

The Hornsey Vampires

(Season two of London's Night Stalkers)

Chapter 6 – The Hungry Ground

“There were bad days, but Laura generally liked her job at the hotel. She even liked the staff dining room that had a constant smell of burnt lasagne lurking in the air, sometimes mixed with over cooked macaroni cheese.”

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Liz Grant was a little apprehensive about simply arriving at the office where Sam Isaacs did business. Antiquarian books could be valuable; he might well have a guard, maybe more than one. Add on the Jerusalem factor, a city where diverse peoples and religions lived in often turbulent coexistence....

No Liz didn't think just turning up was a good idea. Brendan was the boss though.

“This is the address you gave me.” Said the Cab driver.

All her language skills and the cab driver spoke English, even if his accent took a little effort to understand. Brendan paid the driver and they were out of the cab and into a street that could have been in any business district in most cities.

“It's cold.” Said Brendan, while buttoning his thin jacket.

“I did warn you, Jerusalem is colder than London at this time of year.”

There was no sign on the outside of the building, just a street number and a bell push next to the door. Brendan pressed the bell twice and they waited. A young woman opened the door.

“Yes, can I help you ?”

She'd asked the question in Hebrew. The woman looked to be in her mid-twenties and dressed in what the magazines once called a power suit, grey pinstripe with the jacket and skirt tailored to fit in all the right places.

“We've come all the way from London to see Sam Isaacs.” Said Liz. “I know it's rude to turn up without an appointment, but we are here on a matter of some urgency.”

“May I know your names ?”

“I am Liz Grant and this is Brendan Roche, my employer.”

“Will your names mean anything to Sam ?”

“No, I'm afraid not.”

The woman looked them over and obviously didn't see them as a potential threat. Liz had put on a warm coat, but Brendan had dressed for the tropics, she could almost hear his teeth chattering.

“I can't guarantee that Sam will see you, but come inside while I find out.”

The waiting room was furnished with comfortable chairs, though most importantly, it was warm.

There was the almost obligatory table covered in magazines and newspapers, many in English.

“This isn't what I was expecting.” Said Brendan. “Not the Jerusalem you see on the TV news.”

“Business districts rarely make the news Brendan, too boring.”

Sam Isaacs couldn't be that far away, she could hear a male voice talking to the woman, though it was impossible to make out what they were saying. She was back quite quickly, the young woman in the immaculate pin stripe suit.

“You're in luck, someone cancelled a meeting. Sam can give you a few minutes.”

Sam was in an office just along the corridor, a large office furnished in a strange mixture of antique furniture. Liz was no expert, but she knew genuine Louis XIVth furniture when she saw it and 18th Century Chippendale. The walls too were covered in an eclectic mix of art, everything from plump

unclad ladies in the Baroque style, to modern abstract pieces. Sam obviously didn't just deal in old books and his office appeared to double as a showroom.

"Please come in, Judith was just about to make morning coffee. Or as you're from London, I'm sure we can find some tea, if you'd prefer?"

Perfect English, far better diction than the average Londoner.

"Coffee sounds fine." Said Brendan.

"Coffee is perfect." She said.

Sam Isaacs didn't fit in with the art, the furniture and the immaculate Judith. He was scruffy in blue jeans and a worn out Rolling Stones T shirt. Liz had met them before, bosses who make a point of dressing down for the office, simply because they can.

"I was just admiring your pictures." She said.

"Yes, all acquired for clients of course." Said Sam. "I just can't resist enjoying them for a while, before they're despatched to the client."

"And the furniture?" Asked Brendan. "It must be strange changing that around every few days."

"No, the furniture is mine, one of my..... eccentricities."

Liz was beginning to like Sam, with his ready smile, worn out clothes and priceless furnishings. Sam was about six foot tall and thin enough to be called wiry. Dark hair and orthodox enough to wear a Kippah at the back of his head, though there were no religious symbols in the room.

Judith brought the coffee on a tray, complete with a plate of biscuits. Once she'd gone, Sam asked the obvious question.

"Welcome to Jerusalem, but why have you come to see me?"

Liz sat back in a gilded chair that wouldn't have looked out of place in Versailles. It was Brendan's coin in the slot after all, his mission to get information out of Sam Isaacs.

