

*Imaginary Friend (A Subject Seven Story)*

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*WAKE UP!!!*

The air was hot and dry, a sign of the Santa Anna winds blowing in from the desert. The night should have been at least a little chilly, because it was late October but there you go. Sometimes things don't work out like they're supposed to.

*Where are you going?*

"Anywhere I want to." She shrugged her shoulders and then looked at the access ladder. It was ten feet off the ground, which maybe would have stopped a lot of people, but she wasn't like most people. She looked around the alleyway for a moment, made sure there were no witnesses and then did a standing jump that launched her twelve feet into the air.

"Top that, Melissa," she whispered to herself.

The ladder vibrated and made a deep note of warning as she caught a handhold. Despite the threats, it did not fall down and neither did she. She scaled the ladder at high speed and practically launched herself onto the roof of the building.

*Sometimes they have alarm systems up on roofs, you know. I speak from experience.* The voice was annoying and a little snotty. She shook her head and kept looking.

“You said you wanted the files from this place. It’s locked up tight down below. You do the math.” Halfway across the roof there was a small access point. She thought she could probably squeeze through it. Her legs shook a bit and ached, but that was okay. She was still getting used to them.

*You getting caught doesn’t help me or you.*

“You stating the obvious is just annoying. Now shut the hell up and let me do this.”

The skylight was not designed for entrance into the building. It was locked from the inside near as she could tell. Still, it was that or try her luck with the solid looking steel door that said it was the access to the roof.

She kicked the light with her right heel and felt the glass shatter, the frame bend. A sharp shard cut into the back of her leg and blood dripped into the back of her shoe. “Damn. I just stole these....”

*Well, I guess you’ll have to steal some more.*

“Or wash them.” She rolled her eyes. He was really starting to annoy the hell out of her. Her lips pursed together in that way that Melissa’s mom always said would make her face old before its time. Not that she cared what Melissa’s mom said, not really.

Two more kicks and the glass broke away completely and she could lower herself into the building. The remains of the window had fallen across a very heavy oak desk and rained down over a leather chair and all of the papers.

“Is this the place?”

*Look over the papers on the desk and I can tell you.*

She scanned the papers and carefully slipped a thick envelope from under a snowfall of broken glass and metal. The letter was addressed to Bifrons Dynamics and requested the attention of Geoffrey Chattersbury.

*This is the place. Look in the filing cabinets. You want anything with the name Janus on it.*

“Spell that.”

*J-A-N-U-S. Greek god of being a two-faced bastard or some such.*

“Transitions.”

*What?*

“The god of transitions and new beginnings.”

*Whatever. Just find the file, okay?*

“You need to not have an attitude, I can just go home, you know.”

*Just like that the voice was calmer, more placating. Sorry. Listen I know I'm asking a lot, but I'm doing this for you, too. For all of us. I need to know what we're all about and what they've been hiding from us.*

“What who has been hiding?”

*Janus. They're hiding something. I know they are. And that something has to do with why you and me and the rest of us are different from everyone else.*

She thought about that for a moment and then decided she'd play along a little longer. The filing cabinets were locked. She pulled until the metal bent and the drawer flew open with a violent squeal of protest.

The file on Janus was a thick one. Around the same time she had it in her hands she heard the sirens coming.

Sure enough, the voice was right. The roof had alarms after all.

The file got shoved into a backpack—stolen at the same Wal-Mart where she snagged the shoes and the black shirt and the black jeans she was wearing. The next time she'd have to get underwear, too, because the denim was chaffing like crazy as she climbed on the desk and then jumped through the broken sunroof.

The next building over was a few feet taller and almost thirty feet away if she decided to make the jump. She got a running start from the other side of the building and made a leap for it.

She got lucky and cleared it, but just barely.

Melissa would have been road kill on the ground if she'd tried that. So there was that at least.

Down below she could see the single cop car coming down the road and into the industrial park. Really, there weren't many people that had any reason for hanging around in this pace after dark so she wasn't too surprised by the quick response.

Time to get gone. It was a school night and Melissa had classes.

"Kid never gets to have any fun."

And that was the truth of the matter. Then again, that was why she was around.

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The bell rang out loud and proud and Melissa Aguirre gathered her belongings together. The backpack was light enough that she just slung it over one shoulder and then grabbed her cane.

Most of the kids in the class were up and on their way before she finally got to her feet. The only exception was Wayne Hooper, who was always the last out of the class. It was a thing for him for whatever reason. Once, just to make sure it wasn't her imagination, she'd waited an extra five minutes before leaving class and sure enough, he waited until she'd cleared the room before he got out of his seat.

Wayne was weird. She had an excuse. Nerve damage, not enough to paralyze, thank God, just enough to make sure that she was never going to be a cheerleader or run a marathon. The cane was just for those times when her leg didn't want to work. Mostly it was doing all right today, so she was basically carrying extra junk, but better safe than sorry. She couldn't feel her left calf at all, and her foot was a numb lump. Just to be extra safe, she was wearing the thin brace on her ankle to avoid twisting it. She wasn't supposed to and she knew it, but sometimes you had to bend the rules if you wanted to survive a day at high school, especially as a freshman.

Out in the hallways she headed for Brandi's locker. They were supposed to meet up and hit the library together. There were reports to be done if she wanted to maintain her solid B average in Social Studies.

Brandi wasn't at her locker. Probably she'd forgotten again. Just to be safe, Melissa decided to wait a few minutes. Brandi had recently decided that Josh Holder was possibly the finest looking boy on the planet, and it was always possible she was stalking the boy. Josh was a jock, bronzed skin, dark black hair and hazel eyes.

He was also going steady with Deanna Gardner, which meant he was so very spoken for and that Brandi didn't have a chance, but that had never stopped Brandi before.

As the wall of kids moving through the hallway thinned she saw Josh heading in her direction from the left. Sure enough, he was still gorgeous. She made it a point not to look in his eyes. Deanna Gardner and three or four of her closest friends—The Bitch Patrol as Brandi liked to call them—were walking along side him and behind them, but very close by, were a few more jocks. And after them, sure enough, Brandi, who had that look on her face: One half hopeful and wistful, one half miserable because so far Josh hadn't bothered to notice her existence. Somehow being surrounded by the cheerleading squad seemed to distract him from the mousy blonde with the braces and enough freckles for any four teens.

Deanna looked at Melissa and leaned in close to her closest friend—Tia Moreno—and said something under her breath. It was surely an insult, nothing new there. Tia laughed like the greatest joke ever had just been told and then both girls very pointedly made sure not to look in Melissa's direction.

And Melissa pretended it didn't bother her, because that's the way it worked. She knew how the whole thing played out, same as everyone else did. She just tried not to let it get to her. Back a few years she'd been good friends with Deanna. That changed around the same time the stupid nerve damage became evident.

Dumbest thing ever. She'd been doing cartwheels along with Deanna and the rest and she threw her back the wrong way. It stung a little but no biggie. Only later, the pain showed up. And later still, the nerve damage. She'd done something when she was moving and whatever it was had screwed up her spinal column. Not a lot,

just enough. A small surgery to correct the damage as much as they could and to fix that vertebra that she managed to hurt—apparently the actual damage was a birth defect, but no one knew it existed until she screwed herself up with the cartwheels—and she was allegedly as good as new. No more risks of increased damage from the problem. And physical therapy, mustn't forget that. Lots of PT in order to keep herself mobile.

Sometimes. Just sometimes, when Deanna gave her one of those little looks and made believe she didn't really see her, Melissa had to resist the urge to break her cane over the girl's pretty face.

Brandi leaned up against the lockers as Melissa was contemplating whether or not breaking said walking stick across Deanna's nose was a good idea.

"Any luck today?" Melissa already knew the answer.

Brandi rolled her eyes. "No. Of course not. He's too busy checking out Deanna's rack to notice me." She'd never understand how her best friend managed to sound so calm about it.

"He's not worth it anyways." She checked out the quarterback's backside. He had a perfect butt. No two ways about that.

"Speak for yourself." Brandi shook her head. "He's looking worth it from here."

"Is he worth dealing with Deanna?" Logic, that would take care of the problem.

Brandi looked away from her favorite boy toy and sighed. "It's not Deanna that's the problem. It's the rest of her pack of bitches." Melissa looked at her friend,

shocked, and then looked around the hallway. No teachers or students were close enough to overhear them. Brandi continued. "Seriously. I could handle one of them, but not six or seven and they don't exactly stay apart, you know?"

Sometimes she forgot who she was dealing with. Brandi wasn't exactly from the area. She and her family had moved up from Chula Vista, an area of San Diego not exactly known for being peaceful. They were in the nicer part of the city here, but Brandi had dealt with a lot of hard asses in her time.

Melissa could never decided if that was a good thing for Brandi or a bad, thing, but either way Brandi didn't lack in confidence when it came to the cheerleaders of the world.

"Well, maybe you should get her on her own."

Brandi shrugged and then reached for her locker's combination lock. "Whatever. He's cute and all, but if he can't notice me because he's too busy with that skank, it's his loss."

They headed for the library together and Melissa listened as Brandi did most of the talking. That was the way their relationship had always worked and she was okay with that. Some people are meant to watch and some people are meant to do.

Melissa was a watcher.

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*Okay, seriously. There are things that need to be done.*

"What did you say your name was?"



*Joe Bronx.*

“Well, Joe, my best friend in the world is having a few issues, so I’m going to take care of them. And then, if I feel like it, I’ll do more of your dirty work.”

She could feel his impatience. It made her resist the urge to smile. Melissa was the one who liked to listen and obey. She didn’t play by those rules.

