

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

# TERROR BAY

A diver in a dark underwater cave, illuminated by a bright opening in the distance. The diver is silhouetted against the light, and bubbles are visible in the water. The cave walls are rocky and covered in algae.

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# LISA TOWLES

# TERROR BAY

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From birth, man carries the weight of gravity on his shoulders. He is bolted to earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free.

Jacques Yves Cousteau

In 2006 I published an article in a surfing magazine. A lifelong surfer read it, emailed me about how much he enjoyed it, and I married him two years later. To Lee - thank you for sending the email that changed my life forever. None of this would be possible without you.

## Other books by Lisa Towles

*Salt Island (E&A Series)*

*The Ridders*

*Hot House (E&A Series)*

*Ninety-Five*

*The Unseen*

*Choke*

And published under the name Lisa Polisar:

*Escape: Dark Mystery Tales*

*The Ghost of Mary Prairie*

*Blackwater Tango*

*Knee Deep*

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# Terror Bay

A Psychological Thriller

Lisa Towles



# Prologue

*Early October*

**She knew. In her bones she knew** they shouldn't be there, and not just for legal reasons, but for all the tangled, convoluted nuances of maritime law that would undeniably stand in the way of ownership, should they find it. According to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, Canada shared maritime boundaries with Greenland and Alaska. That meant Admiralty Law regulations, plus anything involving old ships could be subject to the Abandoned Shipwreck Act. None of that mattered, though, did it? She'd already found it but hadn't followed the rules. Did she ever?

The captain had warned them of the storm, so she knew the risks and the timeline. Her gut told her she was too far in now to ensure enough air to reach the surface. But how could they possibly turn back knowing what they now knew, seeing what they'd seen? The unmistakable shape of a ship's hull still shockingly intact, a spectral hand and wrist outstretched and frozen, pointing to a door, now corroded in rust and thick barnacles, barely attached to its hinge. Around the front, a shocking face glared, jaw open, of maybe an original sailor or more recently a salvage diver, knowing what fate would become him, recognizing his killer and certain of no escape.

The eyes, laughing almost in the hollowed skull, had found it - the artifact no one in over two hundred years had thought of. She pictured the skeleton fragment as a living being, diving with antiquated equipment, slithering through the tight opening without his tank so he could grab it quickly and return in time to breathe. How many divers had perished from these temptations before? If he'd found it, that meant he'd done his research, knew exactly where to look, and had a cool enough head to hold the weighty secret in his heart. But how could he have known that one random British sailor had earlier in his life been a privateer on board a pirate ship and kept a king's ransom worth of valuables hidden in the hull for twenty years? How could the man have known this... without being the man himself? Or maybe an ancestor.

Just one more moment, a few more feet and finagling her way through the narrow hole in the rusted hull. This had to be the place; it even looked like all her years of research foretold. In the flash of a moment, she felt the pulse of that threshold, knowing this was the line, the same line the dead diver before her had stood.

Now or never.

The storm on the surface made it the wrong day to dive. For her, it was the

right day to die.

# Chapter 1

## *Late February*

**I can see things in here, things** the human *living* mind wasn't ever intended to see. I know how it sounds, how it makes me sound. I'm just reporting from this strange place.

I don't know exactly where here is right now, but I also don't think I'm dead. I seem to be waiting for something, but I don't know what. I feel it, my body preparing me. Making plans – shoving things in corners, finishing less significant tasks before the insistent takeover. I can't move forward until I find it, or it finds me. I can't move at all for that matter, or breathe, or remember the *before*. This thing in my future, an intangible presence, will clutch onto my spine, feast on my innards till it's eaten the whole of my vitality. And when it clicks into place, God help me. It's happened before, I can't see it yet but I feel its warm breath on the crown of my skull, descending like a promise of its inexorable coup.

Inside the deepest me there is this knowing, a knowing of another knowing. It could be music, or a name, even a person.

*Genevieve Lucas*. Yes, my bones vibrate inside as I say those five syllables in my head. Somehow, I know that Genevieve Lucas is my nemesis and my destiny.

Water has this smell deep beneath the surface. I recognize it from my scuba exploits so many years ago. A scent that's simultaneously fresh and rank, laden with hope and death. More than that, though, the inky-blue unlit terrain is a secret cosmos unto its own. The lack of light brings about a different kind of perception down here, the way sensory deprivation in one way boosts awareness - and capabilities - in others.

