

The frozen ground crunched underfoot. Rose kept her gaze as unfocused as possible for as long as she could, until Kat was standing next to her.

"I don't know why you came." She cast a sidelong look at Kat. Her hands were in the pockets of her black pants, and her suit jacket was buttoned neatly.

Kat was staring unflinchingly at the grave. "His family's Protestant. And I don't know what he was, but he wasn't Catholic. Someone's gotta pray for the dead."

A silence fell between them. It wasn't comfortable or familiar or anything like it should've been for two people who had been half-dating half-friends for months. It was necessary. Rose shifted her curls around her shoulders. She didn't know why, the day after Ash was discovered, she had bent over her bathroom sink crying and re-dyed her hair the split pink-black that she hadn't had for a year. It felt right. She already missed dying her hair with him.

"I don't know why they gave him a religious burial," Rose said. Her eyes cut out over the rest of the black-dowded crowd, milling around cars and clinging to each other yards away. "I mean, I don't think he's set foot in a church since he was little."

"He came to mass once two years ago."

Rose wrinkled her nose. "Really?"

"Yeah." Kat shrugged stiffly, and her unkempt hair resettled around her shoulders. "I invited him."

"Why?"

"He just looked like he needed it." Kat took a deep breath in, out, and Rose copied her. The cold air stung her lungs. "I guess he did."

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"Do you want to come to mass with me?" Ash looked up from his stupid dented locker that *refused* to open to see that weird religious kid looming over him. *Looming* might not be the right word—she was tall and imposing enough to cast a shadow over him, sure, but she wasn't particularly intimidating when she was fidgeting and her eyes were off to the side.

"Mass?" He repeated, a bit dumbfounded.

"Yeah. Mass. Uh, church. Do you want to come to church with me?"

"Why?" Ash went back to spinning the dial on his locker. He barely knew this kid. They'd compared answers in Math class once (apparently, both of them were ass at geometry) but other than that this kid was a complete stranger. The hell was her name again? Kate? Kylie? Something with a K.

"You look like you need it."

Ash glared at her through his bangs. She looked honest enough—at least, as honest as a closed-off stare could look. "The hell do you mean, I look like I *need it*?" He tugged on his locker one more time. It finally wrenched open.

"Don't curse." Kat toyed with the crucifix hanging around her neck with the arm that wasn't laden down with books. "Our Father in heaven and the saints shudder to hear such—" The rest of her mini-sermon was drowned out by the bell. Ash groaned and grabbed his books and slammed the metal door shut. He started off for his algebra class, only for the kid's hand to land on his upper arm and stop him in his tracks.

*Jesus*, this kid was strong. He was confident he'd never seen her in any sort of sportswear or hanging out with the athletic kids, though.

"I gotta get to class."

"Are you going to come?"

"Yeah, sure, fine, I'll come, whatever." Ash very carefully set his face, determined not to let the weird twinging feeling in his abdomen show. He tasted the color orange in his mouth. The kid gave him a weird look—narrowed eyes, mouth set in a determined frown, a glint of something both vulnerable and horrified at once in the eyes. Ash shuddered.

The kid didn't make to let him go or move, so he awkwardly added, "My name's Ash."

"I heard." He had the sinking feeling he was about to be hate-crimed or some shit. He swallowed.

"You got a name?"

"Katherine."

"Alright." Ash nodded slowly, then stopped when he remembered that some predators can only see movement. "Cool. Well, Katherine, uh, I'm, like, five minutes late for my class, so would you mind...?"

Katherine let go. "Great." Ash turned on his heel and tried not to look like he was running for his life.

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On Friday, right before Ash could slip out of school, Katherine confronted him in the halls and gave him a slip of paper with the address of her church and the time of the mass. Her lips were pressed in the barest indication of a smile. She wouldn't look so scary all the time if she smiled, Ash thought as he turned the paper over in his hands.

He had originally intended to throw it away without a second thought, but something in the crooked curves of Katherine's handwriting made him keep it. Maybe it *would* be good for him. Maybe he *did* need it.

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Katherine's church was tall and imposing. The spire scraped the sky and blocked out the early morning sun. Katherine herself was rocking back and forth on her heels on the pavement in front of the doors.

"You're late."

"I'm, like, five minutes early."

"You're supposed to arrive earlier than that to get a seat." Ash wisely kept his mouth shut instead of saying *you didn't tell me that*. "What are you wearing?"

Ash looked down at his wrinkled white button-up shirt. "Dress clothes?" He said weakly.

"You're supposed to be wearing a *dress*."

"Too late to change now." Ash set his jaw.

Katherine eyed him up and down one more time, then sighed. "Fine. Come on."