The underwear was a good idea. She was glad she’d stolen some. Next she was going to have to find a place to stash everything. As it was she’d almost given herself away when she went into hiding and that wouldn’t do. Still, less chafing was a big plus. Live and learn.

It wasn’t hard to remember where she needed to be, even though she’d never been there. She just had to concentrate.

724 Lemon Seed Drive. Seriously, who the hell came up with the names for roads and why couldn’t they come up with something better than Lemon Seed? She had no idea.

The house was small, but well kept. The lawn was immaculate and there were two SUVs parked on the short driveway.

The room she wanted was around the back. The odds were good that the window would be open. There were perverts and child molesters and all sorts of creeps out in the world, but some people were profoundly stupid. Deanna qualified. She had no idea why Melissa thought the girl was important—okay, yes she did, but she didn’t really agree with the girl—but she was here to go ahead and fix the problem before it became more of a problem. Used to be Deanna was okay with just ignoring Melissa, but lately she was adding layers to the snubs and the snide

comments. She was also adding her friends to the equation. Used to be that Deanna looked at Melissa as an embarrassment, maybe, an unfortunate error in judgment. But the accident that left Melissa a little paralyzed was a long time ago now and either Deanna was just a bitch or she wanted to show how cool she was by walking all over another person. She did that a lot already, so why should Melissa be immune?

The house was a one-story bungalow. The family was only three people, no dogs or cats if she remembered—Mrs. Gardner was allergic to damned near everything with fur—and she crept around carefully until she reached the right window.

*This is not going to go the way you think it is. Believe me, this will end poorly.*

“Shut up, Joe.” She whispered the words. She knew she didn’t have to speak out loud, because Joe had told her as much, but it came naturally to her. Talking in her mind was too much like talking to herself.

Sure enough, the window was open.

Getting the screen out was easy.

Climbing through was even easier.

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The hand covered her mouth and pressed down, barely even giving her the space to breathe through her nostrils. The weight on top of her was solid, heavily muscled, and the first thing that Deanna thought as she tried to push the stubborn

weight aside was that Melissa was right. She should have locked her damned window.

The rest of the thoughts were a lot more immediate and filled with worries about whether or not she was going to live through the next few minutes, whether or not she was about to become a statistic and if she was going to suffer before they were done with her.

Her hand went for the pepper spray she kept tucked at the edge of the mattress. That was the compromise she made for having an open window. A little something she could defend herself with.

The hand on her mouth clamped down harder and the body over her moved, grabbed at her wrist, caught it before she could make her fingers wrap around her prize.

“Un-unh. No. No weapons. This is just a friendly visit.” The voice was soft, low and feminine. Part of the panic left her right then and there. She was still in danger but maybe *that* danger was gone. Was it rational? No, but still, she was relieved.

The room was dark. Deanna had given up her night light years ago, and now she was hating that fact. The face above her was shadows and little more.

“You know who I am?” The voice wasn't familiar. The girl sitting over her—definitely a girl, she could see the boobs now that she was adjusting a little—leaned down closer, their bodies as close as lovers, but, thankfully, that wasn't what the intruder had in mind.

She couldn't exactly speak, so she shook her head.

“Good. Forget me. You don’t know me. You don’t need to know me. But remember this. You look at Melissa Aguirre, you smile and say something nice. Because the next time you hurt her feelings, I’m going to come back here. And I’ll...” She paused for a long moment as if considering. “I’ll cut your face off. Got me?”

Deanna didn’t consider herself vain, but then who really does? Still, she knew she was pretty. You didn’t become a cheerleader without at least having decent looks and she knew exactly how many guys looked her over every day. She nodded her head very hard.

The girl above her leaned in closer, close enough that Deanna could feel the warm breaths that she exhaled. The dark eyes that looked at her were unreadable, as cold as marble. The girl’s weight pinned her in place, a mockery of an intimate position, but there was nothing romantic about it. “Do I need to hurt you to make my point? I can you know. I don’t mind. I could maybe just break your nose, or take a tooth. Do I have to do that?”

Deanna started crying. Not a big, panicky screaming fest, but she closed her eyes and prayed as hard as she ever had, and the tears fell from her closed eyes and she whimpered and wished that the horrible girl above her would just go away, because the girl was too strong, too heavy, she didn’t make any sense, her hair was a mild mess and she smelled of heat and sweat and the same kind of musk as big cats or wolves, a scent that spoke of pain and hunting.

The tears came harder and she shook, fear making her body betray her when she wanted to sit as still as possible and hope that all of this would go away.

And then her prayers were answered. The weight on top of her disappeared and she felt the cooler air of the room where the impossible heat of the girl had been a moment before.

When she opened her eyes the room was empty.

But the window was open too wide and the screen was still missing.

And after she turned on the lights and made sure she was awake, she took the time to look at her wrists, at the spots where the fingers had gripped her hard enough to leave light bruises and where she could see the crescents of red where the strange girl's nails had dug into her skin.

She wanted to tell her parents—Mommy! Daddy! Why did this happen?—the people who half the time annoyed her with their endless questions were suddenly as powerful as they had been when she was younger and she so wanted comfort, but she was too scared to leave the room. Instead she fairly flew across the hardwood floors and closed her window, locked it, closed the blinds.

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“That didn't go badly.”

*Either you scared her straight—the sarcasm in the disembodied voice was impossible to miss—or you just pissed off the girl who can hurt Melissa most at her school. A few rumors, a few snide comments and the next thing you know no one at that school will dare talk to Melissa or they might get the same treatment. Time will tell if you did a good thing or if you screwed up.*

“Whatever, Joe. You don’t know everything!”

*I know you shouldn’t be in this neighborhood any more. There are places you need to go.*

“And if I don’t?”

*I can’t make you do anything. You know that, but you can’t get answers if I can’t get answers.*

“What if I don’t care about the answers? What then?”

*I woke you up. I can help you go back to sleep and stay there. If you’re not doing anything to help me, I have no reason to help you. Understand?* It wasn’t implied threat; it was straightforward. The worst part was, she knew he wasn’t bluffing. Before Joe came around she was, what? An imaginary friend? It was hard to say. She hadn’t been physical she knew that. Before Joe she never smelled anything, touched anything. There was no taste, no sound, only the dim memories of those things.

Rather than answering, she ran as hard as she could, as fast as she could, until the scenery around her started to blur around the edges. The houses ripped past and then she was moving through dark alleys, slipping past shops and apartment buildings and moving further.

*You’re going the wrong direction.*

She uttered an obscenity.

*You’re too far away for me to do that.* Now he was sounding amused. *You know I’m right. You help me, I help you and everyone is happy.*

Rather than fight him, she turned in the direction he told her to go. There were things she could do for him. He was far too far away. According to him, he was in Boston and she knew that was all the way across the county.

So be it. She would help. For now.

But later there would be a score to settle.

She had no intention of being anyone's servant. Not ever.

When she'd slowed down she realized she was ravenous. Hunger tore at her like a forest fire in a drought season. She fished around in the dark jeans pocket and found a twenty she had liberated from the rightful owner when he tried to hit on her earlier. In his defense, she was changing in a back alley at the time and he maybe thought her being naked was an invitation. In her defense, it wasn't, so she broke his face and took the money from his pocket.

The Jack-In-The-Box restaurant offered four massive hamburgers and a very large cola for less than she had in her pocket. She ate fast and drank two refills on the cola before she left. The entire time she was eating one of the guys who was behind the counter stared at her with mixed fascination and revulsion. He apparently had never seen a girl pig out before. She didn't care. She was hungry and she needed to eat.

She also let out an epic belch before she left the restaurant. The way the guy looked at her as she left, he was either in lust with her, or horrified. Maybe both.

And she still didn't care. He was a weak little thing and he smelled like old gym socks. A bath would do him good.

The office complex that Joe Bronx sent her to was located halfway across town. She ran the entire way, enjoying the nearly perfect weather—the Santa Ana winds had eased in the last hour or so and the world once again was a reasonable temperature—and enjoyed the freedom.

She asked Joe questions as she moved, and he answered some and avoided others. Who was he? Just a guy. Why was he so determined to know more about Janus? Because they knew more about him and about her and the others than they needed to know.

Who were the others? She'd find out when she went to Boston, but that couldn't happen until she got the rest of the files that he needed. How many files was that? He had no idea, but he'd know when the time came. Was Joe Bronx his real name? No, but it would do. What was her name? That was for her to decide. Didn't she already have a name? Didn't Melissa give her one? Good questions, but she decided she couldn't trust him with the answer. Not yet. He wasn't really very trustworthy.

The building was as easy to enter as the one before had been. She found the files with ease, and was gone without any incident.

*Don't get cocky. It'll get harder from here.*

"Why do you say that?"

*Because I've been trying to find out about these guys for almost five years.*

*They're very good at hiding.*

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Melissa woke up and stretched and let out a squeak of surprise. Her muscles were sore, which happened sometimes after a bout of physical therapy, but it wasn't just her leg muscles this time, it was her arms and her shoulders and her back. Really, almost everything hurt.

And her left foot hurt. That was the part that made her utter the noise. Her left foot hadn't felt anything but phantom twinges in over two years.

She moved her leg up—flare of irritated muscles—and closed her eyes, letting her fingers move from the back of her heel across the top and bottom of her foot, feeling the shape of the limb with her fingers, checking unconsciously for any wounds she might have acquired—there was nothing—and feeling her fingers as they moved across sensitive flesh.