My arms are floating, and my body's anchored to something soft, but with more form than a mound of sea vegetation or sand. More like a bed. But if I'm under water, how could that be? The brain in this state is capable of mysterious magic, though I can't say exactly what state I'm in. I have pure awareness without the burdens of physicality. No, please, I can't be dead. Can I? But then what is this watery grave? I say the name again to myself because it feels good and real and home to say it. Genevieve... Genevieve Lucas. It echoes, distorted by the water. I am submerged. Separate, but close.

All the Zombie apocalypse movies I've watched aren't helping. I try opening my eyes wider but only see the same bubbly nothing all around me. What's odd is that my arms and legs can move. I try kicking and punching, but my torso and

pelvis are anchored. I feel anger moving through me. What the fuck is going on? I'm a detective, dammit. So detect.

Okay, what's the last thing I remember? A case, a young girl at a club shot at close range on the dance floor and nobody heard a thing. We found our suspect, Jimmy Breslin, who'd been drinking at the same club every night since, as if paying vigil to his victim. We followed him, cornered him, we had him. And now I'm here in this floating nightmare, a house without windows. Something must have happened after that, happened to me, and that's the reason for this transcendent in-between. Coma? It must be, because nothing else makes sense. I admit it's not completely unpleasant, either. Peaceful, serene almost, but with no way out. It's a quiet jail that comes with a dull ache in my heart. I'm getting used to the pain now, the pain of knowing.

Wait, now I'm diving again, maybe part of this same dream, if that's what this place is. The frigid water seeps into tiny holes in my wetsuit. My body's shivering and I'm eyeing the surface, or at least the direction I think is the surface. Then I look down and see something. A dark outline of some structure. On one side there's seaweed, brown and fine. No, it's... hair. Brownish red, the color of seaweed half flowing with the water's current, the other half held down under its head. I use my fins to move toward it.

Something yanks against my waist. Dammit, my partner pulling my cord, a sign that we're heading back up. *I see you*, I say to the figure down there. You're not dead, I can save you. I see her. Please, one more minute. She's just—

Two tugs this time, harder, more insistent, a reminder of life and death. Turn back now or else.

A hand pushes outward from the body, a woman. Oh my God, she's alive. She's... there's no... how could she be down here without any breathing apparatus, how could she possibly be...? But she's moving. She sees me. I can feel her presence *inside me*.

One final tug and the cord's pulling me backwards now against my will.  
Genevieve Lucas.

The name feels right. I see her head and shoulders now, buried under the two-hundred-year-old ship. Of course she's dead. She'd have to be, right? Who are you and why are you haunting me? What do you want? Did you bring me here to this liquid jail?

The cord pulls me away from her and I feel myself sobbing. I see light from the surface. I'm rising with the pull from the cord, my partner three feet ahead looking back to make sure I don't escape, knowing full well that is my intention.

Terror.

Terror.

I've seen it. It's coming.

## Chapter 2

**First metal, scraping sounds, like a soft** roar. Then something clinking against another surface.

I returned to the dark, watery cosmos because it had become a respite. Floating, cool, buoyant, graceful, like being rocked by an invisible mother in a chair made out of heaven. Could I stay here forever? Memories were mashed up in this place, a kaleidoscope of the past – a smelly boathouse, an old man with a strange accent.

Then that scraping sound again. Oh. My. God. What was that fucking noise? Rage now, born from a low spot in my belly, rose in a red fire up to my chest. Everything irritated me, and every body part hurt. The back of my head, left side. Something happened there. Trauma.

“Okay, are we ready?” someone said. “Are you all asleep over there or what?” A man’s voice.

“Sorry, Doctor. Yes, ready.”

“Just going from one bed to the other now, very gently. Lift him now. On three. One... two...”

Wait, no. That was... I felt something. Pressure. Fingers under my sides and butt. Where was I?

“Did his eyes just flutter?”

“I saw it too. Go ahead, get him settled onto the other bed. Yep, you got it, that’s good.”

“Repositioning, one second, okay.”

“Good. Gently move away now. Nurse...”

“I got him. Vitals are... still fine. I’m seeing—”

“There, again! I saw it.”

“Detective?” the first voice said. “Detective Farin, can you hear me?”

