – the laughter. Just soft, a little giggle. The room was already cold, but fresh goosebumps broke out all over his arms at the sound. It sounded just like...

There, thuds. Several small, sharp thuds. The sounds of... footsteps? Little footsteps?

He felt himself having to consciously remember to breathe as he turned his eyes towards his bedroom door, hanging half open onto the darkened landing. In the small gap, there remained darkness, but was he seeing a shadow? Or was he only imagining one?

"Hello?" he called out.

No answer.

He stood, moving towards the door once more, feeling the roughness of the carpet beneath his feet. His feet barely made a sound as he slipped into the shadow of the landing, the streetlight

filtering through his windows not strong enough to reach. One hand reached for the door, and he opened it fully onto the empty landing.

“Mum, are you home?” he called out again. Hoping this time, he would hear her fussing around in the kitchen. But there was no answer. An image came to his mind of his mum, her feet curled under her on an uncomfortable hospital chair, her scarf tucked between her shoulder and her chin. What if she had not yet left the hospital? What if she wasn't coming home?

The laughter sounded again as he stepped onto the landing. In front of him, his parents' bedroom door was closed; to the right, the bathroom was likewise closed. The only light came from his room behind him. As he turned towards the stairs, he could see more light filtering through from the living room, casting orange shadows from the streetlight outside, filtered through his mum's net curtains. He could even make out the frames of the windows in the shadows.

Then part of it moved.

One of the shadows, a small part of it, moved deeper into the living room, followed by the same childish giggle.

He bounded down the stairs two at a time, straight for the hallway. As he turned immediately to the right, hoping to catch whoever was messing around in the act, he saw nothing. Just his normal living room. Coffee table, TV off, nothing moving in the shadows. He looked slowly around, but there was nothing – not even anyone outside the house beyond the bay window.

He checked behind the sofa, behind the armchair, behind the TV cabinet, and moved into the kitchen-dining room at the back, where outside the kitchen windows in their yards nothing moved – not even the neighbour's cat that pissed in her mum's potted plants. Nothing. There was silence, stillness and streetlight. Even the moon wasn't out yet.

When he turned back to the room around him, he saw it. A figure, half in, half out of the dim shaft of light coming through the living room window. Maybe two feet tall, two and a half. A child. The only problem was that some of the light was filtering through him.

"Can we play now?" the little boy asked, his accent a thick Lancashire, but high-pitched. His clothes were like an extra in *Oliver Twist*. Luke knew what he was looking at; it came to him in a flash, even as he blinked and the boy was no longer standing there in his living room.

"Oh bloody hell, it's ghosts."

* * *

Who made it morning?

Mark's silent scream gave way to an epic yawn as his body struggled back to consciousness. It wasn't a particularly difficult struggle; some bugger was banging on his horn on the motorway a few hundred metres away. That was good; clearly people were awake and enjoying their travels. Unlike him, who had been shunted off the motorway overnight and into a service station by bad weather.

Tiredness kills, right?

Even though he'd parked in a darkened corner of the services, between two arctic lorries he realised had already pulled away for the day, and had reclined his seat so far he was practically horizontal, nothing would have beaten a proper bed. However, he'd found himself momentarily stranded at one of the few services that didn't have a Travelodge (or a dark Days Inn equivalent), so he had to spend the night in his borrowed car instead.

Which would have been fine, except now he really needed to pee.

He stepped out into the frosty morning air and was glad to see it had at least stopped snowing. The ground had been gritted enough, now crusted with salt and sand, to let him walk across the vast car park with ease. As he did, he could hear the swish of tyres in the slush on the motorway carriageway and knew they were back up and running. With any luck, since he was already across the border, he'd be with his contact by noon.

Any services were a bleak and miserable affair; even though he didn't travel much, he knew this as a simple fact. The building was squat and ugly, with grey walls and a horrible linoleum floor. As he entered under the bright fluorescents, he saw a battered-looking spa, a Scottish bakery that looked more like a McGreggs, and a flickering light off towards the bathrooms. Definitely a get-in, get-out kind of situation, which he did without wondering why there were holes in the cubicle walls.

"Excuse me, sir, it's only doing black coffee," the far too bright young woman running the café by herself told him, as he stood in front of the infernal machine that dispensed the cups of liquid gold a few minutes later. She spoke as though in apology, but he threw back a gruff smile instead.

"Finally, a coffee machine with some sense."

She chuckled politely, though she looked far too bright for... well, whatever time it was. Six am? He checked his watch. Yes, it was far too early for her to be as sunny as she was; she was obviously a morning person and therefore could not understand how a thick black cup of even the worst coffee in the world was to him as coke was to an eighties pimp. He pushed the buttons, hoping that from the pictures he'd seen he'd chosen the right thing, and sighed in relief as a steaming stream of hot black liquid began to splash down into the cardboard cup.

As he waited, he pondered whether to risk a pasty. Surely something like a cheese and onion bake couldn't give him full-blown dysentery – and perhaps it would even take until after his business was done to cause a disturbance. Of course, he wouldn't want to find himself stuck in the middle of Glen-whatever-the-hell in a snowdrift when it finally struck. He let his eyes drift to the shop instead, wondering whether perhaps a pre-packaged form of food poisoning would act more slowly. Then he saw them.

At first, he believed they were so obvious it was almost comical. Two gentlemen, both wearing actual trenchcoats, on either side of the magazine rack. Now, while the one on the right looked as if he might enjoy reading about the Railways of Scotland, the other hardly looked like a Cosmopolitan fan. The fact that they were both casting slight glances in his direction to see if he'd started moving yet also gave it away.

So as not to let them realise they had been 'made' (good God, even thinking such thoughts quietly made him feel like he was in a bad spy thriller), he moved over to the counter and paid for his coffee, tipping the nice coffee girl a couple of quid on top of the couple of quid he paid for it. He mumbled a half-joke about how expensive things were getting these days and moved through the cafeteria back towards the corridor that led down to the toilets.

Well, unless the urge had suddenly come upon both gentlemen at the same time – or perhaps worse, they were looking for love in all the wrong places – they were definitely following him, breaking away from the magazine rack and heading in the same general direction.

He kept his pace steady, as though he were simply taking his coffee into the bathroom like any reasonable person. The doors led into a little nook. The ladies were on the left, the gents on the right, and just out of sight in the shadows, the service corridor that led around the back of the station. He made as if to head to the gents and ducked through the other door into the corridor – where a bank of grime-covered windows to his left showed the rear embankment of the services.

He knew he would have to make sacrifices, so he threw the coffee behind him onto the slick floor as he bolted for the fire exit at the far end. Having lost sight of him, the two men picked up their pace and rushed through the door, one of them sliding on his slick shoes and landing hard on his arse, tangling with the other, by the sounds of it. He didn't glance back, instead bursting straight through the fire exit and ignoring the blaring alarms as he raced across the car park and back to his vehicle.

By the time he was pulling out of the service station, he could see two figures emerging from the fire door – as a stream of confused truckers, travellers and staff slipped out the front, dazed yet relatively organised. He slapped at the hands-free as he skidded onto the motorway, and began to steady both his speed and the beating of his heart.

"Drake," came the flat welcome on the phone, echoing through his car speakers.

"What the hell is going on?" he snapped, trying to bring himself back down and not exactly doing well. Luckily the motorway wasn't overly rammed for that time in the morning, but he did have to stop himself from screeching past a caravan and not plunging into the central barrier.

"You dialled my number, I said my name," she offered, sounding bored. And well rested. What a bitch.

"I mean, what just happened to me?" he reiterated. "I stop off at the services, and already there are two guys in suits following me. Truth be told, it was all a little X-Files for my tastes; now what the hell is going on?"

"I warned you this could happen," she reminded him. He heard a clink in the background as he realised she'd placed her coffee cup down and felt his own addiction bemoan the sacrifice of his only – bloody expensive – cup. "What did you do?"

"Gave them the slip," he answered, "and ran."

"Effective."

"Who's doing this, Drake?" he snapped again. "Who has the tail on me? Is it you?"

"Oh, please, if I hired someone, you wouldn't see them," she sighed. He could almost picture her checking her nails for chips as they talked, probably sitting in her warm office with her cup of coffee. Or possibly home, though he'd never seen her cave and assumed it would be hard to drink coffee as she hung from the ceiling upside down. "Besides, you know who's likely put the tail on you. I told you, they're dangerous and they're paranoid. I'd advise you to switch cars..."

"But this is my Uncle's car..." he continued the thought, "And he'll expect to see me back in it."

"Right, just do as you're meant to do," she reiterated. "I'm going to be incommunicado for a little while."

"Brazilian?" he bit sharply, annoyed at the suggestion that this little Le-Carre journey he'd found himself embroiled in wasn't her sole focus.

"Watch it."

With that, he heard the dial tone of her hanging up, leading him to slam the button a little harder than he intended. His heart began to slow, his nerves to settle. But as he looked out across the frosty landscape, now the long monotonous road in front of him, he seethed. And wondered where his next coffee might come from.

* * *

As Drake slipped the phone bag into her suit pocket, she straightened her hair and stepped inside the cold grey government building. The boy was being paranoid. Sure, a little light surveillance was perfectly in keeping with what had been asked of him. She was surprised his Uncle bought the little ruse at all in the first place; why wouldn't he throw a few bits of surveillance into this little training-mission equivalent of his?