Deep breaths. Slow, deep breaths. She wouldn't let herself get excited. She'd learned not to put too much stock in the occasional fluke. Now was the time to calmly get out of bed, get dressed, explain the facts to her folks and see if they could arrange a visit to Dr. Weirzensky's offices to see if maybe, somehow, she had actually gotten some feeling back in her left foot and leg. Her fingers were sliding up her ankle, her calf, and she felt them, felt each and every nail as it tickled across her skin.

"Mom! Dad! Holy crap! Mom!"

From down the hall she heard her mother's voice. "Mel? Is everything okay? Did you fall?" In a lower voice, "Dan? Check on Mel. I think maybe she fell down."

Her dad responded, "What if she's just sleeping in her panties again?"

“I don’t care what body parts are changing. Go check on your daughter.”

Half a second after that, her dad was looking at the floor of her bedroom and covering his eyes from any accidental flashes. Last week he’d walked in without knocking while she was changing, he hadn’t actually seen anything, her back was to him, but you’d think he’d suddenly discovered that his daughter was female for the first time. It was embarrassing, yes, but for her dad it was practically traumatic. New rules: Daddy knocks or double checks.

“You decent, hon?”

She was in too good a mood to be embarrassed. “Yeah, Daddy. I am. I’m decent.”

He looked up and visibly relaxed when he saw she was in her cotton PJs.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can feel my foot.”

“What?” That incomprehension on his face was priceless. Her father was one of the smartest men she knew. He was actually a rocket scientist, so yes, he was on the smart side. But sometimes he was a little slow when it came to anything that didn’t involve pounds of thrust per square inch and the volatility of rocket fuel.

“I can feel my foot. I need to get checked by the doctor. I can feel my foot, Daddy.” She jumped up and down, excitement getting the better of her, and laughed out loud at the sensation of weight on her left heel and toes.

“Nancy!” Her dad’s bellow was enough to shake the windows in her bedroom. For a bookish man, he had a hell of a set of lungs. “Nancy! Mel can feel her foot! Call that doctor with the goofy name! Mel can feel her foot!”

From there the excitement escalated. When she'd finished playing twenty questions with her mother, she got into the shower while her mother called the doctor's office and made an appointment. The doctor's receptionist was not nearly as impressed with the sensation that Melissa had in her foot. Her mom was enthusiastic enough for both of them and made the appointment happen despite the receptionist's insistence that they were booked solid.

Melissa's grades were good enough that they would simply have to skip school that day. She was okay with that. She needed to know if this new sensation was permanent or just a fluke. Lord, how she prayed it was permanent.

While she was busy getting her leg examined, she missed the fight between Brandi and Deanna at the school. It was a doozy, the sort that people would have talked about months at the very least, even before the unfortunate ending where the both of them got hit by school bus number 83.

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There were electrodes, and needles and all sorts of probes to apply to her leg. There were questions, of course. Was she doing anything differently No, not really. Was she trying any new foods in her diet? Not unless a different flavor of chewing gum counted. All in all, it took over four hours to determine that, yes, somehow Melissa had regained substantial feeling in her leg. The general consensus was that

sometimes the body just fixes itself better than anyone expects. Or, as Doctor Weirzensky put it, “Now and then you get lucky. Some doctors use a Hail Mary pass and hope they can cure you. Some doctors do nothing out of the ordinary and hope for something extraordinary. In this case, I think it’s partially your age and maybe that the damage was never permanent. It could have been if your spine had been hurt any worse, if you had moved the wrong way, if you’d sneezed at the wrong time.” He smiled and his round face grew rounder and just a little kinder. “You got really, really lucky, Melissa. Count your blessings.”

And while she was spending four hours getting tested and then another two hours doing a celebratory shopping spree with her mom, Brandi and Deanna decided it was time to kick the snot out of each other.

School was letting out around the same time that Melissa and her mom were finishing up at Macy’s, each encumbered with enough bags to make walking a bit challenging and neither of them the least put out about it.

Brandi was in a poor mood to begin with, because she’d wanted to talk to Melissa and her friend wasn’t at school. Deanna was in a poor mood too, because she’d had a rather traumatic night and her wrists looked like someone had handcuffed her to a wall. The bruises she’d seen when she went to bed had become more pronounced and she wasn’t at all happy about that. As a result of trying to hide the evidence—just in case the mystery woman from the night before was somehow watching her—she’d been forced to wear a long sleeved shirt that itched madly. Also, every time she thought about why she was wearing the shirt, she felt a mixture of fear and shame that made her feel a little queasy.

So, really, it was like mixing gunpowder and a big old pile of burning matches.

What really started the fight? That's hard to say. According to Jackie Burnham, cheerleader, it started when Brandi pushed Deanna and called her a slut.

According to Dawn Cambridge, the whole thing started when Deanna called Brandi "white trash," under her breath and Brandi heard her.

According to the two girls involved in the incident, the entire things started for reasons unknown—all either of them would give in sworn statements was a shrug and a glare in the direction of the other girl.

Here's what is known: After Deanna pushed Brandi (or Brandi pushed Deanna) the actual fighting began. Deanna grabbed a handful of Brandi's hair and pulled her head to the side. Instead of going with the flow as it were, Brandi stepped in closer and whipped her elbow into Deanna's stomach hard enough to double her enemy over. Maybe that would have been the end of the problem but it was already well-known according to Deanna and the cheerleaders at least, that Brandi was actively stalking Deanna's boyfriend. So, of course, there was more to be said and done. Deanna tried using her nails to defend herself (Or, according to Brandi, to claw Brandi's eyes out) and Brandi retaliated with a vicious kick to Deanna's privates. Deanna let out a battle whoop and jumped all over Brandi, swinging, clawing, screaming and just possibly biting. She got in a few good blows—as evidenced by Brandi's bloodied nose and the hank of her hair recovered from the scene of the conflict. And then Brandi proceeded to beat the snot out of her with extreme prejudice.

The crowd grew fast, as can only be expected when you're dealing with a large crowd and a good, old-fashioned ass kicking. It seems everyone wants to see a little blood. Kids who'd been heading for their buses and kids who were walking home all stopped what they were doing to watch the cheerleader and the slightly scary girl from the bad part of town go at each other's throats.

That's the problem, really. No one was sure exactly who it was that pushed the two girls as they were locked in a clench. All that anyone can say with any certainty is that both girls were staggered and fell toward the long driveway where the buses parked.

The good news was that most of the buses were parked. The bad news was that not all of them were stationary. Bus 83 was moving past bus 24 with no idea that a fight had broken out. The driver wasn't looking at parked buses, he was busy focusing on the road and on stopping Steve Markowicz from putting something dubious into Jason Bradford's hair. He didn't see either of the girls. He just felt it when the right front tire of the bus ran over both of them.

It could have been worse. That's the important thing to remember in cases like this, isn't it? It could have been worse. They could have been killed. They could have been paralyzed for life—a thought that flashed through Deanna's mind even as the bus was running over her entire left leg—instead, Deanna's leg and Brandi's foot were the only parts to be crushed under the weight of the yellow bus.

Bus 83 stopped when the screaming started. And then moved forward enough to remove the weight of the bus from the ruined limbs.

Being run over by a bus put an instant stop to the fight.

Neither of the girls were moved while they waited on the ambulances. And those people who'd been wanting to see blood got their fix while they waited.

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All the joy of having sensation in her foot was put on hold when she heard about the accident. Melissa didn't have to ask her mom if she could go to the hospital her mom simply sighed, grabbed the car keys and said, "Let's go." On the way she called her husband and said they'd likely be late.

Sometimes it's a different world that adults and teenagers live in. Not always, of course, but there are those places where secrets are kept, either by intention or accident. Her mother had no idea that Deanna and Melissa weren't friends anymore and hadn't been for a long while. Neither did Deanna's mother know that simple fact. Really, Melissa didn't much like the notion herself. Whatever differences they had between them, a shattered leg was enough for Melissa to set them aside.

Brandi was wide-awake and wasted enough on painkillers that she probably wouldn't remember being visited. She spoke and she nodded and her mom explained that several surgeries were going to be needed to put her foot back together. The two moms hadn't met before but spoke amiably enough. Before the visit was finished, Melissa's mom had offered up a card for a good lawyer and for Doctor Weirzensky. The latter just in case there was nerve damage to consider.

Mrs. Gardner was both pleasantly surprised to see Melissa—she knew there was distance, she didn't know that her daughter and the girl in front of her no longer spoke at all—and even more pleasantly surprised to see Melissa's mom. The two women had gone through several different landmarks of childhood traumas together and Melissa supposed there was a certain camaraderie to be found in this latest nightmare. The last time they'd been together that Melissa knew about was when the woman and her daughter had come to see Mel at the hospital. Now the tables had turned, though she got no satisfaction from that thought.

There would be substantially more surgeries involved for Deanna. She had already gone through one and it looked like they might be able to save her leg. Mel thought long and hard about that. Might be able to save her leg. Maybe. If they were lucky. Cheerleading? That was a thing of the past. Prom? That would be another maybe.

She didn't know all of the circumstances. She didn't need to. She just knew that two of her friends were injured and she made herself a promise to try to be there if they needed her help.

She'd had a little practice with what both of them were about to go through, after all.

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The night air didn't so much blow through the area as howl across the streets and between the buildings. Grit lashed against her skin and tried to worry its way into her mouth, nose and eyes.

She ignored it. Really, the irritation level was lower than most other things in her life. Somewhere along the way a dog had found her stash of clothes and run off with half of them. Just to add insult to injury, the mutt had peed on the remaining clothes.

