

## Saints and Sinners

### Chapter 4

A black and white world, frozen in time.

Jack walked the city streets with a straight back and a wide grin, strutting through the darkness like he owned it. To either side, concrete buildings. Ahead of him, a deserted road. Behind him, all his worries and concerns.

This was *his* place. *His* time.

It was night. Well into the early hours of the morning. But Jack wasn't tired. Wasn't even slightly fatigued. Not with the ring on his finger and a world of possibilities laid out before him. He basked in the city's darkness, instinctively avoided the street lights lining the road.

He cast a shadow. How was that possible?

Light might be the fastest thing in the universe, but it still needed *time* to move. If he was able to cast a shadow, time *couldn't* be frozen. And yet... it was.

The ring defied the natural laws of physics.

More than that, it could touch *minds*.

From a logical, scientific standpoint, it wasn't possible. It *couldn't* be possible.

But here he was, walking through the city with time frozen around him. Free in a way he'd never been before. Powerful in a way he'd never dreamed of. A god among men.

He needed to test it more.

The ring. He needed to understand it. Needed to learn everything it was capable of.

Finding test subjects was simple enough.

They were all around him. Normal people living normal lives. Unremarkable, ordinary, pathetic people. Men and women wasting their lives in pursuit of a trivial, mundane existence. Working, eating, sleeping, over and over. Drones, all of them.

He stepped out into the road, walked towards a fancy car that'd been frozen just as it was making a turn.

The driver's seat door was unlocked.

Inside, a man in a sleek business suit with shadows under his eyes and messy, uneven hair.

A simple touch was enough to bring a black cloud out of the man's head. It drifted up through the car roof, floated above the vehicle with only a thin black string connecting it to its owner.

When Jack touched the cloud, he felt the man's exhaustion. The weariness and stress and anxiety. The weight of it all, crushing the driver's resolve. And, when he touched the clouds that expanded out from that first one, Jack saw flashes of the memories that'd brought the driver to his mental limits. Memories of a cheating wife, of threats of losing everything, memories of bills and debts and being demoted at work.

Without even knowing the man's name, Jack knew every source of anxiety-inducing difficulty in his life.

But there had to be more, surely...

The exhaustion and weariness, the stress and anxiety? That was all surface-level stuff. The things this man was feeling at that very moment. They were *part* of him, sure. But those things weren't *all* of him.

What about the man's happiness? His dreams and goals? His hobbies? His secrets? Jack had access to the memories currently wearing the man down, but what about all of the *other* memories the man had stored away inside his head?

Jack grabbed the man by his throat, squeezed.

"Show me more," he commanded.

Nothing happened.

He gripped tighter – wasn't like the man needed to breathe right then. When time

unfroze, the driver would feel a momentary tightness around his throat. But that was it. And Jack would be long gone by then.

"Look at you," Jack whispered. "Wife's fucking another guy, and you're going to work and coming home to her and pretending like nothing is wrong. Debts piled up, savings vanishing, probably gonna get laid off soon. Pathetic. Is that really all there is to you, fucker?"

Jack shook his head, released the man's throat. He planed his hand on the man's forehead instead, closed his eyes and concentrated.

"Show. Me. More."

What did he want to see?

The man's dreams? His hobbies? No. Neither of those...

*Show me your wife.*

When Jack opened his eyes again, there was a second string extending up from the man's head.

Above the car, outside the web of clouds connected to the first, there was a new cloud. One attached only to the man's head.

Jack grinned.

He touched the new cloud, felt a wave of emotions too chaotic to fully comprehend. Love and hatred, affection and adoration and spite and anguish. Conflicting emotions glued together by uncertainty and betrayal and passion.

When he snatched his hand away, the 'wife' cloud had spawned several more clouds of its own – all connected to it by black strings. Memories, Jack figured. And, after poking a few of them and watching as yet more clouds spawned from those he'd touched, he was certain he understood.

Some of the memories were good – a happy wedding day, laughter during a date, messing around while music played in the background. Others were less so – text messages the man had discovered, his wife's infidelity, her lying, smiling face.

And, attached to each of those memories, a new cloud or two.

"I think I get it," Jack said, stepping away from the car. "I think I understand..."

The first cloud. That was an 'overall' feeling. A summation of how a person was generally feeling at any given moment, or how they felt overall about a specific thought or idea.

The second set of clouds were the memories that informed the feeling. The conflict the man felt about his wife? It was born of all the good memories warring with the bad and hurtful ones. The general exhaustion he felt? A symptom of the events that'd led up to it, the memories of all the things wrong in his life.

And then there were the third layer of clouds. The ones drawn out from memories. They were specific, single emotions. Happiness or comfort or pain or any number of lesser emotions. Not riotous combinations and mixtures like the initial clouds, but simple, basic emotions linked to specific memories. If a memory was happy, it'd have a 'happy' cloud. If it was painful, it'd have a 'pain' cloud, if it was happy *and* comforting, it'd have one cloud of each.

"I can rewrite someone's personality," Jack said aloud, the realisation hitting him like a truck.

Could he? Was he mistaken?

"If it..."

