



The Finalist

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SHANTEL TESSIER

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THE RIVER

USA TODAY & WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AI
SHANTEL TESSII

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You can join her reader group. It's the only place to get exclusive teasers, first to know about current projects and release dates. And also have chances to win some amazing giveaways—
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/TheSinfulSide>

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PLAYLIST

“Make Hate to Me” by Citizen Soldier
“Needles” Seether
“Like Lovers Do” Hey Violet
“Numb” 8 Graves
“Killing Me Slowly” Bad Wolves
“Guest Room” Echos
“I Don’t Give a Fuck” MISSIO, Zeale
“Everybody Gets High” MISSIO
“Taste of You” Rezz, Dove Cameron
“SickLike Me” In This Moment
“Bad Intentions” Niykee Heaton
“Mirrors” Natalia Kills, Migos, OG Parker
“If You Want Love” NF
“Broken” Lifehouse
“Honesty” Halsey
“Oh Lord” In This Moment
“All The Time” Jeremih, Lil Wayne, Natasha Mosley

WARNING

Author's note:

The Ritual may contain triggers for some. As a reader, I find trigger warnings to be spoilers, but as an author, I understand that they are sometimes necessary. Although, I'm not going to list each one, (there are many) please feel free to email me at shanteltessierassistant@gmail.com with your specific trigger warning(s) and me or one of my assistants will let you know if that trigger is in the book.

For those of you who wish to go in blind; please remember this dark romance is a work of fiction, and I do NOT condone any situations or actions that take place between these characters.

PROLOGUE

L.O.R.D.

A LORD TAKES his oath seriously. Only blood will solidify their commitment to serve those who demand their complete devotion.

*He is a **Leader**, believes in **Order**, knows when to **Rule**, and is a **Deity**.*

A Lord must be initiated in order to become a member but can be removed at any time for any reason. If he makes it past the three trials of initiation, he will forever know power and wealth. But not all Lords are built the same. Some are stronger, smarter, hungrier than others.

*They are challenged just to see how far their **loyalty** will go.*

*They are pushed to their limits in order to prove their **devotion**.*

*They are willing to show their **commitment**.*

Nothing except their life will suffice.

Limits will be tested, and morals forgotten.

A Lord can be a judge, jury, and executioner. He holds power that is unmatched by anyone, other than his brother.

If they manage to complete all trials of initiation, he will be granted a reward—a chosen one. She is his gift for his servitude.

CHAPTER ONE

INITIATION

RYAT

LOYALTY

FRESHMAN YEAR AT BARRINGTON UNIVERSITY

I KNEEL IN the middle of the darkly lit room along with twenty other men. My hands are secured tightly behind my back with a pair of handcuffs. My shirt is torn, and blood drips from my busted lips. I'm panting, still trying to catch my breath while my heart beats like a drum in my chest. It's hard to hear over the blood rushing in my ears, and I'm sweating profusely.

We were dragged out of our beds in the middle of the night to serve. Our freshman classes at Barrington University start in two weeks, but we already have to show our loyalty to the Lords.

“You will always have to prove yourself,” my father once told me.

“You were each given a task,” the man calls out as he paces in front of us. His black combat boots slap against the concrete floor with each step, the sound echoing off the walls. “Kill or be killed. Now how many of you can fulfill it?”

“I can,” I state, lifting my head to stick my chin out in the warm and sticky air. Sweat covers my brow after the fight. It's rigged. You are supposed to lose. The point is to wear you down. See just how much you have to give. How far you can go. I made sure to win mine. No matter what it took.

He smirks down at me like I'm fucking joking. “Ryat. You seem so confident in yourself.”

“I know what I'm capable of handling,” I say through gritted teeth. I don't like being second-guessed. We were each raised for this—to be a Lord.

Wealth got us here.

Yet our determination will separate us by the time it's over.

The man looks at the guy on my left and nods. The guy walks behind me and yanks me to stand by the back of my shirt. He undoes the cuffs, and I rip the shredded material up and over my head before dropping my hands to my sides when what I really want to do is rub my sore wrists.

Never show weakness. A Lord does not feel. He's a machine.

The man steps up to me with a knife in hand. He holds it out handle first to me, his black eyes almost glowing with excitement. "Show us what you can do."

Taking it from him, I walk over to the chair bolted to the floor. I yank the bloody sheet off the chair to reveal a man tied to it. His hands are cuffed behind his back, and his feet are spread wide and secured to the chair legs.

