

Imaginary Friend



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IMAGINARY FRIEND

Jules was late. I should have expected it. He'd probably gone out with his friends.

I was supposed to be one of his friends, but no one else knew it, so of course I wouldn't have been invited to go along. That was how it had been since our freshman year when we'd been paired up to do an English assignment. We had a lot in common, and in private, we could talk for hours and never run out of things to say

In public, we barely spoke. No one knew Jules and I were friends except us.

I was used to it, but it was getting worse lately. At first, he'd at least said hi to me in halls. Once in a while he'd even sat with me at lunch. He'd been friendly, even if he hadn't wanted anyone to know we were actually friends.

Since July, though, when he'd started dating Marybeth, everything had changed. M.B., everyone called her. Cheerleader, on target to become captain of the squad next year when we would be seniors. Popular, walking down the hall flipping her wavy blonde hair—or straight blonde, depending on how she'd styled it that morning.

She faked friendly at me all the time. A bright little smile with a pleasant little, "Good morning, Trinity. How are you today?"

Every time I answered her with more than a hello, she turned into Queen Snark. "Oh, why aren't you feeling well? Oh, why didn't you do your homework? Why are you complaining about things when other people have it so much worse? You need to be more positive, Trin, or no one's going to like you."

I'd heard her spiel more times in the past two years than I could count, and I had every word memorized.

Jules had promised we would stay friends. He'd told me Marybeth didn't dislike me, she just didn't like some of the things I said. According to him, she wanted to be my friend and was trying to help me fit in.

According to him, Marybeth knew he and I were friends because he hadn't wanted to lie to her about me. They weren't exclusive, he'd said, so there wasn't any problem about him hanging out with me. But I wasn't so sure that had been a good idea, because in the two months since we'd started junior year, Marybeth's snark had gotten worse, and I'd caught some of her friends glaring at me in class and at lunch.

And Jules didn't talk to me at school anymore. Not even to say hello.

He still tried to make time to see me, at least. Sundays, usually, because Marybeth was the good girl who went to church with her mommy and daddy. Even though Jules had told me Marybeth had sucked him off on their second date and fucked him on their third.

I had no clue why he thought I wanted to know things like that. He claimed he was just being honest.

I looked at the clock. It was already three. Jules was supposed to have shown up at two, and my parents would be home in less than two hours.

Not that it mattered. Today, we wouldn't be doing anything I didn't want my parents to know about.

I shouldn't have been sitting at the living room window watching for his car. Seriously, who did that? Well, obviously I did.

When Jules and I had first become friends, I was so shy I barely talked. Thanks to the shit that happened to me in junior high, I'd walked hunched over and almost never looked anyone in the eye. If anyone spoke to me, I jumped. If anyone touched me, I ran.

No more. I had to give Jules some credit. Thanks to him and to some of the other friends I'd made in a new town and new school, I stood up straight now. I talked when I had something to say. I was still kind of shy, but I wasn't afraid of people now. I knew I was worth something.

Counseling had helped too, but even my counselor said I'd done most of it on my own. And Jules had helped.

Which was why my plans for the day were so hard. I knew what I had to do, but I didn't want to do it.

If Jules didn't show up, I wouldn't be able to do it anyway. Maybe that was a sign that it wasn't the right thing. Maybe that was why he hadn't arrived yet.

I wasn't going to sit there anymore. He was an hour late, and I wouldn't get that hour back, but that didn't mean I had to waste any more time.

I got up from the couch to find the TV remote and heard the familiar banging engine of Jules's old Chevy pick-up out front. Just like that, my heart gave a little jump and I smiled.

I forced the smile away. This wasn't a happy occasion.

I opened the front door while he was still walking up the steps. He had a huge grin on his face. The grin he always gave me. The one that made me feel special and cared about.

Today it pissed me off.

"Hey, Trinity." His smile faltered a little, but he got to the door and gave me a hug. "Sorry I'm late. Marybeth's parents invited me to go to church with them."

