

Saints and Sinners

Chapter 5

He ran.

His body reacted before his brain could even process the impossible thing standing there. Jack spun on his heels, bolted through the cafeteria for the nearest exit.

Bursting into a hallway, dodging past frozen students, he spared only one quick glance back at the humanoid shadow.

It was following him. Chasing him. Gliding across the floor effortlessly, glowing red eyes locked on Jack. Its body of shadows rippling and distorting as it flowed past frozen people.

Jack ran as hard as his legs would allow him.

Not needing to breathe, heart still in his chest, muscles never growing tired. He shot down one corridor after another, up one staircase and down another. He ran right through the cafeteria again, sparing a quick glance to his sister's table.

They were all still there. Frozen in time. Devyn sitting at a large dining table, Drake Damilio sitting atop it with a smile on his face.

And then he was in another corridor, the shadow thing hot on his heels. Growing ever closer.

No time to think. No time to pause.

Jack sprinted into an empty classroom, slammed the door shut behind himself and backed up – eyes on the wooden door with its glass window.

A moment later, the shadow thing appeared.

It stared at him through the door's glass window.

Black shadows bled into the classroom from under the door. All around the door, tendrils of shadow snaked forward. The shadow thing vanished from behind the door, reformed inside the classroom instead.

Jack backed up, fists clenched.

No-where to run. The shadow thing was between him and the exit.

"What are you?" Jack demanded, continuing to back away from the humanoid shadow. "What do you want?"

The shadow glided slowly towards him, red eyes bright.

Same shade of red as the symbols around the ring. And, just like those symbols, those red eyes were the only source of colour in the world.

When his back pressed up against a classroom wall, Jack looked down at his body. Covered from head to foot in total darkness, small red symbols rotating around the base of his middle finger.

He reached down, gripped the ring.

His eyes locked on to the shadow thing.

He pulled the ring off his finger.

All at once, the greyscale world disappeared – the shadow figure vanishing along with it. Colour returned to the world, time resumed. And, somewhere far away, a guy broke and a girl screamed.

Jack watched out a school window as the ambulance came to a stop.

Flashing lights and a loud siren.

Two paramedics rushed out of the ambulance with a stretcher, led by a worried teacher. They disappeared inside the school, no doubt heading straight for the cafeteria.

There were others crowded around windows, whispering and gossiping about why the ambulance was there.

Word of what'd happened to Drake hadn't quite spread everywhere yet. And, where it had reached, the stories and gossip was confused and disjointed. Some thought he'd

gotten into a big fight with someone, others claimed he'd had a seizure, others whispered about some medical condition he'd been keeping a secret – which somehow related to Drake's sister or something.

Jack was only half-listening to the gossip.

Rather than being consumed by joy at his bully's defeat, his mind was focused elsewhere – on the humanoid shadow with red eyes.

Whatever it was, the thing was related to the ring. It *had* to be.

But what was it? And why had it appeared after Jack's time-frozen revenge against Drake? Why had it chased him?

He found himself glancing around, searching the shadows for red eyes. But there was nothing. No humanoid shadow, no dark presence lurking over him. Whatever the shadow was, it wasn't here now.

What would happen the next time he put the ring on?

"Actions and reactions," Jack muttered under his breath.

A head or two turned to look at him, but Jack ignored them.

Actions and reactions. Cause and effect. Wasn't it a thing in physics – you can't have an action without there being some form of equivalent reaction. Or was that chemistry? Regardless, there was *some* law of nature that dictated something along those lines. What goes up must come down. To gain something, something else must be spent. Nothing in life was ever free.

Stopping time and playing with people's minds. That was power. But power had to have a price, right?

So, what *was* the price?

Being chased by creepy, weird shadows?

Come to think of it, what the hell was up with the shadows that appeared over people when he altered their minds? What did *those* mean?

So many questions with no answers.

When the paramedics appeared again, they were carrying their stretcher. Moving quickly and carefully towards the ambulance.

Drake Damilio lay motionless on that stretcher, his clothes stained red and his face pale.

All around him, the whispers began again. Everyone sounding far too worried and concerned about the asshole being carted away. A hush fell over the crowd as the ambulance sped away, then the chattering resumed once again. People moving away from the windows, forming little groups – bubbles of gossip and noise.

If any of them noticed Jack's wide grin, none of them commented on it.

"He just..." Devyn shut her eyes, shook her head. "One moment he was fine. We were talking about the dance – there's this big school dance in a few weeks – and he was fine and everything was normal..."

Their mother and father were listening, Mom with a comforting look on her face while Dad seemed more interested in the fact his 'princess' was talking to a guy. Jack kept his eyes on his plate, made sure to keep his face blank and emotionless.

"Then his whole body jerked," Devyn shuddered. "And he started shaking and groaning and coughing blood and-"

She stopped, inhaled a sharp breath.