Okay, so maybe she'd let him talk about his feelings when he got back. She could always do her shopping list in her head while he did, if it made him feel better about it. For the moment, she had other business to attend to.

The corridor she walked along was pure government issue. The floor was a soft, polished linoleum from the old community building built in the seventies. The walls once upon a time may have been painted beige but were now grubby and drab, with doors leading off to all kinds of areas she didn't bother to imagine. She made her way past the grotty radiators and into the little waiting area outside Children's Services, where she was unsurprised to see the young man sitting waiting, staring off into space and errantly, likely subconsciously, plucking at the stuffing popping out of the ancient cushion on which he sat.

She had to admit a kind of doubling when she saw the man. He was the spitting image of his younger brother, or she supposed Ricky was the spitting image of him, but the six or so years between them had made all the difference. He was handsome, still, but haunted. She could see it in the slump of his shoulders, the lines in the corners of his eyes. Haunted by the spectre of

responsibility, given too young. A young tween parent-in-waiting, and he'd not even managed to fumble his way into that mantle either.

Perhaps today would be a blessing, instead of the gloomy curse it seemed.

"Mr Robert Kent?" she asked, standing over the young man. He looked up at her with a frown. Of course he would not recognise her; she usually hid in her office during Parents' Evenings, and he had left the High School well before her tenure.

"Yeah, are you the child services lady?" he asked.

"Oh God no, I've never been a lady," she answered reflexively. His look clouded.

"Then who are you?"

"Miss Drake," she offered, holding out a hand. It was amazing how easy the name came to her now. At first, she kept slipping into her old one and course-correcting halfway through. There were still people out there who considered the odd woman Beaverake instead. Off his still quizzical look, she added, "Your brother's headteacher. I would say headmistress, but I gave up the dominatrix life long ago."

He still didn't look like he quite believed her, but she was hardly surprised. It was good to have a reputation after all. Though, it seemed a little more than that. It seemed as though he was a little spaced out. Perhaps simple tiredness? From what she understood, he worked the night shift. Or perhaps simply from being a little slow?

"You know it's a simple renewal order, right?" he asked her, frowning. "I don't know why they're involving his school."

Slow it was, then. He hadn't exactly grasped what was going on, in full. She thought it would be a shame. After all, when she bothered to glance at the parental engagement figures, she saw he was consistently among the top. He cared. Which was a shitload more than some of her young charges' parents did, at least.

"I'm afraid you will," she answered quietly, but he'd already stopped listening. And so they waited for what was coming next.

* * *

Everything about being there felt wrong. School when they were in the holidays was like... okay, so he couldn't think of a metaphor. Going back into prison after you'd been released? But that's where the books were, and he didn't think Amy would want to sit in the hospital cafeteria researching while his mum bitched at him. Did Mark even have books on this kind of thing?

"School's strange when it's empty," he pointed out, something to say as they wandered down the corridor in the direction of the Library. Classroom doors were closed on either side, the ghosts of old Year 7s drifting through the grey light. It was as if he expected to turn the corner at any point and see it crammed with people, only for them all to fall silent and slip back into the shadows as they did.

"I know... it feels weird," Amy agreed from beside him, "but still kinda like home."

He elected not to do anything other than frown.

"So, how was the, uh..." he tried to find the right words, but they oddly all felt a little short. She'd said she was going to sit in, see what she could hear and maybe get a peek at the report, but he could barely imagine doing it. "Job...thing..."

"Child autopsy?" she supplied before answering quietly, "Not like they make it look on *CSI*."

"You wanna..."

"Catching and/or capturing this human or supernatural git is good enough for me," she reassured him. And he believed her. He couldn't imagine what she'd just been through, but she still seemed to remain chipper. Another tick in the awesome column as far as he was concerned.

They turned the corner once more, and he realised that they were passing by the science block. The restoration was still going on, meaning most of their science lessons were happening in portacabins over on the school field. He felt a shudder and involuntary goosebumps on the arm that had been grabbed as they trundled past.

"I'm thinking more of the super rather than the natural," he pointed out, having explained to Amy what he'd seen the night before.

"The autopsy indicated that as well," she agreed. "There were no bruises or signs of fractures and things as you would expect to happen during a struggle. Not even bruising with the UV light, which is like really deep."

"So he was led away by someone he trusted?" he summed up.

"There were no other tracks found from someone else, remember?" she reminded him. "And his toxicology screen finally came back; he wasn't drugged or anything. You'd think when his mother yelled for him, he would have tried to get back to her."

"He was led away," he agreed.

"Cite your source."

"I think he was led away by the one group of people you can't help but trust. Other kids."

"There were no more footprints," she said, frowning.

"Yeah, I didn't say living children," he supplied.

"You think the ghost kids actually did it?"

They paused at the threshold of the Library, as he pushed the door open for her, holding it like a gentleman. Like his dad taught him.

"It's Christmas, and it's a graveyard," he pointed out before joking, "Even I can do that maths."

* * *

He could only tell it was noon through the watch on his wrist; the skies above had remained stubbornly the same level of bright grey they'd been at since first lightening. He had followed the instructions to a T, sticking mainly to the motorways until he saw the sign for Perth and came off onto

the A roads instead. Luckily, as Perth was one of the larger cities in Scotland, it remained well gritted and open.

Clearly, the Scots understood bad weather more than the rest of the UK.

The instructions from his Uncle, delivered with their usual level of dismissive authority, had been simple. Drive up to the address he'd been given. Meet the gentleman, something of a dealer in antiques, and collect the package. Bring it back, hand it over, job done. When he asked why, he was told it was simply because they needed to protect it. That was it.

And if he'd protested further? Why, their fragile new alliance may have come crashing down. So he'd accepted the mystery. And then now found himself being followed. And still did not know why.

Bloody secret societies and spies were beginning to get on his nerves.

The building in front of him, on the quiet suburban street a little out of the centre, was just like all the others. A tall, brown-stone townhouse style, stretching three storeys into the air. White stone trim, likely limestone. It looked like all the rest, except it clearly wasn't a B&B and had only an intercom buzzer by the door, with a single button.

He contemplated scouting it out a little further; there were no signs of life coming from inside the heavily curtained windows. But he also knew he wanted to be back on the road and back home that same day, and be done with this ridiculous excursion. So he moved forward and buzzed the intercom, waiting only a few moments before a high-pitched, reedy voice came through, distorted through the crackle.

"Who is it?"

He considered sarcasm, but bit it back. How many people was he expecting?

"My name is Mark Matthews," he explained, following instructions. "I'm here about the package."

"What's the password?"

Mark rolled his eyes. He wasn't sure whether the intercom system had a camera, but it didn't matter. His eagle wasn't flying by midnight.

"Covenant," he muttered. The sharp buzz was clear, but as he reached for the handle, he found that it wouldn't turn under his hand. He tugged twice, but the brass handle wouldn't so much as move an inch. "I'm about to get pissed off."

"No, it's a real door," the voice assured him through the speaker. "You have to walk through it."

He stepped back, frowning. The door looked solid. Black, polished and devoid of a number. It did not look as weathered as the rest of the house, but that didn't mean a thing – and it certainly looked solid enough. Fairly certain he was about to smack into a door and produce a You've Been Framed video, he took a breath and stepped towards the door as instructed.

And passed through.

On the other side, he was suddenly assaulted by stuffy heat and dim light. All of a sudden he went from a normal, if chilly street, to what looked like a Moroccan bazaar. Every square inch of the place was adorned with all manner of unusual objects, along with stacks of thick, leatherbound books. Some of the titles he skimmed seemed even more obscure than his own – and more than a few in what he suspected was Sumerian.

Who the hell was he meeting?

He moved forward through the air thick with incense and towards what he assumed was the back room. The dim light didn't allow him to see much detail, though he caught the occasional object that fascinated him. A rounded sphere with looping script all over it, a carved flute that seemed too bone-coloured to be anything other than bone... and was that an Orb of Thessula?

"Admiring my collection?" came the live version of the voice he'd heard over the intercom. He jumped a little as a pair of eyes, bugged out by the goggles he was wearing, peered out at him from around a fake corner made of original Andalucian codices, by the looks of it.

"I don't even know what half of this stuff is..." Mark admitted honestly, moving further into the crowded room. Through the half-drawn curtains, he could see the grey street outside and realised they were still in the townhouse, just further back. The brightness of the outside world contrasted heavily with the gloom, making his eyes struggle to readjust and find the short man as he disappeared from the desk he'd been sitting at.

"Neither do I," the guy muttered, appearing next to him a second later. Mark swore he never heard the guy move, but he'd appeared to cross the room in an instant. He stuck out one hand, skeletally thin and marked with lines at the tips of his fingers where he'd used tiny instruments for long periods at a time. His goggles made his eyes look twice the size as he looked up at him. "Kenny Kraven at your service."

"I'm here about the package," Mark told him, trying to move things along as best he could. Truth be told, the incense in the air was beginning to make his head hurt, and the closeness of the heat from the radiators was so contrasting with the outside that he felt thermal whiplash.

"Ah, yeah," Kenny nodded, accepting his bluntness with all the graciousness of a good host. "Well...uh... I'm sorry I had to like ID you at the door, but I got a lot of people knockin' now they know I have this damn thing."

