

# SPECIMEN

A THRILLER

BY THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF TERROR BAY

LISA TOWLES

# SPECIMEN

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## Dedication

To Lee – my husband, soulmate, love of my life

And to my parents - my greatest inspirations and role models

“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”

*Anais Nin*

**Other Books by Lisa Towles:**

Codex

Terror Bay

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

# Specimen

A Thriller

Lisa Towles



# Prologue

“Mmmmm.”

“Is that you?” I asked, unsure. Her voice sounded dreamy. And who answers the phone that way?

Now an exhaustive sigh.

“Lise, answer me!”

“What was the question again?” I heard her footsteps on the other end, walking slowly, rhythmically on a hard surface.

“Where are you right now?”

“How is that relevant?” she clipped back. Salty. That sounded more like her.

“Because! I’m a—” My words caught in my throat. I wiped my eyes and coughed, hoping to swallow the feeling of horror. “I’m at your house, where-you-summoned-me, where your—” Breathe, Thea. “Why did you run?” My raspy voice ricocheted against the marble walls of the colossal foyer.

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Well ask me something easier then.”

I had no time to pause and think, to consider a strategy or explain the shocking circumstances to the part of my brain grasping for reason.

“Why call me in the first place, then?”

The footsteps halted. I now heard the roar of cars on the other end of the phone; she was outside. I ran to one of the front windows. No sign of her platinum hair or Burberry trench.

“You’re just leaving me here?? What about the police? Who does this?”

“Couldn’t be helped.” Her monotone told me she was dissociating from the situation, which might imply she was as upset as I was. Or maybe that was just a fairy tale.

“What do I tell them?” I whispered.

“Cops? Whatever you want. You know nothing so they won’t waste time on you.”

“Cut it out.” I moved from the front windows back to the same spot



inside the front door, where I'd placed the call. A safe distance from the kitchen. Then my emotions caved in, sobs rippling out through my nose and mouth. My eyes were a mess. I couldn't wipe the tears fast enough.

"Calm down, Thea."

"Calm down? Are you high? They're gonna ask me what I know about \_\_\_"

"My dead mother? No kidding. Believe me, she's better off this way. We all are."

She'd said the words finally – *dead mother*. So I hadn't imagined it? Now I needed to close it up and get the hell out of here. "Lise, did you—"

A thud from the kitchen yanked my attention from my phone. I felt the vibration under my feet. Maybe Lise hadn't actually killed her. Maybe the killer was still here.

# Chapter 1

**Blood pooled under the mop** of the woman's dark brown hair, her skin a horrid chalky color, gray almost, body awkwardly twisted like she'd been on her way somewhere and shocked by the thrust of something blunt and resolute intended to stop the beat of her heart, or at least her intentions. As to what—I hadn't gotten there yet. Was it a good day to die?

I stared down at her body from the kitchen doorway, one hand covering my mouth to quell the shaking in my soul. I knew her. How could this possibly be real?

The house was quiet except for the howl of wind, the Fenning's giant sycamore scraping the east side of the house like a demon's fingernail. Fitting.

Something made me turn, not a sound exactly, more like a sensation. I gazed at the upstairs landing that overlooked a foyer the size of a basketball court. A much better vantage point to say the least. I tore up the stairs and pancaked myself to the cold tiles. My erratic pulse banged in my ears. Tha-thump, tha-thump. Breathe, Thea. Breathe. Okay, my frantic brain re-engaged for the moment, I could see this was a much safer place to assess. The woman's lower half was visible from here on the marble floor beside the island – dark gray pants, expensive black heels, one of them on and the other three inches from her body exposing a bare, grayish foot. Lying on my stomach, pain jarred me from the phone in my pocket—glass on bone. I hadn't pulled it out yet or called for help because I needed time to gather my wits, I had no idea what I'd say and, more importantly, what if her killer was still here?

