

Phoenix

Prologue

Pain. Most people know it, whether it is physical or emotional. But not everyone has to feel it day after day. Not everyone has to feel both at the same time. I admit I'm not the only one abused in the world but I have always been confused as to why I just happened to be in that world. How did I become so unlucky? Doesn't God give a damn about me?

Oh yes, I questioned the reasons for my existence day in and day out. I never did find an answer.

Yet, no matter how I told myself to give up on my search for peace something wouldn't let me. Something told me that this was just part of the path to happiness. I could never understand why it had to be painful, though. Some people actually have happy lives, right from birth. Why couldn't I be one of those people?

Many people may blame me for the Hell I went through. After all, had I just shut up and not said anything, like most everyone else in my house, life would have been just a slight bit easier. But I was always one to speak my mind and give my opinion, even if it wasn't wanted. My mouth got me into more trouble than any of my actions possibly could.

So, here is my story. Blame me if you must. If you need to blame somebody you choose whom. But, as you're judging, put yourself in my place. Then, tell me what you'd do.

Chapter 1

It wasn't that I had no physical family. Oh, that was far from the truth. I had four younger siblings and my parents were still very married. Unfortunately, we were more like a pack of wolves circling each other and fighting over the most asinine things.

No, I'm not saying there that life was completely miserable. We had our fun times. Going to the beach, to an amusement park of some sort, and to visit family in southern California and in Las Vegas. Yes, those were happier times. They were just too rare and even on vacations there was arguing. My parents usually started it, which put them in a bad mood, affecting the mood of the five of us sitting in the back.

My father often ruined good times all by himself. We'd go out but if we said anything that was even slightly close to yelling he would grab whatever body part was closest to him, whether it be an arm, nose or ear, and grit his teeth and whisper viciously to us. He often made us feel as if going anywhere fun would inevitably turn bad. We always walked on eggshells around him. Afraid to make him angry. Afraid of his verbal wrath, which could be so harsh that his spankings weren't needed to make us cry.

Mama was much different than that. There was no discipline where she was concerned. I always wanted to be like her when I was a little girl. Always wanting her pretty soft golden red hair and

those strangely light green eyes sparkled with specks of violet and blue rather than the near black eyes and dark hair I had inherited from *him*; though, I did think I got my red highlights from her. She was model perfect. I always modeled myself after her even though I looked nothing like her. I liked the same things she liked. It all changed as I got older. In fact, a lot of things changed whenever I got to the age of about fourteen. Drastic changes were made. We made a very large move to Wisconsin and then back all in one year. That was the year that changed my life forever, really. Yes, life was always pretty uncomfortable and hard, but it became worse and worse after that. My trust in my mother became so absolutely slight that it made it unbearable for me to even look at her, anymore. And during it all I didn't have anyone to turn to. I was completely, utterly alone in the world. Lost in the prison of my own mind and torturing thoughts.

I'm going just a little bit too far. So, let me just start during my childhood. During when things were bad, not horrible.

My parents have always fought, it seems. For as long as I can remember they argued. He never hit her in front of us but there were times, so she's said, that he had hit her. I remember a fight in every apartment and house we've ever lived in.

I always defended my mother. Whenever I felt my father was in the wrong, as I almost always did, I was unable to just stay out of it. Why was he always right and nobody else was? It made me so angry!

Then came the year whenever I was ten years old, almost eleven, and he went out truck driving. He thought that over the road truck driving would make us more money. So, he left, and everyone got the freedom they needed.

And Mama *loved* her freedom. My siblings were far too young to understand what was going on, my baby brother, Andrew, just two years old. They didn't understand why Mama was going out so often. More often than not she would disappear at around seven p.m. and not come back until three am. My younger sisters and brother became used to seeing her gone and not seeing her until morning.

My younger sister, Celeste, was just a year younger than I was, so she did understand to a good extent. She just didn't care. At nine almost ten years old she was a pretty, outgoing, and very carefree child.

I was always so different from her. I was a worrywart at a very young age, with very few friends. I was always the good girl. I never did anything bad. Not really. The worst thing I ever did was shoot off my mouth.

And, boy, was I good at that! Any time I felt myself to be in the right, I just couldn't shut up. Even if I knew it would be a good idea to just shut my trap and get less of an emotional, or even physical, beating. I was just not good at doing it. I would always fight for what I believed in. It wasn't like me to just sit back and let someone walk all over me.

Mama was different without Dad around in more ways than one. We went more places but usually it was just to her friend's homes. I remember one time when she loaded us all up in the truck. Andrew and Katie in carseats because they were still just two and three years old and Celeste, Lila, who was five at the time, and I sat in the campershell of the truck. She took us to a friend's house out in the middle of nowhere. The house sat in a huge field, the roof partially caved in and a metal fence surrounded it. Celeste and Lila were happy to get out of the truck and bounced happily up to the doorway. Katie and Andrew were let out of their carseats and they waddled their way after the other two. I walked up slowly, not trusting the house or the people in it.

Mama didn't bother knocking, she just went on in. I followed behind everyone reluctantly. I looked around at the worn-out looking sofa with some springs popping out between the cushions. Two men and two women sat on the couch making out, all with beers or joints in their hands. The music and laughter was deafening. I had gone there barefoot, as I went most everywhere barefoot, and while I looked around, my stomach already nauseous from what I was seeing, I felt something furry crawl across my foot. I let out a sharp cry of surprise and looked down to see a rat scurry across the floor and under the one sofa. I could see roaches everywhere, crawling over the large fish tank and all over the VCR and TV that sat just opposite of the sofa. I felt as if I was going to throw up.

"Somethin' wrong, kid?" I heard a man with a rather thick southern accent say to me. I looked at him and he smiled. His smile revealed a mouth full, or should I say a mouth not so full, of teeth. His beer belly hung out over the top of his too tight pants and out of the too tight dark blue tee shirt he wore. He took a puff of his joint and then held it out to me. "Want some?" He offered.

I wrinkled my nose in pure disgust. I gave him a haughty look and pulled my shoulders back as I stuck my nose up in the air. "I'd rather jump off the golden gate bridge than do any kind of drug! Especially one that *you've* touched." I snapped.

He laughed as Mama came around the corner from the kitchen. She leaned across the doorframe and looked down at the man.

"What the hell is so funny, Eddie?" She asked with a smile.

"That's some witty and stuck up brat ya got yerself there, Karen," He laughed, pointing his joint at me.

Mama laughed with him and took his joint away to take a puff off it. I almost burst into tears right there. All of my life I had looked up to her and now she was disappointing me in ways that she'd never understand! I ran out of the house as if Satan himself were at my heels.

When I got out there I sat cross-legged on the roof of the truck, my arms wrapped around myself, the tears running non-stop down my cheeks. I just couldn't understand what had come over the mother I had looked up to my entire life. The woman I had defended against my mean and controlling father. I didn't know this woman who made promises so freely and broke them just as easily as she made them, making up some sort of excuse for doing so.

I felt as if someone had taken my heart out of my chest and was smashing it with a hammer. I was losing faith in the only person that I had ever looked up to. The only person I could ever call a role model. The only person that made me feel as if I had something worth living for.

Eventually I did get into the car and turn on the radio, and then I crawled back up to the roof and into the position I had been in before. Just as I got settled I heard the loud laughter coming from the house. My head shot up and I saw my mother in the front yard with Eddie who was pouring beer all over her. She giggled and laughed and ran away from him in an obvious flirting game of cat and mouse. It made my stomach do flip-flops. I knew it should be none of my business what my mother did. That I shouldn't want to control the things she did just because I thought they were wrong. But I wanted the mother I thought I knew back. I didn't want this strange, flirtatious, party animal to be my mother. That wasn't my mother at all! My emotions were so torn! I didn't want to be controlling like my father! I didn't want to be mean and nasty like him! I wanted to be a good, nice girl! But I didn't want my mother to act the way she was acting. I didn't know what to do. So I sat up there and cried and whenever I noticed her and my siblings making their way back to the truck I turned away and wiped at my eyes, pretending they were watering from my allergies.

Which I had badly enough, to add to the problems. I was always sick. As a severe asthmatic, the stress my mother was putting me through had me in the hospital more times than I can count during those months my father was gone. And we didn't have any insurance at all to pay for the hospital stays. Of course, Mama worried about me more than hospital bills. She was my mother and she did love me. All of my life Mama was always there to take care of me whenever I became sick or had a bad asthma attack in the middle of the night and had to be rushed out to the emergency room. I knew well enough that it wasn't just stress that put me in the hospital. It was my need to have the mother I had always known back for just a short while. I wanted that caring touch. I needed her. Though, I always had a nagging feeling, my conscience telling me that I was being very selfish. The hospital visits soon became less frequent because of it.

