



Scarlet



"Yeah," Nolan said, his hands in his pockets as he looked back at his father. "I mean, I guess I'm as ready for it as I could be. All but the whole, going to class part. The rest of it's fine."

His father flashed a smile. "Chip off the old block," he said, grinning broadly as he nudged his wife. "What do I always say?"

"Get ahold of yourself, Kevin," the blonde woman said to her balding husband. "He's just joking."

"The sad part is that I'm really not," Nolan said, returning the smile. "No, but seriously, I'm looking forward to getting into the meat of my degree. I'm almost done with the survey courses, so I'm starting to get into the useful stuff."

"It's all useful," his mother said.

"Except the stuff that's not," his father, Kevin said, gripping his son's shoulder. "Just try to bring the grades up this year. You're flirting with mediocrity."

Nolan sighed. "Yeah," he said. "It's just hard to stay focused when I know I won't use most of that stuff."

"And when you spend every night partying in that dreadful house," his mother stated.

"Yeah," Nolan agreed. "But you'll be happy to know that we're moving into a new house this year. They just finished remodeling it, and it's ready."

"That's nice, dear," said the woman. "But please pay more attention to your studies. College isn't just about partying. It's about learning the things necessary to —"

"He'll be fine," Kevin said. "He'll be just fine. He always is."

"Thanks, dad," Nolan said, reaching down to grab his last bag. "But I've got to go." He hugged his parents, then said, "I don't know how much I'll be coming back this year, but I'll stay in touch. I promise."



Nolan looked up at the new house, grinning. It was enormous – a good deal bigger than the one they'd used the year before – and was as nice as any other fraternity house on campus.

"Jesus," he said, elbowing his friend, Miles, in the side. "Look at that thing."

"You saw it last semester, man," Miles said, trying to appear disinterested. However, Nolan knew his fraternity brother well enough to recognize that he was at least as excited as Nolan himself. "Don't wet yourself or anything."

"Oh, shut the fuck up, dude," Nolan responded. "You don't have to try to act cool around me. I've known you since we were in seventh grade. I know you're not cool."

"Cooler than you," Miles said, returning his friend's smile as they trekked up the walkway to the enormous fraternity house. The two young men had been friends for almost as long as either of them could remember, and they knew each other as well as they knew themselves.

"You wish," Nolan countered. It wasn't witty rapport, but it was comfortable. They felt like brothers, and they bickered like they were related by blood.

"Seriously, though – it is fucking huge," Miles said as they reached the entryway. Both heads were turned skyward, admiring the red brick façade and the white columns. "We're going to throw some sick parties this semester. You know that, right? A house like this? Off campus and everything? There's nobody around to even think about calling the cops."

"Yeah," Nolan said. "It's kind of perfect."

"You can say that again," said the other boy. "Let's go inside. I bet it's just as nice."

Nolan raised his bag, pointing to the door. "Lead on," he said.





"Seriously man?" asked Nolan, looking at his friend. Miles had stretched his chewing gum almost a foot from his mouth. "That's gross."

"You're gross," was Miles' witty retort. "I'm bored."

"Unpack," Nolan said, nodding at his friend's bags. "Start studying. Watch some T.V. I don't care."

"I don't want to do any of that," Miles said. "I want to get laid."

"Can't help you there, chief," Nolan said.

"Hey - you still with that Blaire chick?" Miles asked. "The cute one with the flat chest."

"She doesn't have a flat chest," Nolan said. "And kind of. I don't know. I never actually broke up with her. But then again, I was never officially going out with her. So your guess is as good as mine."

"I should fuck her," Miles said as if he'd just made some important declaration. "What's her number?"

Nolan laughed. "She wouldn't give you the time of day, dude," Nolan said. When Miles started to object, he said, "Fine. You want her number?" He grabbed his phone from the nearby nightstand, cycled to his pseudo-girlfriend's phone number, and read it aloud. "Call her up. Ten bucks says she won't go out with you."

"Ten bucks?" Miles said, raising his eyebrow. "You're on."

He dialed the number, and after a few seconds, he said, "Hey, Blaire? Yeah - this is Miles. Right. Nolan's friend. I was just wondering if - what? No. I mean, yeah, he's here. But I wanted to...no. Okay. Yeah. Here he is."

He handed the phone to a smiling Nolan, mouthing the words, "Fuck you" under his breath. Nolan didn't respond. Instead, he simply said into the phone, "Hey. Yeah. I'll meet you at your place. Twenty minutes. Bye."

He handed the phone back to Miles, who said, "I fucking hate you sometimes. You know that, right?"

Nolan shrugged, laughing. "You just need to work on your game, man," he said, walking out of the room. "Don't wait up."





"You could at least lie and make some sort of excuse," said Blaire.

Nolan looked up from his phone to see his on-again, off-again girlfriend staring at him with a half-smile. She was pretty enough – all long, willowy limbs and cute features – but she was far from beautiful.

"Would that make you feel better?" he asked, setting down his phone. "Oh – I just remembered – I've got a huge assignment due that week. I won't be able to break free to have dinner with your parents. I hope you understand."

Blaire sighed at his mocking tone. "You don't have to be an asshole about it," she said. "I just want you to meet them is all. We've been going out for almost a year now. It's weird that you've never even met my parents."

Nolan sighed. "I told you – I don't do the whole parent thing," he said. "Besides, we agreed that this isn't serious, right? Neither of us wants that. And I feel like if I met your family, it would start to get serious. I don't want to put you in that awkward situation."

"It wouldn't be awkward," she said, sliding onto the couch next to him. She gripped his arm. "I promise. It'd be good. They'll love you."

Nolan shook his head. "No," he said. "I know you can't deal with a real relationship right now. That's what we both said when we first started hooking up. We wanted casual, right? No attachment. It wouldn't be fair to you if I made you pretend this was more serious than you want it to be."

"But I...I mean...I guess I can see your point," Blaire said. "But –"

"Good," Nolan said, leaning in to kiss her on the cheek. "I'm doing this for you. What would your dad think if you showed up with your fuck-buddy for family dinner?"

"Yeah, no – I understand," she said, her tone one of disappointment. "I get it."



"Did you feel that?" Nolan asked, looking around.

"Feel what?" asked his distracted friend, Miles.

"That chill," Nolan answered, still trying to find the source. "I don't know. It was freaky. It just came and went." The two were in their shared room, with Nolan having just finished dressing. Miles, on the other hand, was lying on his bed, trying to read.

"I don't feel anything, man," Miles said, lying his book on his chest. "But I'm kind of numb after reading this shit all day. I don't know how you do it."

"Read?" asked Nolan, grinning. "You probably should have learned that before coming to college."

"Fuck you," Miles said. "I can read just fine. I'm just saying that it's kind of dumb that I have to read a hundred-year-old book that has nothing to do with my major."

"You complain about your graphic design books, too," Nolan pointed out.

"That's because you can't learn graphic design from a book," Miles said. "It's a hands-on -"

"I think - and this is just me spitballing here - that you're just a little lazy," Nolan said to his friend.

"And I think you're a dick," Miles responded. "Who gets scared because there's a draft in an old house."

"I wasn't scared, asshole," Nolan stated. "I was just...I mean...you know what? Never mind. Just keep pretending to read your book. I'm going out."





Nolan shoved his hands in his pockets. "I don't know," he said.  
"Maybe. It just depends."

"On what?" asked Miles, raising his beer. He took a gigantic gulp before belching loudly. "I mean, seriously. What are you waiting for?"

Something better, Nolan thought, but he didn't say it outright. Even someone as overtly misogynistic as Miles would consider that crossing the line. After all, Blaire was a perfectly good-looking girl. She was smart. She was funny. And Nolan knew she was in love with him.  
But he couldn't commit. Not to her.

"Why are you so interested in my love life?" he asked, deflecting the question with one of his own. "Honestly, it's kind of gay."

"Oh - you caught me," Miles said, springing from the bed. He wrapped his arms around his friend in a restrictive embrace. Leaning close, he said, "I've been waiting for the right moment to say this, but I love you, man. I always have. Let's move to Vermont and get married."

Nolan struggled to extricate himself from his friend's clutches, saying,  
"Let me go, you freak!"

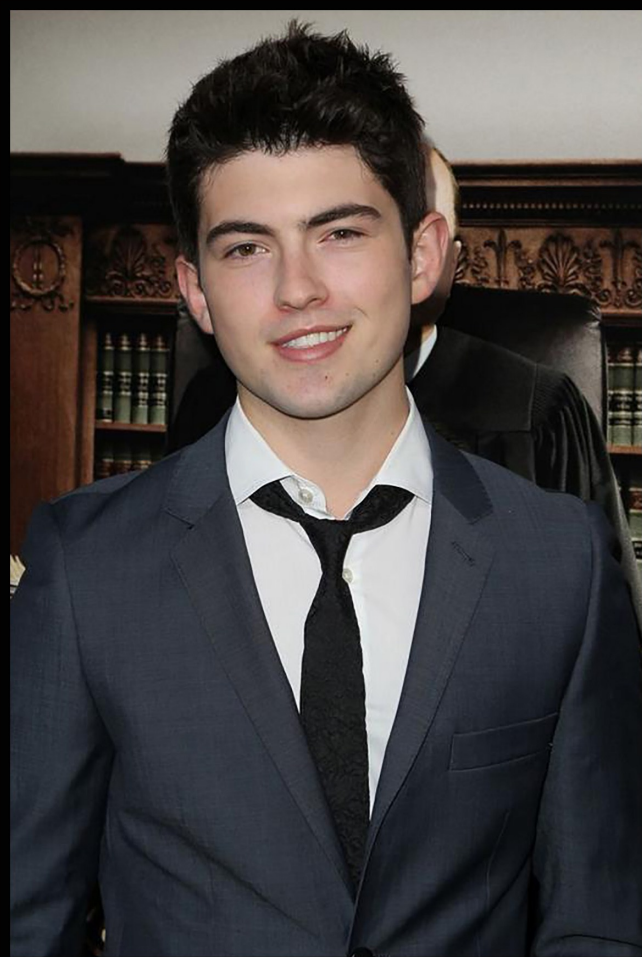
But the stronger Miles wouldn't release him. Finally, he laughed, pushing his friend onto the bed. "You wish I was gay for you," he said playfully.

"Whatever, dude," Nolan said, still breathing hard from the struggle.

"But for the record, I'm asking because I was thinking of moving in on Blaire," Miles said. "She's hot. She's sexy. And I think I've got a shot."

"You don't," Nolan said. He might have been a good deal weaker than his friend, but he was more than confident that Blaire wouldn't give him the time of day - not so long as she thought a relationship with Nolan was possible. "But yeah - go for it, man. If she'll do it, I'm cool with it."

Miles shook his head. "Nah," he said. "I wouldn't do that to you.  
Bros before hos, right?"



Miles loosened his tie. "I hate this crap," he said. "I don't know how anybody wears a tie every day."

Nolan grinned. "Yeah," he said, looking around the house at his gathered fraternity brothers. "But it's just part of it, right? We don't have a choice."

By anyone's standard, it was a silly tradition. Having a party to welcome the new pledges to the fraternity was one thing, but including alumni was something else entirely. No college kid wanted to be surrounded by a bunch of old, has-beens, no matter how influential their connections might be.

"At least it's only once a year," Miles said, shoving his hands in his pockets. While Nolan was fairly comfortable in such situations, Miles had never quite developed the knack of making small talk with people he truly didn't care about. Nolan wasn't sure, but he suspected that his friend had chosen an artistic major in an effort to avoid the near-constant need to network a business major would require.

"You think we'll be like these guys?" the bigger young man asked. "Showing up to the old frat, trying to relive our glory days?"

Nolan said, "I hope not."

Miles nodded at a particularly dweeby-looking fellow. He barely had any hair left, his body had gone to seed, and his round face was red from a rare night of unrestrained drinking. "Like him," he said. "You think that'll be you in twenty years?"

Nolan laughed, tipping his drink toward the man's conversation partner. He was a good hundred pounds overweight, sported a patchy beard, and looked like he hadn't trimmed his ear hair in a decade. "And that would be future-you," he said. "Twice-divorce.

Father of a disappointing, gay son. Middle manager at a car dealership. That sounds like your future."

"Fuck you, asshole," Miles said, suppressing a laugh.

Nolan shrugged. "You started it," he said.





Nolan woke up with a start, sweating and panting as his heart beat wildly. It took him nearly a full minute of telling himself that he was being silly before he started to calm down. Looking over at a sleeping Miles in his own nearby bed was strangely comforting; if there was something truly wrong, surely his friend would be awake too. No – it was just a dream, he told himself. A bad dream he couldn't really remember.

After a few more minutes, Nolan realized he needed to go to the bathroom. So, he quietly extricated himself from his sweat-damp sheets and left his bedroom. The hardwood floors creaked as he padded down the hall and into the restroom. After doing his business, Nolan planted himself in front of the sink and looked into the mirror.

He felt off. There was no other real way to describe it, and it wasn't just the nightmare. It was something else. Something more visceral.

He took a deep breath, turned on the water, and splashed some onto his face. It was cool – far colder than it should have been – but in a good way. Suddenly, he felt a little better. He was being silly. There was nothing wrong. There was nothing that could be wrong. It was just the remnant of a bad dream.

Or at least, that's what he kept telling himself. And as he pushed through the bathroom door and into the hall, he'd almost convinced himself. But that was before he saw her.

She was blurry. Barely visible. And transparent. But even so, Nolan knew the apparition before him was a girl. And despite the fact that he wanted to turn and run, he was immobilized by some outside force. It was like his feet were glued to the floor. He couldn't even open his mouth as she glided toward him.

And then, all in a rush, she flowed toward him. Into him. Around him. All at once, a thousand different emotions – from fear to elation to contentment and everything in between – rushed through his mind. Then, as suddenly as it had come, everything went blank. He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe. And at last, he couldn't remain conscious. He fell to the floor, unfeeling, uncaring, and unresponsive.

"Dude," said a faraway voice, and Nolan blinked his eyes open to see sunlight filtering into the hall. Slowly, his vision came into focus, and he saw Miles' face looming over him. "You know you have a bed like twenty feet from here, right? You don't have to sleep in the hall."



Nolan sat up. "What the hell happened?" he asked, fingering his black vest as he sat on the floor. "What am I wearing?"

"How much did you drink last night?" asked Miles. "And why didn't you wake me up?"

Nolan rubbed his eyes. The inside of his eyelids felt like they were coated with sandpaper, and his mouth tasted like he hadn't brushed his teeth in weeks. That, combined with the fact that he felt on the verge of being sick, made him assume that he'd gotten blackout drunk the night before. Even so, the fact that he couldn't remember even starting drinking was a bit troubling.

"Honestly, I don't even remember getting up," he said. "And I definitely don't remember putting this crap on."

He was wearing the outfit he'd worn to the party the day before, complete with vest, slacks, and well-polished shoes. However, he couldn't quite understand why.

"You should stop drinking so much," said Miles, extending his hand. Nolan gripped it, and his friend helped him up. "Or at least stop drinking alone."

Nolan shook his head, eliciting a pounding behind his eyes. "Yeah," he said. "You're probably right."

"Come on," Miles said. "You're going to be late for class. And you know how Dr. Grant is."

Nolan groaned. "I think I'm just going to skip today," he said, feeling his stomach lurch. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Without another word, he sprinted down the hall and into the bathroom, where he collapsed onto the toilet, vomiting violently. Between retches, he moaned, "I'm never drinking again."





"You have to pay attention to me," said Blaire, her hands on her hips as she stood before Nolan, naked.

"What?" Nolan asked without looking up from his phone. He hadn't even been looking at anything; rather, he'd been lost in thought. However, he couldn't remember what he'd been thinking about. When he tried, there was just a blank spot in his memory.

"Seriously?" Blaire demanded. "Hello? Earth to Nolan? Do you want to have sex?"

"Sex?" asked a distracted Nolan. A few moments passed before it dawned on him what she'd said. Suddenly, everything came rushing in on him, and he looked up. "Oh. Oh...sorry. Shit, Blaire. I didn't...I mean...yeah. I...um...yeah. Definitely. Let's do it."

