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FUTILITY



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Futility

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Futility

The quality of having no useful result

Uselessness

Lack of importance or purpose; frivolousness

Ineffectiveness

A futile act or event



Every nerve ending screams in pain as her body slams against the cement floor, limbs twisting in awkward angles. She hears something crack, but her whole existence is already filled to the brim with so much agony that she can't distinguish new hurt from old.

White blonde hair, now stained and matted with dried blood, falls across her face as she shivers in the darkness. Blackness presses in around her, tight and constricting.

She shudders involuntarily as her breath comes in ragged gasps. Pain ripples through her body again, this time a result of the electricity coursing through her veins. Eternal seconds tick by. Her mouth falls open as if her lungs and vocal chords want to scream but are unable to make a sound. Only the hum of crackling electricity breaks the silence.

The young woman's back arches as the last few sparks die down, and then she falls against the floor in a bloody, bruised heap. She doesn't move. Footsteps shuffle toward her. Someone bends down and inspects her. Their fingers brush the sticky hair out of her eyes and away from her cheeks. Still, she doesn't budge. Her eyes stare off into the darkness, barely blinking; her slightly parted lips are frozen.

"Come now," a soft voice soothes. "That can't have winded you too much. You haven't even started crying yet." The man smiles grimly. "This can all end." He speaks as if chiding a disobedient toddler. "All you have to do is tell me where he is."

Her eyes gradually turn to look at him, but the slight movement is her only acknowledgment of his presence.

"Do you *like* this?"

Again, she makes no reply.

With a growl, the man yanks her up to her feet and throws her against the wall, shoving his arm against her throat. "Do you want me

to take this to the next step? Because I will, and believe me, this all will seem like a paper cut compared to what happens next.”

Slowly, she blinks at him.

Disgusted and frustrated, he throws her to the ground again, delivering a swift, sharp kick to her abdomen. She moans, rolling over.

“Where is he?” the man asks again, a new sense of fury in his tone. “Tell me!”

She coughs and spits out blood but says nothing.

“As you wish,” he growls, spitting on the cool floor next to her. He turns away from her, straightening his tie and walking over to another man standing in the shadows.

“Get it out of her,” he orders, and the other man nods, stepping toward the girl. Blue electricity flows easily from his fingertips.

Her eyes slide shut in silent resignation.

Chapter One

The shrill sound of her telephone ringing brought Ivory Donahue out of her thoughts. Setting a nearly empty glass of wine down on her desk, she glanced over at the ticking analog clock hanging on the wall to her left.

Darn. Her personal assistant, Alice, had most likely taken the rest of the night off. Lifting the glass back to her lips, she drank the last swallow of the liquid and removed the phone from its cradle.

“Yes,” she spoke softly, tipping her head to the side so she could keep the phone in place between her shoulder and cheek. When the caller spoke, however, she suddenly sat upright, glancing around the room with distinguished unease. “I’ve instructed you time and time again *never* to call me here and *never* to use this line.”

The reply was a long string of words, marred with static but desperate and pleading all the same. Ivory swore. “I don’t care what you think our agreement justifies. This conversation is over.”

Without waiting for a reply, she slammed the phone down and stood up, taking short, brisk strides toward her well-stocked liquor cabinet. She slammed a glass down on the surface and filled the container with hard liquor. Downing the alcohol in a single swallow, Ivory breathed out, tipping her head back and closing her eyes. Slowly, she moved over to the large glass wall that overlooked the city and stared out at the lights below.

What was he thinking, calling her here? The man might be a senator, but as far as she was concerned, he fit the description of an imbecile to a nicely drawn T. She didn’t care about whatever his problem was this time. If he insisted on continually making his bed a sloppy mess, he could very well die and rot in it for all she cared. Senator David Tandy was merely a pawn in a much, much bigger game of chess, and in Ivory’s estimation, it was about time that he was sacrificed for the sake of saving the queen.