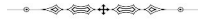
Yes, I heard you. Why can’t you hear—

“Blink your eyes if—”

Why couldn’t I answer him? I hear you, for God’s sake. Can’t you hear me? I was talking, moving my mouth, feeling the sensation of the movement but there was no sound. It was like glass separating me from the world, this bright, awful world I don’t want to be in.

Metal scaping again and this time I knew it was a door. Please just kill me if I have to endure that sound again. My legs were throbbing, this was new. Okay, let’s start on an inventory of pain: head pain, check. My neck and shoulders were fine. My forearms ached, like deep in the bones, same with my hands. Oh, my head. I’d seriously die if I heard that screech again. Where did my blue cosmos

go? I was no longer floating and could feel my heart beating irregularly. My skin seemed hot instead of cool. Why was everything so loud and pointy? I want to go back. Someone listen to me. I don't belong here. Take me back, please. Somebody! Take me back to my liquid under.



A warm presence slithered in from a prick in my right elbow, I'd felt it climbing up my shoulder into my neck a few hours ago before I slept. They must have sedated me. And I now knew what happened to me and understood the effect it's had on my brain. Oh my God. The fingers that pressed into my body when they moved me from one bed to another gave me a glimpse of something, though not a glimpse from my own head... *but theirs.*

Whoever it was, they'd been thinking about TBI. I knew that acronym from my medical training: traumatic brain injury. Was I seeing or hearing *their* thoughts? There must be a name for this freakish new skill.

"Eyes open, here we go. Mr. Farin. Kurt, blink if you can hear me."

I blinked and nodded my head, eyes squinted but anxiously glancing up at the fluorescent lights. I tried to tell her, the bulb-nosed woman leaning over me, with my eyes that the lights were killing me, that they literally hurt. Eyes, lights, back and forth. Come on, are you getting it?

"Nothing," she said.

"Mr. Farin, blink back if you can hear me."

I fucking hear you! I'm blinking my eyelashes off. I tried to talk but something wasn't working. Something wasn't connected yet.

"He's disoriented," the woman explained to someone behind her.

Do you think I'm gonna bite you? I can't even move my arms. Wait, I wriggled the fingers on my right hand. Okay, progress. Toes next, left foot, right. I drew in a breath, careful not to pull it in too deeply because the tubes in my nose and mouth could cause me to cough.

I imagined sitting up and swinging my legs off the side of the hospital bed, placing my feet on the floor, and sinking down into the blue cosmos. But all I could do now was wiggle my toes. The staff didn't seem to notice my success, because they were just staring at my eyes. What the fuck's the matter with these people?

Some measure of time had passed, because the light in here was different and everyone was gone. Thank God. The air smelled like antiseptic, a hospital smell, but I loved the fact that there was a smell and I could detect it. I raised my eyes up to the ceiling, then down to my chest, side to side, my body remembering how to move outside of the blue sphere. This was earth. Corporeal existence. California, a hospital somewhere.

I'd coordinated a sting operation at a grungy, punk dive in Oakland called The

Stork Club. A nightmare of a crowd, sweaty bodies jammed together like sardines and a wall of music that sounded like two Mac trucks crashing headfirst over a heavy bass and cymbals. Two weeks earlier, Jimmy Breslin, fresh out of prison, had shot and killed a nineteen-year-old girl right there. I still needed to talk to her parents. I was sure my partner Vaughn had done that, but I needed to do it myself, to let them see what happened to me. Then again, would it matter and why would they care? They'd lost a daughter.

My head was pounding but only on the left side. I moved my fingers like simulated piano playing, and they all moved correctly and according to the wishes of my brain. Good, one uncertainty resolved. I raised my left arm now, slowly, cautiously. The air in the room was cool, but this was not ICU, I could tell. I reached high and bent my left elbow to touch the left side of my heeeaaaaa--- God what's wrong with me? Eyes squinted, chest heaving up and down. Was this crying? My head hurt but not just out of physical pain. My fingers had barely even touched my left temple, then I literally couldn't stop my sobs. I was still intubated, and I was going to choke if I didn't control myself.

Could I extubate my endotracheal tube myself? That would undoubtedly result in a loud beeping sound and cause a nurse to tear down the hall in their tennis shoes to check what had happened. No. I could wait. I pulled a slow breath in, then out. And again. I needed rest right now as much as I needed oxygen. Because if my suspicions were correct and I'd been unconscious, the next phase of my life was gonna be hell.



