

Saints and Sinners

Chapter 2

The cold air bit at Jack's face.

He'd put on some dry clothes, headed out of the house. Thoughts danced around inside his skull, too many to count. Ideas and doubts, possibilities and improbabilities. He needed space to think, figure all this out.

A ring that stopped time?

It couldn't possibly be real. Whatever had happened back in the bathroom, there *had* to be a reasonable and rational explanation for it.

"You were hallucinating," Jack told himself as he strode down the empty street. "Didn't get enough sleep last night, maybe."

There was one way to be sure.

The black ring was clutched in his right hand, held in a white-knuckle grip. Ice cold and impossible.

Where had it come from? What *was* it?

Another hallucination?

He turned down a different street, feet guiding him as his mind throbbed. Vaguely, he knew where he was going. He hadn't *decided* to go there, but it was where his legs were taking him all the same.

The ring. It couldn't *actually* stop time, could it?

If it could...

A thousand fantasies flashed through his head. And endless barrage of ideas. The countless ways he could use a time-stopping ability-

"Not helping," he grunted. "It's not real, Jack. It *can't* be real."

Another minute or two of fact-paced walking, and he arrived at his destination. A small convenience store; the type of place that stocked up mostly on candy and milk and booze and magazines, a single aisle-store that packed only the bare essentials.

Jack pushed his way into the store, looked around.

A long, cramped store. On one side, shelves of candy and canned food and bread. On the other, milk and soft drinks and a shit-ton of alcohol. In the far back, there were shelves of newspapers and magazines. And, right next to the entrance, the counter and cash register.

Save for Jack and a single store employee, the place was deserted.

The woman behind the counter smiled at him as he walked past her. She looked like she was in her early thirties. Dark brown hair that fell past her shoulders, dark eyes with equally dark circles under them. Tired-looking, but attractive all the same. Her most prominent feature was her bust – the two humongous melons that bulged out her chest.

Jack had been coming to this store for years – ever since his first time being given 'pocket money' as an eight year-old. A full ten years ago. But, over the last two months, he'd been coming here a *lot* more often – ever since this woman had been employed.

He didn't know her name, had barely spoken to the woman during these last two months. But she – and her enormous titties – were the reason he'd been buying so much candy from this place recently.

Jack kept his head down as she smiled at him, eyes on the floor.

Slowly, feet dragging, he made his way to the back of the store. Where the magazines and newspapers were kept. Out of view of the store's security camera – which was pointed at the booze and candy section of the store. His back to the woman at the counter so she wouldn't be able to see what he was doing.

It wasn't going to work. He knew that.

Best case scenario, nothing would happen. Worst case scenario, he'd look like an idiot.

He opened his clutched hand, held up the black ring.

And, in one quick motion, he slid it onto his right hand's middle finger.

The world shifted in an instant. All colour fading away; only shades of black and white remaining. Light and dark and nothing else.

Jack turned on his heels, looked at the woman behind the counter.

Her eyes were forward, staring at nothing.

Jack hopped to the left, then the right.

The woman's eyes didn't follow him. They – like the rest of her – remained frozen in place.

Frozen in time.

"It's impossible," Jack breathed. His voice sounded far away.

He walked towards the counter, waved his hand in front of the woman's face. She didn't move, didn't react.

"Unreal," he whispered.

His eyes moved, lowered from the woman's face to her impressive bust. Those colossal melons.

Slowly, trembling, he reached his hand forward.

A shiver of delight swept through him as his hand brushed over the huge curve of her chest. Clad in a grey polo-shirt that strained at the front, the outline of a bra underneath clearly visible. Jack slid his fingers and palm over the roundness of one clothed breast, then the other.

"You won't remember any of this, right? When I unfreeze-" He looked up at the woman's frozen face, noticed a black line extending up from the top of her head. And there, hovering a foot above her, attached to her by that thin black line, was a black, smoke-like cloud with white symbols and letters scratched into it.

Jack snatched his hand away, jumped back.

Nothing happened.

The woman remained frozen in time. The world remained shades of black and white. Even the black cloud above the woman's head remained perfectly still – the unreadable letters glowing white.

"What in the fuck..."

Jack glanced down at his darkness-covered body, at the line of glowing red text slowly rotating around his middle finger.

"What *are* you?"

When no answer came, Jack looked back to the black cloud.

Wordlessly, he reached up to touch it.

The moment his finger sank into the dark cloud, a sensation washed through him. A *feeling*.

Compassion. Kindness.

Not *his*. The emotion, the sensation, was coming from his fingertip.

The cloud shifted – new black clouds emerging from it, all connected to the first by lines of darkness. Two, then three, then four. More. Continually expanding outwards in a web of dark clouds and black lines.

Jack pulled his hand back, out of the first cloud. He looked up at the store's ceiling and the dozen new black clouds hovering below it – the strings of blackness that connected them all to the first.