Katherine stared at him when they walked through the doors and when he didn't say *thank you, sir* to the man handing out programs like she did, and her stare got even worse when

he dunked his hands in holy water, mimicking her, and then wiped them off on his pants. Eventually they got to their seats.

“Stop squirming.”

“This is the least comfortable thing I’ve ever sat on in my life.”

“You’re not supposed to get comfortable.”

Ash grumbled to himself about all of the sleep he could be getting on such a fine Sunday morning as this.

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Mass went by torturously slow for Ash. He floundered his way through prayers and Latin recitations and he very nearly tripped and knocked into the people in front of him when he stood up from kneeling too fast and caught his foot on the kneeling bench. He had been dreading the homily as soon as he realized that it was a sermon, but strangely, it was the most interesting part of the Mass, purely because of Katherine.

The moment the service started, something in Katherine relaxed, and whatever kept her strung tight as a rubber band all the time let its grip go. She sat up straight and sang and listened with a gleam in her eyes, and she was *smiling*, too, not just simply staring blankly. When the priest stood up and started the homily, Katherine honest-to-god grinned, and when she realized Ash was staring at her she grinned at *him*, as if this was the most exhilarating experience in the world for him, too. He felt himself relax, at any rate, and the homily sailed by without a hitch.

When it was time for the Eucharist, Katherine was practically bouncing in place. “I thought you said not to squirm?” Ash whisper-hissed, only for Katherine to shush him. Rude.

He followed her like a lost lamb up to the priest at the altar and watched as she ducked her head out of respect for the priest. She gladly accepted the little round slice of white-tan bread that the Father set on her tongue. Her eyes fluttered shut peacefully. Ash felt that he was intruding on something dreadfully personal.

And then he was face-to-face with the priest, and the priest was holding out a wafer. Ash thrust his hand forward. There was no way in hell he was going to let a stranger put something directly into his mouth. The priest set the slice in his hand, and Ash popped it into his mouth and moved to follow Katherine. It tasted bland, almost papery in his mouth, and tears pricked in his eyes as it turned into something acidic and burning on his tongue.

Katherine was giving him a horrified look. The moment the two of them were sat back down in their pew together, she attacked. “Why did you take the Eucharist?”

Ash furrowed his brow, well and truly lost. “I don’t—everyone else was taking it. You took it.”

“We’ve all been confirmed in the church! You’re not allowed to—” She cut herself off with a sick-sounding groan, and she slid off of the pew to her knees, mumbling, “Oh, Father in Heaven, Maid of Orleans, forgive him...” Ash just sort of stared at her uncomfortably, then refocused his attention on the stained glass windows. Whatever. If Katherine wanted to be weird over a piece of bread, that was her own business.

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After more praying and silence and hymns than Ash had ever hoped to experience in his life, the mass was over. People got up from their seats and milled about, lingering and talking to their neighbors. Ash turned to Katherine, who had not gotten up from kneeling on the bench. "I'll be seeing you around, then?"

"You're leaving without confessional?" She didn't look up.

"I guess."

"That's the most important part for sinners."

"...wow."

"It is." Katherine straightened up, and Ash winced as the crick in her knee audibly popped. "You need it. Especially after taking the Eucharist with unabsolved mortal sin." She looked almost queasy at the thought.

Ash sighed. "Can't I just go home?"

"And you really should talk with a priest." She continued, blind to anything Ash had to say that wasn't yes. "We can figure out if you're really demon-possessed or not."

The air turned about ten degrees colder, but Ash somehow started sweating.

"Demon-possessed?"

"Yeah." Katherine looked at him like it was just *common knowledge* that Ash Marwood, resident loser Midwestern tranny, had a demon rattling around inside his skull. "I suspect that it's more obsession or oppression than it is possession at this point, but you should—"

"What makes you think I'm possessed?" Ash looked at her very closely and very carefully. His eyes narrowed.

"You curse a lot."

"You think I'm demonically possessed because I say *fuck* sometimes?"

"Yes," Katherine said with complete honesty, and Ash decided right then and there that he was never going to take her seriously again. "And you didn't want to go to church. Those possessed usually have an aversion to holy symbols." She hesitated, and her eyes drifted off toward the great stained glass windows adorning the sides of the cathedral. Her hands twisted the fabric of her skirt. "And I just have a feeling. It's hard to explain."

Ash knew what she meant. He had the sickening feeling that something was hovering just over his shoulder, but he didn't dare flinch or (god forbid) turn to check. He sighed. "I guess I can go, if that would make you feel better."

"It would." She sounded utterly sincere. Ash hadn't heard Rosie sound like that since sometime last week, when she told him that she liked his guitar. Ash let Katherine drag him along to the confessional booth, feeling like a limp ragdoll.