"My employer seeks assistance with the translation of several ancient scrolls and books. On their own they matter little, but my client is a theological scholar of some repute. The translations were done quickly and lack context. I have a list of questions and my employer is hoping you might be able to add a few....Footnotes. My employer hopes to then write a theological paper, an important one. There will be a fee for your services of course. One I have authority to negotiate."

Sam looked straight at her.

"And your role in this is?"

"Brendan needed someone to act as a translator. I speak a variety of languages, including Hebrew and Arabic. I also understand the local zeitgeist, the Jerusalem culture, for want of a better world."

"I understand, may I see this list of questions?" Asked Sam.

It wasn't Brendan's fault, he'd been constantly given instructions on keeping everything confidential.

Other women at the agency had been hired by the same client, a Mabina Gladitch. They'd all thought of her as more than a little scary. Brendan held the list, hesitating about handing it over.

"If you don't give it to me, I can hardly add any footnotes." Said Sam.

"It's just that..... I need your word not to copy it."

"You have my word, I'll read it through now."

It still looked as though Brendan had been asked to part with a limb at least, as he handed over the list of questions. Liz drank her coffee and nibbled at biscuits, while Sam Isaacs read through the questions.

"Very interesting, there is a theme to the list, though an attempt has been made to hide it. May I know the identity of your employer?" Asked Sam.

"Not at this stage, maybe later."

"Hmmmmm I do have my suspicions about their nature. Any more coffee, something to eat perhaps ? Judith can produce wonders in the office toaster oven."

Brendan didn't ask for anything, but she knew that Sam was just giving himself thinking time, a few minutes to ponder on the questions. Liz asked for cheese on toast, which tasted truly amazing.

"I will answer one of your questions for free Brendan you can choose which." Said Sam. "You can call your employer and give them my..... Footnote. Once they are happy, which I'm sure they will be, call Judith and make a proper appointment. We can then sit down and discuss my fee for clarifying the rest of the questions. Does that sound reasonable ?"

"Yes it does." Said Brendan.

"Good, choose your question."

"The one about hungry ground."

Liz noticed the look of triumph on Sam's face, even if he was good at quickly hiding it.

"Yes Brendan, the hungry ground. You have just confirmed my suspicions. The hungry ground refers to an old legend about the undead, the Nosferatu. The parts of the legend I know, originated in the East of Europe, the area now contained in Romania and Bulgaria. I can only offer you what might be nothing but myths or nonsense. It's important that you understand that."

"I do Sam, just tell me what you know." Said Brendan.

"There was a ritual that required the burial of human bodies under a dirt floor. Not any old bodies, the blood drained victims of the undead. There are stories about cellars with thousands buried under the floor. I feel foolish saying this, but the undead thought of the bodies as insurance for the future. If they met a violent end, their body needed to be placed on the dirt floor. Little is known about the details, or even if there was ever a claim of it working. Legend would have us believe that the undead placed on the ground would be renewed, brought back to what they considered to be life."

Liz prided herself on not being a fool, but she didn't understand why they'd come all the way to Jerusalem, to listen to a lot of nonsense that sounded like a bad Hammer Horror film. She was being paid well though and Brendan was the boss and he seemed excited by what Sam was saying.

"What about after the renewal Sam, what did they say the hungry ground needed to be fed ?"

"That is fairly obvious, though as with so many things, the devil is in the details." Said Sam. "The ground needs to be fed with bodies, fresh bodies without the slightest touch of decay. Give the ground anything tainted by decay and it may take back the gift it gave."

Brendan was trying to take notes, but she'd remember it all word for word, even if it was all beginning to bore her.

"How many bodies ?" Asked Brendan.

"That depends on so many things, some of which are only hinted at in ancient writings. Have you heard about something called the Psochic Bible ?"

"No."

"Hmmmmm pity..... Anyway the age of the undead and the amount of physical damage are important. I can only repeat what might be nonsense, but I have heard that six new bodies given a shallow burial should do the trick. The important thing is to stop the hungry ground demanding attention."

"Demanding attention ? Can you explain that ?" Asked Brendan.

"Mention that to your employer in London, I'm sure it will have meaning to them."

Sam Isaacs was trying to give back the list, but Brendan was too busy trying to write everything into a small notebook. Liz took the list back and held it in her lap.