Eventually my birthday rolled around. I had only a very small group of friends from school. Not anyone I actually cared enough about to share with them the secret tortures of my heart, but enough to have a small Halloween birthday party with them. My birthday was a good ten days from Halloween and my mother always had Halloween parties for me. When I was little they were much bigger. That year it was absolutely tiny, a small group of five girls and about a million of my mother's drunk and disgusting party friends. I was so angry about them being there and I made sure my mother knew it.

"Getting drunk and high the night before my party wasn't enough, Mother?! You *had* to go invite these...these...Oh I can't even call them people!" I cried out angrily in the hallway, just outside my bedroom door, not really caring if any of her friends heard me or not.

"I did not get drunk or high last night, Phoenix Parish!" She said in a loud, whining whisper. "And I want you to take that back, this minute! I will not have you insulting my friends!"

"I won't take it back! I mean every word of what I say about these monsters! I hate them all! And I hate what you're turning into!" I ran away from her, crying so hard I thought I might pass out.

I ignored my friends for the rest of the night and ended up falling asleep in the garage, away from my mother and her drunken "friends". Even in the garage, which was attached to the house, I could smell the alcohol and pot emanating from the house. It filled my nostrils every time I took a breath. I cried myself to sleep on the garage floor.

Things were like that right up until my father quit his truck-driving job, about two weeks after my birthday party. I was partially relieved by his coming home and partially upset. I didn't like him. He was mean ninety percent of the time. But this did mean my mother would clean up her act. Unfortunately, my father somehow found out about her partying and the fighting that had gone on between them became worse. Only, I found out later, it wasn't always about partying. It was about how much money she had stolen from him and spent on herself and her friends while he was gone. Funny, I thought, my brother and sisters and I never saw a penny of that money. Sometimes we would have to eat whatever we could find in the cupboards. If there wasn't anything, we just had to go hungry.

I didn't realize that the fighting would only get worse and worse. I never guessed that it would never get better like I always hoped it would. Then, again, I never actually expected it to get better. I just wanted to live through it until I was able to escape.

During the years after my father came home I knew he was just itching to go back over the road. I knew he missed it more than he would ever admit. He loved driving more than he loved anything else in the world. But he was afraid of what my mother would do. He knew she knew too many people around Turlock, California. The place was just so small and she knew everyone that was into the party crowd. I must admit, I didn't like my father but I sure didn't want him to leave again. I feared what his over the road experience would do. Afraid of what Mama would do, again.

The year I was almost twelve years old we got our computer. It was exciting and there were a lot of games on it to play. But the biggest, most fun game to my mother was the Internet. Already Mama had talked to people in her family who had it and they convinced her to ask Dad about getting America Online. My father always did have a problem telling her no. Soon enough Mama was signed online a lot.

Getting online was probably one of the worst choices my father could ever have made. It opened even more doors for Mama. Ones she never even thought of. Soon she was quite popular with many people online. She had pictures to share with everyone and everyone knew her sad and heartbreak life-story about being stuck with a man she could barely stand. She was given sympathy by many.

I got online every now and then. At first it really didn't interest me. I was allowed online for one hour each night. I got on but I was usually off before that hour was even up. I talked to some people but nobody interested me.

But many men were interested in Mama herself. They knew my father and were supposedly friends with him, too. Except one man who wanted my mother so badly he couldn't see straight. He said he wanted to whisk her away from her unhappiness. And he tried to do just that. To this day I don't know exactly what happened between my mother and this man, though I want to

believe her story about it. She says she picked him up from the airport and dropped him off at a hotel and never saw him again. But a friend of my father's told him differently. And there was Hell to pay for that!

It happened the summer I was twelve. We'd already had the Internet almost a year. Celeste had no interest in it and Lila was only seven and was too young to care. Of course Katie and Andrew were much too young to care. The two were only four and five years old and lost in their own little world.

The thing I thought most strange about my siblings was the fact that none of them looked like me. Every one of them looked like Mama. Katie and Lila both had dark hair but other than that they looked like her. I envied them for that. They were just so beautiful, like her. I just had to look like him. I couldn't understand why I looked so different!

I didn't have too much trouble getting along with Lila, Katie, and Andrew. Sometimes they could be brats but I could manage. It was Celeste I had such a problem with. By the time she was eleven she was beyond conceited. Already she had been blessed with the body of a sixteen-year-old. She, like me, had inherited our father's very tall height. We were the same exact height of five foot four inches. Just like Celeste, I too, was "overly developed" for my age. I just never flaunted it. I was embarrassed by my fast growth. Celeste had a nice body with a bosom that was neither too big nor too small. While by the time I was twelve I was almost a size d cup. I hid it with baggy shirts, hating what my mother said was a blessing. I couldn't begin to understand how it was a blessing.

Celeste was much prettier than I. She was thinner, her hips not as wide. Perfect, in my opinion. Both of us always let our hair grow out long, but hers always seemed softer to me. Or maybe it was just the beautiful pale red color that made it look shinier and softer. Maybe it was because she looked like a doll rather than a vampire that made her prettier. I could never pinpoint it but she was prettier. Boys certainly thought so. But I didn't trust anyone from the male gender so it didn't really matter if boys liked me or not.

Thing is I never really trusted anyone, whether they be male or female. I just couldn't stand any of them. I was a loner. I didn't need anyone but myself and my solitude. I was an oddball. So odd that Celeste made it clear she didn't want to be my sister.

"She's not my sister! She couldn't possibly be my sister. We look nothing alike and she's a freak!" Celeste would tell everyone at school this. They would all laugh and nod. I was unbelievably happy when summer hit that year.

I didn't know what was about to happen. I never expected that summer would not bring the relief I sought at all! No, instead it only brought with it more pain.

Dad was out renting movies when he ran into a friend of his who knew a friend of Mama's. They got to talking and somewhere along the way Dad was told about Mama and the Internet man. He was so angry he called her from the video store. Mama went absolutely crazy! I didn't know how unstable she was until then, but I was about to find out! She began screaming at the top of her lungs. She threw the computer screen across the room. I heard the bang on my bedroom wall and

flew out of my bedroom to hers. She glared at me as if I had done something wrong. Then she ran past me and into the kitchen then ran outside screaming over and over again, "I want to die! I want to die! I hate being alive!"

"No, Mama!" I screamed at her as I followed her outside. Celeste, Lila, Katie, and Andrew followed and huddled around me. A family friend had come over and had Mama pinned down on the front lawn. I watched as she threw her body around, trying to free herself. But, Laura, Mama and Dad's friend had a tight hold on her.

"Call 911, Phoenix!" Laura yelled at me as she struggled with my mother in the lawn. Neighbors were coming out of their houses to see what was going on. I ran into the house, away from the scene, to do just as I had been told.

Just as I picked up the phone my father came home. He made Laura let Mama go, but only for a second. Soon he had her by the arm and in the house. He threw her on the floor.

"What the Hell is wrong with you?" He screamed at her.

"You think I did something I didn't do! You accused me of cheating on you!" She cried.

"So you go and try to kill yourself? My god, woman, what are you thinking? You're just so damned stupid sometimes. I can't even stand to look at you right now!" He was screaming so loud that the walls seemed to shake. My siblings were crying and holding onto me as if I were their only life raft.

"It's not my fault he came here, Mike! All I did was take him to his hotel room! I swear on my kids' life we never did anything!" She was bawling so hard that I thought she might break in half.

He called her so many names then. I couldn't count how many times he called her a liar. But not once did he touch her. Had he laid a finger on her he would have been taken to jail when the police showed up only minutes after he arrived.

My mother was taken to the mental institution that horrible night. Taken away for seven long days and diagnosed with Manic Depression and Bipolar disorders. Soon she stopped trusting anyone around us. The next year, right before my fourteenth birthday my father went back over the road truck driving and my mother moved us out to Wisconsin where we didn't know anyone. She wanted to start over.

I didn't take to the change so easily. The others all did. They made friends easily but right from the beginning I became sick. I couldn't cope with being there. The weather was much too different. For the first three months I was sick. I saw so many doctors while I was there but not any of them knew how to handle an asthmatic patient. I wasn't taken care of the way I was supposed to be. Eventually my body had to adjust itself, though it didn't do it so well. After that I was sick much more often than I used to be.

Mama and I did become closer there. That I was happy for. But I also became addicted to the

Internet. I had a whole group of friends that I talked to every day. I found out what the words "AOL drama" meant. Mama knew them, too, and soon the two of us were caught up in a fantasy world. It became our reality. We had nothing else.

It started with this girl named Valerie who I met and introduced to my friend Aaron. She soon introduced me to three of her friends, Marie, Kyle, and Josh. Marie and Josh were supposedly an "aol item". Though Valerie liked Josh. It was so ridiculous but it was my little world. My getaway from the reality that hurt so much.