Licking her lips and tasting the lingering wine and stronger bourbon there, Ivory strode back over to her desk. She lowered herself onto a black leather chair and leaned back, enjoying the numbing buzz of the alcohol while it lasted. All too soon, the effects of the drug would slow to a simmer and then stop, and she would be faced with her latest issue once again. The clock on the wall ticked steadily, but aside from that and the faint sounds of the city below, the room was silent.

That is, it was silent until the shrill sound of the telephone ringing—*again*—caused Ivory to swear and fix her eyes on the phone as if her glare was capable of destroying it. Furious, she was just contemplating taking it off the hook when she glanced at the tiny red light below the keypad indicating that this call was placed on a different line—a line used only for a secure call from someone higher up in the company. Without further hesitation, Ivory picked up the receiver. “Yes.”

An obscured, computerized voice spoke. “We understand that you recently received a call from David Tandy.”

“I did.” Lying was pointless. If they said they understood she had done or said something, or been in contact with someone, they didn’t just *understand* it, they *knew* it. “Does he need to be taken care of? I currently have an asset not more three blocks from his residence.”

“Not at present. He still has a little usefulness left in him.”

“Really? Because as far as I can tell, David Tandy has been bled dry. Would you like to enlighten me as to what this usefulness is?”

“No. We want you to call him back and let him know that you’ve changed your mind and that you will help him with his situation.”

Ivory thought for a moment. “And why would I want to do that?”

“Because as unpleasant as his current state of affairs is, there is a beautiful silver lining around this storm cloud.”

An interesting twist, to be sure. “Why me? Why not just get Masterson to do it? He *likes* handling affairs of this nature.” And that was a bit of an understatement.

“You know him, Miss Donahue, and because, to put it rather bluntly, you’re the best.”

A click signaled the end of the call.

Ivory set the phone down. The way she saw it, there were two choices set before her, and neither one promised positive results for her career. Choice number one was obvious: follow orders like a good little minion. It also meant dealing with David Tandy. Choice two meant disobeying her superiors, a decision that could very easily end in death, or worse: a demotion. Although, it meant never having to see Tandy again, which certainly counted as a bonus.

In the end, avoiding the annoyance that was David Tandy lost out to self-preservation. Ivory found that most of her preferences did. Entirely too much of her life was focused on trying to stay alive.

Her fingers drummed against the glass surface of her desk as she tried to convince herself that Masterson would probably just screw this up anyway. One perfectly manicured finger flipped through her recent call history until she located the number Tandy had used a few moments ago.

Oh, she was going to regret this.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she announced, before he could say hello or even ask who she was. “I’ll help you.”

David’s words were filled with scorn and disbelief, “And why would you do that?”

“Let’s just say that as much as I hate this—going behind my superiors’ backs, not helping you—you’ve been a good friend. You’ve done a lot for me. It’s time I returned the favor. Give me all the information on this problem that you can, and I’ll take care of it for you.”

She paused, then purposely softened her voice, “I at least owe you that much.”

“You owe me a good deal more,” he grumbled gruffly. Ivory disagreed with him on that point but let the hyperbole slide.

“Have a good night, David,” she said in reply and hung up.

Well, the higher-ups did have one thing right, Ivory mused thoughtfully.

She *was* the best.



Unfortunately for David and rather fortunately for Ivory, the senator was going to have to keep his head screwed on straight for a few days longer, because Ivory had more pressing matters to deal with than his numerous infidelity issues. With a sweet smile, Ivory sat down on a cushionless chair and placed her leather briefcase on the floor next to her.

Across the table sat a young man, watching her with an exasperated expression. He wore handcuffs on his wrists and a scowl on his lips. His name was Lucas Darcy, he was twenty-two years old, and he was *perfect*.

Ivory pressed a manila folder against the table with her fingertips.

"This," she explained slowly, "is your file. It's very, *very* detailed."

Ivory opened the folder and shuffled through the papers. "It looks like you spent a little time in juvenile detention for...stealing a pack of cigarettes. Good heavens! Murder is a very large step up for you, isn't it? Strange how quickly you escalated from petty theft to a violent stabbing. Would you care to explain?"