I'm not surprised I know him—he's a Lord. Or was. The fact that he's restrained tells me he's not anymore. But that doesn't change my orders.

Kill without questions.

You want to be powerful? Then you realize you are a threat to those who want your position. In order to succeed, you don't have to be stronger, just deadlier.

The man shakes his head, his brown eyes pleading with me to spare his life. Multiple layers of duct tape are placed over his mouth—those who spill secrets will be silenced. He thrashes in his chair.

Walking behind him, I look down at his cuffed wrists. He wears a ring on his right hand; it's a circle with three horizontal lines across the middle. It stands for power.

Not just anyone would know what it means, but I do. Because I wear the same one. Everyone in this room does. But just because you get one doesn't mean you'll keep it.

I reach down and grab his hand. He begins to shout behind the tape as he tries to fight me, but I remove the ring easily and walk back around to stand in front of him.

"You don't deserve this," I say to him, placing it in my pocket. "You betrayed us, your brothers, yourself. The payment for that is death."

When he throws his head back and screams into the tape, I press the knife to his neck, right below his jawline. His breathing fills the room, and his body strains, waiting for the first cut.

A Lord does not show mercy. Blood and tears are what we demand from those who betray us.

I press the tip of the knife into his neck, puncturing his skin enough for a thin line of blood to drip from the wound.

He begins to cry, tears running down his already bloody face.

“I uphold my duty. For I am a Lord. I know no boundaries when it comes to my servitude. I will obey, serve, and dominate,” I recite our oath. “For my brother, I am a friend. I shall lay my life down for thee or take it.” I stab the knife into his right thigh, forcing a muffled scream from his taped lips before yanking it out, letting the blood soak into his jeans while it drips off the end of the knife onto the concrete floor. “For we are what others wish to be.” Circling him, I run the tip down his forearm, splitting the skin like I did his neck. “We will be held accountable for our actions.” I stab him in the left thigh and tug it out as his sobbing continues. “For they represent who we truly are.”

Jerking on the collar of his shirt, I rip it down the middle to expose his chest and stomach. The same crest that’s on our rings is burned into his chest. It’s what we are given once we pass our trials. Gripping the skin, I pull on it as far as I can with my right hand, then slide the blade through it with my left, cutting it from his body.

He sobs, snot flying out of his nose as the blood pours from the gaping hole in his skin. His body begins to shake while he fists his hands and thrashes in his chair. I throw the skin to the floor to rest at his feet. A souvenir for later.

I walk behind him. The only sound in the room is his cries muffled by the duct tape. I grab his hair, yanking his head back, and force his hips off the chair. His Adam’s apple bobs when he swallows. I look down into his tear-filled eyes. “And you, my brother … are a traitor.” Then I slice the blade across his neck, splitting it wide open. His body goes slack in the chair as the blood pours from the open wound like a waterfall, drenching his clothes instantly.

“Impressive.” The man who handed me the knife begins to clap while silence now fills the room. Walking over to me, I throw the bloody knife up in the air, catching it by the tip of the blade and holding it out to him.

He comes to a stop and gives me a devious smile. “I knew you’d be one to watch.” With that, he takes the knife, then turns and walks away.

I stand, still breathing heavily, now covered in not only my blood but a fellow brother’s. Lifting my head, I look up at the two-way mirror on the

second-floor balcony, knowing I'm being watched and knowing that I just passed my first test with flying colors.

CHAPTER TWO

INITIATION

RYAT

DEVOTION

SOPHOMORE YEAR AT BARRINGTON UNIVERSITY

THE RAIN FALLS from the sky, soaking my clothes and making them stick to my skin. I kneel in the middle of the ring. Water mixed with my blood swirls on the ground around me.

I take a second to catch my breath and regain a little bit of strength because the rain makes it harder to connect. My opponent stands opposite me with his fisted hands up, covering his face while he bounces from foot to foot like he's a fighter getting paid millions to show off to the world for a pay-per-view fight.

I guess, in a way, it is a show. Just not televised. And there is no payout. Your reward is you get to keep breathing.

“Get up!” he yells at me. “Get the fuck up, Ryat!”

Smiling, I make my way to my feet and drop my hands to my sides, letting him think he has me. As if I'm that fucking weak not to fight back.

He charges me, and I step to my left at the last second as he drops his shoulder. I kick my leg out, tripping him. He lands on his face, sliding in the puddle of water, and the crowd hollers.

“Tell me, Jacob. Just how bad do you want to die?” I ask and hear the others laugh at my question.