Soon, though, I learned the reality of Valerie's cruelty. For even in a fantasy world you can be awakened by cold, harsh reality. Valerie used people to get what she wanted. Not caring who she hurt. That meant me. One night, while I thought I had friends, Valerie had everyone turn against me. Soon I was being insulted for no reason at all. After that I stopped bothering to get online. I felt no reason to do so.

I did stay friends with Zack, though. Arrogant, sarcastic, yet sweet in his own way, Zack. I liked him. I would never admit that to anyone but myself since he was just online. I didn't believe in online relationships.

Mama did, though. And I made the mistake of telling Zack about her one night.

"Want to see a picture of my mother?" I asked him one night as we chatted over the computer. "She looks really young and she's really pretty!" I told him.

Zack was taken with her at once. And she loved the attention that he gave her. Soon they claimed to be in love with one another and I was well forgotten. Nobody ever really noticing me. I was left out. But soon it wouldn't matter. I fell into my own silent little world. I let Mama and Aaron be happy and talk to one another while I was, once again, left alone. As always, it seemed. I would always be alone.

But silence, for me, never lasted long. No matter how upset I was with somebody I could only give them the silent treatment for so long. Mama and I talked it all out one night as we sat up in her room.

"Why have you stopped talking to Zack? Why are you giving me the silent treatment?" She asked me as I sat there, singing along with the radio.

I stopped singing and reached over to turn down the radio. I looked at her. "I see no point in talking to Zack. To him I am only a child. He sees me as no more than a little girl," I insisted; though I did have my other reasons. "And I didn't think that you'd wish to talk to me since you were so caught up in him. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings," I explained. Which wasn't a complete lie. They certainly didn't need me since they had each other. I leaned over and turned the radio back up and began singing again.

She wasn't going to have it that way, though. She reached past me and turned the radio back down. I stared up at her. "Why wouldn't I need you, Phoenix? You're not only my daughter but one of the

only friends I have. Everything miserable I've ever put you through I'm sorry for. Haven't I shown you that I care?" She was making me feel so guilty! Tears filled my eyes and I looked away from her. My throat closed up on me and I didn't think I could talk without my voice shaking.

I took a deep breath to steady my words. "I know you care, Mama. I'm sorry for ignoring you. I won't do it anymore. But don't ask me to talk to Zack, because I won't," I said and looked down at the floor as I absent-mindedly twirled a strand of my hair in my fingers, as I often did whenever something bothered me or I was deep in thought.

"That's fine. I won't pressure you into talking to him," She said, obviously relieved by my answer. "He will be awfully upset about you not talking to him, though," She went back to writing in the journal she'd been writing in before the conversation.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, Mother, I know neither of you honestly care if I talk to him or not. I also know," I continued, making her look up at me. "That you're relieved that I won't be talking to him. I know you see me as some kind of competition."

She seemed shocked by my words. "Me? I see you as competition?" She asked incredulously. Then she burst into laughter. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, honey, but I don't see you as competition. He wants me and only me." With that she ended the conversation, only to look up at me every now and then to smile as if I'd said the stupidest thing on earth, shake her head, and mutter to herself "Competition."

I did just as I said I would do; I ignored Zack completely. I didn't want to have anything to do with someone who was so idiotically obsessed with my mother. Though he did try to get me to talk to him whenever he caught me online.

One day he instant messaged me saying "Hey my sexy girl!" as if nothing had happened and we were the best of friends...maybe even more! I was so angry that my, oh so, comforting silence broke.

"Don't call me that!" I typed back to him. I wanted to reach through the computer and smack him.

It took him awhile before he answered back. "Why not?" He asked. I could almost hear the innocence in his voice as he typed that. His question only irritated me more.

"Don't talk to me either. You know why. Just leave me alone!" I signed off and went outside. The Wisconsin winter air came to hit me in the face. The snow was all around me and as I looked around I realized just how beautiful it was here.

Unfortunately I could only admire its beauty for so long before having problems breathing. I went inside to take a breathing treatment. As soon as I finished the phone rang. I was the only one in the kitchen and the phone was on the counter right next to me. I groaned, not wanting to answer it. I absolutely despised answering and talking on the phone.

"Hello?" I answered the phone, trying to keep the annoyance from my voice.

Unfortunately it was someone for me. Someone I didn't want to talk to but couldn't seem to hang up the phone. "Hello, Phoenix. Please! Don't hang up!" Zack cried into the receiver as if sensing my irritation.

I sighed noisily. "What do you want?" I snapped.

"I just wanted to talk to you. I haven't in awhile and I can't understand why you've been avoiding me," He sounded almost sad. Suddenly, the feelings I tried so hard to keep hidden came pouring over me like Niagara Falls. I knew I should hang up but I couldn't help wanting to talk to him. It had been so long since I had talked to him on the phone, since I had heard his voice.

"You know why I've been avoiding you," I choked out weakly, silently cursing myself for letting my guard down yet again whenever it concerned Zachary Brackford. "I can't stand to watch my mother make a fool out of herself with you and I can't stand to hear the both of you confess your love to one another. Don't ask why because I don't know why!"

"Phoenix, I can't help what I feel for your mother. It's there and I can't stop it. I'm sorry,"

"Is that the best you can do?" I asked, trying my best not to cry. "I'm sorry is the best you can do?" I wanted to scream and rip out my hair. Did they not understand the extent of my feelings? Couldn't they see it in spite of how I hid it!?

"What else do you expect me to say!?" He demanded. "What else am I suppose to do? Stop talking to her because Queen Phoenix doesn't like it!"

Now he was treading on dangerous grounds. My blood began to boil. "Oh, trust me, Zack, I wouldn't dare want to ruin your perfect little 'happy' world of love. Oh no! That would just be devastating! I'm so terribly sorry for being oh so whiny and rude to the two lovebirds!" I spit out sarcastically. "You don't have to be sorry, Zack, because I'm the one who is sorry. I'm sorry I ever met you!" I slammed down the phone, wishing that I could have thrown it at him instead.

I was angry that my mother and Zack could be so asinine that they couldn't see how badly I was hurting. I was even angrier that they could be so caught up in each other that they were blind to the reason why I was hurting. I was also annoyed by their moronic "I love you's". So annoyed, in fact, that I had this urge to just kick both of them. Of course, I didn't kick them, no matter how much I wanted to do so.

If there was one thing that could cheer me up or comfort me whenever I was down it was music. It seemed that if I sang my heart out the misery would follow and soon the pain would go away for a little while. It got rid of my thoughts of loneliness for a few minutes.

Mama said I had a gift for singing, but I certainly didn't believe her. Every time I would think that maybe what she said was true I would record myself and be disgusted by my own voice. Of course, I could carry a tune and I wasn't horrible, I just didn't like the sound of my own voice. But

it didn't really matter if I could sing or not, it brought me the freedom that I wanted and needed. It was something nobody could take away from me. So, whether or not I thought I sounded good I continued to sing my misery away.

I never did let Zack hear me sing. It was almost as if I was afraid of his judgment; afraid he would laugh at me. Not that I ever admitted to anyone such fears. I acted as if I didn't care what others thought of me. I made myself look as if their laughter and harsh, teasing words didn't matter. I pretended to lock myself up in a world where nobody could hurt me.

But deep down I hurt badly. I just couldn't show anyone my vulnerability. I didn't want everyone to think me to be weak. I was always known, as someone with strength and that is how it would stay. Never would anyone see me break down and be weak. I couldn't afford for people to see that side of me. What would happen? I didn't even want to think of the possibilities. Showing weakness was for other people, not me.

That is what made my mother think me heartless. My "I don't care" attitude made her, and most everyone else we knew, think me to be cold-hearted. I guess hiding your hurt and acting as if you're stronger than you actually are could make you seem stuck up. Pretty soon I was hiding most of my feelings from people, all of them, that is, except my anger. I was so opinionated that I couldn't hide it whenever I felt strongly about something. Especially when that something made me angry.

I didn't hide my emotions all of the time, of course. I still cried whenever I was miserable, I still hugged my mother or siblings whenever they felt bad. I did care and I did show it. But I hid from them at the same time. I hid from them what I was really thinking. I didn't share my secrets with anyone. I acted as if the world could fall apart the next day and I wouldn't care. But I wanted so much more than what I told anyone. I really did want people to care about me.

I guess showing affection was another thing I had a major problem with. For some reason any kind of affection, especially from the opposite sex, bothered me. I just didn't feel comfortable being hugged or kissed. I felt awkward, almost as if it were wrong. I couldn't understand what was wrong with me. Maybe it had something to do with the lack of affection I had been given growing up, especially from my father.

Whatever it was it drove me insane. It made me wonder if I were normal. It made me wonder how I was ever going to have a boyfriend or husband. How could I ever make any man happy if I was afraid of affection? Those thoughts scared me so much I felt like screaming.