She sniffed the air and caught the scent of the dog. Someday soon she might have to come back and beat the damned thing to death. For now, she had other things to do.

Joe had other things for her to do.

And she also wanted to go by the hospital and see what all the fuss was about.

Pain wasn't unknown to her. She understood the concept, but she healed very quickly and little had hurt her badly enough to leave a serious impact on her as yet.

*Count your blessings, kid. When you feel pain for the first time, you'll know it.*

She rolled her eyes toward the heavens. "Whatever, Joe."

She could almost feel him grinning in her head. She still didn't even know what Joe Bronx looked like, but she could still imagine the smile on his face as he reflected on her cavalier attitude.

"Okay. I've still got three blocks to go before I reach your little warehouse. So I want you to explain this to me one more time."

*Why is it none of you ever listen the first time?*

*“Because it’s harder to listen when you first wake up. Duh.”*

*Good point. Okay, here we go. You weren’t born in vitro. You were created in a lab. But not just you, also your little friend, Melissa, too.*

*“Why don’t I remember that? Why doesn’t Melissa?”*

*Save the questions until I’m done, okay? This will go faster. Oh yes, he was a jerk. You and Melissa are separate personalities, separate bodies. But you occupy the same space. You co-exist, only one at a time. Get it? When she’s awake, you go to sleep. When she’s asleep, you can come out and play. Only you couldn’t come out and play until I woke you up, because you were, well, let’s call it hibernating. You’ve been there all along and you’ve been getting information from Melissa’s mind. That’s why you can speak English why you can walk without having to learn how to walk, and why you know most of the layout of San Diego, because she knows it and you’ve got access to all of her basic long-term memories. Her short-term memories, like what she watched on TV and what she ate for lunch, sometimes we have a lot of access and sometimes almost none. I call it Bleed-Over when you get all of the information from the day-to-day life of your counterpart. It’s not really a good thing as far as I’m concerned. I mean, it can be useful, but it also makes things confusing.*

*“How? How does it make things more confusing”? That notion made zero sense to her. The entire world was basically confusing, right up to why she was listening to Joe’s orders.*

*She felt his flash of irritation, but he answered anyway. If you sympathize too much with your counterpart, you might want to help them. If you want to help Melissa,*

*you might not be helping yourself. Remember, you don't get to live as long as she's awake. How can you have a life at all if she's always in control of your body?*

That was as far as he got before she reached the exterior of the building. It was a good question and one she would have to contemplate, but only after she took care of breaking in and getting the last of the information Joe wanted. He needed to know what was going on with Janus now, and apparently there was a lot of information buried in some files that had been either stored out here or stolen. He wasn't quick to clarify when she asked about that.

This wasn't like the last place she'd broken into. This place had steel bars over the windows, and it was decidedly in a bad part of town. Heavy brick walls, steel doors and bars over the windows. Oh, yes, this would be a bit more challenging.

*Relax. I think I have a plan for you.*

She didn't like the way he said that. Not at all.

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"I-I can't do this. I don't know how."

*Relax. His voice was a purr in her mind. I'll show you. It's easy.*

She didn't like the idea, not one bit, but she couldn't think of another way to handle the problem. "What if it hurts?"

*It won't hurt if you listen to my instructions and do what I tell you. Trust me, I've done this before.*

A long hesitation on her part. "You better not be lying, Joe."

*Trust me. It'll be okay.*

Finally she nodded and she listened. His instructions were simple enough to follow and after a few moments of fiddling around, the engine started. He'd chosen a rather old station wagon for a couple of reasons. First, the engine was easier to start with old hot wiring tricks. Second, the car weighed enough to serve the purpose they wanted it to serve. In this case, knocking down a brick wall.

She knew the basics of driving. Joe walked her through the rest. Five minutes after she'd broken into the car in the first place she was aiming at the front of the building that was her target. Fifty feet from the target, she jumped from the driver's seat and rolled on the asphalt, skinning her shoulder, her arm and her knee all at the same time. The pain was a brilliant, sudden thing and she couldn't help screaming as she bounced and finally stopped moving.

By the time she'd come to a complete stop, the car had too. The front of the vehicle had blasted through the brick wall and the engine made barking noises for a few seconds before it stalled.

She stood up and looked at the hole in the wall. Her body hurt everywhere and for the first time she understood why so many people were afraid of pain and injury.

*You'll be fine. It's just a few scrapes. Just a few more minutes, okay? Just slip on inside and look for the Janus files.* She thought something unpleasant about him and heard Joe laugh deep in the recesses of her mind. Her teeth clenched in anger, but she listened to him, almost as if she were compelled.

It was easy enough to slip past the car. From inside the building she could hear a monotonous beeping noise. *That'll be the alarm. Let's move it.*

"You keep acting like we're in this together, but I'm the one taking all of the risks, 'Joe.'"

*I can't be there physically, or I would do it myself. I'm on the other coast right now. Handling...business.* There was a quick mental image and she didn't think he wanted her to see it, but she did just the same. Thick, powerful hands wrapped around a man's neck, squeezing. The man was older, and he fought, struggled, but failed to break free from the hands choking the life from him. *We're in this together. I just can't be there right now. I want you to come here when the time is right. Then I can explain everything properly.*

She shook her head. There was a tone in his voice that bordered on condescending, and she didn't like it. He wasn't very impressed with her. She resented it.

"Whatever. I'll get your files."

The inside of the building had power, but she couldn't spot any light switches. That was okay, her eyes quickly adjusted and she moved into the darkened interior, past the reception area and into the main offices.

"Where?"

*Look for the offices of the head honcho. Probably they'll be the biggest room with a desk, because these guys always think that a bigger salary means they need a bigger desk.* She found the office door that said **Curt Blanchard, President** and kicked the door in. The door was made of thin wood and while it had a lock the thing

was flimsy. Apparently the belief was that the walls outside and the steel doors would keep everyone out.

That or the man looking at her with a gun in his hand. The man was in his fifties, round and balding. He also looked extremely nervous. "Get out of my office or I'll shoot you!"

*Take him.*

"He's got a gun."

The man in front of her looked around. "Who are you talking to?"

*You're faster than him. Take him before he has a chance to calm down.* Joe's voice was impossibly calm.

"He's still got a gun. I don't want to get shot."

"Who are you talking to?" He was almost screaming now, and he was definitely looking like he wanted to run.

**MOVE! NOW!**

And just like that, she was moving. She crouched down for a moment, assessed the layout of the room and decided on her course of action in an instant. And she knew, even as she did it, that Joe was once again helping her, offering her access to his combat memories and letting her choose how to act as if he were actually the one taking all of the actions. She didn't really understand how it was that she could draw on his experiences, but she also wasn't about to turn down the offer.

The man aimed where she had been, his arm moving so very slowly, and she dropped to all fours, scurried to the left and then came up in one smooth leap. He

may as well have been standing still. By the time he realized that she was no longer where he was trying to aim, she was in the air and almost to him. Her foot swung in a violent arc and she felt the bottom of her shoe slam into his wrist. The gun went flying and he let out a scream as the bones in his hand shattered under the force of the attack.

Joe tried to talk to her, but she ignored him. Her hand grabbed the man by his shirt and she grunted as she lifted him off the ground. He outweighed her by easily fifty pounds. He was taller than her. He was older than her and used to being in authority. He let out a loud squeak as she threw him across the room and into the wall next to the door she had just entered.

And then she was on him. She pounced again, and landed with one leg on either side of his prone form. The man was dazed, but not unconscious. He looked at her with wide, terrified eyes.

“Janus. I want the files. Now.”

He pointed to the proper cabinet.

She had planned on looking away from him, but Joe’s voice came to her, warned her. *He’s either going to run from you, or maybe try to kill you. Finish him before you go looking for files.*

She knew what he wanted. Joe wanted her to kill the older man. Melissa would not approve. Melissa would be horrified.

She was not Melissa.

Still, Melissa had to matter.

She hit the man in the side of his head and his skull bounced off the wall. His eyes rolled up into his head and he grunted as he fell back and slid down the wall.

She listened for a moment. He was still breathing.

*You should kill him.*

“You should shut your mouth.”

Joe remained silent as she hunted down the files. Then, papers in hand, she ran as hard as she could away from the building as the police sirens started in the distance. Hit and run; that was what Joe called it. Hit and run.

She was getting very good at hit and run.

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Melissa woke up aching everywhere. Maybe that would have bothered her, but one of the places that ached was her left leg and no matter that it hurt, the returned sensation was enough to make the pain tolerable.

Her body felt like it had when she was practicing for cheerleading before the back injury: the aches were there, but they were mostly the aches of muscles that had been overtaxed without proper stretching. Because she was up early enough, she very carefully did some of the stretches she remembered from back in the day and, sure enough, the discomfort lessened.

Maybe it was stress, maybe it was because yesterday had been such an amazingly strange day, but the aches and pains were there and she refused to let



them get her down. She had school, and after that, she had to go by the hospital again.

She had friends to see to. And that was another thing: she'd had a dream about an old friend she hadn't thought of in years, her best friend when she was lying in the hospital and uncertain if she would ever move again, before and after the surgery and during the long, miserable span of physical therapy afterward.

She'd only had one friend then, really, an imaginary girl who was always brave, always tough and never took crap off of anyone. Weird. She couldn't even remember what she'd called her any more. Maybe it was the lack of sleep. The last few nights had been fitful at best.

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After a shower and a getting dressed Melissa got downstairs and grabbed a bowl of cereal for breakfast. It had bran, so it was allegedly healthy. She didn't really care. It had enough sugar to make it taste like real food, so it was all good.

