

Ghostly Strings

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Though it sat on a pebble road off a little-used highway, the elderly Danniger estate was the center of Edgerin Falls' social scene. Built on a clearing and on a slight hill, the purple sided house did not hide its frame, as so many of its neighbors did, behind trees, and instead shone its beacon light to all who looked for a grand time. On summer weekends, the gates were opened to any who could make their way down little used roads to the estate, and the vibrant and youthful came from across the county to have a good time inside the house, on its great lawns, and on Edgerin Lake, whose clear waters lapped up right behind the mansion.

The gracious host of this extravaganza was *the* Nicollette Danniger. The passing of her family five years ago left the twenty-seven year old a multi-millionaire. Typically dressed in smooth silk dresses, she exuded a radiance that buoyed the spirits of any who came near her. Her lush blonde hair was typically pulled into a bun, with a few bangs kept loose to bounce and sway as she moved. If she was a witch, as the gossip seemed to indicate, she was not like typical witches.

At eleven o'clock on party nights, Nicollette would make her way to the balcony above her foyer and make a few words to christen the evening, and this Saturday was no different. Draped in a slinky white and yellow dress, she held up a thin champagne glass to the still growing crowd.

“Friends,” she began, “thank you all for joining me on this night. Your company lifts my spirits, and may your happy voices fill all the halls of my home. Feel free to wander and explore my house and fill it with joy. But I warn you – the upstairs attic is strictly forbidden from any trespassers. But aside from that distant room, my house is open to all. Enjoy the evening.” She took a sip of golden water from her glass, and the crowd returned to its various activities, a bit more energetic than it had been before.

A small group of men, who were just of drinking age, walked to Nicollette. They were the type who would be more at home at a kegger than the slightly higher-tone of this party, but they managed to hide their wildness well. The leader of the group, a towering youth who stood almost eight inches higher than Nicollette, came forward.

“So, what’s the story with the attic? Why aren’t we allowed up there?” The woman hid a smile, partly through self control and partly through a simple illusion.

“Oh, it’s nothing important. It’s just that a passing ghost has made a little home for himself up there. I’d much rather the guests let him rest.”

“A ghost?” The man asked with an incredulous arch in his eyebrow, and a less than hidden smile. “We talkin’ something like Casper or a poltergeist?”

“Well, he is quite nice, for which I am grateful. He just gets a little . . . attached to people. If you go up there, he may not let you leave.”

“Ok. I’ll keep that in mind,” the man and his group sauntered off, snickering and jostling as they went, heading toward the upstairs library. As they left, a tall figure walked over to Nicollette. She had a purple ribbon tied around her neck and frizzy hair. She wrapped slender arms around Nicolette’s belly and laid her chin upon the heiress’ shoulder.

“You know they’re just going to do something stupid now. Someone will go upstairs and get turned into a toy.”

Nicollette smiled. "And I know who it will be."

"Oh, do tell!" The other woman said, spinning Nicollette around so they could talk face to face.

The hostess hid her teeth behind a tilted smile. She bopped her pet's nose. "Sorry, you'll have to find out for yourself."

Vicky stepped from her old, very basic, Ford car and immediately felt out of place. She was in jeans and a trendy purple jacket, while everyone else was in a bit better dress. And they looked richer, too, judging by the stately cars spread throughout the large gravel lot. She was a thin girl, but not too short, with platinum blonde hair and slightly pale skin that burned too easily.

"Vicky!" She heard a cry, and turned to see her friend Samantha standing on a second floor balcony, waving down at her. "Come on up, we're over by the library!"

Vicky waved back and made her way into the house, working through crowds of mostly upper middle class people, a group that she only had a passing relationship with. It took a full ten minutes to make it up to the library, though that was partly because Nicollette had more than one. When she finally arrived, Sam was the only one who noticed, even though the majority of the group was guys.