That was one of the things I hid from everyone, especially my mother. I made everyone believe that I wasn't truly interested in having a boyfriend; that all I cared about was getting through school and making a good career for myself. Oh, how far away from the truth that was! I wanted nothing more than to have someone love me and hold me whenever the misery and depression took me down into their pits of Hell. I wanted someone to take care of me whenever I became sick. I wanted someone who I could trust with everything I felt!

But I kept those thoughts to myself. Nobody needed to know that. It was my own, personal

problem. I'd have to get over it eventually. But not yet. I would deal with it whenever I had to. I couldn't think about dealing with it at that moment, there were so many other things going on in my life.

I tried my best not to think of how lonely I was. I tried so hard to pretend that I was an independent female and I didn't need anyone. Yet, there was always that nagging, lonely feeling. That horrible feeling of isolation. I couldn't help but wonder if anyone could actually save me. What bothered me more was wondering if I would actually *let* anyone save me.

Chapter 2

Life was never tedious in my house. No, there was always some sort of drama going on. Most of the time it was "bad" excitement rather than "good" excitement, though. Ninety percent of the time it had something to do with my father. He was, most often, the cause of stress in our home.

With him gone for weeks at a time it was easy to forget about him and just go on with our lives. We never really had much to worry about. He made good money and we never wanted for anything. We had clothes enough for three different families and we always had food in the house. We had it pretty good that first half of the year we lived in Wisconsin.

But we remembered him well enough whenever he came through that front door, after being gone for a month, and started yelling and ordering us to do this or that. He always had something to complain about. It didn't matter if it was the house not being clean enough or how much money my mother spent while he was on the road. It almost felt like a boot camp. At any moment I expected him to hand me a toothbrush and tell me to clean the bathroom with it.

After doing this for so long, you would have thought that my younger siblings would expect it and not be so excited about his coming home. Yet, every time my mother would announce that she was going to pick him up from the truck stop they grew excited and would wait by the front window to see our van pull up the driveway. They may have been expecting kisses and hugs every time but not one of us ever got that from him, unless he was purposely doing it to antagonize us.

I never expected it from him, though. I dreaded it every time he came home. I didn't want him there! He hated me! He may not have shown affection to my siblings but he certainly acted as if he cared about them. I was such a disappointment to him, I guess. He expected the best from his children. He expected them all to be healthy, respectful, and obedient. I was, unfortunately, "d. none of the above".

Whenever I was younger I had always wanted to impress him. I wanted to show him that I was great and just as good at things as Celeste. He never would see that, though. He favored Celeste. I would never be as wonderful.

But that was only because Celeste had a way of kissing up to people to get her way. I was much more demanding. I could never be something I was not, even if it did mean getting what I wanted. I had my own ways of gaining whatever it is I had on my mind to get.

I often would sit in my mother's room, listening to the radio, and watching out the window, dreading the moment the van would pull in. I didn't want him to come home. His homecoming would mean my punishment. He would come through that door and send the other kids to play. Then he would come in his room, see me and start yelling.

It was my fault this time. Maybe I did deserve his harsh words. After all, it was partially my choice not to go to that horrible High School where I wasn't accepted or liked. Normally, being accepted by other teenagers wouldn't bother me, but I hated Wisconsin so much that I refused to even make an attempt. As long as we lived there I would not graduate school. I hated it so much.

I sat in the room, my arms wrapped around my legs, my head resting on my knees. I stared out the window, on the verge of crying. I could almost feel his wrath, already. I could almost hear the words he would scream at me.

A storm was starting outside. It was just days away from Thanksgiving and it was snowing heavily outside. The snow was beautiful to most people, but to me it was just a blanket of ice that killed the flowers, grass, and any other plants beneath it. It was dreadful to me. Or maybe I just hated it because it was part of this wretched state that I hated. Whatever the reason, at the moment it had me trapped in. I couldn't leave the house and escape my punishment for even a few more short hours.

I tensed as I watched my parents pull into the drive. I could tell, even from the second floor window, that he was already yelling at her. Oh, great, I thought, the kitchen sink is half full of dishes. Now we'll both get it even worse. I glared down from the window, almost wishing that he could see me.

As they walked up the path that lead to the front door my mother stopped in the middle and began flinging her arms in the air dramatically, as if yelling at him about something. Then I heard her scream "I hate you!" and rush into the house. My father stood there, his eyes following her into the house. I worried for Mama's safety, for those eyes, even from a second-story window, were deadly. He followed her into the house in an eerie, calm manner. I heard the door slam a second time, telling me that he was no longer even pretending to be calm. He had acted that way for the neighbors. But now he was in the house and more than ready to do battle.

I could hear the screaming, now. It came up through the floor to assault my ears. The worst part about the fighting was the fact that it was, yet again, about me. I tried my hardest not to cry. If I cried he would have what he wanted. He *wanted* to hurt me. So, forcing myself not to cry, I listened to the battle make its way up the steps.

"*It is* your fault, Karen. If you wouldn't give that little bitch her way all of the time she'd actually go to school! But, no, you believe her whenever she says she doesn't feel good, she can't breathe right, and you let her stay home! You're so damned stupid and gullible!" My father's voice kept coming closer and closer and for the life of me I couldn't help but let the tears break free of their prison behind my eyes. I buried my face in my knees, wishing it not to happen, yet knowing it was inevitable.

"She doesn't *pretend* to have those breathing problems, Michael Parish! *Your* daughter has been sick her entire life! It has nothing to do with being gullible, she *is* sick. You just choose not to pay attention to her! What do *you* care if she can't breathe, especially whenever she goes out into that ice cold weather outside? Are you the one who spends nights at the hospital with her!?" The door was shoved open just as Mama got the last word out of her mouth.

My father seemed not to worry or care about anything she had just thrown at him. Instead he looked at me, his black eyes looking at me as if he wanted to choke the life out of me. I wanted to shrink away. I wanted to find a way out of the room and run! But I was never the type of person to run from an argument. I was brave and I took the cruelty, and managed to give it back.

"You had better be ready in the morning, because you're going to school whether you can breathe or not. You can't give me the 'I can't breathe' routine. I don't believe you for a second," He did not raise his voice to me, though I had. He sounded so evil in this calm, authoritative voice. "I'm not her and I will not sit by and let you ruin your education. I don't feel like going to jail because you don't go to school. I honestly don't care if you become nothing but scum. But don't plan on being scum at this moment because I won't be criticized because I have a worthless daughter." Any fear that I had whenever he walked into the room flew out the window. I was up on my feet so fast it, near literally, made my own head spin. I stood on the bed and was able to make eye contact with him without having to look up, but rather having to look down. My hands were on my hips and I glared down at him from my perch on the bed.

"You don't have to believe me, Daddy dearest. I don't really care if you believe me or not. I'll never be scum, not like you. You may think you're high and mighty just because you keep a roof over our heads, food in our mouths, and clothes on our backs but you are worthless scum as far as I'm concerned! You have the nerve to go around and treat your family the way you do while we all have to pretend we're a happy little family whenever somebody steps through the front door or we meet somebody on the street. Now, Daddy dear, tell me, who pretends the most!?" He didn't answer me. He just stood there, glaring at me and shaking his head in disgust. I decided to give him the answer.

"*You* are one to push off judgment on me for pretending. I never fake a sickness! But you always fake the role of the good father. The one who takes his children out and has a dandy ol' time with them!" My own sarcasm rang in my ears. Sarcasm was my one true weapon. It was my sword against the world. "But do we ever have a completely fun time!?! Of course not! I certainly never do, because at some point during our wonderful family outings you find a way to punish me for something or other. You find a way to chastise me whenever I have done nothing wrong. You always find something wrong with me and I'm tired of it!"

"You need to shut up and you need to shut up now, Phoenix," His voice was deadly. "If you don't I will beat the hell out of you,"

"Go right ahead and do it!" I screamed. "It's not like you've never done it before!"

"Phoenix!" My mother gasped. She finally said something and made an attempt towards stopping my father from taking that one fateful step forward. We both knew he would do just as he

threatened. He would smack me, pinch me, scratch me and finally be done with me. During that time all I could do was cower whenever he hit me.

"Get out of here, Phoenix." My mother said to me over her shoulder as she, vainly, held my father back. I did as she said. If I didn't her playing as shield wouldn't last long.

I couldn't help crying as I left. I couldn't stop myself from wondering what I had ever done to make him hate me so much! I didn't think I was so horrible. But maybe I was wrong. If my own father hated me then I was, more than likely more horrible than I even knew.

