

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, August 24th, 1:04 AM, 2037 ...

I JERKED AND looked around. The forest around me was nearly pitch-black. The rustling leaves, caused by a sharp, cold breeze, made me feel like I was surrounded on all sides. A sliver of moonlight peaked in through the treetops above, but it wasn't nearly enough to let me see my surroundings.

And it wouldn't protect me from the voice.

I kept walking like I always did whenever I heard the voice. I wanted to run, but couldn't. Or maybe didn't want to. Something deep down in my soul told me that running wouldn't save me from the voice.

"I see you."

The voice—slippery, feminine, yet cruel and colder than a corpse—whipped through my ears like a knife. Fear overwhelmed my heart and sweat broke out across every inch of my body.

Abandoning all reason, thought, and logic, I ran through the forest. Leaves crunched under my bare feet, twigs and fallen branches scraped against the soles of my feet, and low-hanging branches and thick bushes cut against my thighs, arms, and belly.

I didn't remember losing my clothes and only being in my underwear. But then, I didn't remember a lot of things, like how I got here in the first place. I only knew that this was not the first time I had visited this place and that every visit had always ended the same way.

Harsh, vindictive laughter echoed through the forest. It was as if the trees themselves were laughing at me. Through the slivers of light from the moon above, I saw cruel, vile faces start to appear on the trees. And they all said the same thing:

"I see you."

Oh, God. Oh, God. Please. Please save me.

Without warning, I burst out of the trees and found myself standing at the edge of a cliff. The cliff was impossibly tall. Even with the light from the moon above, the bottom of the cliff was pitch-black. Yet I could hear whispers of creatures below that belonged to no language I'd ever heard. Without being able to even see them, I knew they weren't human.

Why?

Because they had eaten me before, of course.

Reaching the cliff, I knew exactly what was going to happen next. A rustling of trees behind me and

The trees rustled behind me. I whirled around, my body quivering with fear. I wish I had clothes on, but I never did. Not that it would have protected me from what was about to happen next.

"I see you."

The voice startled me. Instinctively, I backed up and nearly fell over the cliff, catching myself only at the last second. Breathing hard, I didn't even look over my shoulder. My eyes were fixed on the tree line before me. *It* was in there. *It* knew where I was.

And I knew it was going to kill me.

More rustling in the trees, causing me to almost jump again. *It* was here. Dang it. Why did it have to be here? Why?

But the figure who stepped out from the trees wasn't *it*. He was a male teenager clad in a red-and-purple spandex costume. On his chest was an insect design that reminded me of a tick. His eyes peered out from the holes of his mask, confusion etched in them.

"Parasite?" I said in a low voice. "What are you doing here?"

Parasite simply blinked. "I was going to ask you the same question. You shouldn't be here."

Without warning, Parasite exploded into gas and smoke. Before I could react to that, however, the voice echoed out from the trees again, this time far hungrier:

“I *see* you!”

From out of the tree line—just like so many times before—emerged something that *looked* like a woman, but wasn’t. A black substance—maybe blood, maybe not—dripped from the corners of its mouth as it dragged its body out of the trees. Sagging, torn breasts hung from its chest, barely covered by a black dress that looked like it had been robbed from the corpse of a Victorian woman. Its stringy, white hair looked like dead grass, hanging flat down its head with mud and blood clotted in it.

The creature stank of mud and blood, too, but its eyes were the worst. Huge, white, and pupil-less, its eyes bore into my soul. I froze, staring into the creature’s gaze, feeling my entire body become numb to my mind’s commands.

A long, slimy, purple tongue licked the creature’s decaying lips. “I *see* you, Ashley Jason.”

The second I heard the creature’s voice, I screamed. My scream echoed even louder than the creature’s voice. Fear completely demolished my heart and what little rational thought I had left departed me entirely.

And then I fell over backward and fell to my death, still screaming even as the tentacles of *something* caught me and brought me into the hot, moist mouth of something I never saw ... and the jaws closed tightly around my body.