Mark doubted very much that anyone wanted to come to this place, nor would he get anyone other than the occasional pizza place leaflet shoved through his letterbox, but he would indulge him as long as was necessary. Besides, perhaps if his uncle was unwilling to give all the answers, he could get a few more himself.

"And what is 'this damn thing'?" he dared to ask.

"Ah... I don't know." The guy trundled back to his desk and began rifling through the boxes on it. How he found anything amongst the hoards of stuff he had there, Mark would never know, but he seemed to be moving through it with purpose.

"Seriously, you don't know?"

"Seriously, I don't. I'm the middleman. I suppose you're the courier."

"In a manner of speaking."

Kenny shook his head, moving away from the desk and bending over to rifle through more boxes in another corner. Mark felt impatience grow, wondering how much longer he could stand being in this place before he gave up and headed into a different room. Mark elected to follow him, wondering how so many different large rooms could be crammed with so much crap, and yet still appear only like a single townhouse from the outside.

"Do you really work for the Covenant?" Kenny asked him, as he rifled through another pile of boxes. Mark found himself distracted by the walls around him, as he began to notice the guy wasn't just a hoarder, but had the newspaper clippings and strings of a conspiracy nut as well.

"Sort of freelance at the moment."

"Cool, that's cool dawg."

"Don't call me dawg."

"Course not."

Kenny stopped dead suddenly, ignoring the box he was rifling through and whirling around to look at Mark directly. His look had changed now, gone from dazed to bright and inquisitive. Almost excited, he felt.

"Hey... Matthews?" he reiterated.

"Yes."

"Mark?"

"Well, I only said my name at the door; I see the confusion," Mark responded dryly.

"One moment."

He dove back into the box as papers began to strew themselves around it, and Mark frowned at one of the articles. It came from the *Calendar Free Press* and seemed to concern... He turned back to his contact.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"Oh, it's just..." Kenny looked up from his box and paused for a moment. With a frown, he looked around him, despite them being completely alone, and leaned in to whisper conspiratorially. "It's everything I have on them."

"Them?"

"You know..." he insisted. "'Them'. The bad guys." His rifling seemed done as he produced a small envelope, yellowed with time, and held it in his hands. "I have this for you. I found it... well... I found it when I inherited your parents' fortune." Mark felt his face drop, his mouth going dry and his mind exploding all at once. He could not comprehend enough of the sentence to truly grasp what the guy was saying. His parents... inheritance... Kenny looked at him with a sheepish expression as he added, "It must have gotten mixed up in the mail."

He looked at the precious artefact in Kenny's hand. The envelope, just a normal envelope. The name on it, he could see, was his own. Mark. Simple. No address. Handwritten. And he realised, with a mixture of shock and horror,

"That's..."

"It's your mother's handwriting," Kenny confirmed. "I never opened it, figured I shouldn't."

"How...?"

The envelope touched Mark's hand, his fingers closed around it. It was real. It existed. It felt old, but it was something concrete. Something he could hold onto. He could feel the thick paper inside. A letter?

He didn't have more time to think. Even as the two of them stood there, even as he held the letter in his hands, the outside world decided to interfere. A bang emanated, a crack of glass. Blood splattered across his hand, and he suddenly realised that it was not his own. Kenny, his eyes widened in horror and fear, was unable to speak, for the shot had gone through one side of his throat to the other.

Instinct took over, and Mark dove to the floor among the stacks of bric-a-brac as Kenny thumped to the floor behind him. A series of rapturous bangs sounded as the window and the wall

were shot through, and Mark army-crawled out of the room and into the main corridor. He couldn't think, he couldn't hear, but he could clamp onto the letter and crawl for his life.

He heard thundering boots; he heard the bashing on the door, and as he made his way to the back door – finding this one wholly human and normal – he managed to break out into the sudden cold day. Behind him, the thundering boots grew closer, the shouts of voices he didn't see, and the sudden silence as bullets stopped.

He didn't even have time to think as he fled into the greyness of the day, his world turning upside down.

* * *

John Matthews stirred his tea clockwise three times and let it settle once more. The honey would integrate itself into the liquid until peak sweetness was achieved. Approximately thirty-three seconds. Then he would take a sip and see if he needed more. All from the comfort of his armchair, as outside the first trickles of the day's snow would begin to fall.

He estimated about seven minutes until his nephew, who was by no means the most athletic of young people, made it to the petrol station down the street. His operative leader on the ground had confirmed his direction of travel. He would have expected the call about a minute after that, give or take a few moments for bartering with the attendant if Mark needed change.

He smiled to himself. They had retrieved the package and eliminated the threat in one fell swoop. Though Mark had never known it, had it been anyone else at the door, dear 'Kenny' would have disappeared into the wind. And he honestly did not want to go to the trouble of tracking down that particular thorn in his side again.

His nephew had played his part perfectly. Perhaps there was hope for him in the organisation after all. If he finally allowed his emotions to die.

The landline rang next to him. He let it ring once, twice, and picked up on the third.

"Is it done?" he asked. The breathless sound was exactly as he thought it would be. The poor boy sounded overwhelmed, frightened and filled with frustrated rage. So, no, he had not gotten a grip on his emotions just yet. But he would, in time. Watching someone die for the cause was perhaps the first step.

"Yes," Mark snapped at him.

"And the package?" he decided to press.

"Someone else has it," his nephew told him, in clipped tones. Well, there they were; he was not lying, at least. Most pleasing.

"How could this happen?" John asked him, planting just the right amount of aggravated disappointment into his tone. He didn't need to know it was on his way to him already; the few operatives staying behind to clean up the scene quickly and efficiently were the only evidence of their passing.

"They stormed the place; they took it," Mark told him.

"Do you know what you have done?" John asked, taking another moment to stir his tea. Why not? He was in a good mood; he'd be frivolous.

"I just got shot at," Mark snapped at him. Such an insolent boy. "So no, I don't suppose I recognise the stakes."

With that, he hung up. Well, he was still only young. He would learn in time that sometimes their business was dangerous. He would get over it. Or he wouldn't. But why focus on something so negative on a positive day? John replaced the handset in the cradle, sat back very pleased with himself, and lifted the cup to his lips.

As he took his first, sweet sip, he considered what the next possible step might be.

So many possibilities.

Act III

Rob didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't this. This grey and bureaucratic-looking room, like the office of the most boring person he could think of. And a conference table, around which there were four of them gathered. The oval shape made him feel like he was sitting at one end, while the other three seemed gathered around the other.

He didn't need an A in English Lit to get the imagery.

And the more it went on, the more he felt like this was less a meeting and more a hearing. A goddamn monkey trial.

There was Miss Drake, the headteacher, dressed in a power suit that looked too business-bitch for running the school. He'd had to assume that his brother had been exaggerating his stories about her, but it seemed like she lived up to them and then some. She sat there with a kind of bored look on her face, grimacing at whatever was in the coffee cup she'd been offered and pushing it off to one side instead.

Then there was the social worker, Lydia. She was nice, but she looked frazzled, even more so by the frizzy Christmas jumper that she wore. She'd been working with them for over a year now, but she always seemed incredibly skittish. Like she was dealing with seventeen cases at once and forgetting the details of each. Which, given what he saw on the news, probably wasn't too far away from the state of child services.

Then there was the last guy, the one he'd never met before but whose name he recognised from the bottom of the notice he'd been sent. Mr Cyril Bosworth. And he looked like a Cyril, even if Rob didn't quite know what he meant by that thought. He was overweight, maybe in his fifties and wore a horribly scratchy-looking grey suit and bland shirt-and-tie combination. His hair thinned on top to the point Rob could see his flaky scalp, and the thin rims of his glasses dug into his nose and the side of his head, leaving marks Rob could see as he fiddled with them. He spoke in clipped tones, and kept his eyes firmly anywhere but Rob's own.

Rob instantly disliked the man, and it was obvious from the beginning the feeling was mutual.

"So, Mr Kent, I assume we all know why we're here," was how Bosworth began, shuffling the papers unnecessarily in front of him as he did so. Considering the letter had invited him to a meeting to discuss his brother, he'd assumed that's what it was about – but looking over at Drake and the way Lydia wouldn't meet his gaze, he began to wonder whether he knew the extent of it.

"I'm not sure what Miss Drake is doing here," Rob offered.

"She is here to explain how your brother's school performance has been over the past year," Bosworth replied, peering at him over the rims of his glasses and dropping more than a heavy dollop of condescension into his tone. "As a direct indicator of the sort of care you have been able to provide."

"Isn't that nice?" Rob blurted sarcastically, getting a glare from the knob in charge for his troubles. He saw Lydia start a little, and began to wonder if Bosworth wasn't her boss or something. He dropped her an apologetic look, as the proceedings continued.

"Now, can you remind us of the circumstances leading to your guardianship of your brother?" Bosworth continued, tapping his pen annoyingly on the papers in front of him. Rob stared at him, a little incredulous.

"You mean how did our parents die?" he asked.

"Well, I wouldn't put it so bluntly," Bosworth answered him, as though Rob were being unreasonable for having emotions. "But yes."

Rob fought a glare, bit back a more sarcastic response, and took a breath to steady himself. Everything he was about to say could have been read in the report, no doubt. He'd been through it enough times in the initial application to assume guardianship of his brother. And the other, less formal recounting to various family and friends afterwards. And he never wished to go through it again.

