

## Saints and Sinners

### Chapter 1

He liked the night. Always had.

There was something calming about the darkness. The world being empty, dead. It was as if he were alone, no-one left to bother him or push him around. Quiet and cold and empty. It was as if he were finally free.

It was a particularly dark night too.

No moon, stars hidden behind black clouds. The soft pattering of rain drops drowned out all other sound.

Just for a little while, he could pretend that the rest of the world didn't exist. It was just him, alone. Ruler of the night. Master of the world. Though, deep down, he knew the truth. He could pretend all he wanted, imagine the world as he wished it was. But he knew the truth.

He pulled his hood lower, strode around the circle of light a street-lamp was casting on the ground.

Not much further now.

He didn't know the exact address. Only the area.

Was it this street? The next one?

Or was he mistaken? Was the girl's house not where he thought it was at all?

"What am I doing?" He asked the night.

But, of course, the darkness had no answer for him. No-one did. He was alone. On his own. Just him. As always.

"Not too late to turn around," he told himself.

But the words tasted bitter.

"And go where?" He said, voice cold. "Home? Fuck that."

He clenched his fist, kept walking.

"Not too late, Jack," he whispered. "A warm blanket, some hot coco, boot up the computer and-"

Jack stopped in place, glared at nothing.

"No!" He growled. "I'm not- I won't-"

He shut his eyes to silence the thoughts. Stood there, listening to the rain pattering against his body. His black hoodie and backpack. The scent of wet grass in his nostrils. His heart thumping heavily in his chest.

No. He wouldn't go back. Not tonight.

There'd be too many questions.

So he kept walking; following through with the dumb, stupid idea he'd come up with. More of a whim than anything else, a way to fill the gap. Something to do before he went and found a bridge somewhere to sleep under.

It had to be around here somewhere. Tally's house. It *had* to be.

He turned down another street, eyes flicking to the houses on either side of the road. All of them with trimmed gardens and neat hedges. Some of them had garages, others had driveways with two or more cars parked up them. Big houses, at least compared to Jack's home.

Lots of lights on. But curtains closed.

It could be any one of these houses. Or *none* of them.

A house party, but a small one from what Devyn had told their mother. And Devyn didn't lie. Would a 'small' house party be active enough for Jack to notice from the outside? Or would it be totally indistinguishable from every other house?

It was impossible to say. And so he kept moving, keeping to the shadows and the darkness as much as he could.

Perhaps he *should* turn back. Find some shelter from the rain and hunker down for

the night. Sleep through as much of it as he could. It would, at the very least, be better than spending his whole night wandering empty streets looking for something he'd probably never-

That car.

Near the end of the cul-de-sac he was searching.

He *recognised* it.

A cold shiver tickled Jack's spine, unrelated to the night or the rain or the chill in the air.

It couldn't be...

But no. As he approached, he became certain. *It was* that fucker's car. Right down to the polished wheel rims and the stupid flame decals. A shiny, black muscle car. There was no mistaking it.

Maybe... Maybe this was just where *he* lived.

Even as Jack's mind gave him the excuse, he dismissed it.

Drake Damilio didn't live here. His family were the kind of uber-wealthy snobs that would never *lower* themselves to live in such *common* housing. They had, if Jack remembered correctly, a small mansion somewhere just outside the city. *This* was not Drake's home. But it *was* Drake's car.

"Maybe," Jack muttered, glaring at that stupid fucking car, "it's a coincidence."

A small party somewhere around here, where Jack's sister would be. A house with Drake Damilio's car parked outside. No, there was no coincidence. *This* was the place. He was *certain* of it.

Eyes narrowed in a dark glare, Jack crept towards the house.

He couldn't see much. The crack between the curtains was tiny, only allowing for a small portion of the room beyond to be seen. But what little Jack did see was enough to confirm his fears.

A table littered with party food and empty bottles. The back of a girl's head; a girl with bushy brown hair. And the muscled arm of a guy in a t-shirt.

This was the place.

To get a better view, he'd have to climb into a rose bush directly below the window. Not something Jack wanted to do.

The *last* thing he needed was to be caught here.

So, with his tiny view into the house, and the darkness to hide him, he crouched by that rose bush and listened. His heart beating fast, his fists clenched.

Laughter. Male and female voices, most of which were too quiet to make out the words to.

The room was well lit. Painfully bright to look into, but Jack forced himself to look all the same. Hoping that it wasn't true, praying that his fears were unfounded. That he was wrong.

"Spin the bottle," one of the guys said – voice loud and eager.

Some cheering followed. Annoying, dumb laughter.

And then he saw it. A sight that crushed his heart and twisted his gut. It felt like he'd been punched, the wind knocked out of him – and he knew too well what *that* felt like.

A pretty girl moved into view, a smile on her lips.