"I've been standing here talking to you for like five minutes," she said. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Nolan said. "I mean...I'm just distracted. By school and stuff. Right. School."

"Are you high?" she asked.

"What? No," he said. "I don't do that kind of thing."

"Drunk?" was her next question.

"No," he said. "I haven't had anything to drink for almost a week."

"Off your meds or something?" she asked.

"I'm fine, Blaire," he said. "I'm fine. I'm just...look - I'm sorry, okay? I've just been feeling weird lately. But I'm fine. I'll be fine."

She sighed. "Okay," she said. "Well - do you want to do it, then?"

"Do what?" Nolan asked, momentarily confused. A second later, he realized what she meant. "Oh - yeah. Sure. Definitely. Of course I do."



"Where the fuck am I?" Nolan wondered, picking himself up off the ground. He glanced around, realizing he was in an abandoned alley. Rubbing his forehead, he said, "Fuck."

It wasn't the first time Nolan had found himself in a strange place, and with no memory of how he'd gotten there. Over the previous month-and-a-half, it had happened at least twice a week. He'd even started to get used to it, after a fashion. Still, it did scare him.

Staggering to the alley's entranceway, he felt drunk. Or high. Probably both. As best as he could tell, he'd become a sleepwalker almost overnight. And his sleepwalking self was addicted to something that left him feeling hungover when he awoke. It was frightening, thinking of all the ways he could hurt himself. But he couldn't make himself seek help.

Every time he thought about going to a doctor or a psychiatrist, he thought of a million reasons not to. After all, he hadn't been hurt yet. There was no reason to think that would change. His excuses were ridiculous, and he knew it. However, that didn't make them any less effective.

At the head of the alleyway, he glanced right, then left. He wasn't that far from the fraternity house – certainly within walking distance – so he set off toward home, all the while trying to remember the previous night.

It was useless. He couldn't remember a single thing. However, he did feel the aftermath of whatever he'd done. Not only was he sore – like he'd maintained an uncomfortable position for an extended period of time – but he could also feel bruises on his knees. That, along with a stiffness in his jaw, made him think he'd been in a fight.

As he neared the fraternity house, his phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket, thumbing the appropriate button, and held it up to his ear.

"Yeah?" he said, his voice gravelly.

"Where are you, man?" came Miles' familiar voice.

"Went for a walk," Nolan lied. "Why?"

"Because you lit out of here a day and a half ago," Miles said. "I was about to call the fucking cops."

"Oh," Nolan said. "Yeah. I was just...you know...I was hanging out at a friend's place. I'm fine, though. Don't worry. I'll be back at the house in a minute."





"I need you to be honest with me, man," said Miles. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Nolan lied. "I'm fine. Go get one of those over-the-counter piss tests. I'll take it. I don't even care, dude. I'm not on drugs."

Miles sighed. "You know that's not going to happen," he said. "I trust you. I want to believe you. But you're disappearing at all times of the night. Nobody knows where you go. And you keep lying about it."

Nolan didn't know how to respond, so he didn't immediately answer. Instead, he looked away, running his hand through his hair as he tried to think of some sort of response that would get his friend off of his back. For all Miles' faults, he was still a good friend because he genuinely cared about Nolan's well-being. And that made it all the more difficult to conceal what Nolan had increasingly come to consider a very real problem.

His sleepwalking had gotten out of hand. Most mornings, he woke up in a strange, unfamiliar place with absolutely no memory of how he got there. No flashes. No hazy memories. There was just nothing. And what was worse, he knew that his nights were busy; more than once, he'd seen some stranger staring at him. A couple of times, they'd spoken to him like they knew him. It was disconcerting, to say the least, but he knew better than to pull on that thread. Something prevented him from asking those people how they knew him.

"You don't seem fine," Miles said. "That's all I'm saying."

"Fine - you want to know what's going on?" Nolan said. Miles said that he did, and Nolan continued, "I've been sleepwalking, okay? It's not a big deal."

"Sleepwalking?" Miles asked. "That's a real thing?"

"Yes," Nolan answered. "But I'm fine. I've dealt with it before. It'll pass in a couple of weeks."

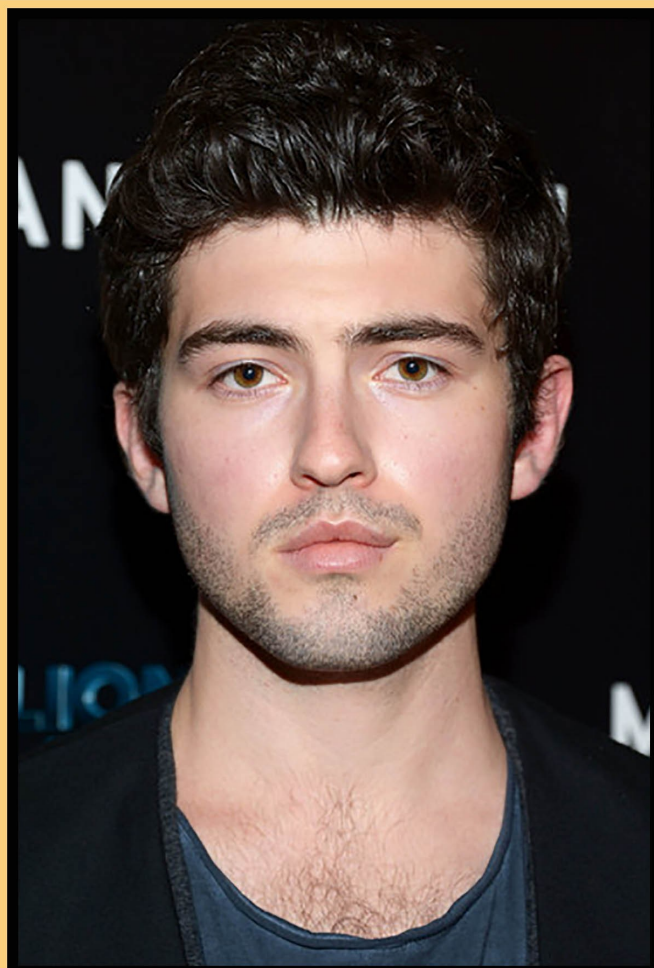
"Oh," Miles said, buying the half-truth. "Okay. So, what do we do about it?"

"We don't do anything," Nolan said. "I have to let it run its course. That's what my doctor said, at least."

"Your doctor," Miles muttered. "So, you're getting treated. Why didn't you just say so?"

Nolan sighed. "Because I didn't think it was necessary to share my entire medical history with you," he answered. "I had my appendix taken out when I was six. And I had surgery on my shoulder when I was twelve. I've got a history of -"

Miles laughed. "Fine," he said. "I get it. Mind my own business. You could've just said so."



"I'm not trying to be a dick here," said Miles. "But I really can't go. I've got to study."

"Study? You?" asked Nolan with a laugh. "When did that start happening?"

Miles shrugged. "I'm kind of failing a couple of classes," he said. "Not like, fail-failing. But if I don't do well on my finals, I'm going to get put on academic probation."

Nolan didn't know what to say, mostly because he'd never seen Miles study. Nor had he ever seen his friend take school seriously. He was convinced that, if he hadn't followed Nolan to college, he would have been perfectly fine entering the job force directly out of high school. Moreover, Nolan wasn't altogether unsure that that wouldn't have been the best route for his friend, who'd always struggled with academics.

"Which two classes?" Nolan asked.

"Maybe it's more than two," Miles admitted. "But it'll be fine. I just have to crack down, you know? Get through this year. Next year, my classes will be almost completely in-major. I can handle that."

"Yeah," Nolan said. "I guess. But if you need help, I can –"

"I'm fine," Miles said, interrupting his friend's offer. "No offense, but we've done that before. And I don't think anybody wants a repeat of what happened last year."

Nolan nodded. It was true. That particular argument had almost ended their friendship. "Okay," he said. "But I can help you if you get desperate. I'm here for you, man. I promise."





The lights flickered as Nolan descended the stairs, distracted by what he'd just been studying. He noticed it, certainly, but it wasn't a big deal. The library's wiring was practically ancient, and it wasn't an unusual occurrence for the power to flicker. However, as soon as he saw her standing there, staring at him from a place where, a second earlier, no one had been, he nearly fell.

"W-who are you?" he asked, catching himself on an ice-cold railing. He'd seen her before. Somewhere. Though he couldn't remember where. But she felt familiar. He knew her. He was about to ask her who she was again when, almost as if his mind was suddenly catching up with his eyes, he noticed that she was slightly transparent.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead, a high-pitched keening erupted, filling the air. Nolan collapsed, his books tumbling down the stairs as he clamped his hands over his ears. It didn't help. The noise filled his brain to bursting, setting it to boil, and he let out his own, accompanying scream of agony.

Tears flowed down his face, and the only rational thought that could batter its way through the pain was that he was about to die. The girl, the ghost - whatever she was - was going to kill him. And there was nothing he could do about it.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the screams stopped. His. Hers. Silence filled the stairwell, and he looked up to see her looming over him.

She was crying. She wanted to say something, he knew. She wanted to tell him something. But she couldn't. Communication was impossible.

She reached out, touching his shoulder, and a whole new pain erupted. It was fire. It was ice. It was every sort of pain he'd ever felt in his life. But he couldn't flinch away. He couldn't stop her. So, with no other choice, he simply endured her touch until he passed out.

It wasn't until almost an hour later that he woke up, barely remembering the encounter. But the echoes of the pain remained as he stood up, brushed himself off, and started the trek back to the fraternity house.



"I don't know, man," Nolan said, his eyes wild. He pointed in the general direction of the library. "I don't know what I saw. But that was fucking weird. I'm freaking out, okay? I'm freaking out."

"Calm down, dude," Miles said. "Just explain it to me again. You fell on the stairs?"

"No - I mean, yeah," Nolan answered. "I fell. But that was after I saw a goddamn ghost. A real fucking ghost."

"In the library," Miles said.

"The old one," Nolan said.

"And she hurt you somehow?" Miles asked.

"Yeah, but I don't think she meant to," Nolan said. "I think she was trying to tell me something. She couldn't, though. She was too -"

"Listen," Miles said, interrupting his friend. "I don't know if you're pranking me or if you really think you saw something, but that's crazy. You know that, don't you? Maybe you were sleepwalking or something. I saw this thing on Youtube once where they were talking about ghost sightings. They're all just your mind playing tricks on you."

"My mind wasn't playing tricks on me," Nolan insisted. "She was there."

"Maybe you fell and hit your head," Miles suggested. "You saw a girl and you thought she was a ghost. Or like I said, you fell asleep when you were studying and you started sleepwalking. I don't know what happened, but I do know that ghosts aren't real. You understand that, right?"

Nolan shook his head. "You don't understand," he said. "Fucking shit, man - I don't understand. I don't. But I know what I saw. I do. And nothing you can say will make me believe I didn't see what I saw."





"I don't know why you won't just say it," Blaire said. "I mean, we've been together for over a year now. They're three, little words. I love you. See? It's not hard. I love you."

Nolan didn't want to be having that particular conversation. In fact, he didn't want to be having any conversation with Blaire at all. He liked her well enough, but for some reason, spending time with her had lost much of its luster. And then, added to that was her insistence on talking about their relationship, which left him with a bad taste in his mouth.

"Do you want me to say it when I don't know if I mean it?" he asked. He did know, but he didn't want to tell her that he had no intention of ever establishing a long-term thing with her. In fact, in his mind, Blaire was little more than a booty call. They didn't date. He barely spent time with her outside of the bedroom. And he wasn't terribly affectionate. However, rather than reading the writing on the wall, the girl had taken his distant nature as an invitation to build their relationship into something more than it clearly was.

"You don't love me?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not the kind of guy who just says that. It means something, saying that you love someone. I don't just throw it around."

"I knew," she said. "You don't. You just want -"

"Listen," Nolan said, reaching out to grip her arm. Even that much physical contact left him feeling like a fraud. Sex was worse. For months, he'd felt like he was just going through the motions because that's what he was supposed to do. There was little passion. No lust.

"I'm just saying that I don't know yet. Love isn't something that happens overnight. It's the culmination of getting to know someone on their deepest levels. I can't say that either of us has reached that point yet. That doesn't mean I don't want to. I do. I really do. I'm just trying to say that I can't say the words unless I'm absolutely sure."

She sighed. "I know," she said. "You're right. I shouldn't have put you in that position. If you're not there yet, that's fine. More than fine. I respect it. It's frustrating, but I understand."

He leaned in, kissing her on the cheek. "I knew you'd get it," he said.



Nolan stared into the mirror, unsure of how to react. It wasn't so much that he disliked his suddenly-longer hair. He didn't, which was an issue all its own. However, what scared him was the fact that it had grown to jaw-length in what had to be a record amount of time. Only a week had passed since he had his normal, close-cut hairstyle.

Nolan wasn't a biology major, but he knew that hair wasn't supposed to grow that quickly. Nor was someone supposed to lose almost thirty pounds in the space of two weeks. But there he was, having experienced both changes.

"You look like a chick," Miles said, coming into the room. "You should get a haircut."

Nolan didn't answer because he knew his friend was right. His face felt softer. His hair was longer. And the weight loss seemed almost entirely comprised of muscle.

"Fuck you," was Nolan's retort. "This is the new style."

Miles shrugged. "Blair put you up to that?" he asked. "Because if she did, I think she might have figure out your little game, and this is revenge."

Nolan looked away. The worst part of it was that he didn't dislike the new hairstyle. In fact, when he looked at it, he felt an undeniable sense of pride. And what's worse was that he hoped it would grow longer. He'd already caught himself watching Youtube videos on styling longer hair. And he'd even seen a few tutorials on makeup.

"What the fuck is happening to me?" he wondered, his voice barely audible.

"What was that?" asked Miles.

"Nothing," Nolan said. "Just...nothing. I didn't say anything."





Over the few months since he'd started sleepwalking, Nolan had woken up in some strange places. Alleys, a triple-x theater, abandoned houses – he thought he'd all but exhausted the possibilities. But when he woke up surrounded by trees, he realized that it was the first time he'd found himself in the woods.

Rising on wobbly legs, he looked around, trying to get his bearings. It wasn't easy. One tree looked much like any other, after all. And he'd never been much of a woodsman. However, after hearing a passing car on a nearby road, he started walking toward what he hoped was civilization.

As he trekked through the dense brush, he tried to identify the taste in his mouth. He'd had it before – that much he knew – but he still didn't know what it was. However, despite the fact that it wasn't an altogether pleasant flavor, it was somehow comforting – like a taste from a treasured memory. He was still trying to identify it when he pushed through the tree line and into a picnic area.

"Simmons Park," he muttered, recognizing the place. It was practically famous as a known, illicit hook-up spot for anonymous gay men. And Nolan had spent the night there. A shiver went up his spine at the possibilities. He could have been molested in his sleep.

He ran his hand through his shoulder-length hair. "Fucking shit," he whispered. "What the hell is happening to me?"

Not only had he continued to lose weight – he was down to barely a hundred-and-twenty pounds – but his hair had continued to grow at an accelerated rate. In addition, his face was barely recognizable; what sharp angles and edges he'd once possessed were all but gone, leaving everything looking softer. Younger. More feminine. It was horrifying.

He set off down the path toward the nearby parking lot, trying to put as much distance between the woods and himself, almost as if he was trying to forget all the things that might have happened to him there.



"I don't know what to do," Nolan said to his own reflection. His face had continued to change, and though he knew he should be alarmed, he couldn't help but feel a sense of comfort when he saw the near-alien features. He looked like nothing so much as how he imagined his nonexistent sister might look. His eyes seemed bigger. His features seemed smoother. And then, there was his hair. So long. So feminine.

"Get a haircut," suggested Miles, who'd just come into the room.

"I've tried," Nolan said, pushing his hair behind his ear. The other young man hadn't mentioned how much Nolan's face had changed, but he saw it. Nolan was sure. "It just grows back."

