

# The Vanishing Of Scarlett Valentine

Who would have thought that an abandoned police station would be the best place for solving crimes every Friday night with complete strangers?

Except they weren't strangers, not really, they'd known each other for months online, and they were the only people who Ivy could share her love of crime with. Not the most trustworthy, perhaps, but it was better than pretending to be a detective by watching true crime documentaries on her own. This week, the four of them had chosen a case they'd been putting off for a while: the murder of local schoolgirl Adeline Fletcher, who had attended the same school as Ivy's brother.

Their surroundings only added to the mysteriousness of it all; the rusted jail cells, broken windows, paint peeling off the walls, and most disturbingly the constant feeling of being watched by the ghost of a once mass murderer.

"Right," Esther's voice brought Ivy back to earth. "Has anyone seen Adam? He should've been here almost ten minutes ago," she said, glancing at her watch. But all she got were two clueless shakes of the head from Ivy and Jack.

"I've sent him a few texts already, but he hasn't..." Ivy started, though coming to a stop mid sentence as her phone buzzed from inside her pocket and the screen lit up. Jack peered over her shoulder for a better look.

"He's not coming today- says he's busy." He reported.

"Anyway," Esther said. "Has everyone got their research?"

Only Ivy nodded, Jack's mind appearing to be elsewhere. He waved a dismissive hand in the air.

"That doesn't matter," he said, voice bouncing off the walls. "Remind us, Ivy, why you chose an abandoned police station for this week's meeting again when I specifically told you not to."

"Well, I just thought..." Ivy's voice faded into the darkness of the room, its place taken by footsteps coming from the vacant, dimly lit streets outside. The three of them turned in sync towards the window, exchanging startled glances as they scrambled to their feet and fought to get a view. Who knew they were here?

The shadow of a teenage girl emerged from the corner street light, smart-looking, with a stack of books under her arm. Alone she walked the streets of the small town, cautiously, yet with the confidence of someone twice her age. A shadow followed on. That shadow didn't seem to have a stack of books, or a fancy black bow on its head. But when the girl turned around to look behind her, expecting to see somebody there, she was met with no one. Both paces quickened. From a walk, to a jog, to a sprint. On the walls were the silhouettes of two people - one chasing the other. Like cat and mouse. Like victim and murderer.

And then, in the blink of an eye, the silhouettes merged into one, disappearing behind an old bookshop without a trace. Now, there was just one part of the girl left; her screams, growing louder and sharper by the second. Esther turned to face Ivy, face pale with terror. "Wh-what just

happened?" she said, voice quivering. But there was no need to say it out loud, because it was clear that amidst all the panicked thoughts swimming in their heads, there was one they shared: they had just witnessed a kidnapping.

By unspoken agreement, it was decided that they'd stay inside the police station until the danger was long, long gone. The idea of that shadow still lurking around the corner waiting for its next victim sent shivers down Ivy's spine.

"You know what?" Jack said after a while, getting to his feet. "I think it's safe to go now. Whoever was out there looked like they had a very clear target, and I doubt we're the next people they're out to get."

"I don't know..." Ivy said, doubt creeping into her voice.

"Well, I'm leaving." Jack announced, followed by a reluctant but immediate 'me too' from the girls. The three of them slipped out through the door and vanished from sight.

The walk to the bus station, Ivy thought, might have even been more terrifying than witnessing a kidnapping. Despite knowing the streets were completely deserted, she came to brief stops before every corner, scared that the shadow she feared the most was awaiting her. But Ivy had gotten lucky, unlike the poor girl in the darkest corners of her mind, and was fortunate enough to be standing outside her house, having been waved goodbye by the last bus.

Surprisingly, not one light was on inside. Not in her older brother Josh's bedroom, or her twin sister Scarlett's; they must both be asleep. There were no lights on in her parents bedroom either but she had expected that, as they were out of town for the week.

Ivy made an effort to be discreet, without letting the front door slam behind her, careful not to wake anybody up. The first thing she did was collapse onto her bed, ignoring the 'Ten Top Tips To Solve' Crime book she read every night as she fell into a much needed sleep.

A knock at her door a few hours later suddenly woke her up. Her bedroom door swung open to reveal a panicked Josh standing in the doorway.

"Have you seen Scarlett anywhere?" he asked anxiously.

"No." Ivy replied. "Not since yesterday evening."

"What about before you went to the library with those friends of yours?"

Ah yes, the library. The place she'd told her entire family she went to every Friday night with her friends to get her grades up. And of course, they'd believed her, oblivious to the midnight outings she went on with the strangers she'd met online.

"She told me she was going to the library too, although that was an hour before I left and I haven't seen her since." Ivy replied.

"Alright." Josh said plainly, retreating to his room and to Ivy's annoyance, leaving the door slightly ajar.