"And you couldn't have told me that?" I pulled away from him and went back into the living room. I didn't bother watching to see if he followed me. I knew he would.

"Marybeth just asked me this morning." The door closed and his shoes clunked across the floor to me. "I thought you'd understand."

"You and I had plans." My eyes watered, and I squeezed them shut for a second. No way was I going to waste any more crying on Jules. Not anymore. "You could have told her we had plans. You said she knows we're friends."

"Yeah, but she's my girlfriend." He put his hand on my shoulder, and for just a second, my heart melted at his touch.

I hardened it right back up again. He wasn't getting away with anything this time.

"You could have texted or something," I said. "I've been waiting for you."

"Maybe you shouldn't have." Now he sounded annoyed. "I said I'm sorry."

I yanked away and whirled around, rage twisting my face. I wished I'd had lasers to shoot at him, but all I could do was glare. And yell. "You're right. I shouldn't have waited. I shouldn't have been waiting all these months. You promised me!"

My voice broke, and I started to cry. He would see it as me trying to manipulate him or something, but I couldn't hold it back now that I'd started. Even if I didn't want to waste the tears on him, I had to let it out.

"I haven't broken any promises." He took a step back, looking confused. "Why are you being like this, Trinity? You're the one person I thought wouldn't flip out on me."

"I'm not flipping out. I'm standing up for once in my frigging life." I took a deep breath. I was going to get through what I had to say if it killed me. "You have broken your promise, Jules. You promised we would stay friends."

"We *are* friends!" He gritted his teeth. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"An hour late and hoping to get laid." I took another breath so I wouldn't scream, and wiped my eyes so I could stop crying enough to talk.

"I don't care if we have sex," he said slowly. "You know that. That's never been why I hung out with you. We didn't even fool around until what, six months after we met? You said you liked it. We have fun together."

That much was true. The first time we'd crossed the line between hanging out and making out, it had just kind of happened because we'd been talking about couples we knew at school, and then he'd started tickling me to make me laugh because I'd been too close to crying about how I would never find anyone to love me after what had been done to me.

I hadn't fooled myself into believing Jules loved me. I knew better. But I'd believed he cared, and that was why I'd let him touch me, kiss me, and after a couple months, have sex with me.

I couldn't even wish I hadn't done it, because that was what had given me the confidence to talk to him the way I was now. Sleeping with Jules had shown me I was desirable and still pretty even with the burn scars marring half my face. Even with the emotional scars that no amount of surgery could fix.

And he'd told me the attacks hadn't changed me. That I was strong and beautiful where it counted, and that anyone who couldn't see it was an idiot.

Apparently that made him an idiot.

"Yeah. We did have fun," I said.

"Did?" He raised his eyebrows. "Past tense? Why?"

If he couldn't figure it out, I wasn't sure I should bother telling him, but I deserved to say it. I deserved to have him hear me even if he didn't like what he heard.

"You're one of the popular kids now," I said. "When we became friends, you said you'd always be my friend. You'd always have my back. You said I could trust you, and I did. I trusted you more than almost anyone else I know."

My voice cracked and the tears started flowing again. “You got in with the cool kids, and when you started going out with Marybeth I said to you that you would end up not being my friend anymore. They don’t like me, and you’ve told me what they say about me.”

“I promised I would still be your friend!” His voice rose. “You promised you wouldn’t be in the way of me and Marybeth.”

The words hit me like ice pellets, and I straightened my back and looked him right in the eye. “In the way? Thanks, Jules, that makes me feel really fucking special.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t think I do.” I paused. He looked away. “Or maybe I do know exactly what you mean. You lied to me, Jules. You swore going out with her wouldn’t change things between you and me, but you don’t even talk to me at school anymore. You don’t even smile at me. You’re glued to her and her friends, and now I don’t exist. I’m the imaginary friend you don’t want to admit to.”