If he could move a cloud's original connection and attach it to another, he'd theoretically be able to alter anyone's personality in any way he wanted.

In theory, he'd be able to remove all the 'happy' emotions from that man's memories of his wife – removing the conflict he felt and allowing him to hate his wife freely. Or, alternatively, he could take the 'pain' away from the bad memories and replace it with 'acceptance' or 'happiness' or 'comfort' – make the man *enjoy* the fact that his wife was

cheating on him.

If he could move those clouds around, detach them and reattach them elsewhere, he'd be able to reprogram anyone's personality in any way he wanted.

If.

That was the key word. The most important one.

*If* he could.

He walked over to the car again, eyes scanning the many clouds now floating above the vehicle.

With his right hand, glowing red letters rotating around the base of his middle finger, Jack reached for one of the 'emotion' clouds at random. He grasped it, felt it in his hand, moved it.

The string connecting it to its memory snapped and vanished.

Likely, he'd just removed 'happiness' from one of the man's memories of his wife.

He moved the emotion, pressed it to a different memory and felt that memory's images nudging at him. A phone with flirty messages, teasing hints at more. And, when he moved the cloud again, a new black string had appeared – connecting the emotion to its new memory.

When he let the 'emotion' cloud go, it remained in place.

Instinctively, he knew it was true.

He'd just made the man *happy* about finding those text adulterous messages.

Jack burst out laughing.

He swayed on his heels, hunched over with a great big smile on his face. A dark, warm tingling rippled through his body. A burst of energy and excitement at his discovery and all the possibilities it opened up for him.

In the driver's seat of the car, the man remained frozen in place. Though now, his entire body was covered in a dark, impossible shadow.

His fingertip slid around the rim of the black ring. Held between finger and thumb, his other index finger gently caressing the unnaturally cold metal object. Blacker than black, singing its silent song of temptation.

All he had to do was slip it on his finger and he could leave this place as a god. Walk out of the men's restroom and stride through the school, going wherever he wished and playing with anyone he wanted on the way there. He could walk right off school grounds and nobody would stop him. Nobody *could* stop him.

The toilet in the stall next to his flushed. A few heartbeats later, the stall's door unlocked. Footsteps walked over to the restroom sinks, turned a tap on.

Jack suppressed a sigh, slid the ring back into his pocket and turned his gaze up to the ceiling.

What was he doing?

School. Who needed school? He had a ring that granted him godlike powers. School had been beneath him *before* he'd found the ring. Now it was nothing but an annoyance. A joke. And one he had no choice but to continue with.

One day soon, when he'd mastered the ring and its powers, he'd use it on his parents. Make them into obedient little puppets. He could drop out of school then without worry. Do whatever he wanted with his time. But, until that day came, he had no choice but to be here.

There was a constant temptation to use the ring here. Grope hotties, beat up assholes, experiment with its powers. But, even before arriving here today, he'd decided not to use it at school.

Putting the ring on at school meant he'd be here even *longer* than he needed to be.

Instead, he'd hold off on using the ring here. Wait the time down until the school-day ended and he was free to leave. Then, and only then, would he experiment with his

newfound powers – happy in the knowledge that he wouldn't have to go back to studying as soon as he took the ring off.

He was above this place. Above school in general.

But, for the time being at least, he'd tolerate it.

Just as he was getting up from his toilet seat, ready to endure yet another boring, useless lesson, the restroom door slammed open. Jack froze, listened.

"You know it!" A familiar male voice grunted.

Jack's heart sank. One of Drake Damilio's goons.

"Nah, she ain't like that," Drake's voice spoke up. Deep and clear. "She's different. Not a whore like all the other bitches 'round here. She's classy."

Jack began reaching towards his pocket.

He'd slip the ring on for just a few moments. Long enough to get out of the restroom and leave these assholes behind-

"Classy?" A voice chuckled. "Devyn? Nah, dude. She's a stuck up bitch. Thinks she's better than everyone. You seen the way she looks at us?"

Jack's hand froze. He stared at his toilet stall's door, eyes narrowing.

"No idea what you're talking about, Bear." Drake said, a smile clear in his voice. "Every time she looks at me, she gets that slutty look in her eyes, ya know? The cock-gobbler stare."

"She won't even let you kiss her!" Another voice grumbled loudly. "No way is she gonna 'gobble' your cock. Keep dreaming."

"Mark my words," Drake Damilio said proudly. "After the school dance, I'll be poppin' Devyn's cherry and giving her the fucking of her life. I'll even take some pictures to prove it. Give you losers something to jack off to while I..." He trailed off into silence.

Jack leaned forward, pressed his ear to the door.

They were talking about Devyn. About his sister. He had to listen! He had to know...

Nothing. Pure silence.

They were still there. He'd have heard their footsteps if they'd left. They *had* to still be there! So why weren't they talking? What'd stopped them?

Three light taps on the door.

Jack flinched back away from it, heart thumping in his chest.

"Come on out, Jacky boy." Drake gleeful voice said on the other side. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

His voice was followed by the laughter of his two goons.

Jack froze.

All thoughts left his head. Every single one.

The only thing he could hear was the *thump, thump* of his heart. Over and over again, rapid and relentless.