“Thank you Sam, thank you.” Said Brendan. “I’ll contact my employer right away, as soon as we get back to the hotel.”

“Judith ! Judith.” Called Sam. “Our guests need to be shown the way out.”

“I’m sure we’ll manage, she must be busy.” Said Liz.

There comes a point in any meeting, when everyone knows it’s over. Brendan was all smiles, as Judith offered to call for a cab to take them back to the American Colony Hotel. Liz was wondering why Sam expected to receive a large fee for telling them crazy stories about the undead. It was all over, but Sam was holding her arm.

“There is one other thing, most likely a myth.” He said. “Better safe than sorry though. The hungry ground is said to prefer the taste of sullied corpses. Sullied is probably a far too literal translation from an ancient dead language. In this case it refers to the sick, those with a serious illness, preferably a terminal illness.”

Liz felt disgusted and no longer wanted Sam to be holding her arm. She’d put up with far worse to earn a living though and Brendan was once again taking notes. She felt nauseous in the cab, though Brendan seemed too excited to notice. Her head was filling with wild ideas about what might and might not be true.

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Strangely they hadn’t immediately ripped the crate apart to see what was inside. They’d all been covered in blood and Tom’s van had needed a thorough cleaning. Then there was the question of where to put the crate, they could hardly carry it into the house in Hornsey. The neighbours didn’t seemed cursed with too much curiosity, but the crate might well appear on the evening news.

“The old paint factory.” Suggested Clara. “There are collapsed stairs and part of the roof caved in years ago. Perfect for us, as there are places no human could reach.”

Clara knew the old paintworks quite well, it was where she’d sat for days with Simon, waiting to see if he lived or died. Nothing in the news about the discovery of decomposing bodies in the area, which usually meant the site hadn’t been redeveloped. The gate had another new chain though and a sign warning about security patrols with guard dogs. Probably not a lie this time, the sign and chain looked quite new. In a match between a chain and a vampire, the chain always loses, even if it is a shiny new chain and padlock.

“I remember a place on the second floor.” Said Clara. “Three of us together will be able to get the crate up there. There are no stairs at all, but the roof is still intact, or at least it was the last time I was here.”

Clara led them through the dilapidated factory and if there were regular security checks, they weren’t deterring the drug addicts. The floor was littered with used syringes. The young too were using the place for sex, used condoms forming dust covered heaps in various places. It had felt like an awful place to bring Simon after Mabina had stabbed him.

“The pond still looks clean.” Said Laura. “Even the moorhens are still here.”

“One day they’ll drain it and find at least seven bodies.” Added Simon.

Past the pond and they were near to where Clara had held Simon in her arms, feeding him with a woman she’d found in a nearby housing estate. Clara climbed and swung, using her strength to get to a ledge about thirty feet up. There were still bloodstains there, most of them from Simon’s terrible wounds.

“There, see ? Over there, it’s perfect.” Said Clara. “You can’t even see it from the ground.”

“There ! Spiderman would find that a challenge,” said Laura, “even without the crate.”

“Where’s your spirit of adventure ?” Asked Clara.

There were two remnants of floors to use effectively as stepping stones, to reach the space about twenty feet above them. A fairly large space tucked under the roof.

"We need to check if it's still dry." Said Simon.

"I'll go and look." Said Clara.

It was an easy leap for a vampire, to reach the first safe area of floor, if a few square feet of concrete hanging from two pillars, could ever be called safe. Another leap and she was safely onto the second slightly higher piece of reinforced concrete.

"So far nothing has wobbled." She shouted to the others.

The last leap wasn't going to be easy; it had been hard on her own that night when she'd left Simon sleeping to explore the ruined paintworks. There was a large area of floor to aim for, but the iron rods in the concrete had bent upwards to become an obstacle rather than useful hand holds. It was a long drop if she got it wrong. Not enough to seriously injure her, but it would hurt and the others two would tease her for weeks. Laura must have seen her hesitating.

"Where's your sense of adventure?" She shouted.

That did it, Clara was hundreds of years older than Laura, the new young upstart. Clara backed up as far as she could, before running for the far edge of her precarious perch. She leapt, trying for just the right angle take her onto the safe area of floor. Clara landed just on the edge, so close to the pieces of rusting steel reinforcement, that her feet caused dust to fly up. She tucked and rolled, coming up safely under the roof.