"That doesn't make any sense," Miles said. "Hair doesn't just -"

"Nothing makes sense!" Nolan hissed, wheeling around to face his friend. "I've lost almost sixty pounds, man. In three months, everything has changed. And I don't know why."

"Are you sure you're not on something?" Miles suggested. "Weight loss. Blackouts. Irritability..."

"I'm not on anything!" Nolan insisted. "I haven't even had a drink in almost eight weeks."

"That you know of," Miles said. "You told me yourself - you don't remember what happens when you black out. And every time I try to follow you, you just lose me. It's crazy. You're like a sleepwalking ninja."

"Can you please take this seriously?" Nolan asked. "I'm changing, man. I know I am. And I can't control it. I don't know what's going on."

"Did you go to the doctor?" Miles asked.

Nolan shook his head. "I stood in front of the building for like twenty minutes," he said. "I couldn't take another step forward. I don't know why, but I just couldn't."

"I could carry you," Miles suggested, grinning. "You barely weigh anything anymore."

"Fuck you, man," Nolan said. "I'm freaking out here, and you're making jokes. Just...you know what? Just leave me alone, okay? I need to figure this out."



It was a dream, Nolan kept telling himself. It wasn't real. He couldn't have done that. No. He didn't. He was sure.

But it was so vivid, and it wasn't just the images flashing through his mind. It was the smell. The sensations. The taste. He knew they were all accurate. Just like he knew, at least deep down, that it hadn't been a dream. He'd really done it. He'd actually sucked a cock. And what's more, he had liked it. No. He hadn't. He had loved it. Even the mere thought sent a tingle of pleasure up his spine.

He couldn't remember much. Mostly, it was just emotions. Physical sensations. He didn't know how it had happened. Nor did he know who it had happened with. But he knew how it made him feel. And he knew that he'd do it again, and soon. It was as inevitable as his next blackout.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Blaire.

He looked up, stunned. He barely even remembered going over to her dorm. But there he was, sitting on her bed. "What? Nothing," he said. "Nothing."

She reached out, fingering his long tresses. "I like the new look," she said. "It suits you."

"Yeah," he said absently. "I guess."

"It's amazing what a different hairstyle can do for a person's face," she said. "You look like an entirely different person."

"Right," he responded, still distracted by his fragmented memories. "A different person. That's me."

"Do you want to fool around?" she asked hopefully. In the past, it was the only reason he would have come over to her dorm. But in recent weeks, he hadn't been as interested in that sort of thing. Her presence was comforting, though. And in his frazzled state, that was enough.

He shook his head. "No," he said. "I just...I just want to hang out, if that's okay."





"Feel free to make yourself some breakfast," came the unfamiliar voice as Nolan came to. He looked around, confused – an increasingly familiar frame of mind, given his propensity of wake up in strange places. But to date, he'd never found himself in someone else's home – until now.

The house was well-furnished, if a bit stark. Stainless steel appliances gleamed in the kitchen while modern-looking furniture decorated the living room of the open-plan apartment. And then, almost as if on cue, a man wearing nothing but a towel stepped out of the nearby hall. His muscular body still glistened with moisture.

"You look like you saw a ghost," he said. "Are you okay, Allison?"

Allison. He knew that was the name he'd given himself. It fit him damn comfortably. Looking down, Nolan saw that he was wearing a pink shirt, a pair of matching panties, and nothing else. He wanted to panic. He wanted to scream. But he couldn't, because it all felt so familiar. So natural. So normal.

"I'm fine," he said, noting that his voice wasn't the one he normally used. It was higher. More feminine. "Just...um...thinking about last night."

The man stepped closer, grabbing Nolan's waist. "Me too," he said, pulling Nolan close. He was so big. So strong. And, Nolan soon realized, so horny. He could feel the man's hardening cock tenting the front of the towel as it pressed against Nolan's body.

Nolan pulled away, panicking. "I...um...I've got to go," he said. "Where are my...um...where are my clothes?"

The man looked confused. "What's the matter? Did I do something wrong?" he asked.

"N-no," Nolan said. "It's just...I mean, I've just got to go, okay? I'm sorry. This was...this was a mistake."

He spotted a pair of blue jeans that looked like they might fit, grabbed them amidst the man's objections, and practically ran from the apartment, all the while wondering what the hell was going on.



"What the fuck?" asked said Miles, bringing Nolan into the present. He blinked once, then twice, and suddenly he was aware that he was standing before his best friend, wearing nothing but a cotton pair of panties and a matching bra.

"Oh," Nolan said. "Um...I guess...you know...I guess you probably want an explanation. It's a funny story, but...but..."

"You're dressed like a girl," Miles said, stating the obvious as Nolan's mind struggled to catch up with the situation. "Shit, if I didn't know better, I would think you were a girl."

"I mean...yeah," Nolan said. "That's the...um...that's the point."

"Yeah?" asked a skeptical Miles. "And what point are you trying to make, man? I mean, seriously, what the fuck, dude? I've looked the other way for as long as I can. I've ignored the hair, the weight loss, the makeup. But this? I mean, I think I deserve an explanation. Are you a fucking crossdresser? Or what?"

"It's complicated," Nolan said, realizing that he wouldn't be able to simply laugh it off. He'd been caught red-handed, and what's more, he had no explanation for why he was wearing girls' underwear. He didn't even know himself.

"Yeah? Uncomplicate it," Miles said.

"I don't know, okay?" Nolan said. "I don't know what's been going on with me, man. I wake up in strange places. I don't feel like myself. I don't look like me. And I don't know why. That's the real reason. Just now, when you walked in, it was like I'd just woken up. I don't know why I'm doing this. It's not a conscious choice. I just wake up, and I feel like I've been living someone else's life."

It wasn't the entire truth, but it was as close as Nolan was prepared to admit. The fact was that, with each change, he'd become more and more certain of its genesis. He knew it was linked to the ghost. He didn't know how or why, but he knew she was the reason his life had gone off the rails.

"Have you thought about going to a psychiatrist?" Miles asked. "I mean, you might have multiple personalities or something, right? They have medicine for that, don't they?"

Nolan shook his head. "I'll figure it out," he said. "I know I will. But in the meantime, can you sort of not tell the other guys about this? I don't want them to get the wrong idea."

"Yeah, sure," Miles said. "You know I've got your back."



"I had a lesbian experience, once," Blaire said. "My senior year of high school."

"What?" asked Nolan, looking up. He'd done his best to tone down his femininity, but nothing could hide his increasingly curvy figure, long hair, and soft features. "Why are you telling me this?"

She shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Just thought you might be interested. Guys like it when girls do stuff with other girls, right?"

Nolan returned her shrug. "I guess," he said.

"Like I said, it was senior year," she explained, sitting next to him on her bed. "Prom, actually. And my date sort of...well, he kind of ditched me. You know how high school boys are. Anyway, I was sort of crying in the bathroom when Vikki Lang came in."

She smiled at the memory. "You have to understand about Vikki," she said. "She was, like, super butch. Short hair. Never wore makeup. Played softball. We all knew she was gay. And we used to treat her so bad. Making fun of her behind her back. That sort of thing."

"Yeah," Nolan said, nodding. He was only barely listening to her, but she hardly cared.

"Anyway, she came in, and well, she looked so different," Blaire explained. "She was wearing a real dress. And makeup. And her short hair looked so cute. But most of all, she was so nice to me. She sat with me while I cried. She told me how pretty I was. How stupid Brian was for leaving me there. And one thing sort of led to another, and...she kissed me. And kissed her back."

"So you kissed a girl?" Nolan asked. "That's your big confession?"

"It went a lot further than kissing," Blaire said, blushing. "A lot further."

"And why are you telling me this?" Nolan asked.

She shrugged again. "Because I thought it might be interesting to you," she said. "I'm super open-minded about that kind of thing. You know, just for future reference is all."



Nolan knew it was a dream. He couldn't quite pinpoint how he knew that, but he knew it nonetheless. But he also knew it wasn't entirely a fabrication of his own mind, either. No – it was so much more.

He looked around the dark room. One side was constructed entirely of wood while the other three were naked rock. And in the center of the wooden wall was an imposing, metal door. It screeched open, moving ponderously, and a figure was shoved inside.

Nolan recognized her immediately. She was solid, and she looked a good deal less distressed, but she was the girl who would become the ghost he'd encountered in the library.

"Are you okay?" he whispered, his voice echoing strangely. She didn't respond. Nor did she act like she'd heard him. Nolan reached out, trying to help her up, but his hand passed through her without an ounce of resistance. He was as incorporeal as she'd been the last time he saw her. "What's going on?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she sat up, looking around as she tried to figure something out. That gave Nolan a chance to study her. After all, there was little else to do but watch, to listen, to learn.

The girl wore a plain, black top that left her midriff bare and a pair of incredibly brief shorts. Bruises ran up and down her thighs, and older, half-healed contusions decorated her knees. She was pretty enough, after a fashion. Big eyes. Sensuous mouth. If Nolan had met her in real life, he would have considered asking her out.

Suddenly, without warning, she turned to face him. Her eyes burrowed into his soul as she whispered, "Help me!"

Nolan was about to respond when the door reopened, and the entire scene faded in a puff of smoke as he awoke, his heart pounding. He sat there for a long moment, trying to make sense of what he'd seen. She had been a captive. That much was certain. And he knew she'd died, else he wouldn't have seen her ghost. But beyond that, he knew nothing. He wanted to help. He wanted to give her what she wanted. He just didn't know how.





"Look, man," said Miles. "I know you don't think anybody's noticed, but they have. The guys are talking. They have been for a while."

"I know," Nolan said. "I just don't know what to do about it."

"I thought you were getting this under control," Miles said. "I've been taking up for you. I've been trying to cover for you. But looking the way you do? There's only so many excuses I can make."

"Then stop," Nolan said.

"What?" asked Miles.

"Stop making excuses," he said. "I don't know what else to tell you. I'm trying to figure all this out. I am. But I'm fucked up, okay? I don't remember most nights. I've lost more time than I want to admit. And sometimes, I wake up wearing...w-wearing...I mean, I don't know what to do. I even went to a psychiatrist the other day."

"And what did he say?" Miles asked.

"That I'm transgender, and I've spent most of my life repressing it," Nolan said. "She said that I need to come to terms with my womanhood, whatever the fuck that means."

"Maybe she's right," Miles said.

"Do you think she is?" Nolan asked.

"I don't know," his friend admitted. "But it would make sense, right? I mean, I'm not judging. I'll still be your friend no matter if you're a girl or a boy. But -"

"I'm not a fucking girl, okay?" Nolan said. "And repression doesn't explain how my face changed almost overnight. It doesn't explain why, if I cut my hair, it's back to the same length within a week. It doesn't explain anything except why I sometimes wake up wearing women's clothes."

"Then what's the answer?" asked Miles. "Just wait for it to pass?"

"I don't know," Nolan admitted. "I just don't know."



"This is so stupid," Nolan muttered to himself, looking down at the Ouija board. It was the sort of thing teenaged girls did at slumber parties. Which, if he was honest, was probably closer to his current state than he cared to admit.

"It's the easiest way to contact a spirit," said the young woman sitting across from him. Kaylene was a self-proclaimed clairvoyant, but she didn't look anything like Nolan had expected when he'd found her ad online. She looked so normal that his already-strong sense of skepticism kicked into high gear. Psychics were supposed to look like old, gypsy women. Scarves. Cushions. Piercings. This girl looked like she'd just come in from the mall.

"You're the expert," Nolan said. "I just want to figure out what she wants."

"If she wants anything," Kaylene said. "There's no guarantee that she isn't just a run-of-the-mill vengeful spirit. She might just be -"

"She wants something," Nolan insisted. "I know she does."

"We'll know for sure soon enough," Kaylene said, putting her hands on the Ouija board's plastic planchette. "Put your hands on the other side."

Nolan obeyed, asking, "Did you buy this thing from Walmart or something?"

"Yes," she said. "Now shut up. I need to concentrate."

Nolan bit back a reply about discount store psychics as she started chanting in what he thought he recognized as Latin. She flowed into English, saying, "Spirit, hear me. Make yourself known, for we wish to help. Please, we \_"

Suddenly, Nolan felt like he was being jerked backwards by his midsection. The entire room went dark, save for a single, illuminated and familiar figure.

"It took you long enough," said the ghost. "I've been trying to reach you for over six months."





"W-who are you?" Nolan managed, his voice echoing unnaturally.

"My name is Scarlet," she said. "Scarlet Grimes."

The name sounded vaguely familiar to Nolan, but he couldn't place it. "You're dead, aren't you," he said. Despite the phrasing, it wasn't a question.

The ghost nodded. "Yes," she said. "It took me a while to figure it out, but yeah. I'm dead."

"What's it like?" Nolan blurted. "Being dead, I mean. Was there a white light or -"

"I don't remember much before that night in the hallway," she said. "You probably don't even remember that, do you? No. I didn't think you did. That was the first time I possessed you."

"So, you are possessing me," Nolan said. Even as he said it, it seemed obvious. Of course she'd been possessing him. It made so much sense. "Why? What do you want?"

"That's complicated," she said, her form wavering slightly. "And I don't have much time. I didn't choose you. You were just sort of there. But now, we're linked. I can't leave. Not until I get what I want. What I need."

"And what's that?" Nolan asked.

"I need to bring my murderers to justice," she said. "Or that's what I think, at least. I'm kind of new to this whole ghost thing."

"And if I help you, you'll leave me alone?" Nolan asked. "I can go back to being me?"

Scarlet nodded. "I think so," she said. "But until then, we're in it together."



"You really should get up," said the voice in Nolan's head. Ever since that first conversation, it was like some dam had been broken, letting her inside of his head. "It's not a good idea to lie around all day. We've got an investigation to start."

Nolan groaned. "Get the fuck out of my head," he said to no one in particular. Then, he looked around. "Did you change my sheets?"

"I like them," Scarlet said.

"I don't," Nolan said. "And I thought we agreed you wouldn't just take control like that anymore. I help you. You butt out of my life. That was the deal, right?"

"I can't help it sometimes," she answered. "I feel these urges, and I just...it's almost like being alive again. I can touch. I can taste. I can feel. When it's just me, everything's so hollow."

"Listen - this isn't going to work if you keep doing this," Nolan thought. "I can't keep acting like a girl. Just change me back to how I was, okay? I can help a lot more like that."

"No can do," she said. "I don't even know how this happened, much less how to fix it. So, we're stuck like this for a while. But look on the bright side - at least you know what's going on, now. I know how worried about it you were."

"Oh yeah - I'm being possessed by a ghost who wants to take over my life," he muttered. "And I have to solve the murder of a girl I don't even know so I can get my life back. That's great. Awesome. Such a bright side."

"I didn't make the rules," she said, her thoughts pouty. "I didn't ask to die."

Nolan sighed. "I know," he said. "I'm sorry, okay? But this is hard for me. I don't want to look like a chick. But I know this isn't your fault. Just...I'm sorry. We'll figure this out. Together."







"Jesus Christ," Nolan said, looking into the mirror.

"What's wrong?" asked Scarlet, her voice echoing inside his head. "You look super cute."

"Where the fuck should I start?" he asked. "Maybe the fact that I'm wearing panties? Or that I have boobs? Or –"

"Those aren't really boobs," Scarlet said. "They're barely ant bites."

"I shouldn't have anything up there!" Nolan said, his tone exasperated. "I shouldn't have these hips. Or this hair. Or –"

"I think you're just going to have to get used to it," Scarlet stated. "I'm no expert, but I think this is just your body responding to my presence. And no. Before you ask, I can't help it. I can't just turn it off because I'm not consciously doing anything. I think it's just something we have to live with until you figure out who killed me."

"I have to live with it," Nolan corrected. "You're dead. You're not living with anything."

"Low blow, Allison," Scarlet said.

"Not my name," he said. "I don't care how often you say it."

"Come on – Allison totally fits you!" she said. "I could call you Allie. It'll be great."

"No," Nolan said. "Just...just no."