He didn't answer, so she closed the file. "The truth is: I don't care what your explanation is. I don't care why you killed that man. I don't care who he was to you, and I don't care who you were to him. It doesn't matter to me. I'm here because I think I could get you out of the sticky little situation called 'death row.'"

"Death row" was an exaggeration, as Ivory well knew; his case hadn't even gone to trial yet, and in all likelihood, he could plead out for as little as ten or twenty years. But there was no reason for *him* to know that, and he was no good to her in prison.

Ivory leaned over and pulled a different folder out of her briefcase. "I can make all this go away within a single day. I'm here to offer you freedom. You sign the papers in this document and leave here a free man."

"What do you want in return?" he asked coolly.

She admired his directness. “My, my, you are the astute one. I’m impressed. I do want compensation, but it isn’t a terribly horrible thing. That is, not horrible if you choose to look at it from the proper perspective, which I am sure you will, because you’re a smart one, aren’t you, Lucas?”

“The truth is, I work for an organization of people who wish to better the lives of others. We help people out of desperate situations, but we do ask for something in return. A little service, call it *quid pro quo*. A few years of working for us and your debt will be paid. Should you choose to remain in our employ—and many of our recruits do—you will be compensated richly with a monthly allowance.” Placing the paper in front of him, Ivory retrieved a pen, twisted off the cap, and set it on top of the paper before him.

“I am sorry to report that this offer does expire in the next five minutes, so if you have not signed by then, I will be forced to leave and after that you will never see me again.”

“You’re not my court-appointed attorney, are you?”

Demurely, Ivory smiled. “Not exactly, no.”

He scoffed. “Court would never appoint someone who dresses like you.” His fingers played with the pen, but Ivory’s eyes stayed on him, staring him down.

Suddenly, without any outward indication of what he was thinking, the young man positioned the pen correctly in his hand and affixed his signature to the bottom of the document in one quick scribble.

Ivory stood as he handed the paper and pen back to her. She deposited them in her briefcase.

“Now what?” He leaned back in the chair.

“Now comes my favorite part.” She grinned. Sliding a hand behind her back, she slipped it beneath the material of her shirt. Her fingers wrapped firmly around the grip of the SIG Sauer tucked inside her waistband.

Lucas visibly tensed.

Without warning, she whipped out the gun and fired two shots directly into his chest. He slumped over and tumbled out of his chair.

Ivory snatched up her briefcase and fired another shot at the lone security camera, which went up in a nice little blaze of sparks.

After tucking the firearm back into her skirt, she swiped an access key through the box affixed to the side of the door. As she left the room, she turned to wave at the young man bleeding out on the linoleum.

After slipping out of the police station, Ivory pulled out her cell phone and tapped the screen a couple of times to activate the voice command software. "Call Sara Mitchell."

The girl picked up a second later. "Yes."

"Sara? He took the deal. Better pick him up quickly."

"Gotcha," the light feminine voice answered. A pause. "Call just came in. Be there in ten."

The line went dead.

Ivory pulled open the front door of her Mercedes Benz and slid onto the dark leather seat. A simple push of a button and the engine rumbled to life.

She slipped the vehicle into reverse and backed out of her parking space. As Ivory pulled out of the parking lot, she heard the telltale wail of an ambulance siren. The vehicle whizzed by her, and she smiled.

Good. Now it was time to deal with David Tandy's problem.



Sara Mitchell, once known as Mitchie to her close friends, forced herself to relax as her partner helped her maneuver the stretcher into the back of the ambulance. Freaking out would not be beneficial to her or to the man bleeding out right before her eyes. Climbing into the back with him and letting her partner shut the door, Sara took a deep breath, letting all the tension seep out of her shoulders. Panic wouldn't help her.

Calmly, she placed her hands on his chest, one over each bullet wound. Sara closed her eyes and focused all her energy on helping him. White light spread through her fingers, and she drew in a sharp breath. The power they contained was electrifying, almost euphoric. A white

smoky mist flowed up from the tips of her fingers, curling in soft wisps above the young man.