Her folks were watching the small television in the kitchen, the one they almost always had on when Mom was cooking—or Dad, when they were feeling adventurous—and the story was about a car being driven into a building, likely by vandals or just possibly by a street gang looking to score drugs.

She frowned at that notion, then paused and added more milk to the bran-sludge her cereal had become. For some reason the idea of a gang doing it didn't feel right. Or maybe it just didn't seem as cool to her as the idea of one person doing it.

Melissa closed her eyes and imagined what it would feel like to grab a car, hotwire it and then drive it into the side of a building. She'd been watching too many movies. She could see the wires under the car's steering column and in her imagination she suspected she could actually manage to cross the right wires to make the car start.

That was silly, of course. She'd heard of hotwiring, she might have even seen it on a TV show once or twice, but no way she was capable doing anything like that.

Still, with her eyes remaining closed, she went through the entire process in her imagination and remained convinced she could do it.

Not that she was going to test the theory any time soon.

An itch ran across the bottom of her left foot and Melissa felt it and smiled. Maybe someday that sensation would get old, but she hoped not. As far as she was concerned, the sensation returning was nothing short of a miracle.

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"I thought we were done with this."

*So did I, but the information you sent me two nights ago gave me one more possible location.*

She sighed and looked at the buildings around them. The business district was very, very different from most of the San Diego that she knew and the buildings were much, much, higher. "Listen, it's one thing for me to bust into a couple of dumps. But this place has security. Cameras and maybe even guys with guns." She shook her head. "I don't care if I should be grateful to you for waking me up, I don't feel like dying."

*Have I let you down yet? Are you still alive? Are you injured?* She could feel him in her head. It was like fingers digging through her mind and she hated it, but she didn't know how to stop him. All she knew was it made her feel dirty. *Even Melissa's getting something out of this. The feeling's come back in her leg. Do you know why? Because you and her are linked physically and she's getting the bonus of your regeneration.*

She shook her head again and her lips pressed together. In the black glass of the building she was in front of she could see her face reflected, watched the features scrunch in irritation. "People don't regenerate that way. Lizards do, maybe, but not people."

*I told you before, we're different; stronger, faster and we heal better. Melissa wouldn't be able to see her face reflected in that glass right now, because she can't see in the dark as well as you. She wouldn't be able to smell the bums half a block away from here, or hear them arguing over that bottle of ripple. We're not human. We're better than that.* He sounded so smug when he talked, like what he was saying shouldn't be terrifying. But it was. It scared her a lot because even though she was new to the world, she never thought she was anything other than human and how

would Melissa react to that? Melissa had enough trouble with things like when she couldn't feel her leg. Still, she could tell he was right. Melissa could feel her foot again, her leg. She was walking without a cane. That was the Bleed Over he'd spoken of, maybe. That was why she could feel what Melissa felt. Maybe that was even why he knew what was going on with Melissa.

"I still don't see how I'm supposed to get inside that place and get whatever files you want me to send." She eyed the structure before her. Fifteen or maybe even twenty stories tall, a gigantic black glass monolith. The doors to at the front of the building were locked. They required a security code. She knew, because she'd already tried them.

*I'm still working on that, but we'll make it happen.* And there it was again, that cocky tone in the voice in her head. Like he knew what was best and knew exactly how to make it happen and all she had to do was play along. She'd listened when he told her to steal all of the other information and she'd put the files in packages and put those packages in the Fed Ex boxes with the code he made her memorize—a necessity because she didn't have money and besides most of those places were closed when she was up and moving around—and now, after swearing it was done, he wanted one more.

"I don't want to do this."

*I need this. You need this.*

"No! I don't need this! I'm fine without it!"

Oh, she felt his anger then, a thunderstorm of rage that washed through her mind. Was she supposed to be afraid? If so it wasn't working. Instead she responded

by getting angry herself. The fury she felt was like the pain from the night before: the first she'd ever felt, really, and as a result it was so potent, so powerful that it overwhelmed his voice inside her head.

The anger exploded. Really, that was the only way to put it. The anger buried inside of her demanded to come out and she listened. Melissa's mom would have called it a tantrum, something Melissa had stopped having around the age of three.

She had never had a mom. She had never had a tantrum.

She had no idea how to deal with the sudden burning rage, and so she lashed out.

Again and again and again, she lashed out.

Her anger was a living thing and it wanted to run free. What choice did she have?

Somewhere, distantly, she heard Joe's voice trying to calm her, but nothing seemed to work. Nothing stopped the rage. She reveled in it, bathed in it, waded deep and let herself drown in it.

Anger felt so much better than fear.

At least until she woke up again.

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Melissa woke up slowly, the sound of the waves washing against the shore enough to let her drift slowly up from her sleep.

Waves. Shore. She could smell the ocean and hear the tide lapping at the sand. Her eyes flew open wide and she sat up. The world around her was dark, and her heart blasted in her chest like an overheating steam engine. She was supposed to be in bed.

“Mommy? Dad?” her voice sounded wrong, too high, too weak. Part of her was terrified to even consider screaming. The damp sand had glued itself to her face and she brushed it aside with a worried hand as she stood up. Her clothes were wrong, too big and soaking wet. The scoop neck of her shirt was so large that one shoulder slipped from the fabric.

Melissa looked around and tried to figure out where she was in the near-perfect darkness. The sky was heavy with clouds and the only indicator she had, the only landmark worth noticing, was the ocean. No, wait, not true. Behind her and to her left she could just make out a streetlight. With no other choice, she started walking.

She had nothing on her. No phone, no purse, no cash. Melissa suppressed a powerful desire to panic and slogged her way to the parking lot where the streetlight glowed. Though it took her a minute she finally realized that she was at least close to home. Four blocks, piece of cake, right?

Despite her near panic, Melissa felt a little better knowing she was at least close. She walked as quickly as she could without drawing even more attention to herself—not that there was anyone around to see her that she knew of, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

After two blocks she stopped and took a few deep breaths, looking around to make sure that she really was alone, because she had a sneaking feeling that she was being watched and no idea why or where the feeling was coming from. She just knew she didn't like it very much.

Her skin felt too tight, the way it always did when the salt water dried on her. She shivered a bit, but only partially from the moderately cold wind. There was something

*How do you hide this one? What if Melissa finds out? What will she say about it?* weird going on in her head. Her guts wanted to twist with guilt, but she hadn't done a thing she could think of to cause that sort of sensation. She didn't like feeling guilty, so she made it a point to avoid anything that would cause her to feel that way. Her dad called it "a properly developed sense of responsibility." Brandi called it being a wuss. The difference was that Brandi spent a lot of time in detention and Melissa always went home on time.

And when she thought of Brandi the guilt came back with a brutal twist. Maybe that was it. Maybe she was feeling bad because her friend was in the hospital and hurt. But she'd visited with Brandi and Deanna earlier in the day, and this time they'd both been conscious. Sure, Deanna had almost jumped out of her skin when she saw her, but that was kind of to be expected, because Deanna didn't always act like a friend. If one of them had a reason to feel guilty

*You look at Melissa Aguirre, you smile and say something nice. Because the next time you hurt her feelings, I'm going to come back here. And I'll...I'll cut your face off. Got me?*

it was surely Deanna. Melissa frowned and shook her head, the snippet of conversation coming into her head with a strange sense of familiarity, though she didn't recognize the voice that spoke at all.

"Enough. Get home." She spoke just to hear someone talking and then she moved, going as quickly as she could, her skin goose pimpled under the wet clothing and her hair feeling too heavy.

When she got back to the house she realized she was still in trouble, She might have gotten home in one piece, but she needed to get inside and her house key was wherever her clothes were.

The panic wanted to take over again. Where the heck had she been? Where were her clothes? What the hell was she doing in someone else's clothes on the beach? Too many questions tried to assault her all at the same time, and she hated it. Still shivering, she snuck around the house looking for a way in that didn't involve knocking on the front door because her dad would have a cow, seriously. He would go absolutely nuts if she knocked on the door to get inside.

Her bedroom window was open.

Melissa stared at the window for a very long moment, both grateful for the easy access and deeply disturbed as well. When she was maybe four years old, a girl down the block had been kidnapped; stolen from her home in the middle of the night by unknown strangers. They found the girl's body two weeks later and everyone in the area knew what had been done to her. Even at a very young age Melissa understood that sometimes people weren't nice. Sometimes they were anything but kind. Long before she was old enough to understand why the girl had



been taken and exactly what had been done to her, Melissa had developed a fear of leaving her window open. So now she looked at her access back to the house with a mixture of relief and deep, abiding dread.

“Screw it. I’m already outside.” She whispered. She didn’t dare speak loudly. Her mom could be a very light sleeper.

The window was four feet off the ground. Melissa managed to get inside but only after a few failed attempts and even then only by leaving footprints on the outside wall. She was going to have to find a way to wash those away without her parents seeing them, because there was no way they’d understand what had happened when even she didn’t understand it.

Her PJs were on the bed. Neatly folded and waiting, just as easy as you please for her. She remembered putting them on before she went to bed. The alarm clock’s digital face lit up in big bright numbers that told her it was 5:08 AM. She still had forty-two minutes before she had to be awake.

Melissa quickly stripped down and then climbed into the soft flannel of her pajamas. She’d have thought for sure that she couldn’t sleep. She was wrong. She closed her eyes and was slumbering inside of minutes.

Despite having apparently slept very little, Melissa woke up feeling refreshed. She wanted to tell herself that it was all a bad dream, but she couldn’t quite make herself believe it.