# About the Author



Lisa Towles is an award-winning, bestselling crime novelist and a passionate speaker on the topics of fiction writing, creativity, and self-care. Besides writing, one of Lisa's favorite activities is helping other writers, which she does through her blog, speaking engagements, consultation, and 1:1 mentorship. Lisa has eleven crime novels in print with a new title, *Switch* (Book 3 of the E&A Series) forthcoming in 2024. Her novels *Hot House* and *Salt Island* (E&A Investigations Series) were both #1 Amazon bestsellers and each won multiple literary awards. Lisa also writes standalone thrillers, including *Terror Bay*, *The Ridders*, *Ninety-Five*, and the forthcoming *Specimen*. Lisa is an active member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers. She has an MBA in IT Management, works full-time in the tech industry, and lives in California with her husband and two cats. Learn more at [lisatowles.com](http://lisatowles.com) and follow her on social media:

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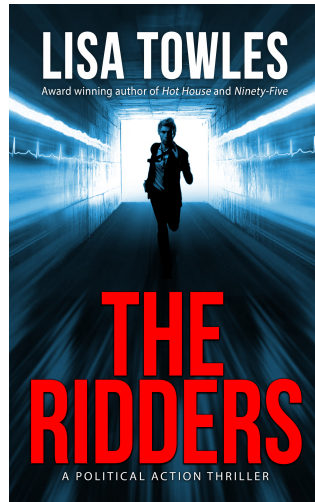
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You are all a part of my village,  
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The Ridders  
Political Thriller  
Indies United Publishing House (2022)



*Young PI, BJ Janoff is randomly approached by a stranger with a proposition he can't refuse – a million dollars to deliver an envelope to a hotel lobby. The pusher forces him to accept the money upfront and threatens to kill him if he doesn't deliver the envelope in three days. BJ's growing obsession leads him down a treacherous path toward the orchestrators of the game, where he discovers a large-scale political controversy, a treasure hunt for a priceless sword, and a global crime ring linked to a WWII-era secret society. When an act of brilliance changes the balance of power, the safety of everyone he loves is in jeopardy. And the more he digs, the closer he comes to truths he can't bear to face – about his missing father and the elusive Bilderberg Group.*

## Chapter One

What would you do if someone offered you a million dollars to bring an envelope to the reception desk of a luxury hotel? That's it. Sure, a no-brainer. A relatively inconsequential risk, easy money, right? Trouble is, anything involving a million dollars might not be what it seems. So many questions. Namely why me, BJ Janoff, should be offered this seemingly innocuous task. There were no answers available, no consultants waiting with details or clarifications. One million dollars in cash to perform this social experiment. Right now. Yes or no?

I know what my older brother Jonas would do. He'd say no because of the multitude of potential hazards his paranoid mind would concoct, keeping him tied

to the past, still wearing the same ugly khakis from ten years ago, stuck in the protective bubble of his big house in Ladera Heights and his geriatric Mercedes. So, of course I didn't tell him. Yet.

Then there was Lacy Diaz, the girl-next-door-turned-lawyer, who drives a car flashy enough to get a speeding ticket if she goes over fifty on the freeway.

"Hell, yeah, I'd take it," she said, with about a hundred caveats. What do you expect; she's a lawyer. "Wear rubber gloves," she said. "Ask to see the contents of the envelope first. If it's money, fan it out so you can see the bill denominations. Take photos of the payor."

"Photos of the payor?" I laughed and closed my eyes, a response Lacy inspired by pretty much everything she did. "Excuse me sir, would you mind if \_\_\_"

"I'm just trying to protect you from potential—"

"Potential. Now you sound like Jonas. His whole world is so much potential there's no room for now."

"He's your brother. You can't choose your family so get over it."

So be it. A million dollars? Hell yeah, of course I said yes, I'm not stupid. Luckily, the task was intended for not only the most beautiful hotel in LA but the one I went to almost every morning. Sure, the cappuccinos were okay at the Peets counter, but the staff was even more noteworthy.

"Good morning," I said, loping up to the counter.

"Is it?"

"Pretty sure." I didn't let my eyes fall below Raquel's neck, given her choice of a low-cut blouse.

"Usual?"