"Fine," she pouted. "But I'm continuing this possession under protest."



"Allison!" called an unfamiliar voice. "Come over here. I want you to meet someone."

Nolan shook his head. "You've got to be fucking kidding me," he said, looking around at the gathered partygoers. "Where the hell am I, Scarlet?"

"I'm sorry," she responded. "I didn't mean for this to happen. It just sort of snowballed when I went out to have a little fun. You were never even supposed to know about it."

"Wait, fun? What fun?" he thought. "What did you do?"

"It's not my fault," she answered. "I can't help it. I was just thinking about it. You were asleep. And then, suddenly, I was in control. You can't blame me."

"What did you do?" Nolan asked again.

"I might have had sex with a couple of guys," she said. "But don't worry. I didn't let you wake up. You won't remember a thing."

"I...I won't...oh, God," Nolan said aloud. A few partygoers turned to look at him. He smiled innocently, and they turned back to their own conversations. "Did you just say that you had sex with a couple of guys?" he thought. "Like it was no big deal. Just fuck a couple of dudes in my fucking body. W-wait. You...you haven't done this before, have you? Tell me you haven't done this before."

"Um...do you want me to say I haven't done it?" she asked. "Or do you want the truth?"

"Oh, God," he repeated, his mind whirling with the idea of sleeping with other men. "Oh, mother fucking God."

"It's not my fault!" she insisted. "I was just -"

"I'm done," he thought. "Done. I'm not helping you anymore. I'm going down to that occult bookstore downtown, and I'm going to figure out how to get you out of my head. I'm going to -"

Suddenly, Nolan's mind went blank. "No," she said. "You're not. I didn't want to do this, but you're giving me no choice."

And then, Nolan watched from behind his own eyes as Scarlet took over his body.





Nolan – or rather, Scarlet – stood in front of the bathroom door. “I’m sorry for doing this,” she said. “You know I didn’t want it like this.”

Nolan railed against his lack of control. It was such a strange feeling, being a prisoner in his own body. It was even stranger to see himself embrace femininity so completely. With Scarlet in control, Nolan realized just how girlish his body had become. And wearing what Scarlet picked out made the change even more dramatic.

“Fuck you!” he screamed in his own mind. “Give me back my body!”

Scarlet ignored him, pushing into the bathroom. A few of the girls inside – classmates Nolan knew – giggled as he stepped into a stall, pulled down his panties, and did his business. It was so embarrassing.

“Why are you doing this?” he screamed. “I was going to help you! I just wanted control of my own body!”

“I said I was sorry for taking control,” were her answering thoughts. “But you wouldn’t accept my apology, would you? So, I have no choice but to do this on my own. You can have your body back when I’m done.”

“No!” Nolan yelled, pushing with all his might. For the briefest of seconds, he regained control. However, it quickly vanished.

“Nice try,” Scarlet said. “But you can’t push me out. If you could have, you already would have. But here’s the thing – from here on out, I’m not holding back. No more restraint. I might be dead, but that doesn’t mean I can’t live a little.”

“W-what does that mean?” a more subdued Nolan asked.

“You’ll see,” she said, stepping out of the stall and up to the sink, where she washed his hands. After touching up her makeup, she repeated aloud, “You’ll see.”



Nolan screamed for her to stop, but he knew it was useless. If he could have stopped her, he would have long before it got to that point. But that didn't make it any easier to accept that he was on his side, his legs spread, as a man whose name he didn't know stuck his cock in his ass.

Scarlet didn't make it any easier. She could barely think coherently, she was so excited. And what's more, her emotions threatened to completely overwhelm Nolan's entire consciousness, forcing him to enjoy it as well. No matter how hard he fought to be disgusted, he just couldn't stop himself from mentally moaning for more.

Scarlet's screams echoed that sentiment. "Harder," she breathed. "Give me that dick, baby. Fuck me harder! God, right there. Right there! Yes! That's it! That's it. Fuck me!"

By the time the man came in Nolan's ass, he was both mentally and physically exhausted in a way he never could have anticipated. So was Scarlet, who could only mumble, "Thanks, baby. You can go now."

The man said something Nolan barely heard. It didn't matter. He was just a passenger in his own body. He didn't need to pay attention to Scarlet's lover. By the time the man left, a deep depression had overtaken Nolan's mind.

"You don't have to pout," Scarlet said. "I know you liked it."

"Because you made me like it," Nolan thought.

"You're welcome," the possessing ghost said.

"Go to hell," he said.

"If you'd just agree to give me what I want," Scarlet said. "I could let you have control. I could give you back your life. Remember that. This is your fault."







"This has to stop," Miles said. "You're not even trying to hide it anymore."

"What's there to hide?" asked Scarlet-as-Nolan. "I like wearing dresses. What's wrong with that?"

"Please don't do this," Nolan said, the thought small and contrite. "I'll do whatever you want."

"It's for you own good," was Scarlet's response. "This is who you are for the foreseeable future. There's no sense in trying to hide that from your cute friend."

"You're so different lately," Miles said. "I don't know what's going on with you. I don't. But I don't -"

"Have you ever thought about getting together?" asked Scarlet, her voice hopeful. "You and me, I mean. Like a boy and a girl."

"W-what?" asked Miles. Nolan's objections were practically screams. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you're cute," Scarlet said. "And I'm willing if you are. We could be special friends."

"What? No," Miles said, backing away. "No. You're joking, right? No. God, no."

Scarlet shrugged. "Suit yourself," she said. "But the offer still stands if you're interested. We could have a lot of fun."

"Yeah," Miles said. "No. I mean, no. I'm not...just..no."



"You have to stop," Nolan thought, doing everything he could not to think of what he'd just been forced to endure. However, the man getting dressed in the corner of the apartment made it difficult. "I can't do this anymore."

He was on the ragged edge between sanity and insanity, and he knew that if Scarlet pushed in just the right spot, he'd fall. And he also knew that it was only a matter of time before she did just that. And then he'd be lost.

"I can," Scarlet said, looking into the mirror. She'd donned a pair of lacy, white panties and nothing else. "And I will. I've told you that I don't have a choice. I have to do this."

"You haven't even tried to find out about your murder," Nolan said, trying his best not to see his own reflection. Whatever masculinity he'd possessed was gone. "Just figure it out so you can go. I'll help."

"Yeah - I wish I could," she responded. "But that's not how this works."

"What do you mean?" asked a confused Nolan.

"It means I can't control myself," Scarlet answered, moving toward the man. He leaned down, kissing her deeply before saying goodbye.

"This is who I am."

"But you want to find your killer," Nolan said. "If you do, you can -"

The door shut behind the man, and Scarlet let out a sigh of relief before saying aloud, "I'm driven my impulse. All ghosts are. I can't plan. I can't think of what's going to happen tomorrow. It's all about today. So, as much as I wish I could just find my killers, I can't. I'm just not built that way."

"Then give me control," Nolan said.

"I can't do that either," Scarlet stated. "You won't give me what I want."

Nolan screamed in his own mind, trying to argue with Scarlet. But she just ignored him as she went about feminizing his life.



Nolan had begun to accept his fate as a passenger in his own feminized body. He'd tried everything to exert control, but Scarlet was too strong. He was mentally exhausted from his efforts, which made her hold even more unbreakable. So, he simply watched. He waited. And he hoped that one day, he'd have some sort of opportunity to retake his life.

"I think Allison is a good name," she said. "What do you think?"

"I don't care," Nolan said.

"Don't be like that," Scarlet answered. "You should be happy."

"About what?" asked Nolan. "I'm about to get kicked out of my fraternity. I haven't been to class in almost a month, so I'm probably going to fail all my classes. Oh, and I have a ghost making me have sex with men every night. What the hell am I supposed to be happy about?"

"You make a pretty girl," she said. "So, there's that. And all that class stuff is useless anyway. Give me a few weeks, and we can make more money right now than you'd ever make with that business degree."

"What are you talking about?" Nolan asked.

"Lots of men would pay good money to get with a girl like Allison," she said. "That's independence. That's happiness waiting to happen."

"Sounds like a nightmare to me," said an impotent Nolan. As much as he wanted to intervene with her plans of prostitution, he knew that he had no chance of breaking her hold. He'd tried enough to realize how futile that effort would be. So, he confined his resistance to passive aggressive comments.

"You could enjoy this," Scarlet said. "I'm in your head, remember? I know what you feel when we're having fun. You like it. Or at least, you would if you'd allow yourself to."

"Fuck you, Scarlet," Nolan said.







"What the hell kind of person were you, anyway?" asked Nolan as Scarlet reclined in the bed, watching her latest lover leave the apartment she'd acquired. Or, more accurately, that she'd conned one of her "special friends" into giving her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, rising. The intertwined personalities both felt the man's semen running down their leg. However, where Scarlet enjoyed the idea, Nolan was still horrified.

"You're in my head, right?" Nolan said. "You know exactly what I mean."

She did. "I'm the kind of girl who knows what she likes," she said. "I'm not afraid of it. I'm not -"

"Normal?" Nolan suggested. "You're a slut."

"Maybe," she said. "But there's nothing wrong with that. I like sex. Always have."

"I like sex too," Nolan said. "But not to the exclusion of all else."

"You sound like my mom," Scarlet said. "She found out about my first boyfriend, and she freaked out. I mean, he was a little older, sure. And I was kind of young. But what fourteen-year-old girl wouldn't be impressed by an eighteen-year-old guy on a motorcycle who looked like Darren? She understood. I know she did. But she acted like she didn't."

"And what happened to Darren?" Nolan asked.

"Left," she said. "Went into the Army or something. I replaced him quickly enough, though. It wasn't so much about him. It was more about what he gave me. I remember sitting in class, just daydreaming about sex. Constantly. I would get wet just sitting there."

"So, you've always been a slut," Nolan said. "Good to know."

"I am what I am," she allowed. "And nothing you can say will change that. So, you'd better just get used to it, because as long as I'm in control, you're a slut, too."



"God," said Nolan as he gripped the man's thick manhood, working his fist up and down. "I love your cock."

It took him a long moment to realize he'd said it aloud. He was in control. He was in control! Or he thought he was, at least. Scarlet's presence was nowhere to be found. She was gone.

But he still wanted to wrap his lips around the man's cock. He wanted to feel it deep in his ass. He wanted to taste his cum. He wanted....no...no, he couldn't. He didn't.

But he did. The desire was undeniable. And it was irresistible. No matter how much he wanted to stop, to let it go, to run away, he couldn't. He needed it too much. So, he did the only thing he could do: he wrapped his lips around the cock, and he started sucking, bobbing his head up and down. It felt normal. Natural. It felt like he'd been sucking cock for months.

Lost in the passion of the moment, he turned around, presenting his ass to his lover, who knew exactly what to do. The man gripped Nolan's hips, thrusting himself deep into the feminized boy's ass. Nolan let out a low, high-pitched and quivering moan as the man fucked him, slamming his thick cock in and out of his eager ass.

It went on for a while, and Nolan savored every second of it. He couldn't control himself. He needed it as much as he'd needed anything in his entire life. It wasn't just sex. It was something far more important. It was a reason for living. It was ecstasy.

And then he came, a series of involuntary contractions rocketing through his body. He screamed. He begged for more. He wanted it faster. Harder. Rougher. On and on it went, orgasm after orgasm until the man was spent. As he lay there, basking in the afterglow of the act, he felt a presence in his mind.

"I knew you'd see it my way," Scarlet said, a knowing smirk in her thoughts. "It was only a matter of time."



"You did that on purpose," Nolan said, once again a passenger in his own body. "Why?"

"Because you were judging me," Scarlet said. "I didn't like it, so I wanted to give you a taste of what it could be like for you. Did you enjoy it?"

"Was it you?" he asked. They both knew good and well that he had enjoyed his foray into Scarlet's world. Being in control, as opposed to being a spectator, made all the difference in the world. "Did you make me like it?"

"I just let you feel what I feel," she said. "And you loved it. I know you did."

"I don't want to be gay," Nolan stated. "I don't want to want that. But I can't think of anything else. It's like an addiction. I just want more."

"That's how I feel every minute of every day," Scarlet said. "My therapist called it sex addiction. I don't know about that. But it certainly feels like an obsession, doesn't it?"

"I don't like it," Nolan said.

"Like it or not, it's there now," she said.

"I could fight it," he said.

"No," Scarlet argued. "You can't. You know you can't. So, just give in to it. Work with me. Be what you're supposed to be. And when I'm gone, you can have your life back."

Nolan didn't know what to do. She was right; he was sure of it. But that didn't mean he had to like it. And it certainly didn't mean that he had to give in to her addiction. No – he could fight it. He could resist.

He gave a mental sigh, knowing full well that such thoughts were mere bluster. He couldn't resist. He couldn't fight it. She was right.

"Fine," he said. "You win."

Scarlet smiled, her hands on his hips. "I knew you'd see it my way," she said.



"Push back against him," said Scarlet, her thought dripping with lust. "Let him know you want it as deep as it'll go."

Allison, as Nolan had begun to think of himself, followed her instruction, mostly from instinct. His body, having been under her control for so long, simply responded according to what it had previously experienced. However, there was certainly something to be said for his own desires. Once he'd committed to living as Scarlet wanted, the Allison persona had all but taken over.

"That's it," Scarlet said. "Take that cock. It feels good, doesn't it. Filling you. Fucking you. You love being a girl, don't you?"

"Yes!" Allison screamed, unsure of whether he was responding to the man's efforts or Scarlet's question. Perhaps it didn't matter. Not really.

Rocking his hips back and forth, the man – Heath, Allison thought he was named – thrust his impressive manhood into his well-fucked ass. Allison let out a thin, quivering moan of pleasure, knowing full well that he'd crossed a line. He knew there was no going back. He knew he couldn't go back to being Nolan. Not after what he'd felt. Not after what he had done.

"You're right," Scarlet said, interjecting her own thoughts. "You can't go back. You don't even want to, do you?"

"No," he thought, trying not to let her distract him from his pleasure.

"Then, don't," she said, her thought a whisper in his mind. "Give in. completely. Be what you know you want to be."

And he did. Or rather, he already had. And there was no going back.





"Is this what you want?" asked Miles. "Really?"

Allison smiled, holding the hem of his pink, embroidered dress. "It is," she said. "I know you think this came out of nowhere, but it didn't. I've been -"

"No," Miles said.

"What?" asked Allison.

"It didn't come out of nowhere," he elaborated. "I knew. I think I always knew. You were always a little feminine. You tried to hide it, but I could see it as clearly as if you'd said it aloud."

Allison wanted to argue. Before being possessed by Scarlet, she had never even had a transgender thought, much less wanted to be a girl. She wanted to point out that fact, but Scarlet restrained her, saying, "Let him think what he wants to think."

"He's wrong," Allison thought.

"Does it matter?" she asked. "Seriously - this is good. You don't want him suspicious."

"Why?" Allison asked. "He's not going to think I'm being possessed by a female ghost, right? That's crazy. It doesn't matter if -"

"Just let him think what he wants to think," Scarlet insisted.

Allison sighed. "Fine," she thought, giving a mental eye roll. "But this is stupid. He's stupid."

"You okay?" asked Miles. "You seem like you're a million miles away."

"Sorry," Allison answered. "Just a little distracted. I get a little flighty sometimes."



"You like the taste, don't you?" asked Scarlet, practically giggling at the sight of the man standing over their body. He'd just cum all over the face and chest.

"I don't know," said Allison. "It's salty."

"I can see your thoughts," Scarlet reminded her. "You can admit it. I'm the last person to judge you."

"Fine," Allison said. "I do, okay? I like the taste of cum. But it's more than that. It's not just the taste. It's the idea of it. It makes me feel naughty and sexy."

"I know," Scarlet said. "I remember my first time tasting it. It was like I'd just discovered the greatest thing in the world. The taste is irrelevant, though. It's the feel of it. It's knowing that you made him cum, right?"

Allison didn't immediately answer because there was still a part of her that wanted to resist her new identity. As much as she told herself that she was a girl, Nolan – or whatever was left of him – continued to lurk just out of sight. He wasn't strong enough to assert himself, but his personality was enough to influence Allison's thoughts.