Power slowly flowed from her fingers to his wounds; she felt the wholeness and the healing they contained transfer from her to him. When at last she lifted her hands, his wounds had vanished. Two bullets rested in the curve of her right palm. His blood still stained his clothes and her hands. It smeared on his neck when she leaned forward to check his pulse.

His breathing was normal now, and his heartbeat was steady. Her partner's voice came through the intercom, "Everything okay?"

Sara grabbed her radio and pressed down the talk button with her thumb. "He's unconscious, but he's fine."

"Good. I'll tell Ivory."

Sighing, Sara grabbed an antiseptic wipe and started methodically cleaning her bloody hands. This was Ivory Donahue's very favorite trick. She wondered if Ivory would ever grow tired of it. Sara was absolutely sick of it, not that her opinion mattered.

Grabbing a bottle of water dosed with several heaping tablespoons of sugar, Sara swallowed several large gulps. She needed both the sugar and the hydration if she wanted to stay conscious. Saving people from near-death experiences wasn't the easiest thing in the world.



Taking another sip of her champagne, Ivory studied the data her assistant had downloaded onto her electronic tablet. The portable touch screen computer was the width and length of an eight-by-eleven sheet of paper and slimmer than the average paperback novel.

With her first finger, she scrolled through the first file the company had provided. It held information on everything from the name of Senator David Tandy's high school sweetheart to his dental records. It even told her how many times his daughter, Allison, caught a cold in the first grade.

However, the details concerning his actual *relationship* with Allison were ambiguous. She was nineteen years old and had previously been enrolled as an art student at a prestigious college until the one day she inexplicably dropped out. Or rather, *somewhat* inexplicably, since her father happened to know that her radical decision was the result of her finding out about his infidelity issues. She had proof, and she was angry enough to threaten to destroy her father's career if he didn't leave her be.

Ivory knew about the photos for the same reason Allison did: blackmail. One of her coworkers had taken the images over a decade ago, and the senator had been tucked neatly in her back pocket ever since. At first, he was useful to win a few hands of political poker, but eventually the shine wore off. Over the years, as his influence in the political circle diminished, he became a spare card that could be played at an opportune time or ignored until the hand was over.

Until now.

Which led her to the purpose for this little excursion. David wanted this little predicament of his sorted out, and, for reasons she could only speculate, Ivory's bosses did too.

She closed the window and opened the second file.

It was significantly smaller than the first.

Allison Tandy was currently living in New York City. The Big Apple had been anything but kind to her. She'd taken out a restraining order on her ex-boyfriend. (Allison Tandy had bad taste in men—his file was about three times the length of her own.)

Ivory studied a picture of the smiling brunette, the latest photo that they had of the girl when the file was assembled. Ivory pulled a more recent photograph out of her purse and compared the two. The girl in the first was just that: a girl. Freckles dotted her nose, there were dimples on her cheeks, and her eyes seemed to sparkle with youthful innocence. The young woman in the more recent photo was older; her hair was a darker shade of brown, the freckles were gone—most likely covered with some form of makeup—and she looked world weary.

Ivory slid her tablet back into her briefcase as the plane began its descent. A bit of turbulence hit. Wincing, Ivory closed her eyes and leaned back in her moderately comfortable first-class chair.

They'd better pay her extra for this.



“Stop here,” Ivory instructed the cab driver, peering out the window as the flash of brunette hair disappeared into an alleyway. Digging through her purse, Ivory handed the cabbie a large bill. “Wait fifteen minutes. If I’m not back, keep the change.”

The cool air fanned her face as she stepped out of the yellow car, slamming the door shut behind her. Her heels clicked against the pavement as she briskly strode down the sidewalk in search of the girl. A cry from the alley caused her to stop walking for a moment and listen. Slightly muffled protestations met her ears.

Ivory smiled. Somebody was in trouble. How wonderful.