But dusk dawned and still there was no sign of Scarlett. Ivy began to think this could be something more serious than she'd first thought. Scarlett was too much of a goody-two-shoes to run away without warning; she'd never broken a single rule in her lifetime. So, as the sun began to set, Ivy watched as Josh did what had to be done: report Scarlett missing to the police.

Then, they set about designing and printing missing posters. Josh pinched a sheet of paper off the stack and handed it to Ivy. Scarlett's face stared back at her, hazel eyes and chestnut curls-indistinguishable to Ivy's. It pained her to look at her missing twin sister's face now, so she folded the sheet up neatly into quarters, holding it so tightly her knuckles turned white, before slipping into bed and leaving Josh alone with his thoughts in the living room downstairs.

That night was spent secretly refreshing news sites under her covers, desperately hoping that there'd be answers to some of her questions. She had no luck. Not only that, but worse than all the terrible things that had happened in the last day was her feeling of guilt. It was eating her alive, going from that sick feeling in the pit of her stomach to a numb feeling spreading throughout her whole body. Because buried underneath the pile of lies Ivy had told recently was the feeling that she was to blame for Scarlett's disappearance. And truthfully- if she were to be entirely honest with herself- she was.

Yesterday morning's conversation the two of them had at breakfast- out of Josh's earshot- replayed in her mind like a record on repeat.

"Please?" Ivy had pleaded. "It's simple; you pretend to be me and I'll pretend to be you- no one will ever know. All you have to do is take my chemistry test for me and I'll take your French test, seeing as it's the only thing I'm relatively good at that you're not. Please? You know I can't afford to fail yet another one."

"Fine." Scarlett had finally given in, after going over their carefully thought out plan several times. "But if anything goes wrong, you'll have to admit this was all you and none of me. I'm not ruining my record for another one of your shenanigans, Ivy."

"Thank you!" Ivy had said, and in that moment she really had been grateful for Scarlett's susceptibility. Now she wished for nothing more than to take her words back and throw them far, far away.

Ivy's gaze turned to the crumpled piece of paper in her hands. She scanned the description Josh had typed up underneath the photograph: Scarlett Valentine. Fourteen years old. Date of birth: October 14, 2009. Female. Height: 5'4. Weight: 50kg. Brown Curly Hair, Hazel Eyes. Last seen wearing: Black Raincoat, White T-Shirt, Blue Jeans, Converse, Black Bow.

And that's when it dawned on her. It hit Ivy like a stab to the heart. The girl the four of them had witnessed being kidnapped wasn't just any girl- it was Scarlett. And it was all her fault. The black bow explained it all. She was the one that should've been taken away last night. But now was not the time to wonder what she could've and should've done. She needed to find out exactly what happened to Scarlett.

She needed to get her thoughts out of her head and down on paper. Ivy ripped a page out of her maths book and bit her lip, pen poised by her head. What did she know? She knew that Scarlett went to the library to borrow books for Ivy's chemistry test around an hour before Ivy and her friends met up. She knew that, as Jack had said, the person completely responsible for Scarlett's

disappearance most likely had a clear target they wanted vanished, which means they also had a particular reason to want that target gone. She knew that the most obvious reason would have to be that someone secretly knew she'd been investigating unsolved crimes and didn't like her doing so. She knew that, in this case, it was really Ivy they intended to take, but mistook her for Scarlett. She also knew that while the kidnapper could've been anyone, there were only three people who thought they knew what Ivy got up to every Friday night: Mum, Dad, and Josh. Which could only mean one thing. Except it couldn't, because these were people who she knew inside out, and it would never even cross their minds to do anything to Scarlett. Or, rather, Ivy. Everything was getting mixed up in her mind, the scribbled words on the maths page meant nothing, and the people she needed the most- her crime solving friends- weren't here to help her. So she imagined her conversation with them instead.

"It couldn't have been your parents if they've been out of town," said the imaginary Esther inside her head.

"Unless they lied and it was all planned in advance." Jack chipped in.

"There's no way of knowing that now though, so the only thing you can do is check Josh's room for evidence." Adam told her. And she listened.

Ivy forced herself down the corridor and into her brother's bedroom. It felt different being in his room knowing that he was a potential kidnapper. Frantically, she searched through drawers, his wardrobe, the shelf, and even emptied the bin, unsure what it was that she was looking for. But the evidence was in the most unexpected place of all: stuffed inside the duvet. She held Scarlett's black bow in her hands, her heart leaping to her throat. But before she had a chance to decide how to feel, there was a sound. The screeching hinges of the door made her spin around, the sudden movement making her nauseous. Josh stood at the doorway, his face twisted into an evil smirk, venom dripping off his next words:

"It should have been you."