I used to think a day that began with a game of cards was destined to be good. With a father and grandfather in the Navy, of course I grew up playing cards. I could beat them both at cribbage by the time I was fifteen, or maybe they let me win. There was something about numbers that had always comforted me, like a tacit reminder of the ordered universe despite all the visual evidence of chaos. And cribbage was a game that valued numbers and pairs, and in my fragile heart that symmetry felt, somehow, like safety. Okay sure, life in the Marshall Islands was a little sheltered, but my dad wanted it that way. My mother disagreed and tried to move us

all to San Francisco, where we'd have the support of her family along with the contemporary imprint of urban life. She won the battle but lost the war. My father remained five thousand miles away in Majuro Atoll, and after my brother Rudy died she and I built a new life in San Francisco's Mission District without them. The culture and beauty of my Islander roots lives in my heart forever but honestly failed to prepare me for the spectacle of Roberta Fenning's bludgeoned body. Could anything have?

Rudy died on his seventeenth birthday, my age now, which my mother said was like being erased by the universe and twice as bad as just losing him. Now we can't even celebrate his birthday without reliving the trauma of his loss. The closest thing I had to a brother now was Fergus Wilde, my best friend since the third grade.

"Stop dreaming and cut the deck," Fergus had said this morning while we drank coffee on the floor of my bedroom, preparing for another game of cribbage during the lazy, summer lull before college. And I had been daydreaming while he decided which cards to throw in the crib. Nothing I hated more than wasting time. And there was nothing I wanted more than to escape reality go back to the safety of that cribbage game right now.

My chin touching the cold floor of the Fenning's second floor landing, I couldn't make my lungs remember how to work. Sucking in air, I clawed the grout between the foyer's white marble tiles to steady myself. That same marble downstairs in the kitchen would now be permanently stained with Roberta Fenning's blood. Wait...why was there blood under my fingernails? I hadn't touched the body. Not even close. Had I?

I shouldn't even be here, I realized, gasping finally like a surfer reaching air after being held down by a set wave. My nose ran and the fluid mixed with tears sliding down my cheeks. I couldn't wipe it because whoever did this to her could still be in the house watching me right now. *Stay silent. Don't move.* Two questions: would I be next and, more importantly, why had Lise summoned me if she wasn't even here? I ignored the most obvious possibility because honestly it was too much weight on my heart. I needed to get the hell out of here before the police arrived. Had anyone even called them? Had Lise done that before she skipped out?

I went through it in my head to sort of rehearse. I entered with my own personal key to the Fenning estate, given to me by Lise Fenning, my other BFF. It's not that I lived here, necessarily, just that the house was huge and running to answer the door every time the bell chimed was apparently too extraordinary an effort on a regular basis. So they gave me one of the spare keys. Lise should have been here to meet me, and she was scheduled to be. I'd called out for her and at least expected Nanny, the live-in cook,

to be in the kitchen where I always stopped in to say hi. She's nice, I liked her. Today the kitchen was completely closed up. No Nanny, no Roberta, only her discarded body staining the pristine tile with a pool of her blood.

What if they asked me if I knew her? I needed an answer ready for that. Yes, of course I knew her, I even liked her. She was my best friend's mother so I'd been to that house at least once a week for years. The words felt so strange in my mouth – *was, best friend*. Best friends didn't do what Lise has done. Roberta was the kind of woman, the kind of mother who cared about people and wanted to know them. She'd stop me in the hallway sometimes and grasp my shoulders, look in my eyes to not just ask how I was doing but see for herself. My God. Roberta.

I'd only stood in the doorway and honestly didn't take a single step into the kitchen. But when I crouched low, I caught sight of a pooling of blood in the back of her head, mostly dried now, and the ghastliest color I'd ever seen on another person. I tried to remember if she'd been sick lately, but she was fine the last time I saw her. My God, the blood. I knew that had to mean something about the timing of her attack, but my mind wasn't capable of critical thinking right now. I'm not sure why, but I'd snapped one quick photo of her lying there before charging up the grand staircase and dropping to the floor of the landing.