"There's no shame in liking sex with men," Scarlet said. "You know that, don't you? Boy, girl – it doesn't matter. You like what you like."

"I know," Allison said. "But you don't get it. You can't. This isn't who I am."

"It is now," Scarlet stated. "I know you don't want to accept it, but it's true. You're as much a girl as I am."

Allison didn't answer. She couldn't.







"Why?" asked Allison. "I mean, seriously - why should I care what they think?"

"They're your brothers," Miles said. "You owe them some sort of an explanation, and you know it."

"They're a bunch of assholes," she said. "And that whole fraternity 'brother' bullshit is just to get people to shell out a bunch of money so they can feel accepted. As soon as someone doesn't fit their little definition of what's acceptable, they have nothing to do with them. Or did you forget about them kicking me out?"

"They didn't have a choice," Miles said.

Truthfully, Allison was a bit hazy on how it had all gone down. At the time, Scarlet had been in control, which made everything blurry. But from what she could gather, she'd been caught having sex with three of her fraternity "brothers". She'd been kicked out while they'd merely been reprimanded. It was the height of discrimination.

"They just didn't like that I changed," she said.

"No," Miles said. "They didn't. They didn't like that you looked like a girl."

"I am a girl," Allison pointed out. The sentence still sounded odd in her own mind, but it was as true as anything else she could have possibly said.

"I know, but -"

"But nothing," she said. "They either accept me, or they don't. There's no in-between. No compromise. And they made it clear which side of the fence they fell on. I'm fine with it. I've moved on. But if they think I'm going to act like it didn't happen, they've got another thing coming. And I'm definitely not signing some agreement not to complain to the dean about discrimination. I resent the fact that you're even asking me to do it."

Miles sighed. "Fine," he said, running his hand through his hair. "Whatever. I don't even care anymore. Fuck them, right?"

"Been there," said a giggling Scarlet. "Done that."



"Say that again?" Allison said.

"Yeah - so, I'm totally a lesbian now," Blaire said. "I mean, I've always been a lesbian. You remember me telling you about my experience in high school, right? Well, it wasn't just an experience. I was just a lesbian, and I didn't know it."

"You can smell crazy on this girl," thought Scarlet. "You get that, right? Besides, we're not into chicks."

"Shut up," mumbled Allison.

"What? I don't -"

"No," Allison said. "Not you. I was talking to myself."

"Aww. That's so sweet," Scarlet said. "You think we're the same, you and me."

Allison ignored her mental passenger. Instead, she sighed. "You're not a lesbian, Blaire," she said. "You know you're not. And neither am I."

"But you don't know until you try it," Blaire said. "I bought a strap-on and everything. I think that if you just give us a chance, we can -"

"I'm sorry," Allison said. "Just...just no. I shouldn't have led you on like I did. And I certainly should have treated you better. But this can't happen."

"W-what?" Blair muttered. "I thought...no...I'm just...I'm so stupid." She rose from the couch, shaking her head. "I'm just so stupid. All my friends said to let it go, but...but...I just couldn't." She moved toward the door, and Allison tried to stop her, but she jerked away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come over here. I just shouldn't have."

When she finally left, Scarlet said, "Like I said. Crazy."



Allison had long since stopped trying to resist. It was pointless and useless. And besides, she didn't really have any reason to abstain from her more feminine inclinations. Everyone she knew was well aware of her proclivities. They'd seen her as a girl. They knew what she was. So, it didn't make sense to even try to hide it – even from the people who'd judged her so harshly for it.

"You're not going to tell anyone, are you?" asked Eric, one of her former fraternity brothers. "I don't want it getting out that I fucked a dude."

"Do I look like a dude to you?" asked Allison, standing naked before him. She knew the answer to that question. It had been quite some time since she could rightly say that she was male, even with the lone remnant of her masculinity hanging between her legs.

"No," he admitted. Eric, on the other hand, was all man – just the way Allison liked them. She dropped to her knees, gripped his cock, and started sucking.

"That a girl," encouraged Scarlet.

"Shut up and let me enjoy this," Allison thought, a comment which elicited a wordless, amused response. "You are such a bitch sometimes."

But Scarlet remained silent for the rest of the night. However, Allison could feel her emotions well enough that it didn't matter. In any case, they were of a single mind as Eric fucked the former fraternity brother. In fact, the separation between the two had become increasingly blurry. It had gotten to the point that Allison sometimes couldn't tell the difference between her own inner monologue and Scarlet's influence.

But in the moment, it didn't matter. She was getting exactly what she wanted...what they both wanted.





"I wish you would have come out sooner," said Miles.

"What? Why?" asked Allison before taking a sip of her milkshake.

"Why should it matter?"

Miles shrugged. "You seem happier now," he said. "At peace, even. I don't know. Before, you were always trying to impress somebody. Now, it just seems easier for you."

Allison didn't know how to respond because she had an incredibly complicated perspective on the matter. On the one hand, she was happy. He was right. She was more content than she'd been in the entirety of her memory. But she had no idea if that was Scarlet's influence or if it was real. On the other hand, she'd never asked to be a girl. She hadn't chosen that path. It had been chosen for her. And she didn't know if her happiness was cheapened by that fact.

"Yeah," she said, trying not to think about her own doubts. "I guess. Yeah. I guess that makes sense."

"What's it like, though?" Miles asked. "I don't know if I'm stepping over a line, but we're friends, right? We always have been."

"Of course," Allison allowed. "But I don't really know what you want from me here. What's it like being a girl? It's different. But the same. I like the clothes. I like the attention. But more than that, I just feel right when I wake up in the morning."

"And you didn't before?" Miles asked.

Allison shrugged. "Sometimes," she said. "But most of the time, no. No, I didn't. It felt like a struggle."

"I can see that, I guess," Miles said. "But I just want you to know that I'm happy for you, whatever that's worth."

"Thanks," Allison said. "That means a lot to me. It really, really does."





"We need to figure this out," said Allison aloud. She was all alone, save for her mental guest. "We need to do what we set out to do from the beginning."

"Trying to get rid of me so soon?" asked Scarlet.

"No," Allison said. "I mean, yes. I don't know. I know I can't go back to being who I was. But I feel like there's at least as much you as there is me running around up there."

"Is that a bad thing?" Scarlet asked. "It's working, isn't it? You like having me onboard."

"I know you're scared," Allison said. "I would be too. But this isn't right. You're gone. You're dead. And you need to move on."

"I don't want to," Scarlet said, a note of fear in her thought. "I want things to stay like they are."

"I know you do," Allison said. "But we can't. That's not how the world works. When you're dead, you're supposed to be dead."

"I could take over again," Scarlet said.

"I know," Allison allowed. "But that's not what either of us really wants. I know you well enough to know that you're not a bad person. Or you weren't when you were alive. You want to do the right thing. And you know what that means."

"I need to let you lead your own life," she said after a long moment.

"You do," Allison said.

"But I don't know what comes next," Scarlet said. "I'm afraid."

"I wish I could help you there," Allison said. "But we've all got to face it at some point, right? I know that's easy for me to say. But you know it's true. We need to find out who killed you so you can be at peace. I know you agree with me."



"We should tell him," thought Scarlet. "He could help."

"No," Allison insisted, knowing exactly how it would go. You can't just go around telling people you had the ghost of a dead girl living in your brain. That was how people got put on antipsychotics.

"Then you should let me sleep with him," Scarlet said, mentally eyeing Miles. "He's cute. And I've seen the way he looks at us."

"He doesn't look at us any way," Allison insisted. "He's just my friend. We've known each other since seventh grade."

"We spend our lives looking for the perfect match, but in the end, it was there in front of us all along," Scarlet said before giggling uncontrollably.

"You sound like the plot of a bad romantic comedy," Allison said. "But the answer's no. I couldn't do that. Not to him. Not to me. It's just wrong."

Scarlet groaned. "Fine!" she said. "Then give me that stud from your old fraternity. The one with the big dick."

"What are you thinking?" asked Miles.

"What?" Allison said. "Nothing. Just girl stuff."

"Oh," he said. "Yeah."

Allison thought, "Big dick? How do you know any of them had a big dick?"

"Showers," Scarlet said. "Memories. I've been looking around up here. I think his name was Zack."

"Zack Williams?" asked Allison, thinking of her old fraternity's president. He was as homophobic as they came. "No. Not him."

"Then give me Miles," she said. "One or the other. That's how it has to be."

Allison mentally rolled her eyes. "Fine," she said. "Zack. But he's not going to do it. He's not into girls like us."

"Every guy is into girls like us," Scarlet said. "Just wait and see."



"Told you," thought Scarlet as Allison bounced up and down on Zack's thick cock.

"Not now," Allison thought. "A little distracted here."

"But I did tell you so," Scarlet said. "Remember that next time you try to argue with me."

"Fine," Allison said. "Just shut up."

Scarlet didn't say another word, but as Allison rode Zack's impressive manhood to completion, she got the distinct impression of satisfied humming echoing through her thoughts. And, Allison had to admit, it was well-deserved satisfaction. Not only had Scarlet been right - as evidenced by the fact that Zack had become Allison's latest lover - but he hadn't even put up a fight. Allison had simply walked up to him, asking if he wanted to fuck, and he'd agreed without so much as a moment's hesitation. From there, it went as Allison had come to expect. It was almost boring.

When they were finished, Zack said, "Always knew you were into dudes."

"Same," Allison said, unable to stop herself from pointing out that, technically speaking, Zack had just had a close approximation of gay sex. "Maybe next time, you can be my bottom."

It was a pointless boast; it had been months since Allison had felt so much as a twitch down there. But the look on Zack's face made it all worthwhile.

"What? No," he said. "I would never...I mean...no. Just no."

"You could suck it, at least," Allison said, thrusting her hips slightly to make her limp manhood jiggle. "I won't mind."

He couldn't get out of that room quickly enough. He'd barely pulled on his pants before he stumbled into the hall and out the front door. Allison laughed.

"That was mean," said Scarlet.

Allison shrugged. "Maybe so," she admitted, still grinning. "But it was funny."





"God," said Allison, looking at the computer screen. On it was a photo of Scarlet. "You were beautiful."

"That's what everyone used to say," Scarlet said. "Until they found out I was a slut."

"What do you mean?" asked Allison.

"Nobody with my...um...nobody like me is ever beautiful," she said. "We're hot. Or sexy. Not beautiful. Because to them, a girl's not special unless she's unavailable."

"That's not true," Allison said.

"Really? I remember what you thought when you realized the sort of appetite I had," Scarlet stated. "You were grossed out. A girl can't have a healthy sex life without being shamed somehow. Whether it's overt or not is irrelevant. It happens."

"But what you had wasn't healthy," Allison pointed out. "You said it yourself. If you were horny enough, you'd sleep with just about anyone. That's not right, Scarlet."

"You sound like my mom," Scarlet said. "She tried being the good guy, too. But nobody accepted me. Nobody wanted me to be who I was. You're as bad as Cole. He couldn't understand the concept of an open relationship. It didn't mean I didn't love him. It just meant that we were -"

"Wait - who's Cole?" Allison asked. It was the first time she'd heard that name.

"Oh," Scarlet said. "That was my boyfriend. We broke up just before...you know...just before I died."

"Interesting," said Allison. "Very interesting."





"What kind of boy were you?" asked Scarlet, surprising Allison. She had grown used to her ghostly companion; in fact, life without her constant presence felt like a strange, surreal memory. But in all the time Allison had had her in her head, Scarlet had never asked about Nolan's life.

"I thought you knew me," Allison said. "You have free reign over my memories, right? You know what kind of boy I was."

"It doesn't really work like that," Scarlet answered, a note of melancholy in the tone of her thoughts. "I know the things that happened. And I have an idea how you felt. But memories are strange. I lose focus. I can't concentrate on things like that. One of the issues with being dead, I guess."

"That sounds frustrating," Allison stated.

"It is," she said. "But the good thing is that I never dwell on anything for too long. Today's disappointment will be tomorrow's long-distant, half-forgotten memory. And the day after that, it'll be gone entirely. So - what kind of boy were you?"

Allison shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Normal, I guess? It's really weird, though. A lot of the things I used to enjoy, I just don't anymore. Like baseball - I used to love watching baseball on T.V., but now...well, now I just think it's boring."

"Me too," Scarlet said. "I never liked baseball."

"So, I don't really know how to answer that question," she admitted. "So much of who I was seemed tied up in being a guy. And now, free of that, I think I'm closer to the sort of person I was supposed to be, if that makes any sense."

"Does it?" asked Scarlet. "I don't know. I wish I knew. I wish I could relate to things like that."

"Come on," said Allison. "It's okay if you want to. I won't tell anybody."

Zack looked down at her, uncertainty on his face. Scarlet laughed. "He's going to do it," she said. "I told you he would."

"He's not," Allison thought. "He's just going to fuck me. Just like the last time."

"With that attitude," Scarlet said. "He'll never eat your ass. You have to believe he will."

"A-and nobody will know?" Zack asked.

"I told you so!" Scarlet exclaimed. Then, in a sing-song voice, she added, "He's going to eat your ass! He's going to eat your ass!"

"Shut up, or I'm going to start laughing!" thought Allison as she said, "I told you I wouldn't, baby. I swear."

"Okay," Zack said, getting on his knees as he flexed his jaw. "But it's not gay because I don't think of you as a guy. It's definitely not gay."

Scarlet took over Allison's body for a moment, saying, "Fine. It's not gay. But don't forget to play with my balls."

"Scarlet!" Allison thought, seizing control.

"Ha-ha," Zack deadpanned. "Very funny."

Allison didn't respond as he lowered his mouth onto her anus, but Scarlet kept singing, "He's eating your ass! He's eating your ass!"







"Who did you say you were again?" asked the young lady sitting across from Allison. She was very prim, with jaw-length blonde hair and high cheekbones. Allison could clearly see the judgment in the young woman's eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My name is Allison Holland. I knew Scarlet in school."

"I thought I knew all of her friends," the girl said.

"The bitch knew who I wanted her to know," Scarlet said. "Just let me take over. I'll tell her where she can stick her judgmental glares."

"Shut up," thought Allison. "I'll do this."

Allison smiled, crossing her legs. "Yeah," she said. "We actually met once, Zoe. At your mother's Christmas party."

"Is that so?" asked Scarlet's sister. "I don't remember you."

"I don't blame you," Allison said. "I sort of blend into the background. Or I did. Scarlet helped me with that."

"Indeed," the woman said, relaxing a bit. The backstory was, according to Scarlet, foolproof. At that particular party, there had been a half-dozen girls, and her sister wouldn't have bothered to remember them all. "So, what can I do for you?"

"I had some questions," Allison said. "About your sister's disappearance."

"And I have no answers," Zoe said. "We didn't talk much, Scarlet and me. Not since we were kids. I don't know where she ended up. But I hope she's still alive, even if she's strung out somewhere. I truly hope she'll turn up someday."

"She didn't have anything to do with it," Scarlet said. "Let's go."



"It's a needle in a haystack," said Scarlet. "I don't know why I ever thought we could figure this out. We should just stay like this. We should –"

"No!" Allison insisted, looking into the mirror. Having someone to focus on, even if it was only her reflection, made it easier to have a real conversation with Scarlet. "You said that she might have information. Why?"

"Because the night I was taken, she was the only one who knew where I was," Scarlet said.

"Can you please stop being so cryptic?" Allison asked. "Just tell me what happened. Tell me how you died."

"It's not that easy, Allie," Scarlet said. "You don't understand. For me, when I try to remember something, it's like I'm reliving it. You're asking me to relive my own death. I can't do that. I just...I just can't."

"You have to," Allison said. "I'm trying to help you. I need to know what happened."

"I don't want to do this anymore," Scarlet said, her thoughts weeping. "I can't do this anymore. I shouldn't be here."

"You found me for a reason," Allison said. "You deserve justice. Your parents, your sister, your friends – they all deserve to know what happened. I deserve to know."