“I care about you.” He reached for me, and I stepped back. “Trinity, come on. We’re still friends. What do you want me to do? You know Marybeth’s my girlfriend. You said right from the start you didn’t want that. You just wanted to be friends because it was safer. You have to understand, some of us want more than that.”

I just stared at him. We’d talked about this. He wouldn’t have gone out with me anyway because that would have meant admitting we were friends—or more. But even if he hadn’t been worried about other people finding out he liked the freak, I couldn’t handle a relationship. To me, those meant doing what the other person wanted. Not being able to be yourself because you had to be what they expected.

I knew what people said about girls like me. Girls who slept with guys they weren’t in relationships with. Who actually liked sex because it was fun and felt good and not because “Oh, I’m so in love!”

The first time I’d realized it didn’t matter what they thought had been the first time I’d believed Jules about how strong I was. Sex was supposed to feel good, especially if you had it with someone who you trusted and had fun with. It didn’t matter if you were just friends or in a relationship as far as I was concerned.

That was another promise Jules had made to me. That he would never look down on me for having sex just because I liked it. Half the other people at school did the same thing anyway; they just wouldn’t admit it. Especially the girls like Marybeth. They had their perfect image to uphold.

I wasn’t a slut. Jules was the only guy I’d ever even fooled around with, let alone had sex with, but most people assumed any guy I talked to had been in my bed—or my body—because they believed I wanted attention and had low self-esteem.

They were right about the second part. Or at least they had been. No more.

“I understand that I’m not what you want,” I said slowly, picking each word very carefully because if I didn’t, I would burst into tears again, and I still hadn’t completely stopped leaking around the eyes from the last burst. “I’m not pretty enough or fun

enough—”

“Shut up!” He reached for me again and this time I let him hold me. Even when I was pissed at him, having his arms around me soothed me. “You’re awesome, Trinity. You’re a lot of fun, and I don’t mean sex. You’re the smartest girl I know, and the way you think about things and the ideas you have are amazing. Don’t ever let anyone tell you different. You are awesome.”

“I know.” I sniffled and pulled away from him for what would be the final time if I could just stick to my plan. “You’ve been telling me that for two years. You know what? I finally believe you. I am awesome.”

“Good.” He smiled, but he still looked confused. “So?”

“So we’re done.”

There. It was out, and I couldn’t take it back.

Even though part of me wanted to. I was throwing away the one guy who wanted to touch me in spite of the burns and the fucked-up way I acted sometimes and the weird way I wore my hair because it wouldn’t grow through the scars on the left side of my head. The one guy who’d gotten through to me that my neighbor had been the one who was really fucked up. That I hadn’t deserved to be assaulted or set on fire to cover it up.

Other people agreed with Jules now, though. He had opened me up, and now I had other friends who cared about me. Sure, Marybeth and the rest of the cool crowd put me down, but they weren’t the only ones at school.

I’d needed Jules, and for a little while he’d let me believe I could lean on him. And now I was ready to stand without him.

Even if it felt like someone jamming a meat cleaver into my heart.

“What do you mean?” His smile vanished and he gave me a look of pure pain.

I didn’t completely believe the expression. The way he’d been treating me, I doubted he really cared if we stayed friends or not.

But I knew he’d shared things with me he’d never let out to anyone else, so maybe he did mean it.

I tried to soften things up a little, but I wasn’t backing down. I couldn’t.

“You don’t need me,” I said. “You have Marybeth and all your other friends. You promised you wouldn’t bail on me. I said now that you’re in with the popular crowd you would ignore me, and you told me I was wrong. But I wasn’t.”

“I haven’t been ignoring you.” He shoved his hands into his pockets and pressed his lips together. “I’m here. We talk online all the time.”

“You haven’t talked to me online since Thursday. You don’t talk to me at school at all.” I’d even tried instant messaging him the day before to make sure he was still coming over today. Instead of an answer, I’d gotten him signing out of IM. “You’re trying to have everything, Jules. Your girlfriend and your fuck-buddy. The one you can show off to prove what a wicked cool guy you are, and the one you hide because you’re ashamed.”