"Bravo Clara!" Yelled Simon.

"Yay for Clara, our very own Cirque du Soleil." Shouted Laura.

There was need for caution, a group of kids might arrive at any moment, armed with their condoms and bottles of cider. They applauded her though, as Clara took a well-deserved bow. Doing it all again with the crate was going to be harder of course, much harder.

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Bill Jarrold was frantically trying to setup a cell structure in his organisation, compartmentalising as Tom thought of it. At heart they'd always be the same people though, people who liked to gossip. Cyril had dropped a few hints about the job he'd been asked to give to Simon and his people and a few others in the organisation had popped into the car breakers for a quiet word. By the time Tom saw the blaze reported on the morning news, he knew who'd done it.

"Good old Cyril." He said. "He's been wanting to give them a bloody nose for a while now."

"Did Cyril do that?" Asked Beetle. "Wow....Why?"

"Never you mind lad, though I expect Simon had something to do with it."

"And Laura?"

"Oh yes, I think she'd have been there."

Beetle was only a run around, an odd job boy, but he was a useful one. Tom resisted the urge to tease him about his obvious infatuation with Laura. Besides, he was more interested in the way the lady on the breakfast news was reporting the story.

'..... Following reports of explosions being heard..... The police discovered five badly burned bodies once the fire brigade had brought the blaze under control.....'

Tom's phone rang, the mobile he always denied owning. Very few people knew the phone existed and only a tiny number had the number. No saved contacts of course, but Tom recognised the number.

"Hi Cyril, just watching an interesting story on the breakfast news."

“Yes, I’m watching it too. Just calling to let you know that one of my people will be over later. He’ll be bringing something over for the consultant you recommended. His name’s Nigel and he drives a Lada Niva.”

“I’ll tell the lads to watch out for him.”

“And..... Don’t take the piss out of him Tom.”

“Never, Lada make decent cars.”

“No..... His name you idiot....Bill calls him Helping Hand Nigel. It was in a song once or something. Anyway, he’s a bit sensitive about it.”

Tom went back to watching the news after the call, switching to News24 to get a different version. He tried about four different broadcasters, before realising the story was never going to be different. It was wrong, downright weird actually.

“What’s wrong boss ?” Asked Beetle.

“I’m not sure, something..... I want you watching the gate this morning. A man called Nigel will be here soon, driving a Lada. Let him in and take him round to the workshop.”

“Ok boss.”

Once Beetle had gone Tom used the PC usually dedicated to old movies on Netflix. All the media had the same story about the fire, even the overseas ones. He had a pretty good idea about the people Simon would have been used against. Tom had even heard rumours about the fire gutted building. “Five guards is too few.” He muttered. “No mention of anyone hearing gunfire. That’s not right, the cops aren’t telling the truth, or someone told them not to.”

Tom wasn’t the techno dunce he often pretended to be. He used Google to find the story on the newswires, looking it up on Reuters.

‘..... Police suspect an accidental fire killed five gang members in London blaze.....Condemned office building known to have been used to manufacture narcotics..... Tragic accident.....’

“Tragic accident my arse.” Muttered Tom.

Helping Hand Nigel turned up at mid-morning and Tom did resist the temptation to tease him. Tom did remember the old XTC song from the 70s, but only vaguely. Nigel left two cricket bags and was gone in less than two minutes. No signatures, zero paperwork, even though Tom knew the bags had to contain a lot of cash.

“They’re for Simon lad, I’ll call him later. For now they can go in the cupboard under the inspection pit.”

“What’s in the bags boss ?” Asked Beetle.

“You should know lad after all my training, can’t you smell it ?”

“Smell it ?!”

“Money Beetle, lots of it, all in used notes, tens and twenties but definitely no fifties.”

“Wow, I’ll put them straight in the cupboard.”

“No opening them to have a look lad.”

“No Boss, I never would.”

No he wouldn’t, the boy had that old style honesty. He’d grab anything that wasn’t screwed down, but never from his own, never from those he worked with. Despite falling standards in the world, there really was still honour among thieves.

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It was all to prove she was better at something than them, the hundreds of years old people she lived with. Laura had been in the school gymnastics team, she’d even won trophies for it. As she

dangled, her legs wrapped around rusty tie rods, she wondered if putting the crate in a storage lockup might have been better. The drawback though was CCTV, lock up storage places had lots of it. "I'm going to swing it." She yelled. "Are you ready?"