The damp clothes on the floor told a different story.

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After school Melissa took the bus down to the hospital. Her mother would pick her up before dinnertime but until then she was visiting with Deanna and Brandi. There was all kinds of drama going on, and Melissa couldn't avoid it as much as she might have wished otherwise.

The first bit of drama involved Deanna's leg. They were doing a procedure in the morning to reestablish proper blood flow to all parts of her leg. If it failed, there was a very good chance that Deanna would lose her leg from the knee down. Even if the surgery went well, it was still going to be touch and go on whether or not she got to keep all of it.

Deanna was a wreck. Her mom was a mess. Melissa understood. She only stayed for a few minutes. Then, feeling almost like a traitor, she went to visit Brandi.

Brandi was as messed up as Deanna. If she could have Brandi would have paced the length of her room with nervous energy. Instead her hands flew everywhere, like birds anchored to the rest of her by the chains that were her wrists. "What if she loses her leg? What if I did that to her?" Brandi, who was always as tough as nails in public, blinked back tears. It was one thing to have a high school rivalry and another to ruin someone's life.

"You didn't do it. You said someone pushed both of you, right?"

Brandi shook her head. "I think someone pushed us. Doesn't mean I'm right. Maybe we just really got into it."

"Or maybe someone pushed you. The police are supposed to be looking into it, right?"

“Who would push us?”

And as unsettling as it was, Melissa realized she had a few notions about that. But didn't say anything. Instead she changed the subject. “So, I woke up on the beach this morning.”

Brandi looked at her. “No way.”

“Yeah. Seriously. I woke up in someone else's clothes, and I was soaked and I don't even know how I got there, Brandi.” She looked around and leaned in closer. “Seriously. I don't know what happened to me.”

“You weren't, you know, partying or anything?” Brandi looked at her with a shrewd eye.

“No way! I so totally don't do that sort of thing.”

“Nobody does that sort of thing, until they suddenly do. I thought maybe a guy convinced you to try it. Weirder things happen, Mel. So don't go getting all defensive on me.”

“There's no one, Brandi.” No. There were no guys. There were a couple of them that she thought were cute enough, of course, but most of them never gave her the time of day. She didn't stand out. She wasn't like Deanna—ridiculously good looking—and she wasn't like Brandi—confident and loud enough to demand attention. She was just the girl with good manners. No one cared enough to try to get her in trouble. But even as she thought that, there was a voice in the back of her head that disagreed. That voice said she was getting noticed plenty, even if she didn't know it.

Worst part? That voice in her head sounded almost like the voice she remembered hearing before, a wisp of a memory that didn't make sense and didn't feel like it was hers. *You look at Melissa Aguirre, you smile and say something nice. Because the next time you hurt her feelings, I'm going to come back here. And I'll...I'll cut your face off. Got me?*

Crazy. Maybe that was it. Maybe she was going quietly crazy.

The thought made her shiver.

She finished her conversation with Brandi just as the hospital staff was bringing in a tray with food and meds for her friend. She promised she'd see Brandi again tomorrow and she meant it, too.

Fate had something a little different in mind. Different, and bloodier.

End Part One

Her eyes opened in the dark room and she smiled. Melissa was asleep. That was good. The girl needed her rest and the time had come to finish with a few things.

The memories came in hard and fast. She didn't want, them, not really, but they insinuated themselves into her mind like worms creeping through holes in a stone wall.

The rage had been white hot and the barrier between her and what she wanted had been reinforced glass. She drove her fists through the black glass and roared as it shattered around her.

What had she looked like when she charged into the building? She had no idea, but she had no doubt that somebody somewhere was studying the images to see if they recognized her. She was a big girl, and she knew it. Almost six feet tall, heavily muscled, with wild dark hair and black clothes. She also had arms that were bleeding freely at that moment, because glass did not break without fighting back.

She'd stormed through the building, her teeth bared, a scream peeling from her lips. She hadn't bothered with the elevator. She remembered that clearly, because the stupid thing seemed to take forever so she ran for the stairs and stormed up the ten flights to the office she knew to look for. All the while Joe had babbled in her head, trying to make her calm down and she had ignored him, except to feed on the anger that his existence generated within her. He spoke and she grew angrier. He made noises and her rage bloomed harder and hotter and brighter, until she could barely remember anything at all.

Except the guards. She remembered them. Whatever their reason for being there, whichever offices they were trying to protect, they tried to get between her and her goals. And she slapped them down for their trouble.

Blood. So much blood. How fragile were the people around her?

She shook the thought away. It wasn't time for that. She was done with Joe's dirty work. He was supposed to contact her soon, after he'd looked over the latest information she'd sent to him. Until then, she wanted to take care of something that was bothering

*Melissa. Melissa needs to know who*

her. She couldn't get the notion that Deanna and Brandi needed her help. Not that she cared, of course but Melissa did and that meant she was sort of obligated.

Not that Joe would have agreed, if course but she wasn't Joe.

Pushed. That was the thing. They'd been pushed. One of the girls had said as much to Melissa, and the other one? Well, the other one was behaving herself these days, but that didn't mean the girl was suddenly friends with Melissa. That might never happen again.

What did she know about friends? The only friend she'd ever had was Melissa and that had been a long time ago, hadn't it?

She slipped out of the window and dropped to the ground outside of Melissa's bedroom. She could smell detergent, and in a moment of Bleed-over understood that Melissa had cleaned up a mess outside of her bedroom window earlier in the day. She had a flash of scrubbing at the wall with a sponge Melissa's dad normally saved for washing the cars.

The night sky was indecisive and the moon kept hiding away behind a broken veil of clouds. She felt no doubt in her heart and knew what she needed to do. The challenge would be in getting away with her plans.

It would have been easier if she could have simply stolen a car, and while she remembered what Joe had taught her, she didn't trust her ability to drive well enough to risk ramming a few thousand pounds of vehicle into another building. Especially since the idea this time around was to get where she was going in one piece.

Instead of bothering with trying to understand the mysteries of the bus system, she walked and when that proved boring, she ran. She liked to run, to feel her feet pounding in the ground and to see the world rip past at high speed.

And when she arrived at the hospital, she stopped outside and panted for a moment, catching her breath properly. Melissa was not there. Melissa, had she been conscious at that time, would have been close to panicking, because in her entire life Melissa had never run anywhere near to fifteen miles. Her counterpart had just done that distance with ease and was barely breathing hard.

She knew nothing of Melissa's feelings on the matter. Had she known, she'd likely have been smugly amused by the idea. She needed Melissa. Melissa was her only friend. That said she still liked being better at something than Melissa was. Melissa would have laughed at that, and like as not pointed out that the notion made her human, despite what Joe Bronx might have claimed.

She didn't need to creep through the hospital, but she did anyway. She didn't know when visiting hours ended, and she also didn't want to talk to anyone. She just

had to check her facts with the memories from Melissa that kept forcing themselves into her head.

The first room she entered belonged to the girl she'd last seen at home, sleeping peacefully on her bed. The smell of antiseptics, detergents and medication overwhelmed the air. She could barely smell the girl under all of the other odors, which was going to make her task that much harder.

Working with the careless efficiency of a person throwing a house for one specific item, she tore the room apart, opening the closet and then the drawers in the generic dressers until she found the plastic bag stuffed with the clothes Deanna came into the hospital wearing.

Once she had the bag she opened the door, looked outside of the room and left as soon as she was sure she wouldn't be spotted. She never worried about Deanna waking up; the girl was stoned into the next week on pain medications.

Brandi's room was more challenging, but only a little. Like her nemesis the girl was heavily medicated for sleep. She also snored up a storm. Despite the noise of the girl's slumber, she was careful as she looked around. She'd have been hard pressed to explain why she was stealing dirty clothes. When she had both bags of clothes she headed for the closest exit. She was almost there when she paused and studied a door she had noticed on her way in and thought nothing of: the door said CHAPEL. She knew the word. It was a variation on church, on synagogue, on mosque. It meant a place of worship. Despite her need to be elsewhere, she slipped past the doors—which were open, because apparently worship was not like banks and office buildings and did not have a set time—and eyed the room cautiously.



Melissa liked church. But depending on her mood, sometimes the girl feared God. She understood the concept well enough, but had trouble with understanding why it was important to Melissa.

Just the same, she walked past the small row of pews and settled into a seat to consider her situation. Should she pray for enlightenment? She wasn't sure if she knew how. Still, there was no one else for her to speak with—except Joe, who seemed preoccupied now that she had done what he wanted. He was not answering her queries—and so she rested a moment, her bags of stolen clothes beside her.

The thing was that she knew something was wrong with her target—if he was her target, something she had to find a way to discover. He was sick, she knew that. Not sick in body, but sick in his mind. The way he acted told her that. Melissa thought the boy was strange, but the girl didn't understand as well as she did. Melissa's world was blocked by other concerns. She had to consider her mother, her father, her friends. She did not have those complications. She had no mother, no father and the only friend she had—with the possible exception of Joe—was Melissa. There was no schoolwork, nor did she have to consider bus routes, the stories and articles she had to read or homework. Instead she contemplated what she learned through Melissa's memories and considered the things she saw that stood out.

The boy was wrong. She could sense it as well as she could see the color blue.

She found a sense of comfort in the quiet of the chapel. But found no answers, so eventually she left the hospital. She needed to be away from the overwhelming scent of flowers and cleaning agents before she tried her luck.