"It's okay, honey," their mother said soothingly. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

"I don't know what happened," Devyn sighed, poked the food on her plate with her fork. "I haven't heard anything since they took him to the hospital. He could be..."

She didn't finish the thought.

In his mind, Jack did it for her.

'Dead. He could be dead.'

Resisting the urge to grin was difficult, but somehow Jack managed it. He didn't want Devyn to see him smirking at Drake's suffering, much as the prick deserved what he got.

"I can't eat any more," Jack said, pushing his plate away and standing.

His mother spared him a quick, disinterested glance.

No doubt, if it'd been Devyn who didn't want to finish her food, their parents would be all over her – asking her what was wrong and if she was feeling okay.

He walked out of the dining room, fingers fishing into his pocket.

When he was safely out of view from his family, he slipped the time-stopping ring onto his finger.

The world shifted to shades of black and white instantly.

Jack looked around, searched for the shadow with red eyes.

No sign of it.

He nodded his head, walked back into the dining room.

A coward, after seeing that shadow monster, would never have tried putting the ring on again. A loser with no ambition would've set it aside for good. But Jack was neither of those things. He was a *god*. And gods didn't hide from shadows.

He'd learn about the ring. Master it. Figure out what that shadow was and get rid of it.

But, before all that, he'd have a bit of fun...

Jack walked over to his sister. Devyn. The prettiest girl around, hands down. With a smile that'd warm even the coldest hearts and a laugh so beautiful that it echoed in Jack's dreams.

Only, she wasn't smiling or laughing now.

Face downcast, eyes on her barely-touched dinner.

Jack placed a gentle hand on his sister's shoulder, watched as a black cloud rose from her head.

"Sis," he whispered in her ear. "He's not worth it."

Slowly, Jack reached for the cloud above Devyn's head.

As he touched it, he felt everything he'd been expecting. Worry and horror, stress and pain. But, in addition to that, he felt some things he hadn't anticipated. Conflict. Determination. Uncertainty. Hope.

Odd.

More clouds spawned from the first. Memories for him to explore.

Jack began reaching towards one of the new clouds, hesitated, drew his hand back. His eyebrows knit together.

Whenever he began messing with someone's memories, a shadow passed over their entire body. An impossible, unnatural shadow. It was only visible while time was frozen, but still... What was it?

If he began touching Devyn's mind, she'd be covered in shadow too, wouldn't she?

"I don't know what the darkness means," he said to himself and Devyn both, "but it's probably best not to start messing around with you until I do, right? Same goes for Mom and Dad. I should figure out what the darkness is first. Test it on other people."

He took a step away from Devyn.

A pang of regret. A silent argument inside his head.

He knew what he wanted to do with his sister. Knew exactly what he'd use his powers for.

First, he'd make her forget all about Drake. Make her hate him as much as Jack did. Kill any chance of that bastard ever hooking up with her. Then, he'd tweak things in her brain a little further. Make his sister see him the same way he saw her...

Devyn was cute. More than pretty. She was attractive and kind and slender and bright. She was everything a female *should* be.

And, with the ring, Jack saw a future that'd never been possible before. A future of Devyn and him together.

"It'll be perfect," he told his motionless sister before turning away, walking out of the dining room once again. "I can't wait."

He slipped the ring on his finger just before entering the store.

Save for an old lady at the back of the store, it was only Sally Saunders in the place. The busty, beautiful store attendant he'd paid a home visit to. She stood behind the counter, covered in a shadow that was only visible when time was frozen.

Jack hopped over the counter, walked up behind Sally and gave her ass a firm spank.

The frozen woman remained face front, giving no reaction at all to having her ass slapped. Save for Jack's handprint embedded in her left butt-cheek, there was no indication that he'd even touched her at all.

"Figures," Jack sighed, glancing above Sally's head. "Spanking you while time is stopped isn't fun. Some day, I'll have to do it for real. Make you *want* me to do it. Now *that* sounds fun."

There was, thanks to the spank, now a black cloud above Sally's head.

Without waiting, Jack reached up and touched it.

Boredom. Dull, empty boredom. Barely even awake, not thinking about anything, just a sense of boredom.

He pulled his hand away, saw just a single cloud had extended out from the first – didn't need to touch it to know what memory it contained. It'd be the memory of that day, standing there behind the counter while waiting for her shift to end.

Jack nodded his head, slid his hand down Sally's back. When his fingers reached her jeans, he slid them underneath the fabric – under her panties – to grope her ass directly.

"Show me..." He paused, gave himself a moment to think. What did he want to know? How was he going to test his powers today? "Show me your boyfriend."

He looked up, saw no new clouds.

Again, Jack nodded his head.

Then he closed his eyes, focused on the silent words and the command.

Show me your boyfriend.

When he opened his eyes, there was a new cloud above Sally. One not connected to the first two. A new *root* for him to follow.

"Better," Jack smiled.

