

LISA TOWLES

BY THE AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
CHOKE AND THE UNSEEN



NINETY - FIVE

ONCE YOU'RE IN, THERE'S NO WAY OUT

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For Lee

“Logic will get you from A to Z. Imagination will get you everywhere.” - Albert Einstein

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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. Licorice, but more herby. Like sophisticated licorice. God help me.

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday morning, I had no idea what time. It was way too quiet in here. Wait. Where—

I snapped upright too fast, which made my head spin, my half-naked body clammy with sudden panic. Where were my clothes? Why didn't I remember taking them off? Calm down, Zak. Breathe. This wasn't my room. It was David Wade's down the hall. I recognized it from the Drake and Sia posters. What the fuck was I doing here? Possible scenario number one: I lost my key, couldn't get into my room and decided to sleep here. Ridiculous. I'd rather sleep on concrete. Then why was it so quiet? Was everybody out of the building already? Or were they all dead?

I lifted the sheet to see my bare legs. Just then the door opened. I covered myself like a prostitute caught in a congressman's hotel room. I looked to the doorway; everything got blurry.

"Good morning."

Fucking Wade, that toothy grin. Whatever happened last night was his fault. He didn't meet us when he said he would, so we had to pay admission unnecessarily. Why didn't I remember what happened next?

"What am I doing here?" My voice caught and my eyes filled up. My mother said I'd lost my ability to cry. I just think I never learned in the first place, or maybe never learned it was an acceptable thing to do.

Wade sat on the opposite bed sizing me up, fumbling with a cacophonous paper bag. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"How do you th—what the hell am I doing here?"

Wade tore open two sugar packets and poured them in a tall cup of hot liquid.

"I think I'm gonna throw up," I slapped my palm to my mouth.

"Calm down, this is just what you need, believe me. Drink it." He passed the cup over.

My hand trembled as I reached out. Naked, vision blurred, nauseous, disoriented.

I started an imaginary list in case I ended up in the Emergency Room. Two sips of the warm, slightly sweet liquid calmed my stomach.

“I feel like I need a blood transfusion. What’s wrong with my throat?”

“How’s your head?”

I hated how Wade kept answering questions with questions. I hated how he was naturally athletic and good looking but didn’t seem to care about either. Arrogant, full of himself, I didn’t believe a word he said.

“I just answered that,” I shot back with a loathing I never felt before now, certain he had all the answers I was looking for, yet more certain he’d never give them to me. I sipped more of what tasted like English Breakfast Tea. My stomach liked it, so I propped up the bed pillow. I leaned back and took three more sips. Head throbbing, my throat felt like broken glass. “Where are my clothes?”

Wade tossed my jeans and a shirt across from the other bed. I set the cup on the floor to pull them on, half listening to his story of a party, a bar, warring fraternities, how I apparently drank something intended for someone else. Great. Like he would have stopped me if he had the chance. I was standing now in the center of the room, clutching the cup of tea looking for my tennis shoes. I saw them inside the door. My heart pounded; I was dying to get out of there. But I needed to know how I got here. Even more disturbing was why I didn’t remember. I started with basic questions:

“Today’s Sunday October 11th. Confirm or deny?”

“Confirm.” Wade smiled.

“Who brought me here?”

“I did.”

“In a car? On a stretcher? What?”

“You walked. Barely.” He seemed to enjoy the back and forth. I wondered how it would feel to punch the grin off his face.

“From where?”

“Fountain of Time.”

“Who took off my clothes?”

“Not me.” The look on his face confirmed that, during my period of lost time, I hadn’t been violated, at least by him.

My brain struggled to remember Fountain of Time. “Hyde Park?” I asked. “I’ve never even been there.”

“Well apparently you have,” he corrected me.

Think like an investigator. “Who was supposed to drink what I drank? What was it?”

Wade settled back now on the other bed, leaning against the wall, still facing me. “Question one, I don’t know.” He paused.

“Question 2?” I pressed.

First, he stared, unblinking. Was this telepathy? It wasn’t working. “Tamango,” he said.

I only knew this drink from reputation, or at least until today that was true. “What’s in it? I mean, is there…”

He read my thoughts. “No, nothing that would cause permanent damage.”

I paced around David Wade’s room and the floor was surprisingly clean, for a

college dorm. “I need some answers,” I said, torn between wanting to run out the door screaming and pounding every answer out of Wade’s smug face.

He moved to his closet, rifling through a stack of books, all the while telling me about Tamango’s frightening list of ingredients, only two of which were actually known to man. 85% grain alcohol mixed with Roselle leaves, in addition to a mysterious concoction of purportedly hallucinogenic African herbs.

“First of all, I was told it was absinthe. I feel like I’ve seen my entire body from the inside out. I seriously remember the color, the texture of my blood, my muscles, organs. Is this, like, normal?”

“Last night was a glimpse into what we’re not really supposed to see,” Wade explained.

What was he, a science professor now?

“If you want a real glimpse, you need a guide to show you around. Come back here tonight at midnight.”

No wonder he was pimping for fraternities. “No thanks, oh master of the opium den. Throw your own life away if I care. I’m gonna try to clean up. I need to feel normal.”

“Try all you want, but I will see you at midnight.”

“I’ll see you in hell.”