Moving out of the complex of buildings was as easy as going in had been and a small part of her was puzzled by that. To her thinking the people you love were supposed to be protected and if they were injured, they were vulnerable. Of course there weren't many people in her life, really. She had only had a physical form for a few weeks and even then she wasn't around for many hours at a time. The only person she could say she knew well enough to love was Melissa and she wasn't sure if that qualified.

The night was growing older, and she had things to do. Without wasting any more time, she opened the first back of clothing and inhaled the scents captured within the plastic. Had she been a normal person she would have smelled a few things. She knew that much from sorting through the vague recollections she could get from Melissa's mind. She also knew that Melissa was nearly blind in all her senses in comparison. She knew that even before Joe told her as much.

She smelled anger. She smelled blood. She smelled Deanna and she smelled Brandi. There were other smells, too, some weak and some strong. Perfume, hair spray, light sweat. And there was a man-scent, too. Strong and laced with emotion.

She made a mental note of the scent, and then she opened the other bag and sniffed, taking in odors and cataloguing them with unsettling ease. She was new to the world, but she had Melissa's experiences to help her.

She knew the scent of the male the second time she caught it.

At least she thought she did.

But she couldn't be sure, not until she encountered the male herself.

And that was a problem.

She knew the scent, yes, but couldn't place a face with it.

Melissa would never know what she was going to do.

That didn't matter.

She needed to do this thing the way Melissa would. That was what she owed to her only friend.

And she needed to be sure that if what she thought was true.

She was a predator. It wasn't a question of self-evaluation for her. She simply was. She knew it from the moment she opened her eyes. When she looked at the people around her she automatically assessed them and considered their strengths and weaknesses. The man to her left was older, and walked with a limp. The woman beside him was younger and should have been vital, but even from a distance she could smell the disease on the younger one. She was dying and didn't know it. They were not threats.

She had only met a handful of people in the world so far. Most of them were not threats.

But Melissa had met many more people and when she struggled to remember Melissa's world, one face came up a threat each and every time. One threat. One predator.

And that one? If she was right his scent was on the clothes of two girls who had been pushed under the wheel of a moving bus.

And that one was too close to Melissa for her comfort.

He would have to be stopped.

He would have to be killed.

That was the way her world worked.

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Melissa woke up, showered and got dressed for school, pausing only long enough to savor the feeling in her leg and foot. She still hoped that never became something she took for granted.

Instead of wearing the jeans and blouse she'd planned out for the day, Melissa changed her mind at the last moment and switched to a long skirt. She seldom wore skirts, but for some reason it seemed important. When she was done dressing and talking with her folks, she headed for school.

And if she felt like she was on autopilot all day long, that was hardly surprising. She was tired. That was all. She'd been studying hard and she'd spent hours at the hospital. So, really, she told herself it was nothing to worry about.

Deanna was a mess. The girl was still filled with enough painkillers to make coherent conversation almost impossible, but even though she was barely able to have a chat, Melissa knew that her friend was suffering and miserable.

Brandi wasn't much better. She was trying to be cheerful, but it wasn't really possible. While she should have been listening to Ms. Harper talking about the Civil War, Melissa instead found herself remembering the conversation with her best friend and the growing certainty that the girl had that they'd been pushed.

She closed her eyes and saw the earnest look on Brandi's face, the wide eyes and the tears that threatened. Not tears of pain, though there was some of that every

time the girl moved her leg, but tears of frustration, because no one wanted to believe her. There was no evidence and even with a dozen people who had spoken to the police, there was no one who saw anyone push the two girls.

Without even being conscious of it, she looked around each class she was in and wondered who would be that cruel. There were a few people she thought could be willfully mean, but none that she could imagine being murderous. Then again, murders happened every day, didn't they? Her dad loved the news and watched it during dinner every night. And almost inevitably there was another story about a body found or someone accused of making another body for the police to examine.

Small wonder no one believed that her friends might have been pushed. If they believed that, they'd have to believe there was another case for them to solve.

Melissa couldn't believe she was being that negative.

Long before the last period was finished for the day she'd gathered more homework assignments for both of the girls she'd be seeing at the hospital. It didn't seem that anyone expected them to actually do the work, but she took it anyway, just in case.

Melissa remembered how hard it had been to keep up when she was in the hospital. She made a mental note to try to keep both of her friends on track for finishing the school year on time. No promises, but she would try.

Just before the last bell of the day rang, she closed her eyes at the sudden blast of pressure she felt deep in her skull.

She did not open her eyes for a long, long time.

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There is only one way to learn what you are capable of in this world: you have to try new things. She learned a new trick that afternoon. She learned to piggyback on Melissa. Not physically, of course, but in her mind.

Melissa had always loved to ride piggyback—or as she'd called it when she was a child pick-a-back—on her father's back. The man carried her as if she weighed nothing at all. She had never actually tried riding piggyback before, but she imagined what it must feel like and that was what she did when Melissa woke up. She didn't say anything; she merely hung on and waited. And it worked. That was the best part. She hadn't been sure if she'd be able to hide herself that well. Or that she'd be able to influence her best friend, for that matter, She wanted Melissa to wear something other than jeans because she was physically larger than her friend. Melissa went with a long skirt that was perfect for her needs.

Melissa fell into a deep sleep when she decided to exert her will over her only friend in the world. And as Melissa started to slumber, she lowered her head to the desk to hide what was happening as best she could. It wasn't easy, either. The changes in her body were painful. Muscles shifted and bones grew and her skin felt hot and flushed and sweaty. The hairs on her skin changed and even the texture of her flesh became something different. She was a different girl, really. The only things that didn't change were the clothes on her body.

As soon as the transformation was finished, she slid gracefully from the seat and moved into the hallway, knowing full well who would come out the door next.

She knew his scent, had found it as she had expected to on the clothes worn by Deanna and Brandi alike, a strong odor that was impossible to miss.

Wayne Hooper came out of the room and looked only at the floor, refusing to notice her, or anyone else around him. He did this every day and unknown to Melissa, he normally followed her. He was casual as he looked around and his muddy eyes looked at her and slipped past, not acknowledging even the clothes that were the very same as Melissa wore earlier. Melissa was shorter, softer than she was, and her face was different in shape, her hair cut to a different style—in fact her hair had never been cut, where as Melissa's was styled. She may as well have been invisible to the boy. She knew this only because she had studied him, studied his patterns as she contemplated why she'd smelled him on the clothes she'd stolen. She could sense his hostility, his darker needs. He walked in an imitation of a submissive, his shoulders hunched, his head down and his feet shuffling, but she was not fooled.

He shuffled his way down the hall and she followed, ignoring everyone else as she moved. It wasn't that she didn't see them, merely that they were not important to her. They were not the target she had set her sites on.

Perhaps she was not subtle enough. It's possible that, as she was attuned to her enemy, so he was seeking any possible threats. Whatever the case, Wayne turned and looked directly at her, his face pinched into an expression of distaste. He was not unattractive. He was also not handsome. He was plain, the sort of person that no one sees in a crowd. Unremarkable, unlike her. He was perfectly camouflaged, in other words.

“What do you want?” He spoke softly, his face relaxing a little as he looked at her. But his eyes, oh, they told a different story. He was doing a very good job of looking like a mouse until you saw the lion in his eyes. No, not a lion. That denoted a certain courage that he didn’t have.

She smiled at him. “A killer.” She spoke softly. “The kind of creep that pushes girls in front of buses when they aren’t looking.”

His eyes flashed, but his face remained surprisingly calm.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She stepped closer, looking him up and down. The smell of him, the stench of the hidden predator, was potent now. All around them kids moved through the hallways, and from not far away a boy called out “Lookit Hooper, finally getting some action.” The tone of the words was mocking. Neither of them looked at the voice of the boy. He wasn’t important.

“You can’t prove anything.” His eyes looked her over from head to toe, and unlike a lot of the boys she’d met he didn’t look at her to appreciate her charms. He looked at her to size her up. He didn’t like what he saw. He shouldn’t have.

“You run now, hard and fast, and maybe I’ll leave you alone.” She stepped closer as she spoke, deliberately violating his personal space. He didn’t flinch, didn’t back down, didn’t even really look at her. His eyes trailed over her face and then looked past her.

“You want me? Come on then. You touch me here, they’ll break it up. You follow me, I’ll gut you.”



And there it was, the darkness inside of him coming to the surface. She knew it was there, sensed it. He was a dangerous boy. Instead of backing down, he bared his fangs when he was cornered.

“Your call. Here or elsewhere. You lead. I’ll follow.”

He finally looked at her for a second, only a moment, really, his eyes locking on hers and then moving on again. Then he turned away from her and walked down the hallway toward the front doors of the school.

Melissa had walked the halls a hundred or more times and for that reason there was a sense of familiarity, but little more than that. The kids walking the hallways and heading for the exit were strangers to her and she to them.

Wayne Hooper moved the same as he always did, but she could see the tension in his strides, could hear the pounding of his heart even past the sounds of everyone else around them. He was scared and he was ready to run.

She slipped Melissa’s backpack across her shoulders and readied herself for when he made his move.

As soon as he was out the doors of the building, Wayne bolted, moving with a speed she barely believed him capable of. His legs pumped furiously and his body dropped lower, into a stance designed to let him move faster and shelter his vitals at the same time.

She let him run. What was coming next was best done away from prying eyes.

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Wayne ran hard, his breaths blasting from his lungs after the first two blocks. He barely bothered looking behind him, barely even seemed to care, but she knew better. He was running for a reason. She was that reason.

As fast as he was, she was faster. The skirt billowed out behind her and flapped in the wind her pace made. She didn't care. It was easier running in the skirt than she would have expected and the shoes she was wearing had a good tread for keeping her footing. But they pinched, too. Melissa was smaller than her, even her feet were smaller.