"Up to you," Drake chuckled.

A moment later, the stall door exploded open – lock shattering completely. The door slammed against the stall wall, Drake standing on the other side with his foot up and a grin on his face.

Tall, strong, handsome. Dark hair and dark eyes. The kind of guy girls drooled over and other guys flocked to follow.

There was nothing 'handsome' about the venomous grin Drake Damilo had on his face. The malice and glee. He stepped into the bathroom stall, his two bulky goons behind him.

The ring.

The thought hit Jack like a lightning bolt.

If he put on the ring, he could-

A fist in his gut put a quick end to that idea.

Jack hunched over, felt a hand grab him by his hair, drag his face back up.

Drake stood directly in front of him, eyes cold.

"Listening in on other peoples' conversations is really fucking creepy, Jacky," Drake said, grip tightening on Jack's scalp. "What've I told you about being *creepy* Jacky?"

Jack said nothing. Just glared at Drake.

His hand inched closer to his pocket. Slowly, as to not draw Drake's attention. All he had to do was put it on and freeze time. He'd be able to erase Drake's memories – along with the memories of the other two – make them forget about him ever being here.

He could do much more than *that*.

The ring. All he needed was to put it on.

When Drake kicked Jack's legs, Jack yelped in surprise – toppled backwards. Before he could react – before he could even realise what was happening – Drake had spun him around, locked both of Jack's arms behind his back with one hand and gripped the back of Jack's head with the other.

"What is it they do in films?" Drake snarled, a animal grin on his face. "Swirlies, right? You ever been swirlied, Jacky?"

Jack tried to resist. Tried to fight Drake off. But it was useless. The bastard was just too strong.

"What're you gonna do?" Drake whispered, words for Jack and Jack only.

He fought as hard as he could, struggled as his forehead pressed against the toilet seat, continued moving. But there was nothing he could do. He was powerless.

"Don't worry Jacky," Drake laughed, pushing Jack's head into the toilet bowl. "There's a first time for everything!"

He ignored the attention as best he could.

Girls and guys, all turning to look at him as he walked by. Pointing at his wet hair, whispering and giggling.

Jack clenched his fist, kept walking.

Lunch hour would be over soon. Just a few more lessons and he'd be able to leave this stupid fucking school. A little while longer, and he could turn his back on all these assholes and never look back.

When he stepped into the cafeteria – it was the quickest route to his next class – Jack froze in place. A wight dropping itself inside him, bringing him to a sickly stand-still.

Over there, at one of the tables.

Devyn.

And, sitting on the table beside her, Drake. Smiling a charming, confident smile. Not a care in the world.

Devyn. She was smiling too.

Smiling that that *piece of shit*.

It wasn't the first time he'd felt it. A dark hatred that gripped his heart with icy fingers. He'd known *that* feeling for a long, *long* time. Years and years. It was nothing new to him.

But now he had the ring.

In the past, he'd had no choice but to bury that hatred. Feed it, but do nothing about it.

Now he had power.

Now he *could* do something.

He didn't allow himself to think. Didn't allow his mind to come up with excuses not to. Jack reached into his pocket, pulled the ring out, slid it on his finger in one clean motion.

The world froze. Colour drained away in an instant, leaving only blacks and whites and greys.

He strode over to where his sister sat, his fists clenched.

Drake's smiling, care-free face.

Jack growled, swung his fist.

Pain. A jolt of it shooting up his arm from the impact.

Drake's face tilted to one side, froze in its new position.

"Fuck!" Jack swore, clutching his hand. "Why the fuck is your face so hard, cunt?!"

He raised his fist again, hesitated.

No. Not his hand.

Something else. Something *harder*.

He spent a moment looking around, searching for a weapon to use. Something to punish this smirking, stupid fuck with. Something to *end* his torment once and for all.

And then he saw it.

A discarded baseball bat.

He grinned, went and picked it up.

"What're you gonna do?" He asked Drake, climbing onto the cafeteria table behind the asshole. "What're you gonna do?"

He raised the bat.

"Whatever the fuck I want."

He swung.

And felt the vibrations of the impact in his fingers. Heard the wonderful *thump* of the bat against Drake's spine.

He raised it again, swung. Again. And again.

A wild grin spread Jack's lips.

He didn't notice the shadows spreading behind him. Didn't notice the rest of the cafeteria darkening.

"Whatever," Jack spat, hopping off the table and moving to face Drake head-on. "The fuck. I want."

The asshole had decided to sit on the table. Knees out, legs spread wide. Carefree. Happy. Arrogant. *Asshole*. Jack tapped Drake's shin with the bat. Took a step back, lined up the swing – one that'd put an end to Drake's petty bullying and daily torments once and for all.

He spared one glance at Devyn. His beautiful sister. *His* sister.

Not Drake's. Not anybody else's.

*His*.

His eyes snapped back to Drake, a harsh glare.

"She's mine."

He swung the bat one last time, felt the satisfying crunch of Drake Damilio's shin-bone shattering.

"Fucker."

Then he turned around.

And saw a humanoid shadow standing there, watching him with glowing red eyes.