Wrapping her fingers around the Glock one of her contacts had supplied her with upon her arrival, Ivory continued toward the alley, peering in and around the dumpsters and trash bags that littered the cement path. No sign of Allison Tandy, but she heard whimpering coming from behind one of the metal containers. She tightened her grip on the firearm as she crept forward.

A burly African-American man pressed the brunette against the brick wall. A hand clamped over her mouth to keep her quiet. He spoke to her in low, threatening words that Ivory couldn’t make out. The business end of a silver Beretta pushed against the poor girl’s temple. Silently, Ivory set down her briefcase and dug out a suppresser. Passersby hearing gunfire and calling the police simply wouldn’t do. Affixing the device to her weapon, she stepped toward the man.

If she was a betting woman—and she wasn’t, Ivory preferred chess to gambling—she would wager the thug was not interested in Allison personally. In fact, she would have bet any amount of money that the girl had done nothing to upset the man. On the contrary, she was most

likely the recipient of a message meant to be passed on to someone else. Her boyfriend, if the information written down in her file was any indication.

Either way, Ivory was not in the habit of letting other people get in the way of a job she wanted to accomplish herself. Therefore, she didn't even flinch as she stepped beside the man and touched the tip of her own gun to his temple. "Drop the weapon and let the girl go."

She saw his jaw clench. Ever so slowly, he lowered his arm, but he didn't release Allison. The girl was trembling violently, her eyes wide and frightened.

"I said *drop it*," Ivory barked, growing more impatient by the minute. The gun clattered against the concrete but mercifully didn't go off. "Now let her go."

The man turned to face Ivory slowly. She kept her gaze and her hold on her weapon steady.

With a flick of her wrist, she motioned for the man to leave. He began to walk away, his hands still in the air. When he was a good seven or eight feet away, Ivory fired two rounds directly into his back. He dropped to his knees and then planted his face into the pavement.

Ivory flicked the safety on and put her gun away. When she turned toward Allison, the girl was curled up on the damp ground.

"Allison." Ivory held out a hand. "Let's go."

The brunette's head snapped up at the sound of her name. "How do you know my name?"

"Your father is a friend of mine," she answered simply as the girl stood without any help.

"You killed that man," she murmured.

"He was problematic." Ivory smiled. "Don't worry. I won't hurt you." She studied Allison's dirty jeans and wrinkled blouse for a minute. "Would you be interested in having a cup of coffee with me? There are some things you and I need to talk about."

"Involving my father?"

"Yes."

Allison jutted her lip out. "I don't know you."

“Well, that’s fixable. My name is Ivory Donahue, and I just killed a man who was threatening you in a dark alleyway. I’d say that I’ve earned an hour or so of your time.”

“Yeah,” she conceded softly, brushing the palms of her hands against her jeans. “I’d say you have.”



Allison Tandy wasn’t sure whether Ivory Donahue was certifiably insane or her knight in shining armor.

Long, shimmering raven hair hung in loose curls a good six inches below her shoulders. Her shoes probably cost more than what Allison made in a year. Shopping excursions with her stepmother told Allison that the silky black dress was designer. Dark red lipstick flattered her flawless skin. She looked incredibly out of place in the quaint corner coffee shop, sipping her Styrofoam cup of espresso, with her legs elegantly crossed and her face unreadable.

Allison wrapped her hands around her own warm cup of coffee and released a shaky sigh. “You probably think I’m an idiot.” She took a sip of the black liquid, cautiously eyeing the woman across the table.

“Not at all,” Ivory answered, tapping her long fingernails against the table. “Your fear in the face of such danger was normal and logical. If you don’t mind my asking, why was that man so interested in you?”

“He wanted to use me to send a message to Nathan.”

“Nathan?”

“My ex.” She wrinkled her nose. “He’s a deadbeat. I dumped him a few weeks ago, right before he skipped town, but somehow these people he owes money to seem to think that I know where he is. I don’t!”

“Allison, what if I told you that, despite the fact that your problem is a whole lot more serious than you imagine, I could make all this go away?”

“What do you mean?”