Wayne ran and she followed. She could have taken him down several times, but part of her was curious, wanted to see what he would do and where he would go.

Melissa could have told her about the term "curiosity killed the cat," but Melissa wasn't there.

Wayne cut behind a shopping center four blocks from the school and poured on the speed, his breaths coming in harsh gasps. She felt a flash of irritation. Whatever he was planning, whatever was going through his mind, he was starting to annoy her.

She ran faster, no longer wanting to play his game. The distance between them vanished in seconds and she lowered herself into a half-crouch, ready to leap and take him down.

And just before she could make a jump at him, Wayne abruptly stopped running and turned back toward her.

The knife came from his hand with the casual grace of someone who had thrown the blade a thousand times or more. It arced into the air slightly and leveled out at the height of her chest. She was faster than him, stronger than him and until a moment earlier she'd have said she was smarter than Wayne, too. But she'd never once expected the blade and she was caught unprepared.

Still, she was fast. The blade missed her chest as she dodged and instead rammed home in her right shoulder.

She screamed, the pain an unexpected sensation, one that she was still not used to. For a moment all she could do was stare at the handle of the weapon as waves of nausea and fiery agony rippled from the wound. She looked at the handle, watched blood dribble from around the metal piercing her flesh, and tried to make sense of what had just happened.

And while she was busy with that, Wayne came at her, his teeth bared and his eyes finally allowing her to see the full measure of his madness.

He thought he could take her, could kill her. She saw that easily enough. He thought she was wounded and that the injury would make her weak.

She showed him otherwise. He came in hard his hand reaching for the blade in her shoulder. He meant to take it out of the wound and cut her again.

As soon as he was close enough she moved out of his way, twisting to her left and leaving his hands seeking nothing but air where she had been a moment earlier.

Wayne tried to compensate, to slow himself, but he wasn't as fast to stop as he wished. While he lumbered past where she had been, she pounced. Her left hand

grabbed his hair, her fingers digging at his scalp. He screamed as she jerked him toward her and hauled him off his feet.

Wayne fell back and crashed to the ground, gasping and stunned. She leaned down and kept her grip on his hair and scalp and before he could recover from his sudden fall she lifted him from the ground.

Her right arm was still threatening to catch on fire but she did her best to ignore it. She had to understand what he was doing and why. She had to understand this creature or she thought she might never understand people at all and she couldn't protect Melissa if she couldn't understand the threats.

“Why did you push them?”

Wayne's eyes roiled in their sockets and he shook his head. His mouth worked, but no words came from him, the pain in his scalp was too much. While she tried to work out what he was trying to say, Wayne lunged and his hand caught the hilt of the knife sticking from her shoulder.

He didn't try to pull it free. He tried to haul it down, to cut through more muscles and to bleed her. His face, shocked a moment ago, flashed with that white-hot rage he'd revealed before and she felt the blade scrape bone in her arm. She roared and let him go, twisting as she did so. The knife pulled from her arm before it could do much more damage.

The pain! She'd never felt the like before and the need to vomit came back as her knees grew weak. How could anyone fight through this?

She staggered backward and Wayne fell to the ground, caught himself on his hands and knees, the knife between his palm and the dirty asphalt. “You wait right

there! I'm not done killing you!" He smiled as he screamed, his eyes locked onto hers and his bland face suddenly wild with delight. This was what he wanted; this was what he lived for. He was a predator, but he preferred his prey wounded before he finished it. He liked to play with his kills.

Her legs felt weak and a river of heat was running down her arm now, blood flowing from the open wound he'd made of her useless shoulder. She shook her head and felt the anger there, under the fear, trying to hide away.

*No. Let it out. Make it come out and play. Make it yours.* Joe's words were in her head. *That's your pain. That's your anger. Use them. He's nothing next to you. He's just a weak little boy with a knife. You don't need a knife to take him out.* The words alone might not have done it. She was scared and there was no way around that, but at the same time Joe gave her memories, his memories. He pushed them into her mind, hot and squirming and so very, very angry.

*There were needles, and knives that cut, and metallic probes to pull muscles apart and to touch the blistering heat of exposed nerve-endings and scraped bone. The pains were infinite, the cuts so very much worse than the wound in her arm. And through it all, there were people talking, asking questions, speaking as if the boy they cut and wounded wasn't even in the room, except when they wanted their questions answered.*

Seven. Joe was just a word, a name to hide the real person behind it. Joe was a mask. Subject Seven was the name that mattered. Subject Seven was the one they cut, and bled and tortured. Subject seven was the one that held those pains in his

heart and gathered them like flames, each small wound one more stick of kindling to fuel the fire of his rage.

Subject Seven spoke to her, whispered in her heart: *It's just pain. Use it. Make it yours and then share it with him. Make him scream.*

She closed her eyes and took in the memories, the name. She opened her eyes again just as Wayne was standing up and heading for her, his hands scraped raw by his fall to the ground, his head bleeding where her finger nails scratched into his scalp. His face was no longer placid or calm, and instead was a mask of hatred and twisted joy. He wanted her to die and he wanted her to suffer and as he spoke she understood at last why he had pushed the girls.

"Melissa is mine. She belongs to me. I love her better than anyone else does and she'll understand that soon enough. Until then, you stay away from her. You hear me?" He stepped closer and she shook her head. His words made no sense. "I can smell her on you! You're wearing her clothes. You stay away! She's mine!"

Her left hand lashed out as he raised the blade. Her fingers caught his wrist and she bent his arm to the right until Wayne screamed and dropped the knife, his eyes suddenly filled with pain instead of righteous anger. He tried to pull free and she stepped closer, forcing his arm further to the side until he staggered to try to avoid the pain of grip. His steps might have eased the pressure but they also left him off balance and she moved in fast, pushing his body even as she maintained the grip on his arm. Wayne staggered and flailed and then screamed as his arm broke.

To make sure that she was right and that he was hurt, she yanked his arm in the other direction and Wayne shrieked and the flesh of his forearm bulged where the bone threatened to break through the skin.

Melissa would have been horrified. She knew that. Melissa didn't like pain. She didn't like feeling it or inflicting it.

Wayne fell to the ground, screaming and crying and trying to get away. His monstrous anger was gone again and in its place there were the confused tears of a boy who has been bullied too often and taken more than his share of beatings over the years. Wayne was an outcast. He always had been. There was that something about him that most people didn't understand. She did, of course. She could sense the predator inside of him. But to most people he was just Weird Wayne Hooper, the quiet kid who always looked at the ground and almost never spoke to anyone. He was different, and therefore not to be considered. If they noticed him at all, it was merely to remember that he was supposed to be ignored.

Wayne looked up at her and almost whined as he pushed himself back. She came toward him slowly, cautiously. Her arm hurt, but she could feel the blood slowing, the wound starting to heal. Inside her head she could feel Joe watching, studying what she was doing.

*What will you do with him?*

"I'm not sure."

*He's dangerous.*

"Not to me." And it was true. He was still backing away, the knife forgotten, the pain becoming his master as the wound in his arm screamed for medical

attention. The break wouldn't kill him, but it hurt so much he probably wished that it would.

*No. To Melissa. He wants her. He's already tried to kill people who got too close to her.* Joe's voice had that edge in it. He was telling her half-truths to suit his needs. He might suspect that Wayne would always want Melissa but he didn't know it. He just liked to sound like he knew.

"What makes you so sure?" Wayne looked at her, and the curiosity peeked past his pain; he couldn't understand who she was talking to and it bothered him. She didn't care. She looked at him and knew that his wants and needs meant nothing to her.

*I know a thing or two about obsession. I've spent five years looking for answers.*

"What would you do, Joe?"

*I protect my own. Nothing else matters.*

She nodded her head.

At her feet, Wayne looked up and frowned.

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Melissa looked at the scar on her shoulder and frowned. She couldn't remember a time in the past when she'd been hurt on her right arm, but there was an old, faded mark there and the area felt just a little tender.

It wasn't important, not really.



When she got to the hospital the day before she'd felt exhausted and a little confused. She couldn't for the life of her remember what she'd done to her clothes or why she was wearing a different blouse than the one she'd remembered putting on that morning and she'd had a nasty headache besides. They were little things, and for now at least, they were smaller than she needed to worry about.

Brandi was coming home after school. She was going to need to wear a cast for at least the next few weeks and she was going to be in pain, but she was coming home. That made her happy. She was looking forward to having her best friend back in school.

And Deanna? Well, it was looking good for her keeping her leg at least. That had to count for something.

Maybe Deanna was having trouble seeing that, but Melissa could see it and understand. And though it would probably cause her troubles with Brandi—she wasn't sure, but she feared it would—she decided to stay friends with Deanna. Deanna needed someone who could understand a little of what she was going through.

Melissa climbed from the shower and toweled off, wincing a bit at the pain in her shoulder. Weird. Still, in comparison to the feeling that had come back to her leg a little twinge in her arm was a minor thing at worst.

Within her, locked away and sleeping, her Other rested. Joe wanted her to come to Boston. She didn't think she would accept the invitation. Melissa had a life here, and Melissa was happy. That meant she was happy.

She didn't see that changing.

Of course both Melissa and Joe would have warned her that life can change in an instant. Sometimes happiness is fleeting.

Perhaps she might even have listened.

Whatever the case, she had no plans to meet the others like her, or to make Melissa leave her home.

She was safe and Melissa was happy.

That was enough.

Funny isn't it, how things can change?