It hadn't numbed, either. The words came out mechanically now, but the emotions still evoked strongly. He could keep his voice steady as he talked about that spring day two years ago. The day he was home from university for the easter break, or 'reading weeks' as they liked to pretend it was. He could keep his tone from breaking as he explained that they had planned a trip away, somewhere in the Lake District, and loaded the car with their suitcases.

What he couldn't explain was how his mum and dad had seemed so happy that day. It was their wedding anniversary after all, and his dad playfully kept swatting his mum's bum, despite both his and Ricky's protests. As a thirteen-year-old, Ricky had pointed out how gross they were being, but he couldn't explain how that never really went away when you reached Rob's tender age. He couldn't explain how the bright smile of joy on his mum's face, as he'd finally shown up to babysit his brother – who consistently moaned he didn't need babysitting. It lit her up, because she was a person who lit up the world around her.

He could tell them how, as they pulled out of the driveway, he and Ricky stood by the front door, watching them head down the street toward the main road. But he couldn't explain how it felt to know that that moment, the one in which he'd been contemplating sneaking Ricky his 'first' beer that night and kicking his little bro's arse on Call of Duty, was the last good one. He could tell them how when the guy came around the corner, driving that big white van that never bothered to get even a faded decal on the side, the speed was far too high for the road they were on. But he couldn't tell them how it felt to watch the front of his parents' car crumple in, and everything fell away.

Finally, he could tell them that the guy was so far over the legal limit that when they brought him up in court, he was ordered into a mandatory rehabilitation programme alongside a pitiful jail term. But he couldn't explain to them how it felt to see blood on his mum's face, looking only like she was sleeping, as he dragged his screaming and crying little brother back from seeing the same thing.

And after all of that, after the facts were laid out bare, all Bosworth could do was shift his glasses on his nose and say flatly,

"I'm sorry for your loss."

And made it sound like the truth was he was anything but.

"Now, moving on, you then quit your degree in Engineering, correct?" he briskly continued, as Rob struggled to cement himself back in the present and not that sunny street they no longer lived on. "You got your job as a night watchman and moved to take guardianship of your brother?"

"Well, we had the funeral first," Rob snapped at him sarcastically. He barely noticed.

"And now you live in a small terraced house, barely able to support yourself and your brother on your salary," he continued. Though the question mark was implied, it didn't feel that way.

"We get by a lot better than some."

"And people with cancer have it better than dead people," Bosworth quipped. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't look for a cure."

"You're comparing me to cancer?" he asked, incredulous.

"It was an analogy, Mr Kent; try to keep up," Bosworth pursed his lips. "Now, onto the matter of your brother's school life..."

He could see this now. He could see it in the shape of their shoulders and the furtive glances between them. This wasn't a meeting to check how everything was; this was a witch-hunt for a specific purpose. Everything about the man's bearing was dismissive and cruel, and Rob found himself bubbling up with the same kind of fuck you attitude that got him in detention more than once in his time.

"For fuck's sake, this is ridiculous," he snapped. He could have sworn he heard Lydia gasp, but he didn't care. "I don't beat him, I don't mentally abuse him. And there are plenty of kids out there with both a mother and a father who have emotional problems. I'm doing the best I can because I love my brother. He may be a handful sometimes; he can be downright fucking teenage, but so are all of them. So was I when I was his age. But if you take him away from me now, slap him into some foster home with fifty other kids, he's gonna go far further down that bad road a fuck of a lot faster."

He bit back on his tongue, knowing he could and wanted to say more, and he really struggled not to. He was sat there with them in judgment of him... and they didn't care. None of them cared. He felt something worse beneath the frustration: the sting of his sadness, his grief.

"He's the only family I have left," he said, deflated. "Don't take him away. Please."

He didn't catch the strange look on Drake's face, because by the time he looked up again, his entire field of vision was taken up by Mr Bosworth. In his way, he almost seemed pleased, as he brimmed with his own kind of quiet satisfaction and said,

"Perhaps we should take a short recess. Especially for you to calm down, Mr Kent. We'll resume in ten minutes."

* * *

"There's been another one," Luke announced as he returned to the Library. After several hours of staring at various line-drawing depictions, only to realise he was in the middle of an illustrated Christmas Carol. Literally, he'd elected to do the coffee run instead. And, surprisingly, it was a good thing he had.

"What?" Amy looked up from the table, in the exact same position in which he'd left her half an hour earlier. Hunched over her laptop, books strewn about and with her look of plucky determination that he swore half the time was just her resting face. Resting thoughtful face, maybe?

"While I was grabbing the coffee, I bumped into Julie," he pointed out, even though Amy just shrugged in response to the name. Right, Julie ran in... well, other circles. "She said she was down by Bank Street earlier, and the police were there again. Apparently another kid has gone missing about an hour ago."

"Oh God..." she whispered.

"Yeah, and it's gonna start getting dark in a couple of hours."

He nodded, having already run through much of the maths in his head on the way back. Young kid, same cemetery, and similar temperatures to the night before? Even with only the mild sprinkling they were going to get on top of the normal sprinkling they'd already received, that pretty much added up to something he didn't want to have to deal with. She waved him over as he placed down her cup in front of her and slipped into the seat beside.

"Decaf," she made a face. "You've been talking to Sara."

"Sorry," he smiled.

"It's alright," she sighed. "Anyway, I've been researching ghosts, since Mark isn't here to do the heavy lifting." He could see from her screen she had about seventy-five tabs open and didn't want to wonder how the hell she made sense of any of it. Some people were just... capable of many things.

"What does the lore say?" he asked.

"Lore?"

"I've been watching this new show, *Supernatural* on ITV..." he began, but she rolled her eyes. Clearly she'd heard of it. He wouldn't have been surprised; Dean did seem like Sara's type. Then again, according to locker room talk, a pulse seemed like her type some days. And yet he couldn't ever recall any one of his mates ever having gone out with her. Shit, he was going off on one; he returned to the present.

"Well, naturally there's lots of stories about ghosts and stuff across cultures – they're a kind of dawn-of-time phenomenon," she explained, "But also kinda interesting psychologically, with some papers saying that there's this region of our brain called the temporoparietal junction..." He shot her a look; she was losing him and fast, "...sorry, digression. Anyway, boils down to a couple of consistencies – when people die, they have a spirit body, and that spirit body can interact with the living sometimes. Some go on to... y'know, whatever spirit there is in the sky, and others hang around. Do the whole unfinished business vibe. And since you said your midnight visitor was vertically challenged, I think we know whose business is unfinished."

"Right," he nodded, strangely enough following along with her logic. "So how do we stop them?"

"Okay, so one way is the head-spinning, find-your-way-to-the-light, they're-here exorcism attempt," she explained. "And the other is communing with the spirits. Finding out what the hell is happening and what they want. Resolve the issues keeping them here."

"The Freud approach?"

"Pretty much."

He sat back in his seat, wondering how quickly Christmas turned into a horror movie without him even really trying. He'd never even seen *The Exorcist*, except for that parody on Scary Movie 2, but even then he realised he didn't exactly want green vomit everywhere. But Amy seemed confident. Plus he sometimes hated talking and sharing feelings.

"So... exorcism?" he suggested.

"I think we'd better go down the benefit of the doubt before we go out exorcising all willy-nilly like," she countered.

"You want to ask the ghostly children why they're murdering other children and hoping they don't murder us in the meantime?" he summarised.

"Talk first, exorcise second," she said, nodding. "Or what Sara calls 'getting healthy'." She snorted at her own joke, and despite the moment, he gave her a faux-serious look before they headed out.

"How the hell have you guys fought bad guys?"

"Mainly improv."

* * *

She didn't like to say bad things about the police in town, and apart from a few words about the shoddiness of their firewall she'd one day drop anonymously in a letter to the editor, she never

had. But when they arrived at Crawford Cemetery fifteen minutes later, she was disappointed to find that the police already seemed to have moved on. Well, enough so that it obviously wasn't their highest priority. A missing kid, that was the long and short of it, in a chillingly familiar tale. Dad strapped the baby into the car seat, and the five-year-old was there one moment, gone the next. Same cemetery, same place.

And already they had moved on. She saw another photo had been added to the collection of flowers. She saw several officers out of the corner of her eye, standing and drinking coffee next to their panda car. A few people milled around, though some looked too young to be the kids' parents. And that was it.

Was that how easy it was in Calendar? Oh no, how sad, never mind? Place down the flowers and just... forget?

She felt a small shudder run through her bones, just small enough to pretend it was the bite of the cold. She felt Luke's hand on her shoulder, drawing her thoughts back into the present. They had talked a little on the way over, and he nodded to the mausoleum nearby. They needed somewhere away from prying eyes, a thought which now seemed to hold even less weight given the sparse population.

Ignoring the implication of finding the door unlocked, she and Luke slipped through into the darkness, and she clicked on the flashlight. The mausoleum was one of the only ones in the cemetery, and it was large enough to be a full room. The walls were thick, grey – marble or concrete, she couldn't tell through the dust – and recesses disappeared, slinking back from her light. Dust motes flew around the beam as she wondered whether it had dropped a few more degrees as they slipped inside.

"Do you have the bag?" she asked him, her voice echoing around the empty chamber. She didn't know why she expected a huge stone sarcophagus in the middle, like in those American TV shows. But this was different; the recesses where shapes lurked were the only evidence of potential occupation. At least she hoped these dead would remain quiet.

Well... actually not quite, but just as long as they stayed over there.