“Ashley! Wake up, girl! It’s okay!”

My eyes shot open. I sat up so fast I nearly hurled. My heart hammered in my chest, my whole body was drenched in sweat, and I thought for a moment that I saw the creature sitting at the end of my mattress, grinning at me with its fungus-covered, broken teeth.

But then I blinked and the creature was gone. Instead, I found myself looking into the face of a nineteen-year-old black girl, her usually braided hair messy and down. Her eyes were full of concern for me, her lips turned in a worried frown.

“C-Cora?” I said, breathing in and out hard. “What ... what happened? Where am I?”

“Heck if I know,” said Cora, though she was trembling slightly herself. “You just started screaming all of a sudden. It sounded like you were dying.”

I blinked. “You mean I didn’t?”

“You mean I—?” Cora shook her head. “Do I *look* dead to you, girl? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure that heaven doesn’t look like my room, which doesn’t even have any streets of gold.”

Startled, I looked around at my surroundings, which were illuminated by the lamp on Cora’s bed stand next to her bed.

I was on the floor of Cora’s room, sleeping on her extra mattress at the foot of her bed. The walls of her room were covered in posters of her favorite boy bands, with my eyes lingering on the poster of The Neos—a band composed entirely of superhumans—directly above her bed. Next to that poster, the window was closed, with blue curtains drawn over them, though the bright light from the moon was still visible.

Directly in front of my mattress was the old, creaky wooden door to Cora’s room, upon which hung a full-size mirror. This allowed me to catch a glimpse of my pale, sweaty face. I looked even worse than I thought. My brown hair was completely messed up and my eyes were so big that they scared even me. My pink cat t-shirt was drenched in sweat, while I’d somehow tossed my blankets off my legs, which explained why I felt so cold. The air was cool thanks to the air conditioning, cold enough to even make me shiver.

I gulped. “Y-Yeah. No streets of gold.”

Cora, who sat at the foot of my mattress in her own white t-shirt with a symbol of The Neos on her chest, leaned toward me with a frown. “What happened? Did you have your nightmare again? I’ve never heard you scream that way before.”

I shuddered and wrapped my arms around my body in a futile attempt to stay warm. “Y-Yes. It was the nightmare again.”

Cora’s frown deepened. “Deep, dark forest, scary woman-like thing chasing you, and then you falling off a cliff into the mouth of something you can’t even see?”

I took a deep breath and exhaled. “Yes. You sound like you saw it yourself.”

“Naw,” said Cora with a shake of her head. “I only know as much as I do because I’ve spent way too many phone calls listening to you describe it to me. If we weren’t best friends, I wouldn’t even bother.”

I nodded shakily. “I know. It’s just ... it’s just been so *real*. If you experienced it yourself, you would get it.”

“I know,” said Cora. She smiled. “But on the bright side, it’s just a nightmare. You’re here, in my house, safely on my spare inflatable mattress. No one’s gonna get you here. And if anyone tried, they’d have to go through me first.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, you’re right. But it wasn’t the normal nightmare.”

Cora raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean? Was there something different?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. “Parasite appeared at one point and he said ‘You shouldn’t be here.’ ”

Cora’s frown returned, though this time it looked a lot angrier. “Parasite? Wasn’t he that crazy guy who tried to kill you and your classmates a couple of years ago?”

“Is,” I corrected. “Parasite is still out there. But yes, that’s him.”

Cora tilted her head to the other side. “Why were you dreaming about him if you haven’t seen him in forever?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And I don’t know why he said that. It’s all so confusing.”

Cora nodded. “You said it. I wish I could help, but I’m not much of a dream interpreter. They don’t teach that in normal schools.”

I chuckled again. “Trust me, the Academy doesn’t have a course on that, either. I have no idea why I’ve been having this dream.”

Cora poked me in the chest. “Yes, you do. It’s that new Super Pill you’ve been taking, the one your professor gave you before you came back home. That’s when you started experiencing this nightmare, right?”