Sam got up quickly and came over to Vicky. She was bigger, taller and more muscled, stemming from her days when she hated to be called cute and went everywhere with a bat and a glove. These days, she still kept her red hair short, though in a girl cut, and tonight looked more feminine than Vicky in sleek high heels and sharp black dress.

"So, who are your friends?" Vicky asked, pointing to the group of college aged men.

“Architect majors at NWS. C’mon, I’ll introduce you.” Sam guided her over to the group, who were all sitting crossways on the chairs and couches in the room. They laughed about something or other. “Guys, this is Vicky. Vicky, these are the guys.” She said, ignoring that there were two other girls in the group.

“Hi,” the newcomer waved, “so what were you guys talking about?”

“Just something that the blonde lady was saying about the attic.” A black haired fellow in a black jacket said.

“Oh, I wasn’t here, so I must have missed it.”

“Well, she went on this little spiel that, you know, her house was our house, go wherever you like, and then she says but don’t go in the attic. So, I got curious and asked her why and she told me that it’s haunted up there and she doesn’t want us to bother the ghost.”

“That’s it?” Vicky said, making a sideways glance to Sam, “That’s what you guys have been giggling about?”

“Well, we were also talking about what she could be hiding. I maintain she has a full-blown porn studio up there.”

A red-headed guy standing over by one of the bookshelves shook his head. “I dunno, all those rumors about her being a witch might be real. Look at some of these books. ‘Basics of Conjuration and Alteration,’ ‘History of the Salem Wars,’ ‘Complete Guide to Magic Rings.’ If she is a witch, then it’s possible that there’s a ghost up there.”

“Hey, Nolan,” the black haired man said, “you have a little gullible right here.” He motioned to his cheek, but Nolan didn’t play along.

“OK, Zach, let’s go over there to see what’s actually in the room.”

Zach quickly quieted down, and Vicky thought his face turned a shade paler. “No, man, I’m not walking into a porn studio. Do you know how much disgusting shit must be up there?”

“150 bucks to go up there.”

“One-fifty? C’mon, man, I can make that in one day.”

Another guy piped in, “I’m down for fifty more.”

“I’ll put in forty,” a third added.

“I have . . . hmm, I have twelve.” Sam said. With each voice that pitched in, Zach turned a slightly more pink shade of red. And at the drop of a hat, 350 dollars had been put on the table. Zach kept shaking his head, and Nolan’s smile became larger. Vicky looked at the money already piled up and quickly thought of the new laptop she was getting ready to buy.

“I’ll do it.” She said, stepping forward.

“All right, new girl.” One of the women said.

“See, Zach, we even got a girl to do this.” Nolan said, while Sam patted Vicky on the back.

“OK, let’s see it.” Zach said, “If you want to go up there, be my guest.”

Nolan handed Vicky the money, and a good portion of the group followed her to the attic stairs. On the way, they passed a woman with frizzy hair and a purple ribbon tied round her neck. She watched them with a close eye and a smile.

The entrance to the attic was off of an obscure landing in the northwest corner of the house. There was little decoration around the door, and the landing was well out of view of any party guests, and most especially the party host. Zach was the only member of the group that hadn’t come. The rest crowded around Vicky a few feet from the door, with Sam being the closest and getting her friend pumped up.

Vicky didn’t know what she was doing; there wouldn’t be anything up there, and standing here was only going to get her worked up over nothing. She opened the door to reveal a flight of stairs. It was entirely dark in the room apart from the light flooding past the group.

“Well, it doesn’t look so bad.” Sam said.

Vicky found a light switch and flicked it on, illuminating the room upstairs, though she couldn't see anything unusual. Without a word Vicky bounded into the attic.

She was surprised by what she found up there. First, maroon rugs covered the floor. Second, it was littered with colorful toys, many of them from the fifties and sixties. Yet, they all looked brand new. Vicky started to reach for one when a small voice piped up behind her.

"Hello."