Simon gave her an old fashioned thumbs up, one of the things about him she found quite endearing. The crate wasn't heavy, just long and awkward to carry. Her fingers had a good hold on the rough wood, all she had to do was swing it and let go at just the right moment. Get it wrong and Bill's crate might end up shattered on the grubby factory floor below her. But as Simon had mentioned; "We're probably going to incinerate the contents anyway."

Laura swung the crate like a pendulum, back and forth, building up enough speed for it to arrive where Simon and Clara waited to catch it. She could feel the contents of the crate shifting about, which might ruin the momentum and spoil her Cirque du Soleil'esque piece of gymnastics. The crate was becoming difficult to hold onto, it had to be now.

"Here it comes."

Laura let go of the crate and the angle looked perfect. It tried to tumble end over end, but too late, Simon and Clara were grabbing it. Laura's own jump across was easy, almost an anti-climax. She always carried a blade, usually something small hidden in a sleeve, or her boot. Laura knelt next to the crate, knife ready to use on the lid.

"I'm not sure if we should open it." Said Clara. "It might be something we can't avoid dealing with and it's getting late."

"Come on Clara, just a peek." Said Laura. "I just have to see what's in there."

"She's earned it after that display of gymnastics." Said Simon. "And she's ruined her jeans."

"What? Oh Christ, these are only a few weeks old."

Laura hadn't noticed the hole where the rusty steel tie rod had ripped open her jeans. They were an expensive pair, not the usual cheap stuff she wore to go hunting. Perhaps the look on her face weakened Clara's resolve.

"Fine, take the top off Laura." She said. "It's probably just a few bags of drugs."

"Cyril wouldn't be paying us a small fortune if that was all it was." Said Simon.

Laura used her hands to do the pulling, while the blade eased out nails and screws. It took about ten minutes to get the top off the crate. Inside was something Simon recognised.

"Fuck, it's a metal coffin." He said. "Though it might not contain a body of course."

"We should leave it and come back better prepared." Said Clara. "If there is a body in there it might stink the place out. We need to be able to incinerate it straight away."

"I'll get some petrol from my SUV." Said Laura. "Come on Clara, where's your sense of adventure?"

"It was spirit of adventure actually, though I can see you'll never let me forget it." Said Clara. "Open it if you like Laura, but you get the job of clearing up any mess."

Two clasps locked with tiny padlocks, which quickly succumbed to fingers with vampire strength.

Laura opened the lid and much to even her surprise, there was a body inside.

"I've seen a lot of bodies, but I've never seen that done before." Said Simon.

"She looks perfectly preserved." Added Clara.

It was like shrink wrap, really thick shrink wrap, or maybe lots of layers of it. Some process had pulled out the air, leaving the body covered in a tight layer of plastic, so thick that it was almost opaque.

"A woman in her late forties I think." Said Laura. "Though her own mother wouldn't recognise her under layers of that stuff."

“Bill’s mistake Cyril called it,” said Simon, “his great cock-up or words to that effect. He might have murdered her I suppose.”

“So why not just burn her years ago ?” Asked Laura.

“We leave her, this is a good place for that.” Said Clara. “The factory has been empty for years, so she’s unlikely to be disturbed. We need to investigate Bill’s history; there must be some record of a missing woman somewhere in his past.”

“I’m really curious about her now.” Said Laura.

“It’d be nice to have something on Bill Jarrold.” Said Simon. “We might need an insurance policy, something to use against him on a rainy day.”

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Liz Grant heard every word of Brendan’s call to his employer, though only one side of it of course. He had that habit though that anxious people often adopt, of repeating back questions they’d been asked. Liz was now certain his employer was Mabina Gladitch, though she had no idea why he kept calling her his queen. Were they lovers ? It seemed unlikely.

“Yes, I thought the meeting went very well.” He said.

The gaps in the phone conversation were interesting too, the way his eyes gave away Brendan’s state of mind. She didn’t need to be an analyst to know the person on the other end of the conversation was less than happy with their morning’s work.

“Did he mention..... That certain bible my queen. Well, he did ask if I’d seen one.”

“No, he didn’t mention that..... Yes, he did ask your name.”