From this vantage point I could see into the kitchen, her lifeless legs visible and feet turned awkwardly inward. I might never be able to unsee the ghoulish cast to her skin, and the way rigor mortis had frozen her contorted fingers into these spectral claws belonging in a zombie movie. I felt sick and rolled onto my left side before vomiting, another assault on what had once been their pristine floor. How could this beautiful estate be habitable again after tonight? My fingertips gripped the edge of the staircase and pulled my body forward two inches, which gave me a bit more view. Some kind of leather strap stuck up beneath her on the side of the kitchen island, which I hadn't noticed before. Was it her handbag, and why hadn't I noticed it when I'd been in the kitchen?

My frantic brain began some basic calculations, starting with steps. An estimated thirty-seven to the lower landing and then roughly another twenty to the inner front door. Could I make it there before the killer spotted me? Wait a minute, I knew this house. There was a back bedroom. Lise and I removed part of the flooring once to access a support pole that weaved from the basement up to the second floor. If I could get to that closet, I might be able to use the pole to exit the house through the basement's bulkhead, which would be safer than ploughing out the front door for all of Sea Cliff to see. My wet, swollen eyes blinked through these new possibilities, fingernails clicking the white marble, performing a

momentary risk assessment. Had the Fennings discovered our secret escape path and blocked off the closet? If someone *was* still in the house, this could be my only chance of making it out alive.

I tried texting Lise again. *Where the fuck are you?? Don't leave me here!*

I heard the clink of china from the kitchen, a saucer upended and seesawing side to side before it came to rest.

OMG. My stomach tightened with an imaginary vice grip over my throat. That sound could mean Roberta was still alive. I pressed my hands over my mouth to suppress the urge to call out to her, because it could also mean that her killer was down there waiting for me.

## About the Author



Lisa Towles is an Amazon bestselling and award-winning crime novelist, and a passionate speaker on the topics of fiction writing, creativity, and self-care. *Specimen* is her thirteenth published book with a new thriller, *Lineage*, planned for 2025 release. Her 2023 thriller, *Terror Bay*, won a NYC Big Book Award, Literary Titan Award, and is a Crimson Quill Awardee from Book Viral. Her 2022 thriller *Salt Island* won five literary awards and is the second book in her E&A Investigations Series. Lisa's deep commitment to helping other authors led her to develop her YouTube author interview series, Story Impact, which gives authors a powerful medium for promoting themselves as speakers and discussing the meaning and impact of their books to readers. Lisa has an MBA in IT Management, is a communications and marketing advisor, and is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers.

Follow Lisa at [linktr.ee/authortowles](https://linktr.ee/authortowles) and subscribe to her monthly newsletter:

<https://tinyurl.com/4a3bvdpn>

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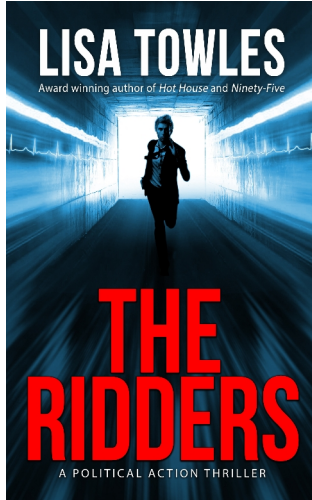
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## Thank You for being on this journey with me

# 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.



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

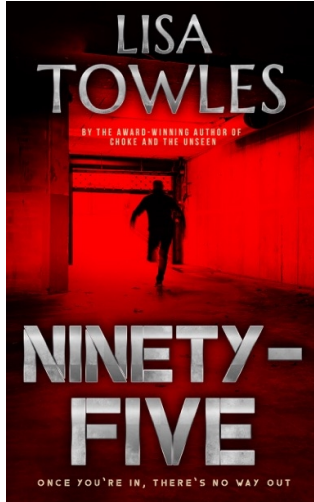
"A captivating tale that engrosses on many levels" - *Midwest Book Review*

"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

A Young Adult 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 darkweb 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 clogged 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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