Ivory leaned down and reached into her briefcase. She slid a picture across the table and nodded her head to signify that Allison should pick it up. “This is the man from the alleyway.”

“His name is Derrick Kern, and he’s a hired muscle-slash-hit man for very powerful mobster. Believe me when I say that if I hadn’t killed him in the alleyway, you would be dead. In fact, if you don’t agree to the opportunity I’m about to present to you, it’s more than a little likely that there will be someone else just like him after you the moment his boss learns of his death.”

Allison shook her head, fighting the urge to cry. This could not be happening. “I don’t have their money,” she repeated emphatically, “and I don’t know where Nathan is. Why can’t they just leave me alone?”

Gently, Ivory reached over and placed her hand over Allison’s. “I know this is unpleasant, and I’m sorry about that.” Ivory took a dainty sip of her coffee. “However, I do have a proposal for you. I work for an organization whose goal is to help people—innocent people just like you—get out of desperate situations. Not for free, of course, we do ask for something in return. A little service, say, a year of working for us without any pay, and your debt is paid. After that time, should you choose to remain in our employ—and many of our recruits do—you will be compensated richly with a monthly allowance.”

“So, what?” Allison asked. “I just...sign the next year of my life over to you and you take care of the guys who are after me?”

“Well, it’s never quite that simple—nothing ever is—but that is the gist of it, yes.” Ivory chuckled, setting her cup down on the table. “But let me assure you. When I say we can take care of your problem, I mean that we can take care of your problem.”

She removed a business card from her purse and pushed it across the table with her forefinger. “I can see that at the moment you’re interested but not convinced. This is my private number. Usually, when I make this offer it has a very brief period to be accepted before I rescind it and go on my merry way. However, in your case, and taking into account who your father is and what a friend he’s been to me, I am willing to give you twenty-four hours to think this over. It’s not something to be taken lightly, and I understand that.”

She stood up, bending at the knees to pick up her leather briefcase. “That number will be disconnected when your time is up. If I don’t hear from you by then, I’ll know your decision.”

With a curious expression on her face, Allison watched Ivory leave. She tucked the card into her wallet and left without finishing her coffee.



Ivory stepped out in to the light drizzle and pulled out her cell phone. She pushed a button, gave a verbal command, and then lifted the device to her ear. “Derrick, my lovely, you deserve an Oscar. You were brilliant.”

She stepped forward and held out an arm to summon a cab. “No, it was perfect. Right now, I have her completely convinced that there are some very unsavory types after her. No, she’s not quite ready yet. Do you feel like making a stop at her apartment later today to shake things up a bit? Good.”

Smiling, Ivory held her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and rattled off an address to the cabbie. “Darling, I have to let you go. Call me when you finish up.”

Closing her eyes, Ivory leaned back against the seat and let out a contented sigh.

Oh, she was good.



Ivory loved it when a plan came together.

She especially loved it when said plan was astonishingly easier than initially anticipated. Allison Tandy had called her the minute she’d stepped foot into her ransacked apartment, rambling about how she couldn’t talk to the police because of her father and they really were after her and they were going to kill her.

Calm as ever, Ivory instructed her to pack an overnight bag and meet her at the airport. Forty-five minutes later, a ragged and harried young brunette ran up to her with a bright red duffel bag slung over

her shoulder. Ivory simply handed her a plane ticket. They'd signed the papers once they were both through security.

Now Allison was curled up in the first-class seat next to her, safe and sound but blissfully unaware that she now lacked the power to destroy her father's career with a few damning photos. The young woman shifted in her sleep, and Ivory silently congratulated herself. Oftentimes it took weeks to emotionally prepare a potential, and she had managed to pull it off in less than five hours. She suspected that most of it had to do with Allison's hesitancy to run back to dearest Daddy at the first sign of trouble, not that Ivory could particularly blame her.

In a few days, however, she would probably be begging to be able to run to Daddy and plead him to kiss it and make it better.

Tough.

Ivory studied the girl again.

Everyone had to grow up sometime.