When my father was gone I slept with my mother. There weren't enough rooms in our house and I didn't have a bed so I slept with her. But since he was there I had to sleep out on the living room floor. I lay there, long after everyone had fallen asleep, thinking about everything that had happened. I just couldn't seem to figure out a reason why he hated me. I could have blamed it on the fact that I didn't go to school very often, but that was an impossible reason. He hated me long before we had moved to Wisconsin and I stopped going to school. So, what could it be?

Soon, my eyes were too tired to stay open and my brain was so tired it had a block up to stop my thought process. I knew it was late. The sun was probably just waiting below the hills for the roosters of the world to wake it up. Wait for them to make their morning call so it could rise and rise above the world to give us its light. What haunted my thoughts just as sleep claimed me was why didn't I ever get to see a completely sunny day?

I didn't get much sleep. About four hours later my father was forcing me to get up. I didn't know why. School was canceled that day due to all of the snow. Yet, he was making me wake up.

"Why?" I demanded as I sat up from my makeshift bed. I groaned and rubbed the small of my back. I hated sleeping on the floor.

"Because you're lazy and you don't need to sleep all day," He answered and kicked at me again.

"Ow! I'm getting up! Stop kicking me!" I yelled "Is anyone else even up? What time is it?" I looked up at the clock on the wall next to the TV and groaned again. It was barely seven in the morning!

"Nobody else is up, but they don't need to be. You're the problem. You're the one that never goes to school and you get to sleep in all of the time. They never do. So, get your ass up! You're going with me today!"

I shook my head as I rose to my feet. I stretched out and pain shot through my back. "If we're going somewhere today can we go out and get me some sort of bed? I have nothing to sleep on whenever I sleep down here!" I complained.

He looked down at the blanket and pillow on the floor that I called a bed whenever he was home. "Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe we'll get you something to sleep on. Can't get you a bed, though. Another one wouldn't fit in this house," Then he looked at me. "Get dressed." He ordered and went upstairs.

I did as he said and within a half-hour we had left the house. First he decided we'd go to breakfast. It was one of those times in my life where I was relaxed around my father. I wasn't getting into any trouble and he was actually doing something with me. He was talking to me as if I was actually human! I took advantage of it. I knew that sometime during this day he would only start up again on one of his tirades and I'd be caught right in the middle of it.

After we left the restaurant we went out to the hardware store. He wanted to get some supplies so he could do some work in the "sun room". It was a room in our house off to the side of the kitchen. The walls of the room were made of glass to let in sun but the floor was hardwood with some place in it rotting. The ceiling was completely starting to cave in and my father wanted to make the room look nice again.

When we left there we went, to my surprise, to the pound. He wanted to see about adopting a dog because it had been so long since we'd had one. I had to admit, I did miss having a dog. Unfortunately, the shelter wouldn't give us one because we hadn't lived in Wisconsin a full year. My father left complaining all the way out, making sure to be loud enough for them to hear. Neither one of us understood what living here for a year had to do with getting an animal from the pound and saving it from an inevitable death.

By the time we were finished with breakfast, Home Depot, and the pound it was nearing noon. We stopped at a Mcdonalds and ate. Then he stopped by a bookstore in town.

"Pick out a couple of books for you and your mother. I know you two haven't gotten any new books since the last time I was home." I was surprised he would buy me anything. Maybe he didn't hate me after all! I did as he said and chose two books. That day he also

bought Mama about six aromatherapy candles, some of her Vanilla Fields perfume that she absolutely loved, and a new comforter and sheet set for her bed. He also bought me a "chairbed". It was just a little cushion that was in the shape of a small chair and folded out into a bed type thing. It had zoo animals all over it and was obviously for a small child but I really didn't care. I finally had something to sleep on.

When we finally got home it was late afternoon. He gave Mama everything he'd bought her and showed her what he had bought me. Everything said yesterday had been forgotten. My father had forgiven us for anything we had said and Mama and I had forgiven him. That's usually how it worked. One minute we hated him next minute we all got along and we were happy and laughing again. I didn't understand it but I was happy for the moments when we didn't hate each other. I guess I accepted our way of life. I knew the bad moments would happen, they happened more often than the good. But the good moments would come and all would be forgiven again and we'd go on with our lives.

It seemed as if God wanted to tease me, though. It was as if he was dangling happiness on a string in front of me and just whenever I thought I'd gotten a hold of it he'd yank it away from me and I'd be left there, trying to reach it again. I would always try to grab the happiness that seemed to be right in front of me the entire time. I just couldn't seem to grasp it fully and hang onto it.

The day had seemed to go on without me getting into any trouble. That was until he started again that night. I knew it was impossible to go a full day without his constant complaints about me. He just had to say something and ruin it all over again!

"Don't be too happy, Phoenix. I'll be here after Thanksgiving and once Monday rolls around you *are* going to school whether you like it or not," He announced. I deflated like a balloon that had been full of air but never tied at the ends to hold that air in.

"I'll gladly go to school. I like going, despite what you think. But you don't know me. You don't even try to know me!" I don't know why but I started crying. Why!? Why did he have to do this!?

And, of course, I was lying about liking school. I hated that school with a passion. I had been sick for the first month or so we had lived here and I still did get sick a lot but I could go to school. I just wouldn't because I hated it so much. I just didn't want him to be right about me. I hated whenever he was right. So I continued to argue.

"I do know you, though. You're my daughter. I know you hate school. I'm not stupid! I see when you're healthy enough to get your ass out of bed and go but you say you're sick. I'm tired of that and I'm tired of your mother allowing you to get away with it!" The sound of his voice was really beginning to annoy me.

"Phoenix, just stop," Mama said before I could even get the words out to argue back. "Please, no fighting. Just stop!" She begged, her eyes pleading. I literally had to bite down on my tongue to stop myself from saying anything else.

I got up to leave just as the phone rang. I answered it and, if my father hadn't been in the room that was next to the kitchen, I would have shut it back off. But he would have heard the beep the phone made and would demand to know who it had been. It was Zack was on the other end of the line.

"What do you want?" I whispered viciously into the phone. I needed to take my anger out on something or someone and at the moment I didn't care whom. Besides, Zack seemed like the perfect person to shove off my anger to.

"I just wanted to talk. What's wrong with you?" He asked. He actually sounded concerned and that was nearly enough to make me calm down. I didn't answer him right away and made my way up the stairs, thanking God for putting the man on earth who had created the cordless phone.

"Don't worry about it," I finally answered. "It's nothing for you to worry about, so why do you care?" I snapped.

"Whatever made you angry I know, for a fact, that it is not my fault this time. You can stop being rude to me at any time now," He was obviously annoyed by my attitude.

"Well, you have given me plenty of reason to be angry in the past. Besides, if you're so annoyed then why don't you just hang up on me?" I was being rude. There was no way he was going to stop me from having my attitude.

His voice was softer whenever he answered me. "Because I know something happened and I want to be your friend and, at least, try to help you through it. We used to be friends." His concern about my problems made me want to cry. But I held back the tears because of his last comment. It wasn't my fault we weren't friends any longer! He had no right to say that!

"Yes, we used to be friends. That is until you decided to ignore me and make future plans with my mother," I said sarcastically.

"How many times do I have to apologize for that?" He asked, becoming frustrated with my refusal to forgive him about my mother and his online romance. Online or off-line it had still been wrong and it had still hurt me.

"As many times as you like. I doubt I'll ever forgive you," I said it nonchalantly. Let him think I didn't care. Though I did. I cared a lot more than he would ever know. Showing him my misery wouldn't get me anywhere. I didn't want his pity. I didn't want him to care about me out of sympathy. That would be exactly what would happen if I let my guard down and showed him just how miserable I truly was.

I was tired of it all. Tired of people only pretending to care. Where was there someone who honestly did care? That person seemed to be close to not existing. I would have given up all hope of a trustworthy person if I hadn't run into someone who was willing to give me the friendship that I needed.

Victoria Landyn was an amazing person. That was all there was to it. I met her online, too. Only this was different than any other online friendship I'd ever had. Victoria was three years older than me and needed someone as much as I did. Her life had had its ups and downs, she had gotten into the party crowd and had become a drug addict and an alcoholic and then managed to get herself out of it all. She was seventeen years old whenever I met her.

I loved it. I finally had a friend that was truly my friend. Though she did talk to my mother she was my friend. She didn't forget me because someone older and "better" was talking to her. I sometimes wanted to cry because I was so happy that I had someone to run to when things became bad and unbearable.

She wasn't very fond of Zack, that was for sure. She said that he had a bad attitude and if he could easily ignore me because of my mother he was an idiot. Suddenly, I was able to forget about my feelings for Zack. I began to ignore him and this time I didn't start talking to him again. My mother stopped talking to him, too. Zachary Brackford was out of our lives and he could stay out of mine. I didn't need someone who wanted her. I was happy without him. Victoria was right, he only made me miserable.