Scarlet was silent for a long moment that stretched into almost a minute until finally, she said, "Fine. You want to know? I'll tell you what happened. But pay attention, because I won't do it again."



Suddenly, Allison wasn't in her bedroom anymore. Instead, she was in a dark, dank cell, and Scarlet, bruised, battered, and bloody, stood facing her.

"This is what you wanted," she said. "You want to know? This is what happened. This is how I died."

The door creaked open, admitting a pair of men. One was black. The other white. But both had an air of menace about them. Scarlet backed against the wall, sobbing uncontrollably as she begged them to let her go. They laughed.

One, the black man, said, "This bitch doesn't get it, does she?"

The other chuckled. "I thought we'd fucked all the backbone out of her," he said. "They told us she was a slut. She probably liked it."

"Not yet," said his partner, unbuckling his belt. "Hold her down."

Allison tried to look away as the two men raped her friend, but every time she turned, the scene shifted. She closed her eyes, but it didn't help. She could still see. She could still hear. And by the time the first man climaxed, tears were running down her face. And all the while, Scarlet stared at her with accusatory eyes.

And then, with a sudden burst of motion, Scarlet raked her fingers across the first man's face. He screamed in pain, jumping back. But Scarlet was on him in an instant, clawing at whatever soft bits she could find. She scraped. She clawed. And for a second, Allison thought she might actually win her freedom. But then, the other man struck her in the back of her head with the butt of a gun, and she fell to the floor, limp and lifeless. The man with the ruined face screamed, jumping onto her, his pants still around his ankles, and he swung. Once. Twice. Three times. Over and over, he pounded his fists into her face.

"I died after the sixth or seventh punch," Scarlet said. "But he kept going. He kept going."

"I-I'm sorry," Allison said, her hand on her face. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Do you have what you need?" Scarlet asked. Allison nodded mutely. "Good."





"Do you want to talk about it?" Allison asked. It had been a couple of weeks since her shared vision of Scarlet's death, and she wasn't sure whether or not broaching the subject was a good idea. But it was necessary.

"Does it matter what I want?" asked Scarlet, who'd been mostly silent in the wake of reliving her death. And when she wasn't silent, she was pouty. And while Allison understood her feelings, she wasn't willing to let her friend's sacrifice be in vain.

Allison took a sip of her coffee, looking around the café. "You like this place, right?" she said. "That's what you said."

"I can't taste the coffee," Scarlet admitted. "Even with your tongue. But I like the atmosphere. The memories."

"What memories?" prompted Allison.

"This is where I met Cole for our first date," she said. "Back then, he was so innocent. It was before my dad got his hooks into me."

"You don't talk about them much," Allison said. "Why not?"

"What's there to say?" she asked. "My dad's a slimy politician, and Cole's going down that road too. But when we first met, Cole was a good person. He didn't care that I liked to have a good time. He was right there with me."

"But that changed," Allison said.

"It changed," Scarlet responded. "When dad met him, when dad saw the potential, he started mentoring Cole. It started with an internship, but it went way past that. He wants Cole to follow in his footsteps. And that means there's no place for a slut like me. That's what my dad said. I heard him on the phone, once. He knew I had a problem. He knew I was trying to get it under control. But he didn't care. To him, I was just a liability. To him, I was just another public relations disaster waiting to happen."

"I'm sorry," Allison said.

"You say that a lot these days," was Scarlet's response. And then, she went silent, leaving Allison to drink her coffee alone.





"I really can't deal with this right now, Blaire," Allison said, looking at her ex-girlfriend. "I'm sorry. I just don't have time for your brand of crazy."

"Crazy? Did you seriously just call me crazy?" Blaire asked. "I am not crazy! I've been in therapy for most of my life, but I am definitely not –"

"Listen – somebody needs to tell you this, and I don't see anyone else lining up," Allison said, her hand on Blaire's arm. She guided the other girl to a seated position. "You're clingy. Obsessive. You see things that aren't there. I've always been horrible to you. I have. But –"

"But you really love me?" she suggested.

"What? No," Allison said. "I don't even like you. But that's not my point. No – don't cry. Don't cry, please."

"You said you didn't like me," the other girl responded, wiping tears from her eyes. Some people look good crying. Blaire was not one of those people; she was as ugly a crier as anyone Allison had ever seen.

"I'm sorry, okay – I didn't mean that," Allison said. "I like you. Sometimes. I just...it's just that there was never anything real between us. I liked having sex with you. That's it."

"Is that what you want?" Blaire asked, staring to unbutton her shorts. "I can do that. I can be your –"

"No," Allison said. "I'm trying to say that you're better than this. You don't deserve to be treated like crap. You deserve someone better than me. Do you understand?"

"Y-you think I'm too good for you?" she asked. "I'm not. I promise, I'm not."

Allison shook her head. "Fine," she said. "You know what? I don't love you. I'll never love you. No matter what you do or what you say, I'm just not into this. You were only ever a booty call for me, and I don't even want that anymore."

Blaire wailed dramatically. Part of it was for show, Allison was sure, but some of it was real. Still, it was better to rip that bandaid off quickly rather than prolong the pain. And she had no interest in stringing the girl on any longer.



"We have to talk about this," said Allison. "You understand that, right?"

Scarlet didn't respond, though she let Allison know she was there. It was a willful silence that said, in no uncertain terms, that she had no interest in discussing the matter.

"Scarlet," Allison said. "I know you're scared. I know you think I'm just trying to get you out of my head. But –"

"Aren't you?" Scarlet asked, the thought coated in a thin layer of disgust. "That's all you ever seem to care about anymore."

"I care about you," Allison insisted. "I care about helping you."

"You just want me gone," Scarlet said. "Just like my dad. Just like my sister. And just like Cole."

"Just tell me why you think they were working for someone," Allison said. "That's all I need for today."

"You heard them, right?" Scarlet said. "They said that someone told them I was a slut. Who? There were only a handful of people who knew about my issues. You learn to hide that sort of thing when you're the daughter of a senator."

"Who knew?" Allison asked.

"My dad," she said. "He did it. He hired those assholes. I know he did it."

"What about your sister?" Allison asked. "What about Cole?"

"Zoe didn't do it," Scarlet said. "I know she didn't. I saw it in her eyes. And Cole loved me. He couldn't have done it. Besides, he doesn't have that sort of thing in him. He'd never hurt a fly."

"Okay," said Allison. "How do we prove it? It's your dad, right? How do we prove that he had you kidnapped?"

"I don't know," Scarlet admitted.



"Is this Cole Carson?" asked Allison, holding the phone to her ear.

"Yes," came a deep, measured voice. "Who is this?"

"My name is Allison Holland," she said. "I was a friend of Scarlet Grimes."

"Oh," Cole said. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I was just wondering if I could meet you," Allison said. "To talk about Scarlet, I mean."

"What's this about? Scarlet's been gone for almost two years," Cole said. "Do you have any information as to her whereabouts?"

"I told you he was a good person," Scarlet thought. "The first thing he does is ask about me."

"Yeah, no - I don't know where she is," Allison lied. "I just need to get some things off my chest. I thought you might be the one to help me with that. I've already talked to Zoe. But I really think I need to talk to you."

"Okay," the man said after a few moments. "But I don't know what help I can give. We broke up before she...disappeared."

"That's fine," she said. "I understand if you can't help. But I really think -"

"Tomorrow, twelve-thirty," Cole said. "You know the Satori Café? Can you meet me there?"

"I'll be there," Allison said. "Thanks."





"I don't know why you keep pulling on this thread," said Scarlet. "Cole doesn't know anything."

"Maybe not," thought Allison, sitting on the bench, waiting for Cole to show up. "But you said there were three people who had reason to want you out of the picture, and -"

"No - I said that there were three people who knew about my sex addiction," Scarlet said. "I didn't say Cole wanted me dead."

Allison didn't respond, but to herself, she ticked the boxes. Aspiring politician? Check. Jealous boyfriend. Check. A nasty breakup? Check. Everything pointed to Cole, despite Scarlet's insistence to the contrary. It was almost too clean.

"I hate it when you shut me out like that," Scarlet said. It was a trick she'd learned over the course of Scarlet's residence in her head.

Allison opened her mind. "Sorry," she thought. "I was just thinking."

"You shouldn't hide things from me," Scarlet stated. "We're in this together."

"Yeah," Allison said. "Maybe. But you know, if you want to go to your quiet place while I do this, I understand. I don't know if you're going to want to -"

"There he is!" Scarlet squealed, her presence bouncing around the inside of Allison's skull. Allison looked up to see a tall, black gentleman approaching from the nearby escalator. "Quick - how do we look? Oh. Never mind. He won't like you. You're not pretty enough."

Allison bit off a reply, rising with a smile. When Cole reached her, she extended her hand. "Allison Holland," she said. "We spoke on the phone."





"You were friends with Scarlet?" asked Cole, sitting down. "I thought I knew all her friends."

"I knew her when we were in high school," Allison said. "We sort of lost touch, and then I found out about her disappearance. I just wanted to know what happened."

"Nobody knows," Cole said. "All the police can tell us is that her car broke down a few miles outside of town. On Highway Forty-Three. Apparently, it's a hotbed of human trafficking, and the police think she was taken. Honestly, it's probably better to talk to her dad about all this. He's the one who hired those private investigators."

"He didn't hire anyone," Scarlet interjected. "Because he had me killed."

Allison ignored the ghost's thoughts, instead, asking, "What was she doing out there?"

Cole shrugged. "I honestly don't know," he said. "She didn't have any reason to be out there."

"Except to satisfy her issues," Allison suggested. Scarlet waived her objection; she didn't want anyone talking about her problems. "That's what you all called it, right? Her little problem? Was she going out there to meet someone?"

"I...I didn't think anyone else knew about that," Cole said.

"I knew," Allison said. "You broke up right before she went missing, right? Did she have another boyfriend?"

Cole looked around. "Boyfriends," Cole answered. "Plural. She screwed half the lacrosse team, four of my fraternity brothers, and a few random guys she met at bars. And those was just the ones I knew about. If you know about her problems, you know she got around. If you ask me, it was probably one of them that killed her. She probably went home with the wrong guy. Simple as that."

"Yeah," Allison said. "You're probably right."

"I told you it wasn't him," Scarlet said as Allison sat in the swing, rocking back and forth. "What did I tell you?"

"I know what you said," Allison responded aloud. It was easier to keep her private thoughts separate from what she wanted Scarlet to hear that way.

"What?" Scarlet asked. "You still think he had something to do with it, don't you?"

"He said 'killed'," was Allison's response.

"Yeah? So?" Scarlet asked.

"He doesn't know you're dead," Allison said. "Or he shouldn't. He should believe what the police said – that you were abducted by human traffickers. He should believe you're in some brothel somewhere in some third-world country. But that's not what he said. He said 'killed'."

"He's probably just given up hope," Scarlet said, though her conviction wasn't nearly what it should have been. She didn't want to believe it. Neither did Allison. "It's probably easier for him to think of me as dead."

"I'm not saying that he did it," Allison said.

"It sounds like you are," Scarlet accused.

"I'm just saying that we can't rule him out," was Allison's response. "He's still a suspect."

"You say that like you know what you're doing," Scarlet said. "You don't. You're not a detective. You're just a stupid tranny who's flunking out of college."

"I didn't ask for this," Allison whispered. "You picked me."

"Because you were there! Nobody else was there!" Scarlet said. "I should have picked that cute friend of yours. He would've made a prettier girl, anyway!"







"I don't understand," said Miles. "You were always the smart one."

"It's complicated," Allison said, running her hand through her long hair. "You wouldn't understand."

"Help me understand, then," Miles said. "In high school, you were third in our class. And for the first year here, you were on the dean's list. So, what happened? Did you suddenly turn stupid?"

Allison looked away. She couldn't answer him truthfully because that would make her sound like a crazy person. In the wake of her transformation, she'd neglected school. She didn't study. She barely went to class. She'd even missed a final exam. But even then, she was passing most of her classes. However, when she'd started to focus on solving Scarlet's murder, everything else sort of fell by the wayside. It seemed so trivial, learning about economics and business management when justice was on the line.

But she couldn't say that. Not to him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just can't do it anymore. They put me on probation last semester, and I did even worse this semester. I can't stay here, even if I wanted to. They won't let me."

"What are you going to do?" Miles asked.

"Get a job? I don't know," she admitted. "I've never really had to deal with stuff like this."

"Can I help?" asked Allison's oldest friend.

"No," she said. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm not going to be here next semester. This is it for me. No more college girl."

"I really don't know what to say," Miles stated.

Allison wrapped her arms around him. "You don't have to say anything," she said, sniffing loudly. "I'm not dead. I'll still be around."



"You're loving this, aren't you?" Allison thought with a wry smile.

Scarlet didn't immediately respond, but the impression of smugness wafted over Allison's mind. Finally, Scarlet said, "You did this to yourself, you know."

"No," Allison said, her frustration boiling to the surface. She'd been on four job interviews in the past week, and no one had even hinted that they would offer her a job. It wasn't all that surprising, either. She'd never held a job in her entire life. Nobody wanted to hire a college dropout who had no skills. "You did this to me. I was doing fine before you showed up in my brain."

"Really?" she asked. "You were okay graduating with a business degree? Taking some corporate middle management job, where you'd have stayed for thirty years until you retired? That's what you wanted out of life?"

"Better than not having anything," Allison said.

"Is it, though?" Scarlet asked. "I never wanted that. Not for me. Not for anybody. That's why I majored in -"

"I don't care!" she hissed. "I don't. I don't care what you majored in. I just want you gone, okay? I want you out of my head. And then I want to get back to living my life."

"Who's stopping you from living?" Scarlet asked.

"You!" Allison screamed. "You are, Scarlet. I know you don't mean to, but you won't even let me solve your freaking murder. You want justice. I know you do. But you're so scared of whatever comes after all this that you trip me up at every turn."

"What? Is that what you think?" Scarlet asked. "That I'm working against you?"

Allison took a deep breath. "No," she said. "Not on purpose. But you won't tell me anything. You won't tell me why you were out on that highway. You won't even tell me why you're convinced that your father set you up. You just talk about your 'issues', like I don't know what sex addiction is. Just be honest. That's all I want. I'm doing this for you, remember? I want to help you. I just want you to help me help you."

"Fine," said Scarlet. "You want it? Well, here it is. I'll answer anything you want. I'll tell you whatever you want so you can stop blaming me for everything that's wrong in your life."

And then, Allison's mind went blank.



"Wake up," Scarlet said, and Allison blinked her eyes open. She looked around to see that she was sitting in front of her computer, and on the screen was a photo of Scarlet and Cole.

"What did you do?" she asked groggily.

"I didn't want to argue with you anymore," said Scarlet. "So, I just brought you here. To show you this."

"You took a picture," Allison said. "That doesn't prove anything."

"No," Scarlet agreed. "It doesn't. But you have to understand that he was the only thing keeping me even close to normal. I gave it all up. For almost two years, he was enough."

"What happened?" Allison asked.

"My dad," she said. "As soon as he got his hooks into Cole, the whole relationship went south. Before, Cole understood if I backslid. He got it. He helped me cope. But after? He just looked at me like I was damaged. He looked at me the same way my dad did. That's what this picture is. Do you see it? That look in his eyes?"

Allison nodded. She saw it. The man didn't want to be there. It wasn't the look of a man with his girlfriend on his arm. It was someone who saw it as an obligation.

"This doesn't mean he didn't set this up," Allison said.

Scarlet shook Allison's head, briefly wresting control. "I know," she said. "But even if he did it, even if he set it all up, it's my father's fault. I know it. He drove Cole to hate me, to hate what I was. We were together for three years, Allie. Three years. We had our ups and downs, but he was always there for me. He was there until...until he wasn't. I called him that night. When my car broke down. I wanted him to pick me up. But he didn't answer. Nobody answered. My mom. My dad. My sister. Cole. Everybody just ignored me because it was easier that way. And then what happened...happened. And then I was killed."

"I'm sorry," Allison said.