Luke slipped the strap from his shoulder and placed down Mark's suspiciously old-looking leather bag. He didn't ask why she knew exactly where it was hidden in his office, nor what he kept in there, and so she was able to rifle through it without interruption.

"Mark won't mind you stealing his Ghostbuster bag, will he?" he wondered out loud.

"Hey, if we're lucky, we'll be done and dusted before he gets back," she answered with a shrug, hoping that was the case. He was, after all, due back sometime that evening, and she really didn't want a lecture about ghost hunting without the boys. After all, she had a boy with her – and so far that hadn't changed the game at all. "He'll never know if I get a chance to replenish the sage beforehand."

"Oh, *that's* what that was," Luke muttered to himself.

"Okay, so we have to light the incense, and we have to wave it about a bit," she told him, beginning to assemble the smudging wand as she'd memorised before they'd left. "There's also an incantation, but I think it's in Sumerian, so I better get the right one."

"Sure."

He sounded distant, but she remained focused on what she was doing. And rambling, because somehow when there was less noise, the place got creepier. She'd have to shut up when the spirits spoke, but until then... ramble away.

"I mean, otherwise we might end up raising the spirits of the dead people in this crypt along with their bodies, which we really wouldn't want to do now, would we?"

"Nope, uh, Amy..."

"Zombies just raise the jinkys factor to like..." she continued, only for him to interrupt her abruptly.

"Amy!"

She finally looked up to see his look had dropped. He'd moved the beam of the torch away from her and towards the back of the mausoleum. His eyes were wide, and his hand had an ever so slight tremble in it. She guessed machismo only took you so far, as she followed his gaze.

"Do you see that?"

"See what?"

The spot where his torchbeam landed was empty, more solid wall – but his eyes were wide as if there was something.

"Okay, I'm getting a Hayley Joel Osmond feeling," he explained, unable to tear his eyes away from what he was seeing. "I can see a dead kid at the back of the crypt."

"There's nothing there," she repeated, unable to see even a flicker of movement or shadow. But her hackles raised, goosebumps spreading across her flesh, and she began to wonder whether it had again dropped another degree – or whether she'd always been able to see her breath like that.

"Well...I'm telling you...I see dead people," he continued. He frowned. "Yeah, well, I got practice."

She frowned at him. "Are you now talking to the dead people?"

"What?" he asked, and again she was unsure whether he was addressing her or whatever he was seeing. "Um... no reason." He finally tore his gaze away and to her; she saw the truth in them.

"Okay, I'm not getting the creepy killer vibe from this kid."

"What's he saying?"

"He wants to play," he answered simply.

She shuddered, even as a profound sadness stole over her. A kid, alone in this place, wanting to play? Did he even know he was dead? Luke's brow furrowed as he seemed to hear something else, and he snapped his head back in the original direction.

"He?" Luke asked sharply. "Is something keeping you here?"

Even she could tell as the atmosphere began to slip once more. She felt the breeze across her face, soft at first, growing in intensity – her auburn hair beginning to lift into her face one strand at a

time. She locked eyes with Luke, but even she did not need to ask what was being said. A voice, disembodied, echoed around the chamber with the deep timbre of adult, unbidden rage.

“GET. OUT!”

She felt herself scooped by Luke, as the door to the mausoleum flung open by itself. She grabbed the straps of the bag, and together they stumbled as the wind behind them became a furious roar. She felt lifted, pushed from behind and suddenly the two of them tumbled together out of the door and into the bank of freshly laid snow.

Only when they could look up did they see they had finally drawn the attention of the few people in the cemetery, as a policeman’s beam caught both of them.

“What the hell do you two think you’re doing?”

* * *

The corridor smelled of dirty water. Not full mouldy or anything, but that kind of used dishwater smell from a mop that hadn’t been cleaned in so long but was still being used for cleaning. It was a banal office smell, one he had grown unaccustomed to having switched to night security. It meant he spent a good chunk of his time outside, or in the portacabin. It became something he couldn’t unfocus on, but it helped him because he didn’t know what he would think otherwise.

Rob kept his head in his hands, already feeling the weight of what was happening. He could tell from the look in the main guy’s eyes that he didn’t care what Rob was going to say; his mind was made up. What did that leave him? What more was there to do? He could shout, scream, telling them they were being dickheads – but in doing so he’d only be proving their point, wouldn’t he? That he wasn’t ready for this.

And he wasn’t entirely sure he’d ever been. But that wasn’t the point.

He caught the scent of her perfume before she arrived, his first indication the coffee cup appearing before his face. He looked up to see Miss Drake standing above him, holding out the offering with an unreadable expression. Not sympathy, exactly, something else.

"I had a brother."

He took the coffee cup from her as she slipped into the seat beside him. He didn't reply; she had stated the fact so simply he didn't even know if a response was needed. Anything he could say might just turn out sarcastic. He was too tired for that.

"You love him a lot, don't you?"

"He's the reason I don't know what midday looks like," he answered. "I'd do anything for him."

"I understand."

Again, that flat, inflectionless tone that just didn't seem anything like the brash, somewhat annoyed woman who'd first wandered into the hall.

"And now they're going to take him away," he sighed, hating the small and pathetic feeling even saying words like that made him feel.

"Well fuck," she muttered. He glanced, surprised, to see her shoulders had slumped a little bit. She glanced across at him, her eyelashes fluttering and for a moment making her seem like a much younger woman than he'd initially assumed. "Normally this is when I'd threaten you. But honestly, if you tell anyone about what you're going to see in there... " She learned in, the ghost of a smirk on the side of her face, "... I don't think they'd ever believe you."

With that, she stood and walked back in the direction of the room, though neither of them had heard a call to the end of the break they had taken. He wondered whether to follow her, but found himself going anyway. Bosworth seemed a little annoyed at the resumption, but within two minutes they were back to the trial... only now his apprehension was coming far more from the direction of the strange woman at the table.

"Now, you've been headteacher at Calendar High School for how long?" was Mr Bosworth's first question. She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Good God, you really do think you're *Ally McBeal*, don't you?" Miss Drake muttered with a roll of her eyes. Mr Bosworth shifted a little in his seat, uncomfortable, but she relented. "My sentence began five years ago."

"So you've known Ricky all of his High School life?" he pressed.

"If I knew all my students personally, I would have to kill myself," she sighed. "They don't usually gain sentence until around Year 10, 9 at a push. But I've known of Ricky Kent for some time, yes."

Rob saw the man's knuckles whiten slightly, tightening around the pen with which he was attempting to write notes. He also noticed the social worker suppress a smirk and began to wonder where this was going.

"And would you say his grades have begun to decline in the past year or so?" he pressed further, flicking his eyes over to Rob, who tried to suppress the urge to lamp him one. "Since he has been under the care of Mr Kent?"

"No, not particularly," she shrugged.

The man shuffled further in his seat, his cheeks becoming flushed.

"But if you look at the test marks you supplied..." he began.

"Test marks tell you nothing," she dismissed with a wave of her hand. "Look, Mr Bigglesworth, I don't know how many A-Levels you failed to find yourself in this line of work – although judging by your gin blossoms I'd guess you did O-Levels instead – but tests tend to get harder the older you get. It's not uncommon for a child who passes his SATs with flying colours to only get Cs and Ds in his GCSEs. His teachers say he shows up for class all the time and is quite attentive and honestly, isn't that all we really care about? The last time I checked, being academically ungifted and working in retail wasn't a reason to go into care."

"But..." he tried to splutter.

"In fact, I find it far more likely that a child needs someone who gives a shit rather than a guardian who's there to collect a paycheck. And, admittedly, I've been at fewer parents' evenings than the governors would like, but of all the parents and guardians I have had the displeasure of dealing with over the years... Mr Kent here seems to be one of the most responsible and nurturing towards his brother's talents."

"Now, since we're all just killing time in between lunch breaks, how about you let us all go back to our lives? I do, after all, have a school to run. And a new espresso maker to order for the staff room."

Her glance flickered over to Rob, who sat there.

"Close your mouth, Mr Kent; you look like a stunned gazelle," she chided him. "Mr Bigglesworth knows he can't do much more than send you a renewal confirmation in the post like a catalogue subscription and go back to terrorising the next struggling family. Correct?"

The venomous look in the man's eyes told Rob everything he needed to know. With that, she nodded, stood and straightened the creases of her skirt as she looked at both of them in turn. As her eyes turned to Rob, he thought he caught a devilish quick wink, and then she was gone.

And all he could think was she'd been absolutely correct. No one would ever believe him.

* * *

His mind refused to settle, but the monotonous return to the road wasn't giving him space to think. Perhaps that was a blessing. After laying low for several hours in a small café, having several coffees back to back while the waitress had glared at him, clearly wishing to go home before the weather worsened, he'd doubled back to scout the townhouse. The townhouse which showed no sign of damage. The door still looked normal, and no one was about. When peering through the windows, he saw no body; they had cleaned up.

And Mark had been left to wonder, to sit and consider just what the hell had happened. He was no stranger to the lengths which the Covenant themselves could go to, in order to erase the evidence of their presence – the warehouse where Ricky had confronted one of their operatives was back in operation the very next morning. But did that mean their rivals, or the vague threat his uncle continued to allude to, did the same thing?