"I'm not ashamed of you." He narrowed his eyes. "Don't you ever say that. I've never been ashamed of you. You're the one who used to be ashamed."

I couldn't deny that, but he was missing the point. Or changing the subject. "I was never ashamed of *you*, though. Or of our friendship. I wasn't the one who decided we could only hang out away from school. I wasn't the one who said not to tell anyone we were getting together."

"I told Marybeth."

"Yeah. She's the only one, though, isn't she? And that's only so she wouldn't find out by accident and get pissed at you." I didn't totally understand why she hadn't told him to stop seeing me completely, since they were supposedly going out even though Jules claimed they weren't exclusive.

And then it hit me. The final smack in the face.

"She told you to stop being friends with me, didn't she?" I was proud of myself. My voice didn't break at all. It was cold stone. Just the way I wanted to sound to cover up how his lie made me want to puke. "That's why you stopped talking to me at school. You were honest with her about being my friend, but when she told you to stop, you decided to stop being honest. With her and with me. And you still kept coming over here to hook up even though you're sleeping with her."

"You've been my friend longer than she has." The way his face kind of collapsed told me I was a hundred percent right. "I didn't want to lose our friendship. Relationships don't always last."

I wanted to grab the huge photo book off the coffee table beside me and slam it right into his face. I wanted to break things. I wanted to scream at him that he was a worthless liar.

I didn't do any of it. Even though rage boiled inside me, I forced my face to go totally blank, and my voice was dead calm when I said, "Neither do friendships. And ours is over."

"Trinity," he pleaded.

"No." I went toward him, and I must have looked scarier than I thought, because he stumbled back and almost tripped over the chair behind him. I would have laughed if I hadn't been so furious. "You lied to me, Jules. You lied to Marybeth. You told the truth about one thing, though. I am awesome, and I deserve to have people treat me that way. I deserve to be important in the lives of the people who claim to be my friends."

I tensed my entire body. I was almost finished. I only had a few more things to say.

"I am no one's back up plan," I said slowly and clearly. "I am no one's dirty little secret. I am better than that, I am stronger than that, and I should thank you, because you're the one who helped me see it. And now you're the one who's walking out of here. Don't come back, Jules. Don't speak to me at school. Lose my number. Lose my IM and all the other shit online."

He opened his mouth. I took a deep breath and spoke before he could. "I am better than being hidden, and I am better than you, because the things you've done are things I

would never do to anyone, least of all someone I called my best friend. Get out. Don't say a fucking thing. Just get out."

"Trinity," he said again.

I looked at him, completely blank, and after a couple seconds of not being able to meet my eyes, he turned and walked away.

Out of my house. Out of my life.

Now I really started to cry. Huge, loud shouting sobs. I barely heard his truck engine as he drove away from my house for the last time.

I sank to the floor, hands over my face, and rocked back and forth. I'd trusted him. I'd let him in physically and emotionally. I'd slept with him, and I couldn't take that back.

But I didn't really want to. One of the things my counselor had taught me was to take the good parts of the bad things and use them to grow. There had been lots of good parts with Jules. I really did owe him a lot, because if it hadn't been for him, I probably wouldn't have been strong enough to say all the things I'd said.

He'd helped me find myself among all the scars, and eventually I'd be able to thank him for that. But right now, there was too much pain.

In the middle of the pain, though, there was triumph. I hadn't accepted the way he'd treated me. I hadn't figured I deserved it because no one else would want to be my friend, so I had to take what I could get.

I'd stood up for myself. For my right to be treated well and to feel good about the people I was around.

I'd removed something from my life that wasn't working and wasn't helping.

And even though it hurt, especially when my brain replayed the pain in Jules's eyes, I felt lighter. Stronger. He'd lifted me up, but he'd also weighed me down, and now he wouldn't anymore.

Even though it hurt like hell, I'd done the right thing, and I could be proud of that.