"Yeah." I watched the Westin Bonaventure Hotel staff moving wordlessly through their tasks today. A keen observer of human behavior, I knew something was going down when Mario the bellhop pushed an empty cart past me and lowered his eyes to the floor. No banter, humming, rapping, high fiving me. No smile. "Hey?" I called after him. "What am I, invisible?" Alena, who managed the daytime housekeeping staff, hurried after him toward the elevators. Her face looked like she'd been crying all morning. No makeup and she was buttoning her uniform top while she walked. Maybe I'm paranoid.

Raquel was moving slowly and clearly not interested in talking. So I took three steps to the left to get a view of the reception desk. The typical chorus line of coiffed, perky concierges today included a confused, twenty-year-old in a wrinkled t-shirt. Something, no doubt related to the FedEx envelope I'd tucked into the back of my pants, was afoot. Out of coffee sleeves, I burned my fingers on Raquel's cappuccino and hunkered low on a lobby sofa watching and sipping. A cadre of men in identical black suits marched to the reception desk. Here we go.

I calculated my distance to be roughly fifty feet from the polished, walnut counter, maybe forty-five. Lucky for me, the acoustics in here rivaled the Guggenheim and I could hear everything. One suited man in front, nine

underlings huddled behind awaiting instructions. I heard the word envelope posed as a question. The misplaced pothead behind the counter looked like he might start crying any moment. He gazed through the suits into the cavernous lobby space. Don't look at me, buddy, I don't exist right now. I took three more sips of coffee then back to my morning theater.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call. Jonas, who I suppose qualified as my business partner even though I wasn't paid an equal salary, and there was no legal agreement in place that formalized our working arrangement. "Hey, bro," I whispered.

"Hey, bro?" Repeating was one of his annoying traits. He had so many.

"What?"

"Where the fuck are you?"

"On a job," I lied. "Where are you?" I laughed inside, knowing this would unglue him. He hated the idea of my taking side jobs because he felt I was unqualified to be a private investigator. When our partner Archie Dax was still around, we used to laugh about this. He and I were so similar. He understood me almost better than anyone. I'd only had my investigator's license for less than a year when he died, but he never thought that mattered. Said I had the right head for PI work. Aww, Arch. My world's not the same without you.

"Job? What job?"

Poor Jonas. I still hadn't told him.

"Okay look, we've got the Bergman family coming in at nine tomorrow morning and I need the..." He exhaled long and hard, specifically to relay his frustration and inspire guilt. That ploy never worked with me.

"What, Jonas—WiFi? Maybe you've heard of something called the internet. Yes, I know, and we're good."

"Router, that's it."

Lord. "It's not the router, it's the modem speed and the unit will be upgraded within the hour. We're fine. Just let them in when they arrive."

No response.

"Are you crying?" I asked. "Pacing? Take your pill, Jonas."

"Fuck off. Say hi to Raquel for me."

I hung up and the phone rang again. "Dude, what?"

"And please don't wear your stupid backwards baseball hat. Please? I beg you. The Bergmans have money, a lot of it. We need that right now."

"Okay Jonas, no hat. Happy now?"

"We'll see."

Okay, so about the Bergmans. Jonas had been talking with them, Sten and Estelle, for the past two days about their vanished eighteen-year-old daughter, Anastasia, heir to their multi-billion-dollar estate, and how her net worth made her an especially enticing ransom target to what they described as "the underworld". LA's not utopia but not sure I'd call it an underworld.

Just two more errands today. First, I put a five-dollar bill in Raquel's tip vase even though she didn't see me. She still deserved it for being open at 6 a.m. and

for looking so goddamn beautiful first thing in the morning. Then I held a small, black plastic ball in my hands and set it on a side table with a perfect view of the hotel's reception area. The table was on the other side of the seating area so that meant roughly thirty feet from the front desk. The plastic ball, a nanny cam designed to look like an air filter, was partially concealed by the fat leaves on a fake rubber tree plant. Unless someone moved that plant, or the filter for that matter, I'd be able to see the front desk of the Bonaventure Hotel for the next twenty-four hours via an iPhone app, which I suspect would be time enough to see why someone would pay a stranger a million bucks to deliver a stupid envelope.