An audience is always needed. Your fellow brothers must witness your devotion. Otherwise, it doesn't exist.

He gets to his feet and spins around to face me. Growling, he shows me his teeth before charging me again. This time, I don't move out of the way. Instead, I meet him head-on with my fist. The blow knocks him back, and blood flies from his mouth. My knuckles split from the force.

Lifting my hand to my mouth, I lick the blood and rain off them. “Tastes like victory,” I mock.

Wiping the blood from his busted face, he stumbles, eyes blinking rapidly. I clocked him pretty good. “You ...” he chokes out. “You ...”

“Ryat,” I remind him of my name since he seems to have forgotten.

He charges me once again, this time much slower than the last. Sidestepping him, I lift my arm and let him run into it. My forearm hits his Adam’s apple, knocking him off his feet and flat on his back.

He rolls over onto his side, coughing and grabbing at his throat. I take the chance and kick him in the face and blood gushes from his now broken nose.

I fall to my knees, straddling him. My hands wrap around his throat, cutting off his air.

His hands slap my arms, feet kick, and hips buck underneath me, but he doesn’t have a chance.

As my grip tightens, his eyes bulge. “You will not beat me,” I growl.

When a Lord fights, he fights to the end. There can only be one winner. Only one left standing. And I refuse to be anything but.

CHAPTER THREE

INITIATION

RYAT

COMMITMENT
JUNIOR YEAR AT BARRINGTON UNIVERSITY

I ENTER THE house as quietly as a church mouse. The order was simple. I was given a location in Chicago, a name—Nathaniel Myers—and a picture.

Take him out.

I make my way down the hallway and up the winding staircase to the second floor. Taking a right, I stop at a closed door. Reaching up, I place my finger to my lips to tell Matt to be quiet. He's like a fucking bull in a china shop. We were given a partner for this assignment to see how we work with others, but I prefer to be on my own. Not only do I have to watch my back but now I've also got to watch his as well.

Matt nods once, running his hand down over his face before gripping the gun, holding it down to his side. Matt and I have been friends for three years now. Ever since we moved into the house of Lords and started Barrington University in Pennsylvania. But that doesn't mean I want to work beside him. I just do better on my own.

Opening the door, I enter the room, seeing a man and woman lying on a bed with the sheets pushed down to their waist. She's topless, her big paid-for tits on full display. A tattoo of a rose underneath her right one. The guy lies on his stomach, hands shoved under his pillow. I'm sure there's a gun under there at all times. He probably sleeps with his finger on the trigger.

Walking over to the side of the bed, I place the barrel of my suppressor to his head and pull the trigger, getting it over with. I could draw it out, but why take that chance? Too many things can go wrong. And it's not like you get points for creativity.

The woman stirs, and Matt goes over to her side of the bed, ripping the covers off her even more. She's completely naked.

“Matt,” I hiss. “Let’s go.”

He pulls the knife from his back pocket, flipping it open. “She ...”

“Is not on the list,” I whisper-shout. We don’t deviate from our orders.

He reaches out and grabs one of her breasts, making her shift and let out a moan.

I round the foot of the bed, coming up behind him, and point the end of my suppressor at his head. “Get the fuck out of here. Right now,” I demand.

He chuckles, lifting his hands in surrender. “Just having a little fun, Ryat.” Turning around, he faces me, but I keep my gun pointed between his blue eyes. “Aren’t you tired of doing what the Lords say? Don’t you want some pussy?”

My teeth grind. “There are rules for a reason.” I’m not saying they make sense, but I’ve come too far to break them now.

“Fuck the rules,” he snaps, loudly making her shift onto her side. Reaching down, he undoes the buttons on his jeans, followed by his zipper. “I’m going to fuck her. You can do whatever you want with your cock.” He rips his belt from his jeans and turns to face her.

A shrill scream makes both of us jump. She crawls across her dead husband and runs out of the room.

“Son of a bitch,” Matt yells, chasing after her.

I roll my eyes. This is why I prefer to work alone. I follow them into the hallway to find Matt standing at the banister. I come up beside him, placing my gun down at my side with one hand while the other grips the railing. Looking down over it, I see the woman facedown on the first floor with blood slowly pooling around her onto the white marble floor.

I turn to look at him, and demand, “Did she fall over, or did you throw her?”

“She fucking fell,” he snaps, immediately defensive.

I shake my head, teeth grinding. “Come on. Let’s get the fuck out of here and call it in to be cleaned up.”