Vicky jumped and turned to see a child, no more than about ten years old. He wore a green and yellow striped shirt, jeans, and black PF Flyers. As Vicky looked at him, she realized she could see through him.

"You're – you're the ghost. You're real?!" She backed away, her heart beating a tad faster.

"I think so." The boy looked at his body, "I mean – I'm here, aren't I?" The ghost held out his hand for Vicky to touch, and she tentatively reached for it. She was surprised that she could touch him, but it felt like she was holding onto something hollow and barely there.

"I'm Vicky. What's your name?"

"Adam." The boy smiled, "Hey, do you want to play some? I don't have a lot of girl toys, but you can play with mine."

"Well, do you have any Hot Wheels? I used to race those with my dad and brothers all the time."

"Do I!" Adam slipped from Vicky's hand and flew to a corner of the room. Literally flew. Meanwhile, Vicky didn't notice the strange changes beginning to sweep across her body.

Downstairs, Samantha watched her friend take the steps two at a time up into the attic. She watched Vicky hit the landing before the attic door closed with a sudden, but silent, thud. The unprovoked movement

startled Samantha, but she reacted quickly and tried to open the door once again. When she reached for the handle, though, she found nothing to grab onto, and by the time she looked to see what the matter was, the door had vanished completely into a wallpapered wall.

“No way.” Nolan said. He and the rest of the group backed away from the door, leaving only Sam standing there. Everyone there suddenly knew a lot of the things about Nicolette Danniger were true. Sam clenched her jaw and ran back down to the party to find the hostess.

It took a few minutes of searching, but the redhead found Nicolette sitting on the back patio entertaining guests. Another woman was curled up next to her, lovingly embraced by the hostess. The heiress talked excitedly with a sweet, but loud, voice. Samantha walked up behind her and tapped the blonde haired woman on the shoulder.

“Uhm, Miss Danniger, uhm, my friend went up to the attic, and she – well, the door up there disappeared.”

“It has been known to do that. What was your friend doing going up to the attic in the first place?” Nicolette said, looking over her shoulder.

“They -- a group of architecture students -- bet her a lot of money to go up there because you talked about the ghost and . . . stuff. And now the door’s gone and she’s up there all alone. I’m really worried.”

The hostess put her hand on Sam’s hand and looked the redhead in the eyes. “Your friend is going to be fine. You needn’t worry.” Sam felt a calming warmth rise from her hand and through her body. “Now, go back to the third floor landing and wait there. The attic will reappear eventually.”

Sam nodded and did as she was told.

Upstairs, in the attic that shouldn't exist, Adam lay on his stomach with a car remote in his hand. Vicky sat next to him, with a remote of her own. They both watched the figure eight track intently, as if nothing else in the world mattered. Two cars, one green and one pink, zipped furiously around the track, electric motors humming, wheels grinding along embankments.

The pair had been at this for almost half an hour now, and the changes to Vicky were nearly completed. But she had been so intent on the races that she hadn't noticed the first subtle changes to her arms, as each lost texture and their tone lightened. Each arm hollowed out and turned to soft plastic, jointed at the wrists and elbows. At the same time, her hair began to change color to a bubblegum pink, starting at the roots. As the color grew more vibrant, it also turned to thin strands of nylon.

The tongue on Vicky's white tennis shoes vanished, and the sides of her canvas shoes split open as a buckle appeared across her foot. The shoes then turned glittery purple. Her toes turned to hollow plastic and melted together, followed by her foot, then her legs. Lavender stockings stretched up her plastic legs moments later.

She still didn't notice while joints cut into her body at her hips, shoulders, and neck, or as her chest became plastic. Vicky's simple gold necklace grew larger and wrapped around her neck several more times, quickly turning to a long strand of pinkish pearls.

Vicky's clothes, even, had time to grow longer and frillier, their color changing to match her pink motif. A few ribbons appeared, tied into decorative bows on Vicky's new pink dress.