“But if I do that now, he won’t be able to answer the other questions.”

Another gap in the conversation, while Brendan’s eyes darted about the room like those of a hunted animal.

“Oh, I’m so glad you understand my queen. No, he never mentioned anything specific about his fee. Perhaps if you gave me a top end number you’re willing to pay ?”

“No, please believe me..... I’m really not deliberately trying to annoy you.”

Liz could just make out a female voice, shrieking down the line at poor Brendan. Liz was beginning to feel quite protective of him, but she wasn’t about to get involved in whatever was going on between him and the Gladitch woman.

“Yes my queen, that does sound a more than reasonable figure..... Once again I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you.”

“As for the bodies of sullied people..... I do understand that your medical connections might be useful.”

“Is Liz with me..... Of course she is, Liz has been very..... No, next time I’ll make it a private call.... I really do try to do my best.”

He went quiet after the phone call, so Liz brought him a drink and waited for him to talk. It was nearly an hour before Brendan seemed to be back to his old self.

“She has given me a number for a fee she is willing to pay.” He said. “I’m to wait until she has checked.....Thought about the value of Sam’s information. She seemed happy, mostly.”

“We’re in Jerusalem Brendan, the holy land. We’ve an afternoon to ourselves and a new city for you to explore. You have to see the sights Brendan, maybe buy a few guidebooks. It’s almost compulsory.”

“Yes, that would be nice. Supposing she calls though ?”

“I’ll talk to the hotel people about taking messages.”

While she dealt with that Brendan pottered about, digging a thicker jacket out of his case.

“First order of business is to buy you an overcoat.” She said. “It’s only ten degrees outside.”

“I need to ask Liz. If it came to a fight between me and Sam, what would you think about that, how would you react ?”

“You mean hitting each other ?”

“Yes, that sort of thing.”

“Well, Hmmmmm, the agency knows your employer quite well and I do realise your employer is Mabina Gladitch. I’m being paid well for my time and I’m not the sort to go running to the police, if that’s what you mean ?”

“That is good to know. I’m in your hands now Liz, show me what sights Jerusalem has to offer.”

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There were bad days, but Laura generally liked her job at the hotel. She even liked the staff dining room that had a constant smell of burnt lasagne lurking in the air, sometimes mixed with over cooked macaroni cheese. The dining room was on the ground floor, the barred window facing out into a grubby back alley. If Laura stood at the sink under the window, she could just about see the main road with all the people walking by.

“Give you a penny for them.” Said Tim.

“I was just wondering if any of the passers-by might rescue me if I rattled a cup across the bars on the window.”

The thought had been an honest one, though she rarely put such thoughts into words. Tim Chance was giving her a strange look, but he was only a trainee. A thirty year old trainee actually, which probably meant he was running away or hiding from something, just like her. No one really chooses to work ridiculous hours for crap pay.

“Sorry Tim, I’m being a weirdo today.” She said.

“I quite like weirdos they tend to be interesting.”

He was giving her ‘the look’ and Laura felt no inclination to feed on him, which was always a good sign. Tim was tall and thin, which matched her list, but with ginger hair, that definitely wasn’t on her list. Some of her school friends had believed in soul mates and true love, while Laura had her mental list of ideal boyfriend attributes. True love was fine, but Laura had discovered that getting the body shape, age, size and temperament right, was a good first step towards love.

“You might be able to help me with something Laura.”

Here it came, a cheesy excuse to ask her out.

“What can I help you with Tim ?”

“I suffer from anxiety you see, really terrible anxiety. I’m worried that if I ask for your phone number and you say no..... It could set my therapy back by weeks, maybe months. Do you think you’re likely to say yes, to the phone number I mean ?”

Laura was looking for a little romance in her life, coupled with a lot of sex of course. Someone in the hotel though, it could be awkward when they broke up, which they would of course, bound to. Still, he had about ninety percent of the things on her boyfriend attributes list. Maybe more, but she’d need to get him naked to be certain.

“Give me your phone Tim.”

His phone was ghastly, a cheapo smartphone made by a company she’d never heard of, he’d even tapped up one side with red sticky tape. She found the contacts list and added herself.

“Do you like pimped vehicles with wicked paint jobs ?” She asked.

“Of course I do, who doesn’t ?”

“Good, give me a call sometime this weekend.”

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