"Alright," he muttered, shaking his head. "Yeah, I'll admit it. I have no fucking idea what's going on right now. I am officially in over my head. This is *wild*. The hell is happening right now?"

As his brain tried to process the black clouds and what they could *possibly* mean, Jack did the only thing he could think of.

He turned his attention back to the woman and her amazing tits.

His hand moved, palm pressed to the fabric of the woman's shirt. He squeezed, watched as his fingers sank into the clothed tit. And, when he pulled his hand back, the woman's breast remained deformed by his grasp – a visible indent where his hand had been.

"What's your name?" He asked, though the woman was incapable of hearing or responding.

Almost every day. That was how often he came here. Every time, hoping it'd be her standing behind the counter. In his head, he always imagined scenarios where he'd talk to her and charm her, flirt with her. Fantasies of bending her over the counter and fucking her, making her his woman.

And yet, he never spoke to her.

In the two months since she started working here, the closest he'd come to having a conversation with her was asking if there was any cough syrup behind the counter.

She'd filled so many of his fantasies and wank sessions. But he still didn't know her name.

Jack walked around the counter, stood right next to the woman.

There, on the floor, her bag.

He reached down, picked it up, searched through it.

When he found her purse, he opened it up – checked for ID.

"Sally Saunders," he read from her driver's license. "Huh. I never pictured you as a 'Sally'."

After checking her address, Jack slid her drivers license back into her purse. Before setting it back in her handbag, he plucked out bit of cash. Not all her money – just enough to buy some snacks with.

Then he walked back across the store, stood in the same spot he'd been in when he'd stopped time – his back to the woman. Sally.

He grasped the ring, tugged it off his finger.

Colour returned to the world.

And, far behind him, Sally Saunders gasped.

"Are you okay honey?"

Jack looked up from his plate, saw the speaker – his mother – staring at Devyn.

It was a punch to the gut. For just the briefest of moments, he'd allowed himself to believe his mother was talking to him. Asking him if he was okay. But no, it was *Devyn* she was worried about. Not him. *Never* him.

Jack's sister glanced up from her plate, blushed.

Just like yesterday, she was wearing a red headband. Bangs over her forehead while the rest of her hair curved down to her chin. Dirty blonde hair – though that, Jack admitted to himself, might not be the best description. His sister's hair wasn't one shade of brown or blonde. More like, her hair came in two different colours – some strands bright blonde, others a honey brown. More blonde than brown, but unique and pretty even so.

"Yes," Devyn smiled at their mother. "I'm fine. Just... a little worn out. From the party."

Jack felt his fists clench. Did his best not to think about why his sister might be so 'worn out'. Her being unusually quiet and sombre, instead of her usual chipper and happy self, wasn't helping.

"Alright honey," their mother smiled. "Be sure to sleep early tonight then. Gotta be up nice and early for school tomorrow."

The four of them returned to eating their dinner after that.

The dining room fell silent.

Of course nobody asked how *Jack* was doing. Not a single glance in his direction, not a single word spoken for *him*.

He glared at his plate as he ate.

Thoughts of Drake Damilio flashed through Jack's mind, each one worse than the one before it. Drake standing over him, laughing as he kicked Jack. Drake telling his goons to hold Jack against a wall, that he needed a 'punching bag' to practice with. Drake pretending to be a nice guy, being loved and adored by everyone stupid enough to believe the act. Drake's car outside Tally's house. Drake climbing into bed with Devyn-

No!

Just because he'd been there last night, just because the two of them had been at the same small party, didn't mean anything had happened. It didn't mean...

Devyn wouldn't.

She was smarter than that. She was too *good* and too *pure* to let Drake Damilio-

Then why was she so quiet right now?

Why wasn't she enthusiastically telling their mother all about the sleepover or chatting about something else – school work or books she'd read or projects she'd been working on. Why was she being so *silent*? And why did she look so lost in thought?

The idea of her doing *anything* with Drake Damilio – it was like a knife in Jack's chest. A cold, painful, sharp knife. Being twisted slowly – carving out his fucking heart.

He set his fork down, pushed himself away from the table.

Neither of Jack's parents said a word as he walked away from the dinner table, food only half-eaten. Only Devyn looked up and watched as he left.

Jack rang the doorbell, quickly stepped aside and hid around the corner. He was indoors, in a hallway of apartments. The address that he'd read off Sally's ID.

He heard the door's lock click, listened as the door opened.

And he slid the black ring onto his finger.

As with the other times he'd put the ring on, the world around him *shifted*. Colour drained away, replaced by a greyscale. Dull whites and vibrant blacks and every shade of grey between.

Stepping back around the corner, he saw Sally standing in her apartment's now-open doorway. One arm on the door, her body leaning out to look down the corridor.