"I've got you this time." Vicky said. Her pink coupe had gained a multi-car lead over its green opponent. The rear car began to speed up on Vicky, but she aggressively blocked its attempt to pass. "You're not getting by me." The green car tried a second time, but the pink car's quick blocking kept him back. The lap flag dropped for the last time, and the twin cars began their last frantic lap. Adam grinned and accelerated once

again. He anticipated Vicky's block and bumped her pink car as they headed into the turn, and the coupe went shooting off the track.

"No!" Vicky cried, jumping up to retrieve her fallen car. "That's not fair, Adam!" She stomped past a mirror in her purple Mary Jane shoes. Vicky froze in place as she realized her reflection seemed to be quite pink. She made a confused glance to the mirror, just in time to see her face lose its normal complexion, turning a ghostly white, apart from her pink lips and lavender shadowed eyes. The only break in her pale face came from the soft pink circles that appeared on the apples of her cheeks. Vicky looked at the massive changes to her body; the neon pink hair and shiny plastic skin. Her eyes rolled back into her head and Vicky fell to the ground.

"Viiiiicky! Viiicky, waaake uu-uup!"

The doll's eyes fluttered open. Adam floated in front of her face, a mischievous smile crossing his lips. Vicky's body fell slightly forward, but each of her arms were held up by strings.

"Did you enjoy your nap?"

"I – what happened to me?" Vicky glanced left and right, trying to understand why she had been sleeping in such a strange position. She remembered her pink hair and dress; her white face and glittered shoes. And she remembered something Adam had said when he first met Vicky. "When you said you didn't have a lot of girl toys, you didn't mean toys for girls; you meant toys that were girls."

"Mmm-hmm." Adam hummed, spinning around Vicky, floating up above her where she couldn't see him. A strange commotion clattered over her head. A moment later, Vicky's arms fell back down to her sides. She started to wobble, but the strings attached to several of Vicky's joints went taught and she stood upright once again.

Adam began to figure out Vicky's body before she could, and he pulled up a lone string attached to the buckle on the doll's shoe, pulling it up and out. Step after step he did this, until he guided Vicky to a second marionette; a shocking character dressed in an over the top yellow suit with black silk shirt and black fedora. His face was blank of features, until Adam flew around the toy and right into his back. The gangster's plastic eyes opened up, the same sea green as Adam's.

"Here's lookin' at you, doll." He said, beginning a brilliant night of playing with Vicky.

Samantha had fallen asleep on the third floor landing, using her jacket for a blanket and arm for a pillow. Sunlight poured into the house, and the guests had left only echoes after a night of partying. Noisy birds began to chirp loudly, but it wasn't until Samantha felt a light tap on her stomach that she woke up. Sam opened her eyes to the woman with frizzy hair, draped in a large pink shirt. She had pink and purple striped tights banding up her legs and overly large fuzzy pink slippers on her feet.

The redhead looked at the woman with a confused expression.

"The attic's back." The woman said, pointing to the wall Sam had fallen to sleep on. The redhead jumped up before she was fully awake, wobbled, but caught herself and opened the attic door. Not thinking twice, she bounded up the flight of stairs. There was a bed on the right side of the room, a boy sleeping soundly in it. A giant pink marionette sat in a chair next to him, an open book fallen across her lap.

"Oh, Vicky, what happened to you?" Samantha asked. She began to walk to her friend, but the frizzy haired woman held her back.

"Let her rest, Sam. She had a magical night, and needs her rest."

Sam stopped herself, but her body itched to get to her friend, to help her from this predicament.

“So, is this it? Is she a toy forever?”

“Oh, no. Adam’s going to leave someday soon, and he’ll leave Vicky with us. We don’t have much need for a living marionette, and she’ll become human again. Until then, she’ll stay with Adam and keep him company.”

Sam looked at Vicky, sleeping beautifully and soundly.

“You can always stay with her until then,” the woman enticed.

The redhead bit her lip. She stroked her friend’s new pink hair. Then she smiled.