Victoria and I made our little online world fun. We would go into chatrooms to torment people. We would laugh and have ourselves a grand ol' time. Though we were never able to find anyone who would willingly talk to us past one night. We didn't really care. We had each other. Real friendship was something neither one of us had ever had and now that we had it we were going to make sure it wasn't going to go anywhere.

She became my best friend in every way. We sent pictures of ourselves back and forth and it was almost as if she was really there. That it wasn't just online. I was content and happy that whenever things got rough and tough I had someone who would help me stay strong. I wasn't alone and that was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

We had lived in Wisconsin for about six months whenever my mother's nephew, my cousin, Josh came to live with us. I hadn't really known him except for the few times he had visited my family with his mother. My mother's sister Kelly was far too caught up in herself and Josh still had a year of highschool left. So, she sent him to live with our grandmother, Lillie, who said that she couldn't handle a teenager. I talked to him and Grandma Lillie online and it turned out that it was Josh's idea to come live with us. I was excited, finally, more family!

I introduced Josh to Victoria online. Josh fell for her the moment he met her. Which was ridiculous. Victoria wasn't like that and she did not like him. We would make fun of him.

She said that she didn't like the way he treated me. She said he acted as if I was "more than family"

"There is just something about the way he talks to you, Phe," She told me as we talked on the phone the night before he arrived. "It's almost like he has a crush on you. It freaks me out. Be careful around him," She warned.

"I'll be careful. I'm careful around everyone, Victory. You of all people should know that," I always called Victoria Victory and she always called me Phe. People always thought we had strange names whenever they met us. We always used our nicknames to introduce ourselves to other people.

She sighed. "I do know that. I'm just worried about you. He seems weird to me." I agreed with her and promised her that I'd be extra careful. We finally got off the phone around four in the morning.

The next day my parents left to pick up Shawn around seven in the morning. I was left in charge of my younger siblings, who seemed to grow horns once my father left. They were innocent angels around him but once he left they were demons. They were especially bratty for me! Lila and Celeste were really the worst. Celeste was in her teens and since Lila was nine and almost "double numbers", as she called it, they thought they didn't have to listen to me at all. Which only got on my nerves. Andrew was six and Katie was seven and they were pretty easy to deal with.

Celeste was good for the first two hours my parents were gone and then she decided to be cruel and start her usual taunts. "Look at Phoenix! She's so fat and ugly! God! No wonder she's never had a boyfriend. No wonder boys never pay attention to her! You better dig yourself and hole to hide in, sister dear!" She laughed. I was on the attack instantly.

"At least I'm not a little slut like you!" I screamed at her. Her laughter stopped immediately. She glared at me and, if looks could kill, I would have been six feet under.

"I hate you! I hate you! I wish you were dead! I wish Daddy would just beat you to death! You'd deserve it!" She was suddenly charging me. I was taken off guard whenever she collided with me and we fell to the ground. We rolled around on the ground, her pulling my hair and kicking me in the side. She had the advantage of height. But I had the advantage of strength. I was a lot stronger than Celeste whenever I was ready for the attack.

I pulled her off of me by her hair and threw her away from me. She came charging at me again, only this time I was ready. I grabbed her by the hair with both of my hands. She tried punching at me but I threw her against the couch. She screamed and came back at me punching and kicking. I started clawing her. Lila, Katie, and Andrew stood there, their eyes wide. Katie was crying and Andrew was trying to comfort her.

I thrust Celeste away from me one more time, only this time she fell against the stairs. She let out a scream so loud I thought the people two blocks away from us could hear. But it was easy to see why. She had landed the wrong way. Her arm was broken.

"LOOK AT WHAT YOU DID!" She shrilled. "My arm is broken! Daddy will get you for this now!"

"I'm sorry, Celeste. I didn't mean to break your arm, I swear! Please! Don't tell on me!" I begged her. I did not want to get into trouble. I never meant to break her arm and this wouldn't have happened had she not said such mean and nasty things to me. I wouldn't tell her that, not if I wanted her to side with me and make up a story about how she broke her arm.

"It hurts, Phoenix!" She wailed. "It hurts so bad!"

"It will be all right. I'll call an ambulance," I got up to do that and she wailed even louder.

"I hate hospitals! Don't make me go to no hospital!" She screamed at me.

"It needs to be put into a cast. You have got to go to the hospital, Celeste!" I was becoming irritated with her and trying my best not to be. I needed to stay calm if I wanted her to not be angry with me.

"But it will hurt when they put a cast on it, won't it?" My sister acted much younger than she actually was. I felt as if I were trying to keep a five year old calm.

That's when I got the idea. "It may hurt, Celeste, but if you allow me to call an ambulance I'll make sure daddy doesn't know what happened today." I spoke to her as if we were becoming allies against the same cause, when, in actuality, it was my fault.

"Really? You won't tell him? Okay! Call an ambulance!" She exclaimed, the pain in her arm forgotten for a little while.

When the paramedics arrived and realized that we were all there by ourselves they didn't know what to do. They never got to make a choice, though, because just as they loaded Celeste up into the ambulance my father drove up. Fear snaked up my spine at the sight of the van pulling up. My heart pounded fiercely through my veins, making my head begin to ache.

"What happened!?" Mama cried. Her door had flown open before the van had even come to a stop. Which my father began to cuss her out for.

I had to make up a story and quick. Which I was able to do. "Celeste and I were wrestling around in the living and I accidentally knocked her into the stairs too hard. Her arm is broken." There. I hadn't exactly lied. It really had been an accident.

"Oh my god! Is she all right?" She ran to the ambulance and the paramedics let her in to see Celeste whose wailing began again, loud and clear, the moment she saw my mother. Please, don't contradict my story. Please, please, please. I mentally begged God to get me out of this one, to save me just this once.

My father ignored me as he went from the van to the ambulance that carried my melodramatic sister.

My cousin Josh got out with a dufflebag over his shoulder. He raised his eyebrows and looked at me questioningly. I decided I would tell him what really happened later. Right now I watched the ambulance apprehensively, feeling unusually weak. I just knew she would tell everything. That thought made my stomach do flip-flops.

I knew the moment my father stepped out that she had told everything that had really happened. His anger showed in his black eyes as he looked at me. His glare was deadly and filled with promises of a later-to-come punishment. He didn't speak to me as he got back into the van to follow the ambulance to the hospital. As soon as both were gone from sight I began to cry. I ran into the house with tears pouring down my cheeks.

"What happened?" Josh demanded. I shook my head and wiped vainly at the nonstop tears of fear.

Whenever I was finally able to catch my breath I told him. "It was an accident, Josh. I didn't mean to but she made me so angry!" I moaned. "Now I'm going to be in trouble because I couldn't keep my hands to myself, yet again."

The look on Josh's face wasn't very comforting. It was sympathetic. He knew what was to come from my father wouldn't be a strict lecture. It would be worse. I had harmed his princess. "I wish I could help you, Phoenix. But we both know that if I even began to defend you today he'd send me back to Grandma within the hour." Which he was completely correct about. Nobody ever defended me and should they start now the man would have a royal fit.

While my other siblings left to the school to play on the snow hill, before it melted completely, that had been formed there, I waited, miserably, for my father to return. How was I going to make it through this? I didn't think I could. Within an hour I had taken three breathing treatments.

"Calm down, Phoenix, it will be all right." Josh tried to comfort. I sent daggers from my eyes.

"Don't tell me to calm down. It's not you on the receiving end of my father's wrath, if you recall." My nerves were on edge and he was dangling from my last one. He was definitely annoying me.

Three hours later my parents came home. A cast was wrapped around Celeste's arm and she had been drugged up by pain medication. She didn't say a word as she made her way to her bedroom.

My mother also went upstairs. She sent me a look of pity before making her way up there. She must have been yelled at herself, even though she hadn't even been there. I was angry that he could blame anything on her whenever she was with him the entire time. As if she knew that something like this would happen. I was also angry that she would leave me to deal with him completely on my own.

My anger helped the fear pumping through my veins as fast as lightning. I was able to ignore it. I wouldn't show him that I was afraid of him. I wouldn't go down that way. Not now, not ever. I turned my eyes toward him. He stood in the kitchen doorway looking like death himself. I could feel his black gaze burning me from the short distance between us.

"What the Hell were you thinking?" He growled.

"Oh, yes, daddy dearest, I planned on breaking my sister's arm. It was the first thing I thought of doing the moment I knew I'd be left in charge." No longer was I afraid. The fear disappeared the second I had to face him. He angered me more than he scared me.

Smack! I was sure the neighbors had heard the loud noise as he backhanded me across the face. No tears. I wouldn't cry. I wouldn't! It was so hard to hold the tears back and keep the tremor out of my voice. So painfully complicated to bravely look him in the eye and look undaunted by his huge hand that had sent my mind reeling. I should have been ready for it. Yet, I never was ready for his abuse.