Jack walked over to her, ducked under her arm and entered the apartment.

He gave the place a quick once-over, checking every room and familiarising himself with the layout. It wasn't a big place. The apartment's entryway opened up into the main room – living area and kitchen and dining area all in one place. Then there was a bedroom and a bathroom and a small closet which contained little more than a washing machine.

The bedroom, Jack noted, had clothes for both a man and a woman.

Sally, it seemed, did not live alone. Though where her partner was, he couldn't say. Certainly, the man wasn't in the apartment right then.

Jack stood in the bedroom, took the ring off and waited.

He heard the apartment door close, followed my footsteps and movement outside the bedroom. A few moments later, the sound of the apartment's television. Some movie or show Sally was watching being unpaused.

Jack gave it a few more seconds, waiting patiently.

Then he slid the ring back on his finger.

Time froze and the world went black and white and grey again.

He opened the bedroom door, stepped out into the apartment proper.

Sally sat frozen on a small sofa, eyes on a television screen's still image. She didn't react as walked over to her, crouched down in front of her.

"I wonder," Jack found himself saying, "if there's a time limit for this. Will it run out if I wear the ring too long? Do I age with the ring on, or is my body 'frozen' in a way too? What do you think, Sally? There's gotta be a downside. A cost. Right?"

The woman gave no reply.

"That thing that happened earlier..." He reached out, touched Sally's hand. Above her head, a black cloud appeared. White symbols glowing inside it. "Yeah, *that*. What is it?"
He reached up, touched the black cloud.

A distant sense of dread and anxiety flowed into him from his fingertips. The fear of losing everything.

The black cloud multiplied, several more expanding out from it – all of them connected by black strings to the original, which was connected by a similar string to Sally's head. All the clouds had white symbols scratched into them. Different symbols.

"In for a penny," Jack whispered.

He reached up, touched one of the new black clouds.

An image flashed in Jack's mind. A letter. A notice of some kind. A threat. Most of the words were blurry, unreadable for the most part – but a few stood out like beacons. 'Eviction' and 'missed payments' and 'final warning'.

A few more black clouds expanded out from that cloud.

When Jack touched *those*, all he felt were emotions. One was guilt, another was fear, yet another was anger. And, just like the other clouds he'd touched, each of these grew yet more clouds as he touched them – every cloud linked to the one that'd spawned it.

"What in the world..."

Emotions and... memories?

The first bubble – the dread and anxiety. Was that what Sally was feeling right then? Anxious and afraid? And the clouds that'd expanded out from it... The reasons *why* she felt that way? Memories? What about the emotions that'd expanded out from there? Could they be emotions tied to that memory?

"Can I... Can I read minds?"

The answer to that question seemed pretty self-evident. But it was the answer to that question which led Jack to taking the next logical step.

"And," he said, eyes on those black clouds, "if I can. Can I *alter* them?"

He reached up for the memory – the cloud that'd given him the mental image of an eviction letter. This time, instead of sliding his fingertips inside the cloud, he wrapped them around it. Somehow, he felt it in his grip. Felt the memory.

Jack pulled it down – away from the other clouds.

He felt resistance, felt the black string connecting it to other clouds straining. He yanked on it harder, *forced* it away from them.

The black strings snapped.

The clouds that'd spawned from the memory vanished. The string connecting the memory to the original cloud severed in half and dissolved into nothing. And Jack was left holding a single, unconnected black cloud.

He let it go, watched it blow apart like smoke.

"Did..." He looked at the woman again. Sally. "Did I just erase one of your memories?"

His eyes widened as they fell on her.

A dark, unnatural shadow had spread over Sally's body like a second skin. Covering her from head to foot.

"Uhh..."

What was *that*?

Jack took a step back, shook his head.

What the fuck had he gotten himself in to?

What was going on?

What was the ring and how did it work?

What else could it do?

So many questions. More than he could hope to keep up with.

He'd come here to have some simple, easy fun with a time-frozen woman. Play with her tits, maybe explore her pussy. Not... whatever *this* was.

Jack inhaled, held it for a long moment, then breathed slowly out.

"I have no idea what's going on right now, Sally," he confessed to her. "Not a fucking clue. But I *did* come here to have a little bit of harmless fun. Seems a waste to have come all this way only to spend all my time testing shit out. You don't mind if I go back to the original plan, do you?"

Sally didn't reject him. Couldn't reject him.

"No? Good."

He pushed everything else aside. Thoughts and questions about the ring and its supernatural powers, concerns about potentially erasing one of the woman's memories, all of it. And, instead, he focused all his attention on this busty, attractive woman instead.

Currently frozen in time and covered in unnatural shadow.

But a woman all the same.

"Then let's start off," Jack smiled, "by getting a little more *comfortable*, shall we? First things first; let's get that top off you."