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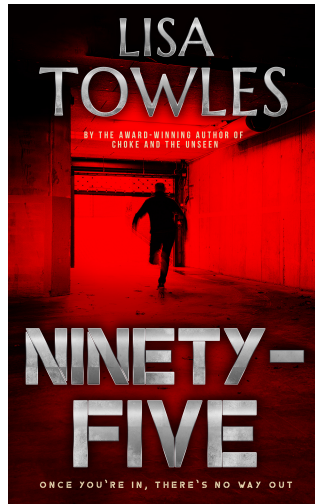
"A fast-paced, tense and gripping murder mystery" - *Readers' Choice*

"A captivating tale that engrosses on many levels" - *Midwest Book Review*

"A must-read for fans of suspense thrillers" - *Book Viral Reviews*

Awards: BookFest Award (1<sup>st</sup> Place), American Fiction Award (1<sup>st</sup> Place),  
Millennium Book Award (Longlisted), Literary Titan Award (Gold)

Ninety-Five  
Techno Thriller  
Indies United Publishing House (2021)



*Troubled University of Chicago student, Zak Skinner, accidentally uncovers evidence of an on-campus, organized crime scam involving drugging students, getting them to commit crimes on camera, and blackmailing them to continue under the threat of expulsion. Digging deeper, Zak discovers that the university scam is just the tip of the iceberg, as it's connected to a broader ring of crimes linked to a dark web underworld. Following clues, Zak is led to a compound within Chicago's abandoned Steelworker Park, only to discover that he's being hunted. While trying to find his way out alive, Zak discovers there's something much more personal he's been running from – his past. And now there's nowhere to hide.*

## Prologue

“Ten dollars... each.”

I reached for my wallet. Riley put up his palm. “We’re guests of a member.”

The bouncer eyerolled. “Who?”

“David Wade,” Riley said.

“We’re both students here. Asshole.” I held out my ID.

“Wade’s not here and I’m not going looking for him. Twenty dollars or leave.”

I handed the guy two tens, then he stamped both our wrists. The entry doors opened with David Wade on the other side, hair styled like a teen magazine cover.



Typical.

“Hope you didn’t pay,” he laughed. “You’re my guests.”

“Wade.” I had a feeling I’d be doing that a lot this year. We followed him back to a booth by the pool tables.

“I’ve set up two meetings,” Wade explained. “For each of you, and they’ll be conducted separately.”

“Why? Divide and conquer?” Riley asked.

“I shouldn’t even be here,” I said eyeing the door. “Riley’s way more desirable to a fraternity. He graduated third in our high school class.” I was in the top thirty percent, if that.

“Dude, you are not leaving me here alone. This was your idea,” Riley reminded me.

“Listen up. Sigma Chi’s first, then Phi Gamma Delta.” Wade with his frat salesman flair. Fine, I’d give them five minutes.

“What’s your finder’s fee?” Riley asked the most important question of the night.

A pitcher and three glasses appeared on the table. Funny how I never knew what I was drinking in this place. Just beer. Not IPA, Pilsner, Belgian. We were college students; we’d drink anything, right?

“You mean if you’re selected? Less than forty-percent of frat recruits actually make it in.” Wade lowered his head. “Even lower for enlistees.”

I repeated Riley’s valid question. “What do you get out of this? For some of these elitist Republican machines, the dues are like three hundred bucks a month.”

“What?” Riley snapped his head toward me. “You’re right. What are we doing here?”

“We’re socializing, remember?” I said. “We just transferred two months ago. We hardly know anyone.” I could barely remember NYU at this point. Chicago’s a long way from home.

Wade smiled his smooth, snaky grin, enjoying the logic of my statement. He raised his glass. “Well, here’s to new beginnings.”

“Choke on it.” Riley clocked Wade’s glass. He glared at me while he guzzled the entire contents.

Wade refilled Riley’s glass and disappeared with the empty pitcher. Now that the pool tables were filled, the noise had doubled, probably because we were getting drunker. Riley hated to drink. In fact, I was surprised he agreed to come in the first place. But it was on campus, just a short walk from Granville West, our home away from home.

“Hey.” A new guy shoved into Wade’s side of the empty booth. “Sigma Chi, how’s it going? Which one of you is Zak?”

Riley and I pointed to each other. The guy had a peach fuzz crew cut. His face looked like it was scrubbed every thirty minutes.

“I can’t imagine why you’d be even remotely interested in me,” I admitted. “Riley’s got a 4.0 GPA and a way better pedigree.”