"Go ahead!" I cried. "Smack me! It won't change anything. She still has a broken arm. I hope you feel better!" I screamed and turned to run upstairs to my mother. He roughly grabbed me by the arm and stared me in the eyes.

"Don't even think about talking to me like that and having it go unpunished." He snapped.

"I always expect to be punished, *Father*. I expect nothing less from a brute like you. In fact, I hate it whenever you even bother coming home to us because I know that there is never a truly happy moment whenever you're around." I was so deadly calm whenever I said this. But my honesty got to him even more. Once again the back of his hand came in contact with my face. This time it was harder and I fell to the floor. I didn't bother even rubbing my cheek or giving him the satisfaction of seeing that he had put me through any pain. I'd cry whenever he wasn't around.

"Get out of my face, right now. I don't want to even look at you." Suddenly, I felt like laughing. And that is exactly what I did.

"*You* don't want to look at *me*?" I asked incredulously. I laughed even harder. "Trust me, Dad, the feeling is completely mutual!" Then I ran upstairs and into my mother's room. I lay across her bed and began to bawl.

As I cried myself to sleep, I couldn't help but wonder if it would ever end. Would he ever just leave me alone? What had I done to deserve what he did to me? I fell asleep with these troubling questions on my mind.

Chapter 3

I didn't see my father again after that. He left the next day without so much as a goodbye to me. Which was probably a good thing because I would have only said something to make him hate me even more. If that was even possible. The man couldn't stand the sight of me already. He was only nice to me every now and then. Those were the times I felt guilty for being me. If I were more like Celeste and I didn't say anything back to him he would actually like me.

Whenever I told Josh that he laughed at me. "If you were more like Celeste he'd only find something else to punish you with. He just doesn't like you."

"Why not? What have I ever done to him to make him hate me?" I demanded.

He turned his blue gray eyes away from me quickly. "You haven't done anything to him." He said. I then realized that Josh knew something that I didn't.

"How do you know I haven't done anything?" I asked. "What do you know that I don't, Josh?"

"Nothing! I don't know anything. I just know that you haven't done anything to make him hate you." Which seemed like a good enough answer. It would have been if he hadn't refused to make eye contact with me.

"You're lying to me. Some cousin you make." I said and stormed off. I was angry that he wouldn't tell me. He had the power to fix what was wrong between my father and myself and he was refusing to tell me. My blood was boiling.

"I never claimed to be such a good cousin to you." He threw out, having caught up with me. He ran his fingers through his blonde hair in frustration. "I wish I could tell you anything that I know, Phoenix, but I can't."

"So, you do know something?" I asked, throwing a quick glance his way.

"A little bit." He admitted. "But I can't tell you. I will the moment I'm told I can, but right now I can't tell you." He repeated. For some reason I was content with that answer. I just prayed that somebody would tell me something soon.

Josh was only there two weeks whenever my mother moved us to a different house in the town fifteen miles away. It was a nice little brick house with five bedrooms. Plenty of room for all of us. I was happy with my room in the basement. Shawn's room was right next to mine. None of the younger kids wanted to be down in the basement. My three sisters shared one of the "bigger" rooms upstairs. None of the rooms upstairs were very big but none of my siblings would come down into the basement to sleep.

Josh and I liked it down there in the huge basement. The basement itself had more room than the house. Most of the upper part of the house was the dining room. My mother's room was tiny and every room had hardwood floors. The dining room was right in the middle of the entire house. The kitchen was a short hallway with a small counter, a sink, and a stove. The bathroom was off to the left side of the kitchen. It was basically in the kitchen with only a thin door to separate the two.

The bathroom was like a hotbox. It was a very tiny room with a bathtub on the left, a toilet in the middle, and the sink on the right side. You could barely move around and it had no windows. Whenever someone took a shower they nearly sweat to death in the tiny room.

The living room was also just a small room. Nobody ever spent any time in there. I was usually found in the basement. I felt safe down there because my father wouldn't bother me down there. Besides, even if he did go down there to get me the basement had a door that led up to the backyard. I would get away before he could get me.

There were several occasions whenever I did escape him and hide out until he would leave again. Sometimes, it would be two to three days before he would leave and whenever I came back Josh would be the one angry with me for running away and not telling him where I was. He was always worried about where I went. He said that there were a lot of psychos around and he didn't want something bad to happen to me. It felt good to have somebody who actually seemed to care about me around. I had a good relationship with Shawn.

"You never know what is lurking behind those bushes, Phoenix," He warned me one day. I had just gotten out of the shower and I was making my way down the steps to the basement drying off my hair and trying to keep my bathrobe shut.

"Sure I do," I said as I stepped off the last step. "I am what is lurking behind 'those bushes'"

"You know what I mean," His voice didn't hide his irritation with me. "I just wish you wouldn't run away from him like that! It scares me,"

I turned around and smiled up at him. It was easy to look at Josh. Though I knew I shouldn't think him so good-looking because he was my cousin it was hard not to notice how handsome he was. He had the softest hair I had ever seen on anyone in my life. It was a soft pale gold. And he had such bright blue eyes that looked like a blue fire

whenever he was angry or worried. His nose was perfectly straight and he had full lips that I overheard one of the girlfriends he'd had while being here say were lips just made for kissing. To add to it all he was very tall. At seventeen years old he stood at six foot one.

I stood up on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Thank you for worrying about me, Josh. I don't think anyone knows how special that is to me. But, really, I'm not in any danger whenever I leave this house. It's better if I just stay away from him. You know that!"

He shook his head and looked down at his feet. "I know that you have to get away from him," He said sadly. "But I wish you'd at least let me know where you are at. I'm so afraid one of these days you won't come back."

"I'll always come back to you and Mama, Josh. You two are the only ones that care about me." I tucked my damp hair behind my ears and looked away from him. "I just don't know how much more I can handle from him. He's mean and nasty. He doesn't care if he hurts me."

"I know. I wish I could help you, but..." He trailed off.

I smiled again up at him. Only this time my smile was melancholy. "You'll have no place to go if that jerk kicks you out. Don't feel bad about not being able to protect me. It's not your fault. I'll be fine as long as I don't have to see him." My shoulders dropped and I sat on my bed. "I promise that next time I run I'll tell you where I am at so you won't be worried."

He finally smiled. "Just because I know where you are doesn't mean I won't worry!" I laughed. That was true. If he knew that I stayed at the park down the street he's worry sick. Even so, I would keep my promise.

I knew that I could hide only so long from my father. Someday he would find me and I wouldn't be able to do anything about it. I feared that day. But until then I could run from him. I had an escape route from him.

The last time I ran away began with a huge fight. It started out whenever he was yelling at Mama about cleaning the house. Most of the time the house was clean whenever he was home. Yet, nothing ever seemed to make him happy. I wasn't sure my father knew what happiness was. He was an impossible man with a nose as good as any hound dog. If he thought he smelt something in the house he would go ballistic.

I woke to the sound of his screaming upstairs. Josh must have heard it, too because he came out of his room. He looked at me and our eyes met. Both of us knew what was going on but I wasn't going to run before fighting and defending my mother this time.

I shot out of bed and up the stairs. I heard what he was yelling about and my blood began to boil. She always made sure the house was spotless whenever he was home. How dare he think otherwise?

"The house looks like a tornado tore through it. Why can't you work as hard as I do? Do you realize that there are ants in that cupboard out there? They are eating our food, Karen! And it's all because you and that bitch of a daughter don't know how to clean!" His vicious attack on her, and not to mention me, had me through their bedroom door in seconds. It was only seven in the morning! Why couldn't he wait to scream at her?

"This house is always clean whenever you're home, Dad! She makes sure it is. And there are ants out there because everyone is having a hard time with them this year, not because we are dirty and don't know how to clean. Just shut up!" I screamed the last sentence. I was so tired of this! It was a constant cycle that never seemed to quit.

"Don't tell me to shut up, you stupid bitch!" He bellowed. "I'm tired of your mouth. I'm going to knock your head right off your damn shoulders."

"Go ahead. That way I won't have to listen to *your* mouth." I snapped back sarcastically. I hadn't thought his face could get any more red than it had been whenever I first began shooting off my mouth, but pretty soon he looked about as dark red as a tomato.

"Damn it!" Was all he screamed before he had his hand around my throat and my feet off the ground. I choked and squirmed but not once did I physically fight back. He was just too strong for me.

"Stop it, Mike!" Mama jumped from the bed and onto my father's back and began beating him in the head with her fists. He dropped me and gasped for breath. My mother jumped off his back and they began arguing. I couldn't say anything, I couldn't even move.

Josh came in the room and helped me up. "I can't breathe." I gasped.