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The confessional booth was dim. Ash could see motes of dust floating in the in the light that made its way through slits in the wood. He heard shifting on the other end, and he mimicked it. The thin cushion stapled to the wooden bench was far from comfortable or welcoming.

After a long moment of silence, he admitted softly, "I don't know how to start."

The priest on the other side of the wood cleared his throat. "Repeat after me. In the name of the Father—"

"In the name of the Father,"

"—and of the Son—"

"And of the Son,"

"—And of the Holy Spirit."

"And of the Holy Spirit."

"Amen." Ash murmured *amen* too. He felt supremely out of place. His fingernail dug into a zit on his cheek.

"How long has it been since your last confession, my daughter?" Ash winced. Did even his voice give him away? Well, it wasn't like the priest knew him, anyways. He could take a risk.

"Son." Ash said, then trucked right on, not wanting to give the priest time to react badly to a correction. "And I've never had one before."

"That's alright. It's good of you to come in for one, then."

"Yeah."

Ash sighed quietly.

"What's your state of life, my son?"

Ash had no idea why he said it. He was going to say *I'm a high-schooler* or even make some stupid self-deprecating joke about how shit sucked for him. Instead, he tasted bright orange on the back of his tongue as his lips moved almost involuntarily.

"I'm possessed by a demon."

Nothing, nothing, nothing, no words or audible reaction from the other side of the boards. Ash took a careful breath in, out. He'd never admitted it before, not in words or thought. He gave the idea of his demon a wide, careful berth in his mind, unwilling to leave the beaten trail he'd been mentally following for all of his life. He quickly backtracked to the trail now.

"I mean, I don't know if I'm actually—I don't know." He sighed, loud enough for the priest to hear. "Um, but, but it started, like, last year or something, when I was fourteen. And now I'm fifteen. And it's still here."

"What kind of demon is it, son?" Ash couldn't detect annoyance or genuine care in the priest's voice. He couldn't hear any emotion in it. He felt like he was going insane.

"I don't know." Was he supposed to *know* the types of demons before coming in here? Were there different types? Were demon types common Catholic knowledge, and was he going to look like an idiot in front of the priest now? He bit the tip of his tongue impulsively. "It's—it's orange."

"Orange."

"Yes." Dammit, he *did* sound like an idiot. "And it—it shows up in my room sometimes late at night."

"What does it look like?"

"I don't know." Ash picked at the chipped nail polish on his pinky. He'd let Rose do his nails last week while they were watching TV at her place. He hated the way that the pink made him feel, and he'd already been called a fag enough for an entire lifetime, but Rose held his hands while she painted them, so he told himself it was probably worth it. "It's hard to make out. It's just orange."

"Does it say anything to you, my son?"

"I don't know." He felt like a broken record. "I guess." He'd never really *thought* about any of this before, because he'd never had to explain it to anyone. When he actually put it into words, he felt embarrassed, like he was just a toddler making up some wild story to explain the crayon scribbled on the walls. "It's sort of in my mind, I think. I don't think it's ever, like, directly talked to me."

"It has. You just don't know how to listen, Ash."

The orange slathered over the back of his tongue was back, and it spilled down into his throat, as acidic as bile. He felt like he was going to throw up. He didn't know if he was allowed to throw up in confessional. He didn't know if he was allowed to run right now.

"Or maybe you just don't want to listen. You will. Yes, I know you will."

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"How'd it go?"

Ash didn't respond as he blew past Katherine on his way out the doors.

"Hey. Hey!" She grabbed his arm to stop him. "Where are you going? How was your confessional? What penance must you do? I can help you, if you'd like—"

"Oh, fuck *right* off." Ash laughed dryly as he wrenched his arm away. "You're so fucking weird."

Katherine stilled and stared. "Did something happen?"

"I don't know. I don't wanna tell you." Ash said. "Aren't you guys supposed to keep what goes down in your confessions a secret?"

"Well, that's just for the prie—Ash!" She cut herself off and jogged to catch up when she noticed him running away. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going home. And I am *never*," Ash spat over his shoulder, "coming back here ever again."

"But you need it."

Ash pretended he didn't hear her as he strode off toward the bike rack. He did. He had just decided in his mind that he was never going to listen to that crazy bitch ever again.

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"Hell fucking yeah, of course he needed it." Rose scoffed. Her eyes drifted off toward the bare, gnarled trees that surrounded the churchyard. There was a pair of vultures looping over the clearing. It was bitter cold, and Rose thought about the flowers set in the coffin and wondered how long they'd last. "He needed a lot of things."

"He needed you." When Rose looked over at Kat, she was staring back, her brown eye set in its solid certainty.

Rose wrapped her black coat closer around herself. "Yeah," she mumbled. Kat let her gaze drift back to the fresh-dug grave to give Rose a moment of privacy as her mascara started running.