“Yeah, but you have lawyers in your family,” Riley shouted in his bar voice.

He leaned in and smiled in a way that revealed rising blood alcohol level. “More likely you’d be able to afford the fees.”

The frat salesman shifted on the bench, sizing us up. He turned his head back toward the bar, probably looking for Wade, the eternal icebreaker.

“Fees are optional,” he said in a bitchy tone.

I peeked one eye at the door, making sure we had a path of egress. Wade was naturally nowhere in sight.

How could Riley bring up my family like that? So crude and indifferent. He never could hold his liquor. I didn’t mind paying to get in here, or even sitting through this ridiculous formality. It beat the monotony of hanging out in our dorm waiting for life to happen. But Wade had showed up at the door, vanished, and now I just felt played.

“Oh, I see,” Riley broke in. “You only charge them to offset your legal fees resulting from discrimination, rape, and aggravated assault lawsuits? I get it. That must be really expensive. You know, hard to plan when all your Daddy’s money’s going to—”

“Riley,” I clipped. “Shut it. Let’s get out of here.”

I scanned the interior. Pool tables, dart boards, wood paneled walls; I remembered reading that The Pub in the basement of University of Chicago’s Ida Noyes’ Hall had been run by descendants of the Medici’s. The only thing missing in here was Sherlock Holmes. Raised voices caught my attention from the opposite corner, then the sound of a beer bottle breaking. Ah, the perfect diversion.

I yanked Riley’s elbow and we headed for the entrance. Five seconds later, I looked back still plowing through the crowd.

“Where are they?” Riley asked.

I pulled open the door and we slipped out.

Two guys followed. One from Sigma Chi and another I didn’t recognize. They were all the same to me.

“Walk faster,” I said. “Follow the path, straight ahead.” Sure, we needed to get away from these people, but the more important question nagging me was why we would be of interest in the first place. New to campus, barely social, not wealthy. What attributes would be of value to them?

“The Fountain of Time’s up ahead,” Riley said, speeding up. “Are they behind us?”

As I was about to answer him, two different guys cut through the evergreens to our left and blocked us.

“Hey guys,” one of them said, palms up, toothy grin. “Look, Damen got us off to a bad start. Let’s start over. I’m from Sigma Chi.”

“And I’m from Phi Gamma,” the other said. “Please, come with us so we can talk. That’s all we want.”

“We’re not interested in you frat clowns, the world’s fucked up enough already.”

Riley drunk always cracked me up.

“We’re all here because you think we might have the money to pay your dues so you can maintain your alcohol supply,” he added.

The thugs squared off in front of us. Riley stepped back. When he crossed his arms, he lost his balance and fell back on the grass. Nice.

Phi Gamma dragged him off with an arm around his shoulders. Sigma Chi stayed with me, waiting. Watching. He sat on the grass and pulled out a flask. I kept my eyes on Riley, now twenty feet away.

“Liquid courage?” I crouched on the ground across from him, knowing at this point we’d need to listen to the pitch before they let us go. If.

Riley and Phi Gamma were no longer visible. Fine. I’d give this freak five minutes of my life, then I’d go find him. I had no fear of him at this point, just irritation. I watched the guy pour something into two little silver cups—one the lid of the shiny flask, the other from his pocket. What else had been in that pocket?

“Absinthe,” the guy said with conspiratorial pride.

I raised an eyebrow. More impressive than Budweiser.

“With or without *thujone*?” I asked of the historical wormwood hallucinogenic constituent.

“You know your poisons,” he replied. “Without.” He handed me a cup and tapped it, then swigged his down in one gulp.

Where was Riley? What the fuck were we doing out here? I came to this school for a fresh start, as my mother put it, and somehow I didn’t think this was what she, or even I, had in mind. Sigma Chi, my salesman, held out the shiny silver cup with a wet smirk on his lips. Was I about to end up in Mexico or as somebody’s bitch in Danville Prison?

“Riley, you alright?” I shouted behind me.

No answer. Sigma Chi stared, wiggling the cup. At this point I was more annoyed than afraid. I wasn’t happy at this place yet, at this University. Riley wasn’t either. But I wasn’t ready to throw it all in either. Had anyone ever died from absinthe? I grabbed the cup, swiveled it around a bit, smelled it, then chucked it back in my throat. Like sophisticated licorice. God help me.

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