She had shoulder-length, dirty blonde hair. A red headband atop her head separated her bangs from the straight hair that framed her angelic face. A small, button nose. Her lips were strawberry pink, with just a faint glossiness to them. The girl's eyes, though, were what Jack found himself staring at. Big, round, brown eyes. Filled with kindness and innocence and happiness. They were the kind of beautiful eyes that made a guy fall in love at a single glance.

The girl shook her head, laughed along with the rest. She said something, though

Jack couldn't hear the soft-spoken words.

Then her eyes turned to the window – looked almost *directly* at him.

Jack ducked, crawled across the ground away from the window.

Devyn.

What the fuck was she doing at a party with *Drake Damilio* of all people? And booze? He'd seen empty beer bottles in there. Had his sister been *drinking*?

The thought made Jack want to vomit.

Girls who got drunk at parties... Assholes like Drake Damilio...

*No*. He *wouldn't* think about that. He *couldn't*.

Devyn was responsible. She was a goody-two shoes. There was no way she'd get drunk. No way she'd let Drake take advantage of her.

But... But what if she didn't have a choice?

What if he forced himself on her? Or slipped something into her drink? What if-

*No!*

Jack refused to think about. Refused to imagine it.

What could *he* do anyway? Charge in there and stop the party? Try to drag his sister home? Show them all who he *really* was?

He was powerless. As always.

So he did the only thing he *could* do. He crept away.

As Jack was sneaking past Drake's stupid car, however, something stopped him. A voice deep down inside.

He turned his attention to Drake Damilio's car, glared at it. And he reached into his pocket, pulled out his house key. A second voice joined the first, one of doubt and uncertainty and fear. Was he *actually* going to do this? If Drake caught him...

"Fuck him," Jack growled, holding out his key. "Fuck all of 'em."

The key screeched, digging a nice line in the side of the stupid muscle car.

Eleven, fifty-nine.

How long did it take for a minute to pass?

Jack felt like he'd been laying there for an hour, staring up at the phone held above his head. Eleven, fifty-nine. One minute to midnight. Or less than a minute. It'd been on that number for *far* too long.

Seriously, how long did a minute take to-

The number changed.

Four zeroes in a row.

Midnight.

And, just like that, he'd turned eighteen.

Under a small bridge, surrounded by weeds and dirt and graffiti. One second, he'd been a boy with no life or prospects. The next, he was a *man* with no life and no prospects.

"I don't feel any different," I told the darkness. "Am I supposed to feel different? I can buy alcohol now. And drive. Probably shouldn't do both at the same time. I can vote. I'm an 'adult' in the eyes of the law. Whatever the fuck *that* means."

As always, the darkness returned nothing but silence.

What was Devyn doing right now?

*Getting laid*, his twisted mind answered. *Bouncing on Drake Damilio's-*

"No!"

After everything that *bastard* had done to him, after everything Drake had taken, Jake was *not* going to let him have his sister too.

*Like you can do anything to stop it.*

"I'll tell her," he whispered. "Everything. I'll tell her all about what kind of a shitbag Drake actually is. I'll..."

No, he wouldn't.

Drake's threats echoed inside Jack's skull. Promises of pain and violence and regret. He shuddered.

"I won't let him have her," he told the darkness. Though he knew deep down that it was a lie. "She's *mine*. She's..."

He sighed. Put his phone down.

Eighteen. An adult now. A man.

And still as worthless and powerless as ever.

For all that Devyn's friends might be bitches, at least she *had* friends. And for as much as she had horrible taste in guys – Drake Damilio? *Really?* - at least she *had* the option for a love life. All Jack had were shadows to keep him company.

His mother and father, Devyn, they all thought he was spending the night with friends. Having a small party of his own to celebrate his eighteenth birthday – just like Devyn and *her* friends were doing. He'd lied to them all, made up a story about him and his 'friends' meeting up for a LAN party sleepover – and then having to explain what a 'LAN party' even was.

What would they think if they could see him now?

Laying in a sleeping bag under a bridge, soaking wet from the rain and totally alone.

"Fuck them," Jack growled into the night. "Fuck them all."

If he woke up tomorrow and the world was empty, he wouldn't care. If he were the last human alive, it'd only make the world that much more of a better place for him to live in.

Only...

Only Devyn wouldn't be there any more.

Eyes closed, he pictured his beautiful sister. Her happy smile and the brightness that always seemed to surround her.

*"This one is mine," the shadows whispered while Jack slept.*

*In the distance, a bright light flared. A flash of lightning, though no thunder followed it.*

*"Yes," the shadows replied. "I'm sure."*

*Another flash of white, a lingering glow. Another question – this one longer, more curious.*

*"Unhinged?" The darkness smiled, crept along the ground towards to human in his sleeping bag. "Perhaps. No, I'm not worried. They only ever see what they want, not what they need. He is my choice."*

*A third, final flash. Acknowledgement.*

*The source of the light vanished, left the boy to the darkness. And the darkness moved, snaked ever closer to the sleeping human.*

*"Don't disappoint me Jack," the blackness whispered. "Show her what you're really capable of. Show them all..."*

Thankfully, it was raining the next day.