He touched the new cloud, embraced the wave of emotion that followed. Fondness and caring and a gentle, relaxed kind of love. Intimacy and friendship and closeness. But some other things too – a sense of limitations, of little annoyances and gaps in their relationship.

Jack pulled his hand away, understanding Sally's relationship in a way that he doubted even her boyfriend did.

Sally cared a lot about her boyfriend, felt close to him. But she didn't love him. Not really. She knew their relationship wouldn't last forever – that the two of them worked better as friends than anything more.

From that cloud, a handful of memories had spawned. If he'd kept his hand on the 'boyfriend' bubble longer, Jack was sure, more memory clouds would have formed. The ones that had? They were simply the most prominent memories Sally possessed regarding her lover.

Jack looked through the few memories above him. Was met with images of Sally's first time meeting her boyfriend, and a scene of the pair on their first date, another of them cuddling and chatting one cold night. Simple memories, all of which spawned 'emotion'

bubbles – happiness and joy and contentedness and affection and the like.

Jack walked away from Sally, hopped over the store counter and began pacing up and down the store's aisle. He glanced around, frowned.

No sign of the shadow thing.

He shook his head, continued with his line of thought.

A person, every single person on the planet, was a culmination of their life experiences. Their memories and the emotions and feelings behind those memories.

If a person was a crybaby, it was because they got pampered and received too much attention when crying as a child. Love? That was just fond, intimate memories paired with sexual interest and passion. Bravery and wanting to be a hero? That was the result of watching stupid films where the good guys always won, wanting the fame and recognition themselves. Every aspect of a person's identity – their entire personality – was a result of their past. Events throughout their life shaping them into who they now were.

It was the age old argument of nature vs nurture, and the fact that the latter of the two was by far the most important.

So, in theory, altering a person's memories – re-contextualising them – was the key to *changing* someone's personality on a fundamental level.

"If I take all those happy emotions," Jack said, eyes on the frozen Sally. "If I *erase* those feelings and emotions from your memories with your boyfriend, will you stop liking him?"

From everything Jack understood about people, that *should* be the case.

"Better yet," he continued. "What if I replace the positive emotions with negative ones instead? Disgust and loathing and spite and all that."

Instead of remembering their first time meeting as a happy, charming encounter, Sally would look back and find the whole ordeal an annoyance. Where before, that memory of her laying in bed with her boyfriend was one of satisfaction and comfort, Jack could re-contextualise it to be one of disappointment and disinterest.

How many memories would he have to alter in such a way to make Sally feel like she want to end things with her boyfriend immediately?

He walked up to the counter, reached out his hand and squeezed a big, soft tit. Smiling, he closed his eyes. Concentrated.

Show me something you hate.

When he opened his eyes and looked up, he saw a new cloud above Sally's head – unconnected to the many that were already floating there.

Through that 'root', he'd find unpleasant 'memories' and through those he'd be able to collect negative 'emotions'. It'd be a simple enough task to move the 'emotion' clouds from unpleasant memories, to memories of Sally's boyfriend. Simple, but time-consuming.

But what did that matter? With the ring on his finger, Jack had all the time in the world. Quite literally.

"Hey," Jack smiled, gave a lil' wink. "What's up?"

Sally raised an eyebrow at him. Amused, not offended. She nodded to the chocolate bar in his hand.

"Anything else?"

"No," Jack put on his flirtiest smirk. "Just this 'n' you."

Sally rolled her eyes, held out her hand.

Grinning, Jack handed her the money.

"Keep the change, beautiful," he said as strode for the store exit. Back straight, chin high, exuding as much confidence as he could muster.

No-doubt, Sally would think he was an idiot.

That flirting? She'd probably have a long laugh over it at Jack's expense. But that was fine. It was all totally fine.

Because later, he'd *alter* it.

The memory.

Remove the embarrassment and amusement. Replace it with desire and lust and longing.

That was how he'd do it. How he'd seduce her.

Create basic memories; templates for him to attach emotions to later.

When the time was right, he'd conjure up Sally's memories of this failed flirting attempt and he'd *change* how she saw it. How she *felt* about it. He'd make more and more memories, a whole ocean of events to twist around and make his own.

Remove any and all attachment Sally had to her boyfriend, while *redirecting* that affection and positive emotion to Jack himself. Essentially, he'd reprogram her experiences – her mind – to find himself appealing as a lover.

Jack peeled back his chocolate bar's wrapper.

"Give it a bit of time," he said, taking a bite – stopping to savour the taste. "Once I've fucked Sally and worked everything out, I'll do the same with Devyn. Get her to watch a show or film or something with incest, then rearrange her feelings about it. Make her think it's sexy..."

It wouldn't be as easy as that, he was certain.

He'd still only scratched the surface of what the ring could do. Deep down, he knew it was capable of so much more.

Small steps first. Simple goals.

First, Sally and her boyfriend. That needed to end.

Then Sally and Jack. He'd have a lot of fun with *that*.

And – eventually – Devyn.