He hated the implications, running through in his mind just what he could rely on and what he could not. He could not trust his own interpretation. A man was dead; that much seemed clear. He had lost the 'package'; that much was also clear. And finally, he had the letter. The one in his mother's handwriting. And yet, in those hours nursing his coffee and thinking through everything over and over again until the shaking stopped... he couldn't bring himself to touch it. He hadn't even removed it from the pocket in his jacket.

And all he'd done was move. Back towards home. Back towards Calendar. Away from where he'd been. Because what else could he do?

The motorway was okay, but the snow was beginning to fall again. They'd been gritted; he heard the salt and sand crunching under the tyres, but he kept his speed low as he went. Slush was kicked up by the trucks and vans as they passed him, and visibility, as the day grew towards its end, meant he had to concentrate even harder to keep himself on the lane.

And that helped, didn't it? That meant he could ignore thinking about anything else. Concentrate on the problem at hand.

But then, as it inevitably did, life – and more specifically biology – forced him into a decision. He had to stop; he had to pee. And so when the service sign, its blue-and-white lettering swimming out of the white haze, he realised he needed to give in – and pulled off the motorway. He went about his business, got back into the car and sat there... waiting.

He knew all he had to do was turn on the engine. Turn on the engine, pull out of the parking space and rejoin the carriageway. He'd be home within two, maybe three, hours. He could delay it

that long and keep refusing to think, refuse to plan. Let it be the next day's problem – or at the very least the future Mark who would fail to sleep even if it was in his own bed that night.

He couldn't do it.

So he slipped the letter from his pocket. The handwriting, faded with time but clear when it was written in his own mother's hand, was clear to him. Within it was a letter, crinkling slightly in the cold as his fingers brushed it. It had not been sealed; who knew who else had read it. It was meant for him. That was enough.

By the time he pulled back onto the carriageway, the snow had begun to slow once more – the clouds moving away further down south. Fresh tears had lain grooves on his face, and though he had brushed them away, their remains lingered – reminding him of everything he had lost. And everything that was to come.

* * *

Ricky didn't know why he did it to himself. Except, of course, he knew. Because he had to. Because if he didn't, then they'd slip away. And even though slipping the top off the shoebox and peering inside his own pain was like jabbing his thumb back into the wound, it felt better than the numbness it left behind. He knew where it was; Rob didn't exactly hide it – even though it had always felt a little... off limits. On top of the kitchen cabinets.

Only Ricky was taller now.

It was so much. Photos, some polaroids from the camera his dad had bought himself for Christmas and pretended was from the boys. Some were just from the Fujifilm his mother clicked away at every possible occasion. She wasn't in a lot of them, except when his aunts finally took over for a bit.

She liked hats; that was something. Big poufy ones with feathers plucked from no known animal. Weddings. Christenings. Retirement parties. Everything required a hat. The blade sliced across his heart to see them, and he'd pressed on.

By the time he heard the engine of Rob parking his car on the street outside, the light had begun to dim, and he realised he'd spent most of the day in the box. In the wound. It throbbed now, the same behind his eyes, low and dull.

"Hey."

"Long thing," Ricky pointed out. His voice sounded weird. Heavy.

"Yeah, I know, sorry," Rob answered. He sounded tired too.

"What do I care, right?"

He didn't know why he said that, didn't know why he shrugged. His brother didn't challenge him, didn't kick off or throw back. He noted it, but he couldn't tear his eyes away, as he heard the creak of the springs as his brother slid into his armchair. There was a pause, and then the question he'd probably been waiting for.

"Ricky, what are you doing with those?"

"I wanted to see them." And why not? It was the truth.

"You shouldn't be..." his brother began, but he cut him off.

"Don't you dare."

It was like a switch flicking. Ricky could feel the anger descending over his eyes as he turned to glare at his brother from where he was. The thoughts he couldn't quite articulate while looking into the frozen eyes of people who no longer existed, their warmth still coming through the fuzzy polaroids and muting the anger he was simmering underneath. Now, when he saw his brother's exhausted, concerned face, he found it rearing up again.

"Don't tell me I shouldn't remember them," he snapped.

"That's not what I'm saying," Rob answered him.

"Then why the hell don't we have any pictures up of them?" he pressed further. That was it, wasn't it? Why was there only one shoebox? Why was it hidden up in the kitchen like memories he didn't want? "Do you want me to forget about them?"

"No, not to forget."

"Then what?"

"Oh, forget it," Rob snapped, looking away. Fine, if that's what he wanted to do, they could do that. If all he wanted was to avoid it, then they'd avoid it. He placed the top back on the box and stood, realising he needed out of there; he needed to be gone. He headed for the door; he'd go to the Library, he'd cool off. "Ricky..."

"What?" he snapped.

"Cut me some fucking slack, okay?" his brother told him, still not meeting his eyes.

"Right, I realise how hard this must be for you."

"They were my parents as well," he said quietly.

"You wouldn't think it."

He hated himself for the twist of the knife. His brother never met his gaze, so Ricky turned and stormed out of there. He may have hated himself, but he also couldn't stand to look at him like that. Like... like he couldn't even think what. Just... not his brother.

He left before he could see Rob place his head in his hands. He left before he heard the shattered sigh utter from his brother's mouth. He left before he heard him say one exhausted word.

"Fuck..."

* * *

Luke was utterly lost now. A couple of weeks ago, he'd learned about the forces of darkness, and now Casper, the friendly toddler, was talking to him in crypts, and weird, creepy voices were forcing them back out. And then, as they'd made their way back to the Library after receiving a right

dressing down from the police officer, Amy had begun to formulate ideas so fast he'd been back to struggling to keep up.

As he sat next to her, things happened on her screen which he'd only imagined happened in those spy movies. The ones where a fancy hacker clackety-clacks on the keyboard so hard while speaking rapidly. He wondered if she'd be able to do the same.

"You don't even wait for the pages to load up," he pointed out, as she switched from something that looked like a forum to a Yahoo search.

"Speed, essence, construct sentence."

"And what are you *actually* doing?"

"So you said the being you saw was like a kid ghost, right?" She spoke really fast, and yet her eyes never left the screen. By now he'd have ended up accidentally buying an ostrich farm or something. Go touch typing. "And what I heard didn't sound like a kid, so unless you saw the ghost of Darth Vader, then maybe the ghost children themselves aren't responsible for the disappearances, and so someone else is."

"The creepy 'Get Out' man?"

"Right, so I'm checking to see who's buried in that cemetery. The local historical society petitioned the council to do a proper registration of all persons living and dead in the local cemeteries, which in Calendar seems a kind of opening-the-Ark-of-the-Covenant idea, but y'know... adults." She suddenly stopped, her hands falling from the keyboard. "Okay, that's weird."

"What?"

"Well, I kinda totally legally snuck..." He tilted his head at her, which she caught, as she remembered their first excursion into the same territory together. Apparently the Year 9 who'd thought SkyNet was rising at the time had elected to switch from IT to Business Studies and was considering a future in lighthouse keeping. "...okay, totally hacked the town planning servers to find who is registered buried in that cemetery and it turns out... not a whole load of people."

"So who is?"

“Crawford himself and some of his immediate family,” she explained, scanning her eyes down the scratchy handwritten names on the screen. “Looks like his two brothers, his wife, his father and some of his cousins. But then...”

“Then...?”

“Like fifty children. All of them having died over the past two hundred years. None of them related to him.”

He felt a shiver go down his spine at the implication and how creepy it felt. Only his family... and unrelated kids. Either the guy was a serious perv or... Amy had resumed clacking on her keyboard.

“I’m playing a hunch,” she told him. “And it looks like, as one might often think, I’m right. I can’t find any records of the Crawfords having children. His brothers had some, and I think there are still a few knocking around.”

“Any of them Cindy Crawford by any chance?” Luke asked. She shot him a look.

“I don’t think there were a lot of family planning clinics around back in the thirties, but I’m guessing maybe they couldn’t have children,” she explained, ignoring him.

“So he’s replacing the children he never had?”

“One of his wishes must have been to be surrounded by children,” she said, shrugging. “So he created a family to replace the one he could never have in life... and now... now maybe he’s taking more.”

Luke felt his hands clenching tighter against the wooden armrest of his chair as he processed the thought. This wasn’t some wayward ghost kids leading others to an accidental death because they wanted friends to play with. This wasn’t innocence wrapped in sadness. He’d ensured that kids would never be buried with their families, with their loved ones, while he was alive. And now, now he wanted more.

Well, simply put – no.

“Amy... “ he started, “I think it’s pea-soup time.”

* * *

It was cold, so cold. And it was dark now. Dark all around him.

The boy he'd followed into the park, the one with the funny small stone houses, was still there. He'd smiled at first, made him laugh as he stuck out his tongue. He'd wandered after him, knowing his dad was still nearby.

But then he'd gotten lost. The snow was heavy, and he'd decided to go inside one of the buildings. They were bare, they were empty, but he'd had company. Yet when he tried to go back out again and see the snow, the door wouldn't open. He'd pulled and pulled, even though the handle was just enough for him to reach.

And he couldn't. The boy had told him it was okay, but he'd cried – he didn't want it to be okay. He wanted to be with his dad. He wanted his mum. He wanted to be home. He wanted his toys. He'd cried, and he'd cried, but no one had come.

"Come on, come and play," the boy told him. The one in the funny clothing. He'd kept coming back, though he'd looked stranger and stranger. Jimmy felt cold, but the boy looked cold. He wasn't even dressed in a thick coat, and his skin was getting whiter and whiter. He shook his head, stayed where he was, and curled up into a ball next to the wall.