He wouldn't have to explain why his clothes were so damp. Or why he was shivering so much.

Jack pulled his key out of his pocket, smiling at a chip of black pain on the tip of it. He slid it into the door's lock, hoping that neither of his parents paid too much attention to him. If he could just go to the bathroom, take a quick shower, and head to his bedroom undisturbed, he could forget all about how stupid it'd been from him to sleep out all night.

The door opened silently.

Jack slid inside, careful to make as little sound as possible.

He needn't have bothered. Mom was out and Dad was too busy pretending he didn't

have a son to greet him.

Without a word spoken, he headed upstairs to the bathroom.

Stripping off his clothes felt like he was removing literal weights from his body. The cloth clung to him, feeling gross and squishy, but came away easily enough.

Usually, he preferred showers on the cooler, lukewarm side. But, for today, he went all in with refreshing warmth. Rinsing away the dirt and chill simultaneously. Basking in the sensation of not being bone-shakingly cold any longer.

Shower done, he wrapped a towel around his waist.

He glanced at his discarded, dirty clothes. Eyes narrowing at a patch of total blackness on the floor next to his damp, dripping trousers.

"What in the..."

He stepped closer, blinked.

No. Not a patch of darkness, just a black ring. Metal and shiny, but a ring all the same. His eyes must've been playing tricks on him.

But... That hadn't been there when he'd entered the bathroom, right?

It looked like it'd rolled out of his trouser pocket.

Odd. But no; save for his key, his pockets had been empty. He didn't own or wear rings – didn't need another reason for Drake to mock him or beat on him for. Whoever the black ring belonged to, it wasn't him.

Devyn, maybe. Though black really wasn't her colour.

And she didn't really wear jewellery either.

Jack shook his head, collected his clothes and backpack, left the bathroom and the ring behind.

Only to return a few minutes later wearing fresh, dry clothes.

"You're not mine," he said, keeling down over the ring. "And I doubt you're Devyn's. Dad's only ring is his wedding ring. And I've never seen Mom wearing a black ring."

Maybe his parents had guests over last night while he and Devyn were out? Could belong to someone else.

He reached down, picked the ring up – was immediately surprised by how cold the black metal was. The thing felt like it'd been left in a freezer. And, more than that, something felt *wrong* about it. Unnatural.

"Huh," Jack said, holding the ring between the thumb and index finger of his left hand. "How odd."

Shrugging, he raised his right hand, slid the ring onto his middle finger.

The world shifted.

All colour bled from Jack's vision. Blues and greens and reds and all flavours in between – all vanished in an instant. The world turned black and white and every shade of silvery grey.

Jack's eyes widened.

He watched, unmoving, as the black ring melted around his middle finger – pooled over his skin. A pitch black shadow spread over the length of his finger, his hand, along his arm and over his clothes. In moments, he was covered from head to toes; wearing total darkness as a second skin – every inch of him, save one.

The middle finger on his right hand, a thin line around his finger where he'd put on the black ring. Red letters – the only colour left in the word – in elegant, cursive script. No gaps in the letters, no words – only strange, unreadable text. The letters glowed crimson red, slowly rotated around the base of his index finger.

"What..." His voice sounded alien, distant.

He couldn't feel his heart beating. Couldn't hear anything but his own voice.

"Holy shit," he breathed, standing up. "What the fuck?"

Everything was in greyscale. Like an old black and white film. Only it was

*everywhere*. Save for the glowing red letters around the base of his finger, there was no colour left in the world. But, even in the greyscale, something was *odd*.

The whole situation was 'odd'. He had no idea what was happening, was half convinced he'd just *died*.

But... The blacks and whites of the world... The white seemed washed out, faded. And the black was deep, dark, *brilliant*.

Jack turned around on the spot, looked around the bathroom.

When he saw his nightmarish reflection in the bathroom mirror, he flinched. A person coated in a blackness so pure and infinite that he appeared almost like a tear in the universe – a perfect void where no light could exist.

"I'm definitely dead," Jack said, shaking his head.

His reflection mirrored the movement.

"What the-"

He saw it then. Something even more impossible than the colour disappearing from the world, or the shroud of black he now wore.

Hovering half way between the shower-head and the bathtub below, a single droplet of water.

Frozen in time.

"No way..."

He glanced down at his finger, at the glowing red letters, then back up at the unmoving drop of water.

He reached down – eyes on the droplet – touched the glowing letters and felt it there. The ring on his finger. He gripped it, pulled it off his finger.

Colour returned to the world.

And the frozen droplet resumed its fall, splashing into a small puddle at the bottom of the bathtub.

It wasn't possible.

*None* of it was.

It didn't make any sense!

*Crazy*, he thought. *You've lost your mind. You've gone crazy.*

Slowly, he dragged his eyes away from that tiny puddle in the bathtub – focused them instead of the black ring he held in his hand.

It wasn't possible, but...

A grin split Jack's lips.