"You don't know what it's like," Scarlet said. "You don't know what it feels like to be a pariah in your own family. They all knew. They all hated me for something I couldn't control. I wanted help. I needed help. But all they gave me was judgement. Lectures on how my actions affect the whole family. And that's how Cole looked at me the last time I saw him. He judged me too. He judged me too."





"I know what I have to do," said Allison, rolling over. "I just don't know if I can do it."

"You can't," Scarlet responded, knowing full well what Allison had planned. "I won't let you."

"You can't stop me," Allison stated. "I've known how to resist you for a while now. I could lock you behind a wall if I want. You know that."

"I can...I can take control," Scarlet insisted. "If I want to."

"I'm going to find them," Allison said. "I'm going to catch them in the act. And I'm going to make sure they can never do it again."

"And what if the same thing happens to you that happened to me?" Scarlet asked.

"Then we'll be ghosts together," Allison said. "But it won't go down like that. I have a plan."

"Yeah? Is it to get raped and murdered?" Scarlet asked. "Because that's what's going to happen if you go out there. You're going to get killed. Same as me."

"I'll have my phone's tracker on," Allison said. "I'll call Miles as soon as I think I'm going to be taken. I've got it preprogrammed into my phone. One button, and he gets the message. He'll call the cops. He'll make sure I'm okay."

"All while you're getting raped and murdered," Scarlet said.

"That's not going to happen," Allison responded. "Like I said, I have a plan. I know what to expect. And this is what I have to do. It's the only way to figure it all out."

"Please don't do this," Scarlet said, making one last ditch effort to stop Allison. It didn't work.

"I have to," Allison said, steel in her voice. "I have to."



Allison walked down the road, trying to stay alert. It was difficult, given the fact that she'd been out there for almost an hour-and-a-half. But she knew they would come. They had to. The area was well-known as a hotbed for human trafficking, and she knew from experience that its reputation wasn't a simple rumor.

"I hate this," Scarlet thought. "I hate it. I remember walking down this same road. It was nighttime, but --"

"Shut up," Allison thought, looking off into the distance. "Here comes a car."

"Van," corrected Scarlet as the vehicle approached. It slowed to a crawl before stopping next to Allison.

The tinted window rolled down, revealing a pair of men. The sight sent Scarlet scurrying for mental cover as she tried to wall herself off from the men who had raped her. Allison imagined her sitting in a corner, rocking back and forth as she clutched her knees to her chest.

"Need a ride, little girl?" asked the passenger, a grungy-looking white man who looked like he hadn't showered in three days. Though black, his partner looked like a perfect pairing. Both wore stained denim jackets.

Allison forced a smile. "Yeah," she said. Turning and pointing down the road, she continued, "My car broke down back there and I forgot my phone at home. I'd appreciate it if you could take me to a gas station or something."

"No phone, huh?" the passenger asked. "Shame."

His partner grinned, revealing a mouth full of gold teeth. "Yeah," he said. "Such a shame. Go on, now. Get in. We'll take you somewhere safe."

Allison knew it was a trap. She could see the hunger in their eyes. But she was playing a role. She knew it was going to happen. So, she played the naïve, teenaged girl, and opened the van's sliding side door. However, as soon as she was in their blind spot, she reached into her pocket and hit the appropriate button on her phone. It would send out a text message containing her find-my-phone credentials so Miles could track her. Then, she slipped the phone into her backpack as she got into the van.



"Where are we going?" asked Allison, trying to act innocent. "We passed the gas station like a mile back."

"That one isn't safe," said the man in the passenger seat as the van turned into an alley. "We'll take care of you."

A few moments later, they pulled to a stop behind what seemed to be an abandoned building. Alarm bells were going off in Allison's head, but she didn't react. She couldn't. She needed to find where their base of operations. She needed to know more. So, she didn't even move when the driver sprang from his seat and pinned her to the van's dirty floor. A moment later, her hands were tied together.

"You take her first," said the white man. "I got the last one."

"Don't mind if I do," responded the other man, grinning broadly. Allison, unable to speak, could feel the man's fetid breath on her cheek. With well-practiced precision, he unbuttoned Allison's shorts, yanking them roughly down her legs. He tossed them aside and immediately started groping Allison's groin. That's when he got a surprise. "What the fuck?"

"What?" asked his partner.

"This chick ain't a chick!" the black man growled. He pinned Allison to the floor by her neck, choking her.

"This what you do? You like to trick men? You want to turn us all gay?"

"She still looks like a girl," said the white assailant. "I don't care if it's an ass or a pussy. I'll still fuck her."

"I didn't say I wouldn't fuck her, Jed!" the man said. "I'm gonna fuck her good. She probably wants it. Little slut. You want it don't you?"

Allison tried to answer, but the words couldn't escape her constricted throat.

"Look at her, Bruce," Jed said, laughing as his friend flipped her over. "She definitely wants it."





Allison tried to remain calm, but panic started to set in as she felt her panties being ripped off. She couldn't help but struggle, trying to pull away as the man's iron grip pinned her in place. "Please!" she begged. "Please don't!"

It was useless. She couldn't escape. Nobody could. They were bigger. Stronger. There were two of them. And her hands were tied. She was trapped and powerless, and a feeling of stark vulnerability washed over her.

"It's going to be okay," thought Scarlet, her tone strangely soothing. Amidst the violence of the situation, she was a bastion of peace. Allison could practically feel the ghost stroking her hair.

"It's not," pleaded Allison. She didn't know if she spoke aloud or in her thoughts, but it didn't matter. The man brutally shoving his cock into her ass didn't care what she said. To him, she was just another hole. One of so, so many he'd treated just the same.

"It is," Scarlet said. "Just let go. I'll take it."

"I'm so sorry," Allison thought. She hadn't counted on it being so brutal. She didn't expect it to feel so wrong. In the safety of her apartment, she had considered rape a possibility, and she had accepted the risk, thinking it was just rough sex. But it wasn't. She knew that now. The men were monsters. The act was abhorrent. And she felt as weak as she had ever felt in her entire life.

"Just let me take control," Scarlet said. "I've been through it. I know I can take it. Just let go."

"I...I can't," Allison thought, feeling as if she was being ripped in two as her assailant thrust himself in and out of her like an uncaring jackhammer.

"You can," Scarlet said.

Allison couldn't take it anymore. "Okay," she said, relaxing her mind. Scarlet flooded in, pushing her consciousness into a dark corner.

"I'll take it from here," the ghost said, tears streaming down Allison's face.





"She's been used," said the man, clutching Allison's naked breast. "Frequently, it seems."

"Wasn't my fault," said Jed. "Bruce always likes to test 'em out. You know how it gets."

The newcomer, whose name Allison didn't know, frowned. He was tall, muscular, and bald. She couldn't quite pin his nationality, but he had something of an accent to his voice. In any case, it didn't matter. After a week of near-constant rape, she had stopped caring about who her captors were.

"You said she had a phone?" the man asked, letting go of Allison.

"Yeah, but we smashed it," Bruce said, flashing his metal smile. "Then we moved here. Nobody's gonna find us."

"You'd better hope not," the man stated.

"What are we gonna do?" asked Jed. "You think somebody's gonna want her? Or should we -"

"You don't touch her again," the leader interrupted. "Let her heal. I know some people who look for girls like her."

"C'mon," Jed said. "You gotta let us have some -"

With a swift backhand, the bald foreigner sent Jed sprawling to the floor. "You work for me," he said. "You do what I say. Or I'll see to it that you end up back where I found you. Do you understand?"

Bruce bent down to help his partner to his feet. "He wasn't serious, boss," he said. "He was just jokin'. We know better than to go against you."

"Good," the bald man said. "Remember that."



It all happened so suddenly. One minute, Allison was sitting in a corner, clutching a blanket around her as she wondered whether or not she'd spend the rest of her life as a sex slave, and the next, a commotion had erupted outside of her room. She pressed herself into the corner, trying to make herself as small as possible.

A gunshot went off, accompanied by frenzied screams and barked commands. A moment later, her door burst open, and a man dressed all in black tactical gear pushed through, his assault rifle leading the way. Allison cowered in her corner.

"It's okay, miss," the man said. "It's going to be okay."

She didn't believe him. After almost a month in captivity, she was on the ragged edge of sanity. Even Scarlet had retreated into the back of her mind, unresponsive. But then she saw the acronym "S.W.A.T." on his vest. It was the police. The police had finally come.

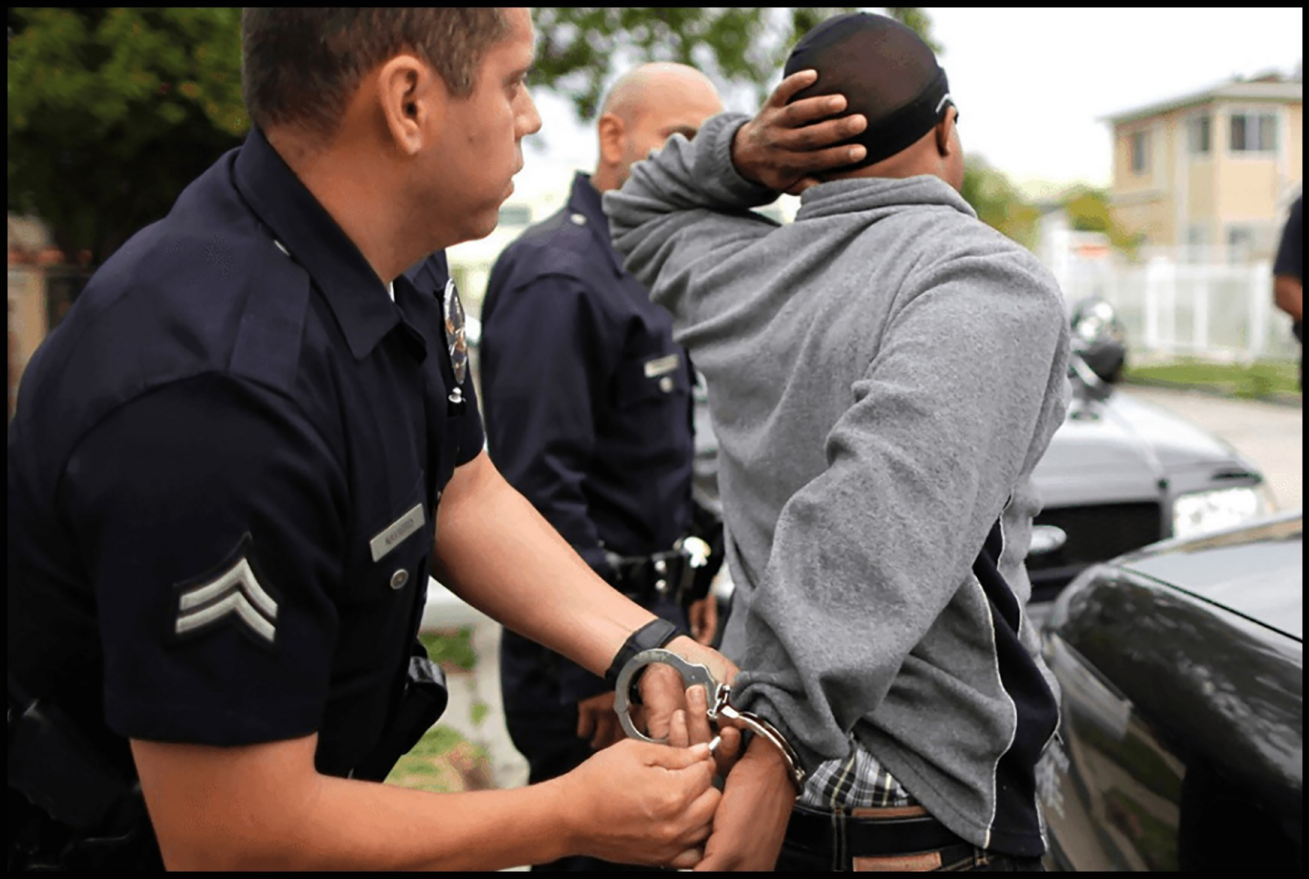
"Oh, God," Allison breathed. "I-is this real? Are you real?"

"It's going to be okay," the man said, kneeling down beside her. Even behind his tactical goggles, she could see kind eyes. He was her hero.

As he helped her to her feet and out the door, Allison was in shock. It was over. It was finally over. They were all going to be arrested. And she would be free. More, the men responsible for Scarlet's death would pay. They'd go to jail. They would be punished.

"It's over," Allison thought. "Scarlet, it's over."

"I know," she said.





"What?" asked Allison, reclining on the grass. "I'm sorry. I was a million miles away."

Even though Scarlet had taken the brunt of the trauma, stepping in when things took a turn for the worst during her captivity, Allison had still borne her share of suffering. And that had left its mark.

"I said they're dead," Miles stated. "All three of those guys that were arrested. Dead in their cells."

"W-what?" asked Allison. "How?"

"They hung themselves," Miles said. "All of them. Within a couple of hours of each other."

"Good," Allison said. "They deserved it."

However, her mind whirled. It wasn't finished. She knew it wasn't; someone else remained. Someone had set everything up. Someone had put Scarlet on that highway. But she had no idea how to figure out who was truly responsible for Scarlet's death. And so, she was back to square one. She was back to not knowing how to give her friend the reprieve she so desperately deserved.

"I'm sorry," Allison thought. "I tried, Scarlet. I did. I wanted to help you."

"I know you did," Scarlet said. "But I think we both need to come to terms with the fact that sometimes, the bad guys win."

"At least those assholes are dead," Allison said aloud.

"Yeah," Miles stated. "But the police found some records. Or that's what they told me."

Miles had been an integral part of the investigation. He'd given the police all the information he had, and they'd tracked Allison's phone to an abandoned warehouse, where they found it smashed to bits. However, that had given them a place to start, and over the course of a month, they'd slowly worked their way back to where they were holding Allison. In short, her plan had worked, after a fashion, if not in the way she'd hoped.

"Maybe they'll figure out who was behind everything," Allison said. "Maybe they'll find their buyers. Maybe they'll find out who was really in charge."

"Maybe," Miles allowed. "I hope so."





"I remember it," Scarlet said. "Time, for me, is a little fuzzy. Sometimes, a second feels like a year. A year feels like a month. I don't know. But I can always feel the anniversary of our breakup."

Allison closed her eyes, seeing what Scarlet saw. She and Cole were dancing in the center of a ballroom.

"I'm sorry," Cole said. "I don't want to do this."

"Then don't," Scarlet said, leaning close. Their foreheads touched as her hands crept up to the back of his neck. "You don't have to worry about what anyone else thinks."

"I do, though," Cole stated, his voice barely above a whisper. The rest of the ballroom seemed to fade away, leaving the two lovers alone, dancing to music Allison could barely hear. "If your problems got out, I wouldn't stand a chance as a politician. You know that."

"I'll be good," Scarlet said. "I've beaten this before. I can be good."

"No," Cole said. "You can't. We both know you can't. We've been down this road too many times. I'm sorry. I love you and I'm sorry."

"I...I can't...I don't..." Scarlet tried to speak, but the words came out in a nearly incoherent mumble as she wept openly. "I won't let you. I'll...I'll go to the press. I'll tell them everything."

"No, you won't," Cole stated, the pain evident in his voice. "And it won't matter if you do. We're not together anymore. This is me breaking up with you. What you do from here on out is on you."

Scarlet pulled away. "You're serious," she said.

"I am," he said. "I wish it didn't have to be like this. But it does."

The scene faded away as Scarlet erupted into what could only be called a tantrum. "That was the last time we saw each other when I was alive," she said. "Two days later, they took me on the side of that highway. And then I died. Alone. Unloved. Friendless."



"W-what?" Allison asked, pulling the sheet up to her chin.

"There's apparently some huge conspiracy," Miles said. "They're still following the evidence, but it goes a lot deeper than just a few assholes trying to make money off of human trafficking."

"How do you know this?" Allison asked.

"I've sort of been tagging along with one of the cops who investigated this whole thing," Miles stated.  
"He's been keeping me updated."

"Why?" Allison asked.