"Don't want to," he pouted.

"Please..." the boy asked, "Please..."

"Sleepy..." he told him. His voice sounded like it was coming from far away. Sure, sleep was needed. He always felt better when he slept. Maybe he wouldn't feel so cold.

"No, you can't," the boy told him. His voice was scared, but it was from so far away. "He'll come..."

Strange spiderwebs touched his face, but he struggled to open his eyes. He realised what they were – they weren't spiders; he'd felt them before. Outside. The soft fall of snow. Coming from the ceiling, inside.

And someone, somewhere, was angry. Someone far away. Somewhere beyond the snowflakes.

All he wanted was to sleep.

Act IV

Luke and Amy walked up to the Crawford Cemetery gates side by side. This time there was no police; their small pretence of investigation had already reached its natural end. No, they were done for the night. He had to file it, but he didn't throw it in the shredder. Instead, he carried the bag, and Amy briefed him a little on what they needed to do when they got there. It amounted to – let her do the legwork.

The streetlights had come on by that point, the snow falling now fresh and fluttering in the beams.

"Are you getting a gunslinger vibe right now?" he tried to joke, feeling himself falling flat.

"I would appreciate His help right now, to be honest," Amy muttered before frowning. "If He exists."

"If you're right about Crawford, he won't want to give his little family up," he pointed out.

"Well..." she shrugged, "We'll say please."

With that, she pushed the iron gate of the cemetery back open, it shrieking in protest. He had to imagine it hadn't been that hard to open earlier and wondered how aware the presence of the graveyard was of their intentions. As they slipped through, he felt as if the sounds of the nearby high street were dimmed, the dial turned down on the outside world.

Amy fished into the bag; he felt the weight drop slightly as she produced a strange white cylinder. It took him a moment to realise what it was, as she walked away from him and towards the memorial.

"A little seasoning?" he wondered.

"Salt," she reasoned, "Good for bad cholesterol... and protection."

She began to draw a large circle of salt on the ground in the clearest patch of ground. Though the snow covered everything, he could see the small traces it left as it landed. He placed the bag

down beside her and frowned as he began to realise that he could hear something now, above the roar of the wind. Something... human and yet... not.

"Stay inside the circle," she warned, as she knelt down beside the bag.

"Why?"

"Because when we exorcise this git, he's gonna get ticked," she pointed out. "And he can't get us inside the circle. Which is apparently one of the only things this *Supernatural* series got right."

"More of a *Star Trek* guy," he shrugged.

He watched as she knelt on the snow, her knees going deep navy blue and soaked through almost immediately, though she didn't seem to mind. Even as she did, he felt the wind chilling his face drop a few more degrees. She began to chant, low at first, but growing in volume to be heard above the roaring of the wind. He realised it had to be Latin.

"Wow, it really is just -us this and -us that," he muttered.

"Shush-us!" she snapped, before returning to her ritual.

The effect was already becoming evident. The sound on the wind was now an unmistakable groan of human pain. Someone or something, perhaps their ghost, was beginning to grow more animated, more restless. The scent of incense hit him hard as she lit the thing in her hands that looked... well, frankly like a giant joint. She began to wave it, her voice rising and falling with a kind of natural intonation he doubted he'd ever get from Latin. Her eyes were closed so she couldn't see... but he could.

The snow was alive now. Moving, undulating. Soft like powder, but something invisible seemed to move through it, seemed to direct it. A drift puffed towards them aggressively, only for it to hit the spot where Amy had been pouring the edge of the circle and fall down as if it had hit some kind of invisible barrier. He had to grin to himself, as frightened as he was.

"This is so cool."

Well, it was... until the snow began to coalesce into a form. It rose, six, seven, eight feet high and unmistakably was generating some kind of face. The snowfall ran almost like water, making a

howling, wraith-like face of rage and fury. In a kind of mockery of human form rather than the actuality of it. It leered at him, still beyond the edge of the circle, but clearly coming for them. Hollow spots where eyes should be somehow burned with furious cold hate, locking with his own. Then finally, he could sense it.

Not just see it, feel the edges of its being, its presence. If this had once been Louis Crawford in life, now it was something far more horrible in death.

“Back!” Amy leapt to her feet, breaking her own ritual and driving forward the end of the burning spliff like a spear. At its presence the snow-spectre howled, a painful mourning sound. It backed away from her, as Amy waved the smoke around its approximation of a face.

Only now there was another sound beneath it, coming in waves. Much higher-pitched, much clearer, and more vital. It was the sound of a crying child – coming from the nearby mausoleum. Amy heard it this time; the vision didn't belong to him alone, and they shared a look.

“I need to get that kid.”

“You go outside the circle; he can get to you.”

“Let him try, I ain't a little kid,” he threw back, moving to sweep up the salt cylinder before he did. Honestly, he sounded a shit load braver than he felt, but he went for it anyway, carefully jumping across the barrier Amy had made and finding himself plunging through the fresh snow.

The thing's sentience was in no doubt as the snow was being moved towards him, circling him like a predator once he had left the safety of the circle. It glided, rather than moved, as though the snow was being drawn up to form it rather than the thing itself moving. It was almost hypnotic, and it took him longer than he would have liked to swipe up with the salt, and he just prayed that he'd remembered to loosen the top before he did.

A spray of small, fine white powder burst from the top as he swiped it like a sword, and struck the snow-thing across the front. It fell backwards, roaring in pain as Luke took his moment to rush for the doorway to the mausoleum.

Beyond, he could see Amy, standing now in the centre of the circle. Five foot four of pure fury, she stood, holding the incense aloft like a dagger and yelling out Latin in a strength and volume he would have never guessed she possessed. She looked like a complete badass, and he found himself smiling, despite the absurdity of the whole situation.

Then he was inside the mausoleum, and immediately saw to his relief that the young boy, the one he recognised from the latest photo laid at the memorial, was there. His skin was deathly pale, but his eyes were alive. Sleepy, sure, red and puffy from crying, but alive. He rushed forward and barely protested as Luke scooped him up into his arms. Sleepily, the kid tried to loosely cling around his neck as he held him, the same way he'd held his little nephews on those Christmases when they fell asleep after dinner.

"Dad?" the kid asked.

"Nah, just the good guys," he reassured him. "We're gonna go outside now."

"He's there..." the kid cried.

"He won't hurt you," Luke told him, determined that if it was the last thing he did, it would be true. He rushed back up the steps and through the door, with the kid in his arms. The creature was back to attacking the barrier, and even he began to see the toll it seemed to be taking on Amy's concentration, her brow furrowing almost painfully.

And there it was, the look in the thing's eye so painfully clear. Even hollowed-out points seemed to say possession. Obsession. The child belonged to him, in life and in death. And it didn't intend for Luke to take him.

"He's not yours!" Luke yelled at the thing, even as it flew towards them. He turned, knowing that he couldn't outrun it, but he had to try all the same. Then he realised there was nowhere to go behind him. There was only... people. Not full-grown people... much shorter. Much younger. Some were only shades, some were shadow. Some were more solid, like the boy in his house and the one in the mausoleum.

But there were a lot of them.

"Hey, kids, do us a favour and teach this dick a lesson, yeah?"

He didn't know if they understood him fully, if they even could hear him. But they must have sensed something because they began to move towards them. Some still walked on legs, some glided through the snow. Some of the shadows simply seemed to be in one place one moment, and several feet forward the next. But move they did, at first towards him, him drawing the young boy closer to his chest, but then they began to pass him.

All that was left was to watch. The young children, the spirits, swarmed over the being that threatened them, and all of a sudden it didn't seem so scary. It raged, it screeched, its howls of anger becoming whimpers of submission as it began to fall deeper and deeper into the snow. And the ghosts, for that's what they must have all been, began to go with it. One by one they fell back into the snow, disappearing into some place none of them would ever know about until they joined them.

But one thing was clear, as he began to hear the tinny sound of shop music playing from the nearby high street. That wasn't going to be any time soon. And the next thing he realised he could hear was the gentle snoring of the small child in his arms, who'd fallen asleep on his shoulder. He locked eyes with Amy, who looked at him breathlessly, and gave him a small smile.

It was over.

* * *

Rob felt exhausted in his bones, but he knew his day wasn't done. How could it be over? He had considered sitting in that armchair, falling asleep, and maybe sometime the following day waking up and doing it all over again. But he couldn't do that now, could he? It wasn't someone else's life, someone else's problem. It was his problem. His responsibility.

And he didn't want to think of his own brother as a problem, so he'd have to think instead of that. Responsibility.

Despite everything he said, and the truth behind some of the hurt and hate in his eyes, he loved him. The little shit.

It didn't take long to walk up to the Summers Graveyard. In a town as small as Calendar, almost everything was a fifteen-minute walk from something else. Even going uphill, as the snow began to settle from its earlier downpour, it didn't take as long as he thought. He could see some traces of footprints, but really he could be wrong.

He wasn't. Twenty minutes after leaving the house, he saw the shape in front of two familiar graves. Side by side headstones. He remembered ordering them. He remembered the guy at the funeral home asking if he wanted gold inlay and wondering whether his mum had ever said. He'd been asked that question at twenty-one, forty or fifty years before he thought he'd ever have to make such a fundamental decision.