Cora was right. Before I left the Academy last year, Professor Dean Hernandez, my Neogenetics professor and an accomplished neogeneticist in his own right, had given me a new and improved Super Pill based on the feedback I’d given him over the last couple of years ago. This version of the Super Pill—an experimental medicine designed to help regulate my Hernandez’s Disease genetic disorder—was only meant to be taken once a week, which was a big improvement from the last version, which needed to be taken once every two days.

But Cora was also right that since I started taking the Super Pill, I’d been having this exact same nightmare over and over again. It was always the same and never changed, which was why I found Parasite’s presence in it weird. And scary.

I nodded reluctantly. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. The Super Pill seems to be doing this.”

“Have you told your professor?” said Cora. “You’re still keeping in contact with him, right?”

I sighed. “Yeah. I talk to him via holo-phone once a week. I also email him my weekly reports on how I feel. But I haven’t mentioned the nightmare to him yet.”

“Why not?” asked Cora in a stunned voice. “I’m no doctor, but my mom, who is, always says you should contact your doctor if you start experiencing any unintended side effects from medicine. No matter how good it might make you feel.”

That was the kicker. The new Super Pill I took not only dulled the pain caused by my condition completely but even made me feel great. It was kind of like taking painkillers, only I wasn’t addicted. That’s what I told myself, anyway. I needed it to survive. You can’t be addicted to something you *need*, right?

Right?

In any case, Cora's statement got to the heart of my fear. I didn't want to tell Professor Hernandez about this in case he decided to make me stop taking it or even revert to an earlier formula.

Now, however, it was starting to look like I was going to have to, especially with the way Cora looked at me.

"He doesn't need to know about it," I said. "It's just a nightmare. People have nightmares all the time. It's nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about?" said Cora. "Ash, you've been losing too much sleep from this nightmare. It's freaking you out, messing with your mind. That doesn't sound like *nothing* to me."

I bit my lower lip, but once again found myself unable to argue with Cora. Even though I was a bit more intellectual than Cora, she always seemed to win whatever arguments we had, especially ones about my health. Guess there're benefits to having a nurse as a mom. And studying nursing yourself, as Cora was doing.

"First thing tomorrow morning, I want you to call up your professor and tell him about the nightmare," Cora said. "Tell him everything you've told me. Don't leave out any details. This is for your health. Got it?"

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Cora chuckled. "No need to call me 'ma'am.' I'm the same age as you. Just do it, okay? I'll even give you some privacy when you do it. Although I might listen in just to make sure you actually tell your prof about the nightmare."

I nodded once again. "Okay. I'll give him a call tomorrow, but not in the morning. We've got a call scheduled for tomorrow night at seven. I'll tell him then."

Cora pursed her lips but nodded. "Fine. I suppose that's acceptable. Do you think you will be able to go back to sleep?"

I yawned. "Yeah, I think so. I'm not as scared now, but ... can you keep your lamp on? Just to be safe?"

Cora smiled. "Sure thing, Ash. See ya in the morning. Sleep tight."

With that, Cora crawled back into her bed and under her covers. At the same time, I lay back down on my mattress, pulling my blankets up to my chin. Within seconds, I heard Cora's loud snoring above me as she immediately fell to sleep.

I didn't, though. No, I spent a few more minutes pondering how I was going to tell Professor Hernandez that I hadn't been entirely honest with him about the effects of the Super Pill on me since I started taking it. Professor Hernandez was all the way in Washington, D.C., but that didn't mean it was a smart idea to anger him. I'd seen Professor Hernandez angry before and, I assure you, you wouldn't like Professor Hernandez when he's angry.

I also thought about the nightmare itself. In particular, I focused on the scene with Parasite and what he told me.

I suppose it was just another part of the nightmare. Even though it had been a while since I last thought about Parasite, who knew what went on in my subconscious? Maybe my subconscious had been worrying about Parasite a lot lately or something.

But I didn't think so. Parasite didn't *act* like he was just a figment of my imagination.

He acted like he was real.

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