"Because he knows I'm friends with you," Miles said. "He thinks we deserve to know what's happening."

"No - that's not what I mean," Allison said. "Why are you tagging along with cops?"

"Oh - that," he said, sitting next to her on the bed. "I've sort of decided to change my major to criminal justice. I think I want to be a cop now."

"A cop? You?" Allison asked. "You're the bad influence every mom warns her son about."

"Used to be," he said. "But now, I'm just a guy who thinks he can help. Look - I know you went through a lot. And how I felt is nothing compared to what you had to deal with. But I felt so useless, just waiting on them to save you. I don't want to feel that anymore. I want to help. I want to make a difference."

Allison sat up, studying her longtime friend's face. Finally, she said, "Good. That's good. You were always horrible at graphic design anyway."







"I don't want to do this," said Scarlet. "There's no reason to talk to him."

"You heard Miles," Allison said, looking around. She had gotten Cole to meet her again, and she was waiting in the same place as before. "There's a conspiracy. They know that he contacted one of the men they arrested. It's right there in black-and-white on his phone records."

"He works at a law firm," Scarlet argued. "He gets calls from criminals all the time."

"Just take a step back from this, Scarlet," Allison said. "Just for one second, try to look at it objectively. Cole is connected to you. He's connected to the kidnappers. He had a motive to want you out of the way. That's enough."

"Then let the police handle it," Scarlet said.

"They will," Allison said. "But I want to look into his eyes before they arrest him. You need to look into his eyes. Wait - here he comes."

"Allison," Cole said, approaching. "What was so urgent?"

"Do you know a man named Rami Abdul?" she asked.

"What? No," he said far too quickly.

"Because you spoke to him four times on the phone two years ago," Allison said. "Right before Scarlet went missing. Are you aware that the men who killed her were arrested last month?"

"What? She's dead?" Cole asked. "H-how did they find out?"

"You know how," Allison said. "The men you hired to kidnap her killed her. They confessed to the cops. And they said that you were involved."

"No," Cole said. "They...I didn't...I only...no. No, this isn't true. You're bluffing. You think I'm stupid. You think I'm going to confess. Well, I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't kill anyone. And I don't associate with criminals."

"H-he did it," Scarlet said. "He actually did it."

"I know," Allison thought as Cole turned away and pushed through the crowd. "I knew from the moment I met him."



An image of Scarlet flashed in Allison's mind. "We need to talk," she said. "And I don't want to do it in your head."

Suddenly, Allison was in an empty room. And though she knew it was a construct of her own mind, it felt as real and solid as any she'd ever been in. Looking around, she quickly found Scarlet, leaning against a bare wall.

"They put me in a room like this," she said. "White paint. A single bed. A nightstand. That was it. The door locked from the outside. They called it treatment, but it felt like a prison."

As if on cue, the room became what Scarlet described. Scarlet sat on the bed, which squeaked ominously in the dead silence of the constructed room. "They did it when I was caught with a boy I liked at school," she explained. "Committed me then and there because I was having sex. I was only fifteen, but the treated me like I was some sort of monster."

"What are we doing here?" Allison asked. She'd heard the story before. She'd heard all of Scarlet's stories. And when she slept, she even lived some of them.

"I want to talk about what we're going to do," Scarlet said. "About Cole."

"We don't have to do anything," Allison stated. "The police will arrest him. He'll spend most of his life in jail."

"I want him dead," she said.

"No," Allison responded. "We're not doing that. I know you feel betrayed. I get that. But --"

"You have no idea how I feel!" Scarlet screamed, the room flexing with the volume of her voice. "I loved him. I thought he loved me. But he...h-he turned me over to those animals. He had me kidnapped and killed. Justice is doing the same to him. Justice is making sure that he can't hurt anyone else."

"No," Allison repeated. "We're not killers. Now let me go. I don't like this room any more than you do."





"They're going to arrest him," said Allison.

"I don't care," Scarlet said. "He should die for what he did to me."

"It's justice," Allison pointed out. "No matter how it feels, that's how this world works. He'll get arrested. He'll go on trial. And they'll decide his punishment."

"He'll get off," Scarlet said. "Guys like him will always get off."

"I don't believe that," Allison responded.

"Then you're naïve," was the ghost's response. A moment later, she was gone, locked away in a secluded, isolated corner of Allison's mind. It was easier for her there. She didn't have to think about the world. She didn't have to contemplate justice or vengeance or all the things in between.

In truth, Allison understood her pain, and better than most. After all, they'd been through something very similar. But Allison's kidnappers were all dead. The person responsible for Scarlet's death was still at large – at least for a while. It must have been frustrating.

However, Allison couldn't help but smile. She'd done it. She had set out to solve the mystery, to get justice for her friend, and she'd done just that. Soon, Scarlet would be free. She could move on to the next life. Or heaven. Or whatever came after death. Whatever it was, Allison was sure it would offer the young ghost some measure of peace. And that felt good. No matter what else happened, she had helped someone. That was cause for at least a little happiness on her part.



"It's been all over the news," said Miles. "I can't believe you haven't seen it."

"I've been a little out of it lately," admitted Allison. Scarlet, over the past few days, had been increasingly morose. At times, her mood was strong enough to affect Allison's, and she'd spent the bulk of the previous couple of days in bed. A depressed ghost, especially when she's in someone's head, can be a powerful thing. "What happened?"

"They tried to arrest this guy," Miles said. "Cole Carson. He clerked for a state senator named Virgil Grimes. Well, apparently, he was involved with the guys who kidnapped you somehow. He even set his girlfriend - his boss' daughter, no less - up to be taken by them."

"Old news," Scarlet moaned. "Tell us something we don't know."

"Shut up," Allison thought. Then, aloud, she said, "Was there anyone else involved?"

"No," Miles said. "Not as far as we can tell, at least. It's possible that there was someone else, but it looks like he's been working alone. Why? Do you know something?"

"What was the motive?" Allison asked.

"We don't really know," Miles admitted. "Money? Blackmail? It's kind of up in the air. But we'll figure it out when we get him in custody."

"We?" asked Allison. "Did you get a job on the police force while I wasn't looking?"

Miles laughed. "No," he said, blushing. "Nothing like that. I've just been spending a lot of time down there, and it's easy to kind of get wrapped up in it, you know?"

"No - I think it's cute," she said. "I think it's great that you finally care about something. It's a good thing."

"Yeah," said Miles. "I've never felt like this about anything else I've ever done. I feel like I'm making a difference, and I'm just tagging along right now. Imagine what it'll be like when I get my badge."

"I'm proud of you, Miles," said Allison. "I really am."



"Are we really ready for this?" asked Scarlet, her consciousness buzzing around in Allison's brain. "We're not, right? We can't be."

"Just shut up," Allison thought as she bent over on all fours, presenting herself to Zack. "I'm horny. He had a big dick. Now shut up and leave it alone."

While Allison presented a confident front, she wasn't entirely sure that she was, in fact, ready for sex. It had been more than a month since her abduction and rape, but even though she'd physically healed from her torment, there were still mental scars. If Scarlet hadn't born the brunt of the trauma, she was sure that she wouldn't have been even close to ready for sex. But as it stood, the benefits outweighed the cost. And she wanted someone to fuck her.

Zack approached. "I thought maybe you'd lost my number," he said, pumping his hand up and down his hard cock. It glistened with freshly-applied lubricant.

"I didn't," Allison said. "I was...um...I was busy."

How could the young man not know what had happened to her? Was he really so secluded from the outside world? Was his bubble that impenetrable?

"Yeah," Zack said, positioning himself behind her. "Me too. Finals and stuff."

And then he plunged himself inside of her. For a moment, it was like the old days. It was like she'd never been raped. And it was good. So, so very good. Until it wasn't.

Suddenly, she was back in that dirty van. Pinned down. Helpless. Vulnerable. Tears started streaming down her face, and without even the slightest warning, she lashed out at her lover, turning and raking her fingers across his chest. They bit deeply into the flesh, drawing blood. She stood facing her surprised lover, blood dripping from her fingers, and ready to keep going.

"Calm down," Scarlet said. "It's okay. He's not here to hurt you."

Her words cut through Allison's panic, and almost as quickly as it had come, the delusion faded to reveal the gravity of her actions. "Oh, shit," she said, reaching out to Zack. He flinched away, his eyes wide. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to -"

"You crazy fucking bitch!" he screamed, looking down at his mangled chest. The scratches weren't deep, but they were blood red. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I-I'm sorry," she repeated. "I had something happen to me and -"

"You know what? I don't need this kind of crazy," he said, grabbing his jeans from the floor. As he stalked from the room, he said, "Not for someone like you."



"I am as baffled by this as anyone else," said Scarlet's father, Virgil Grimes. "When I hired the young man, I only knew what was in his file. He seemed like a promising, future lawmaker."

The reporter, who held a microphone to his face, asked, "And is it true that the young man was in a relationship with your missing daughter?"

"It is," Virgil said. "She was fooled by him, too. It's the chief regret of my life that I didn't recognize the sort of person he was."

"You are referring to the allegations of human trafficking," the reporter said. "Cole Carson, a young man many referred to as the senator's protégé, has been accused to masterminding a human trafficking ring that has sent dozens of girls and women into sexual slavery." Turning back to the elder Grimes, she asked, "What do you say to the allegations that you were complicit?"

"I say that they're false," he stated. "My own daughter fell victim to these animals. My own daughter. I want justice as much as anyone else. Probably more."

"And what about those who question your judgment for allowing a criminal to hold such a prominent position in your inner circle?" she asked. "What about those who question your ability as a father for letting your daughter date such a young man?"

"I say that it's easy to judge people from the outside," he said. "He's a sociopath. He fooled everyone who ever knew him. I beat myself up every day for missing the signs that he was -"

Scarlet took hold of Allison's body, turning the television off. "He's lying," she said, ceding control back to Allison. "He's good at that."

"What are you saying?" Allison asked.

"I'm saying that he knew something," she answered. "Maybe not everything, but he knew something. I know him well enough to know when he's lying. And he is."

"Are you sure?" asked Allison.

"One-hundred percent," Scarlet said.

"Then I guess I need to put my detective shoes back on," Allison said.







"Thanks for coming," Allison said. "I really need to talk to you."

"About what?" asked a suddenly hopeful Miles. "You look nice, by the way."

"Oh," said Allison, looking down at her thrown-together ensemble. She hadn't given it a moment's thought before calling her friend over.

"Thanks. You look good too."

"Listen - I know I've been a little distracted lately, but it's because -"

"No - it's not that," Allison said. "Well, it sort of is. But it's complicated. Can I just tell you what's up?"

"Sure," Miles said, sitting down on her blue couch. "Like the new couch."

"Yeah," Allison said, sitting next to him. "It's about my case. Or more importantly, it's about Scarlet Grimes."

"We already know that her boyfriend had something to do with her disappearance," Miles said.

"I know," Allison responded. "But it's deeper than that. For one, she hasn't disappeared. She's dead. I think if you dug up the basement of the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity house, you'd find the body. Or whatever's left of it. That's where they worked before the fraternity bought and renovated it. But that's just part of what I want to tell you."

"How do you know this?" Miles asked.

"I overheard them when they had me," she said. "That's not important, though. What's really important is that her Virgil Grimes is the one in control of the whole thing."

"The senator?" asked Miles. "Are you sure? Did they say his name? Would you testify to that?"

Allison nodded. "I would," she said. "I'm not sure of the details, but I know he did it. He was in charge."

"How did you find me?" asked Cole, sitting on the beach and reading a note.

Allison sat down beside him. "Does it matter?" she asked. The truth was that she'd had a bit of help from Scarlet, who had told her where she thought Cole would be. That she was right shouldn't have been surprising, but it was.

Cole didn't answer the question. Instead, he said, "It's her birthday, you know. She would have been twenty-three today."

"I know," Allison said, struggling to keep Scarlet from taking control. It was difficult, but she managed to subdue her ghostly companion. She sat down next to the young man. "Why did you do it?"

"It wasn't supposed to happen the way it did," he said. "They weren't supposed to hurt her."

"But they did," Allison said.

"It was Virgil's idea," he said, never taking his eyes off the note. "He knew them. He said they could be trusted. They were just supposed to scare her. They were supposed to make her see that she couldn't keep living the way she was living. I knew it was wrong. I did. But I was so angry. I was so scared. And I had my eyes on the future."

"So you set her up," Allison said. It wasn't a question. She knew the answer. "Things went wrong, and she ended up dead."

He looked up, his eyes glistening. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone," he said. "I loved her."

"But you loved the idea of being an important man more, didn't you?" she asked at Scarlet's urging. "You wanted to be powerful. And she was weighing you down."

"It wasn't like that," he said. "I wanted to help her."

"But you killed her," Allison said. "You didn't bash her head in with the butt of that pistol, but you killed her all the same. And you're going to pay for it."

"Are the police coming?" he asked. She nodded. "Good," he said. "Good. I'm tired of running."







"The cops will be here in a few minutes," Allison said, cornering the man outside of his offices. "They're going to arrest you."

"Who the fuck are you?" a freshly shaven Virgil Grimes demanded.

"A friend of your daughter's," she said. "Kidnapping victim. Rape survivor. I wasn't any of those things. Not before you decided to scare Scarlet straight."

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "Did Cole tell you this? He's a liar and a –"

"It's just you and me," Allison said. "You can tell the truth. For once in your life, step out from behind that mask and tell the fucking truth."

He sighed. "I don't know who you think you are, little girl," he said. "But I will not incriminate myself just because you think you're owed an explanation. But I will say this – if I had done what you say – I didn't, but if I had, she would have brought it all on herself."

"You didn't –"

"She was a fucking slut," he said. "From the moment she was born, I knew she would be a problem. She could never behave – not like her sister. And when she hit puberty, she realized that the best way to lash out at us was to fuck anything with a dick. And she did. Our gardener. The pool boy. The neighbor. Half the boys at her high school. And then, when we sent her to an all-girls school, half of them, too. And when we tried to get her to change, she just hid behind that whole 'addiction' bullshit. Her mother believed it. She tried to get her help. And as I predicted, it did nothing."

"You had her killed because she liked having sex?" Allison asked.

The man shook his head. "I thought she'd turned a corner," he said. "When she met Cole, I thought she had grown out of it. But that didn't last, did it? It would never last. She worked her way through most of his fraternity before I'd had enough."

"So you had her kidnapped?" Allison suggested.

"I taught her a lesson," he said. "And if you don't watch out, I'll teach you one, too. So – if you'll excuse me, I've got to get to work."



"They're both dead," Scarlet said, suddenly appearing in front of Allison. She was more solid than she'd ever been. "I can feel it."

When Cole had been arrested, he had told the police everything about Virgil. The plot to kidnap Scarlet, the deal with the traffickers, the way it had all gone wrong – everything. And then, in his cell, he had killed himself the next night.

Virgil's fate hadn't been so tame. Like the three kidnappers who'd gone before him, he turned up dead almost as soon as he went into custody. However, there was no pretense of suicide for him. He'd been beaten to death with a blunt object that may or may not have been a nightstick. Soon after, the investigation turned up a treasure trove of evidence linking the man to a human trafficking ring which had victimized thousands of girls over the course of almost ten years. His role was to keep the local authorities at bay, which he did with practiced precision.

"I know," Allison said. "I guess this means you're done."

"I guess so," Scarlet said, already a little more translucent. Allison felt strange without the other girl in her head. Empty. Lonely.

"I wish you could stay," Allison said.

"I don't," was Scarlet's response. "I didn't realize it, but I was miserable. I couldn't rest. But now? Now, I can. I feel at peace. I'm ready to go."

"I love you," Allison said.

Scarlet smiled, barely visible. "I love you too," she said. "You're the only friend I've ever had. You saved me, Allie. You gave me the thing I needed most."

Allison wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'm going to miss you," she said, watching her friend fade completely away.

"Who are you talking to?" Miles asked, approaching with a pair of cups of coffee. He handed one to Allison.

She smiled. "Nobody," she said. "Just talking to myself."