His brother knelt in front of them, his back to where Rob stood, and so he waited, feeling a little like he was intruding on private grief. Yet he knew, with a kind of bitterness, that even his brother sometimes forgot his own.

"I'm sorry."

He hesitated a moment, unsure of what he should say, so he settled on eventually,

"That for my benefit or for theirs?"

Ricky turned his eyes towards him, and once more Rob could see the boy in them. He had to remind himself of that. As mature as Ricky came across sometimes – and it was damn older than his years; it was damn near chilling sometimes – he was still only fifteen. A kid. He would have hated him for saying it – would have hated himself when he was his age – but it was true. And even without the red rim to them, that much would always be true.

He would always be the little brother.

"Up to you."

The small smile told him something else, so Rob returned it. They were both too tired, it seemed, for more than that, so it would have to do. Rob moved over to his brother, closer to the

graves, and found it remarkable how little a year had changed them. They could have been laid yesterday.

In some ways, he still felt like they were.

"You come out here often?" he asked.

"Sometimes," his brother admitted. "I like them to know I'm still thinking about them."

"Won't they know that anyway?"

"They're not mind readers."

And there he was, the bratty little brother, in full flow and for a moment Rob forgot they had argued, forgot about all of it. He felt the urge to swat him across the back of the head again, but restrained himself. Ricky stood up.

"Christmas time is shit, y'know," Ricky told him, and he had to admit he wholeheartedly agreed. But as he continued, he began to understand the depth of what he meant: "No drunk Santa... no dad-drinking either. No bad sprout jokes, no fussing over turkey."

"Well, as for the drunk Santa..."

"I don't want you to do that," Ricky cut him off, but not quite with the same venom as before. "It's not what I'm saying." He turned to him. "I think it's worse to try and be them than it is to just... be ourselves."

"I'm your guardian now, Ricky," he reminded him. "A lot of the responsibility that was theirs... it's mine now."

"And on some level I know that," Ricky agreed, "But on another it just... pisses me off."

"Yeah," he nodded, "It pisses me off too. But you're still my brother."

"Yeah, that's something," Ricky agreed, and he could see them trying to come out fresh at the corner of his eyes again. Dammit if he couldn't feel the same thing. How could he tell him everything? How could he tell him how bad it was for him sometimes? Sure, he had to be the responsible one, but he *had* to be the responsible one. He couldn't be a dickhead off at college like

his mates; he couldn't go and get that great career and travel the world and fall in love. He had to be, at least for now – and perhaps in some way always – a dad. And yeah, it pissed him off.

But none of it was Ricky's fault. And so none of it would be said. Instead, he'd do what he could. So he put an arm around his brother, and with a small nod, the two of them began to walk slowly, crunching their steps back across to the gate.

"I mean, I'm still your *older* brother," he pointed out. "So how about we respect the tradition of me sneaking you your first beer of the Christmas season?"

"Sounds great," Ricky agreed. "I've just got one pit stop first."

And then home.

* * *

By the time Ricky walked through the doors of the Library, the whole building had begun to cool down. He had seen the light passing by and sent Rob on his way with the promise he'd join him shortly, then headed inside to see if he had arrived back. And if the sound of the little whirring plug-in fan in the small office was any indication, he was.

"Now I see why you've not put decorations up; tinsel would just make this depressing," he pointed out as he arrived in the doorway. Mark looked up at him, absently, and immediately it was like looking in a mirror. He managed the smallest, most exhausted smile he'd seen from him and immediately asked, "Everything alright?"

He could see the moment of hesitation on his friend's face, but then he reached into his jacket and brought out a small envelope. It looked plain enough, simple and once-upon-a-time white. Mark held it in one hand with only the slightest tremble before he held it out for Ricky to take.

"My contact gave me this," Mark explained. "He didn't say how he got hold of it."

He slipped the pages out and, when Mark didn't protest, unfolded them to read. They were handwritten in delicate but clear script. They crinkled a little as he touched them, the paper rough with the passage of time. And as he read, his heart began to sink.

"Your parents..." he whispered, more to himself. He knew from the very first line; he didn't need to reach 'mum' at the end to confirm it. Ruth Matthews. Mark's mother. He had only spoken of her once, and even then only briefly. As he looked back up at Mark, he saw the fresh sting still there, the raw and reopened wound over which the scab had already formed. The same one he'd opened voluntarily, ripped away without his consent.

"I think they were part of the Covenant," he explained, though Ricky had been able to deduce as much. "Blood? Right? At least on my mother's side."

"When did they write this?"

"About a week before they died."

The revelation hit him like a wave, so much so that he walked over to the sofa and sat down. He wasn't going to ask anything as ridiculous as whether or not Mark was okay; of course he wasn't. It was like waking up one morning and finding out that the sky was red; you didn't have to ask about the weather.

"They knew?" He asked, but really, how could they not?

"Yes," Mark confirmed. "They knew they were going to die. And now, I know who killed them."

"What do you want to do?"

"There's nothing I can do," Mark assured him. "For now."

No, there was; that wasn't strictly true. Ricky knew it. Claire had known it. There were ways to do something about it. Ways to let the pain out and turn it on someone else. Ways to make it hurt. But none of them was right. And Mark, he knew it in his soul, would do the right thing. Perhaps when the rest of them could not.

He slowly and carefully folded back the pages, and slid them back into the envelope. When it was safely back in Mark's hands, he couldn't help but smile wistfully to himself.

"You know, it's shocking and strange and frankly a little creepy to get a letter from beyond the grave," he commented, getting a sharp look from his friend in the meantime, but he continued, "But in a way, I'm so jealous of you." Mark's look turned curious. "What you have there is a goodbye you can hold onto, mate. Some proof they really existed, and they really loved you. And that when they died... they never stopped."

Mark's eyes dropped to the letter, which disappeared into his desk drawer. He didn't answer; he didn't have to. Ricky didn't know exactly what he was thinking, or what he might be feeling. To know the things he could not name, but which would make it harder to sleep.

"Family isn't just shared blood," he continued. "They're the people you care about, and the people that care about you."

"That they are," Mark agreed quietly.

"Wanna come over for Christmas this year?" he asked. "We can watch Rob burn the turkey and drink."

Despite himself, Mark smiled and asked,

"Just family?"

Ricky smiled right on back.

"Just family."

* * *

We all know this, don't we? The moments that close this time of year. Christmas is a ritual we have seen many times. Over and over again, for thousands of years. Somewhere a vicar will be crawling to her third oversized lunch. Someone will be searching for the Scrabble tiles and realising

the family dog may have swallowed their Zs. And somewhere Silent Night will be softly playing, or some other such still and silent hymn.

So much has happened since the game has begun. So many moments we could not have foreseen, even though the shape moves ever onwards – marching towards inevitability. And so we can watch, drifting like the snow and consider something more precious than next. We can consider the now.

Two boys, brothers in all but blood, walking out of sanctuary and towards home instead. Carrying so much before their time, burdened by prophecy and provenance. By souls dark and light. And still, they can share a joke. They tell each other that tomorrow can be what it is and today can be what they make it. Even if grief calls to them, it will still be there again. And maybe that's not a bad thing.

And then there is the day itself. Across the small yet endless town, in a hospital ward, a father sits. His wife, harried and red-eyed, sits nearby, frantic with her own worry but pasting it over with her desire to make everything feel okay today, of all days. In some ways, they pretend they are fine. That the world is fine. That *he* is fine.

And yet the miracle they never thought they'd see walks through the door. A boy and his girlfriend, Luke and Sam, carrying two trays of canteen Christmas dinner each. Cold turkey, overcooked sprouts, and thin gravy. But it doesn't matter. The young blonde boy places one of the trays down before his father, an apology on his face, and forgiveness comes immediately.

A small family sits together and enjoys the illusion of peace. At least for a little while.

Several towns away, Amy, a young woman who just performed an exorcism, sits amongst an extended family at a table too small for any of them. She smiles, she laughs, she rolls her eyes at her bratty little sister. They play party games, although none of them is particularly good at charades, so it divides into two groups – those adults who wish to simply drink in front of the Only Fools and Horses special and those who seek to start a family argument over a game of Monopoly.

A large family sits near one another, finding solace and peace in the simple act of community.

Back in Calendar, another young woman stands on a ladder, hanging the star on top of the Christmas tree because once again her stepfather has forgotten to get the decorations down until Christmas Eve itself – and then came home too drunk from the Calendar Run (consisting, we believe, of several more pubs than is strictly necessary) with his friends from work. While he snoozes off his hangover, stuffed to the gills with nut roast, her mother hands her decorations and tinsel, and Sara places them with gay abandon.

A small reformed family exists together in harmony, each with a role that has become as expected as the sun rising the next day.

And finally we can see one last image. Three young men sit in their living room. The last of the daylight has faded behind them as they take pizza slice by slice from takeaway boxes. There is a lingering scent of burnt meat in the background, and we dare not peek into the small kitchen to see what is there. The house rings out with their laughter, with the tellie going, and with the simple sound of unity.

A trio of brothers, some blood, some not. They're together; the ghosts of the past linger around them, unseen, but not unfelt. All of them young, and in some ways all children. And in many ways, children no longer.

They may suffer. But that is not the whole story. It is a moment. And we have many more of them to come.

And for now? We will leave them to enjoy the peace.

It will, as ever, be short-lived.