"I know. It's okay. I got you. You're all right." He said softly and then helped me down the stairs to my breathing machine. After I could breathe again I packed a few clothes together and went to the door.

"Where are you going?" Josh asked. I turned back around to face him.

"I'm going to the park until he leaves." I couldn't stop the tears that kept bursting from behind my eyes.

Before he could ask anymore questions I ran up the basement stairs to the outside. I walked to the park with the most depressing thoughts. I went to my little hiding place, which was a small area that was surrounded by bushes and trees. It made a small cave-like structure that I could sleep in somewhat comfortably until I could go back home.

But that night I was sick. I had been getting sick and now it was bad. I couldn't breathe and I had no medicine with me. I was scared to death. This was it. I would probably die out here and nobody would even know.

I couldn't go home no matter how much I wanted to. Walking home would only kill me. I couldn't go for any help because the security guards would ask me why I was here so late. I was stuck there, gasping for air and crying silently to myself. My lungs felt so heavy and my chest was in so much pain! I felt as if I was going to pass out. I cried harder at the thought. If I passed out that would be the end. I would die.

Later, Josh told me that if it hadn't been for the sound of my choking, gasping, and crying he would never have found me. But he had been scared about my being out in the park alone and had decided to come looking for me. He truly looked like an angel to me whenever he found me under all of that brush. I was suddenly crying from relief and happiness. I would be all right! God hadn't forgotten about me after all.

I was in the hospital for a week after that incident. Not once did my father visit me while he was home. Not once did I ever ask him to. I didn't want to see him. If he weren't so cruel I wouldn't have felt the need to run away. I probably wouldn't have gotten into the predicament I had gotten myself into. I blamed it all on him. I was afraid that if I blamed it on myself I would only cry myself into another asthma attack and this time allow myself to just give up and die.

Of course, nobody knew what went on in our house. I never had any physical markings and nobody would dare believe me should I say that my father abused me. The people who knew him knew him only as a good hardworking family man that lived only for his family. I hated those people. It was so easy for my family to pretend to be a great, loving family. We all got along so well in front of everyone else. Within the walls of our home, though, after they all left, the demons came out to play once again. Nobody would ever know what went on. We would continue to pretend that we were the perfect family. Nobody would ever know what went on behind our closed door. It wasn't something that anyone would listen to eagerly.

I loved it whenever my father was gone. There was so much freedom. We didn't walk on eggshells. We all felt safe and secure. He wasn't home to make us feel as if we weren't good enough to be his family.

Of course, Celeste never had to worry about it. He adored her and she could do no wrong in his eyes. He completely ignored the other three while he doted on her and beat me. I knew Lila was jealous of Celeste and, just like all of my siblings, blamed all of my misery on me. Why couldn't I just be like them and stay out of it? Because it wasn't my nature, that's why. The sooner they understood that we would all get along just fine. Until then I would stay at odds with most of my family and not talk to them unless I had to.

Mama was caught up in her freedom. Too caught up, that is, to pay much attention to the other kids. She had me cover for her while she went out dancing and partying all night

long. There were several occasions whenever I would get a phone call telling me to have someone pick up my mother because she was so drunk she couldn't make it home herself. Josh usually had to get into the car and run to get her. It seemed as if we were always saving my mother from herself.

That kind of life style continued and, I believe, is the reason why we left Wisconsin. People in town were recognizing my mother. She was afraid to go anywhere with my father, in fear of someone seeing her and saying something to her.

The real downfall of being in Wisconsin was money issues. My father was forced to switch jobs and my mother was spending more money than he could make in a week. We didn't have enough to pay for the phone bill and the check that she wrote bounced.

When the phone was shut off, my mother was afraid that my father would call the entire time. Then, not thinking clearly, she picked up the phone and called nine one-one, wondering if we could still call in case of an emergency. When she hurriedly hung up on them the police were sent out to check to make sure that everything was fine. When they ran my mother's license she was wanted for fraud and was taken to jail.

That day was miserable for me. Josh and I left Celeste in charge of the kids and we ran back in forth between Merrill Wisconsin and Wausau all day long, trying to find a way to bale her out of jail. The day was tiring and she was there from about nine in the morning until six-thirty in the evening. At around six I talked to a friend of hers who spotted me in the grocery store and asked how she was doing. When I told him what was going on he said he would pay the three hundred and seventy-five dollars to get her out. I was so relieved I hugged him, which was very unlike me to do. I hated physical contact!

Mama was so relieved to get out of there she was near tears. She thanked her friend, whose name was Ben Richards, and she thanked Josh and me over and over again. After all was said and done Mama went home and fell asleep. I laid down beside her and watched her sleep for awhile. Sadness filled in around my heart. Why did things only seem to get worse and worse for our family? There was no way we were going to make it even part of another year in this state. We were more miserable as the days passed. But this was far from the tip of the iceberg.

Soon it was the last week of September. My mother already had decided she wanted to go back to California. She hated Wisconsin now. But my father had insisted that things would get better now and refused to listen to her please. He wouldn't let us go back.

I never did understand why Mama didn't just pack us up and do it anyway. Why did she live like this? Why did she put us, her children, through this? She should have just left him. He would have dealt with it. I would have been relieved to get out. But she didn't leave. And as we stayed there in Wisconsin because he refused to move back home I knew that she never would leave. My abusive father would forever imprison us.

But we wouldn't always be imprisoned in Wisconsin. Things kept going wrong and we didn't have enough money to pay for them. Then one day the electricity was shut off. There wasn't a dime in my parents' bank account to get it turned back on and the bill was up to three hundred dollars. I needed the electricity because of my medical reasons but they refused to turn it back on. Mama finally broke completely. She sat on her bed and cried for hours and hours. I felt a sense of dread. I was completely helpless and I had no idea what we were going to do!

For three days we lived off of my mother's last remaining ninety-five dollars to buy pizza for dinner and candles to light up the house. The misery in Mama's eyes gave them a strange, yet, beautiful gleam to them. It seemed that no matter what she was always beautiful, even in sadness. One night, long after my younger siblings and Josh had fallen asleep, my mother looked at me with the saddest look on her face. The candle illuminated her features and gave her eyes a spooky glow.

"I'm so sorry, Phoenix. I never realized how much of a mistake moving here would be." There were tears in her voice. She looked away from me and attempted to take a deep breath but she couldn't stop herself from crying.

I laid a hand on her arm, gently. "How could you have known what would happen here? Besides, it wasn't completely your idea to move us here. He wanted to because he was afraid he'd lose you to some other man." I was praying that I was comforting her. I hated to see her this way.

She looked back at me, tears streaking her face, and she smiled. "You're such a good girl, Phoenix. I always knew I was lucky the day you came into my life, but I don't think I knew just how lucky I was." What a strange way to put it. Why had she said, "came into my life" rather than "the day you were born"? For some reason a chill ran up my spine. I wasn't brave enough to ask her about what she meant. I just smile and hugged her. Then I got up, told her goodnight, and walked into the living room where everyone was sleeping.

Since it was beginning to get very cold already and we had no heater because of the lack of electricity we all had to huddle up together to keep warm. I found a space between Celeste and Josh and managed to squeeze my way in between them. Celeste groaned and turned her back to me, mumbling incoherently. Josh's eyes opened and he sat up.

"I'm sorry, we should have left you more room." He whispered.

"No, it's all right. I'm okay." I pulled the blanket tighter around me.

He moved over a bit more for me, so I could have more room. "What's wrong?"

"It's Mama. She blames all of this on herself." I said sadly.

"It is her fault, Phoenix. This is, anyway. If she hadn't been spending more money than your father makes we wouldn't be having this problem."

I sat back up. "How can you say that? It benefited us, too! Don't say that it's her fault!" I didn't understand how he could blame it on her. Actually, I *could* understand why, I just refuse to look at it that way. To look into her eyes and see such sadness brought me nearly to tears myself. How could I place any blame on her shoulders? She had enough to deal with already.

"Sometimes, Phoenix, I look at you as someone much older than her actual age." He said, staring me straight in the eyes. His own blue eyes were dark and serious. "Then there are those other times whenever you choose to hold onto false hopes. You know damned well that this is her fault. Yet you defend her because you pity her and don't want to admit that she has screwed up once again." I was near tears. I knew he was right but I wasn't someone that easily admitted to defeat.

"Why do you say things like that, Josh? She takes such good care of you! She gives you a home when no one else does!"

"I know, and I am thankful for that. I just can't help blaming her this time, Phoenix. You know it's true. You know that it is her fault. You just don't want to admit it. I need sleep now. Goodnight." He muttered and rolled over, his back to me. I hated being so close to someone that they knew how the inside of my brain worked. It annoyed me.

I sat there thinking about it for awhile. I just couldn't lay down and sleep with that on my mind. She wasn't such a horrible mother. Sure, she had her problems, and, sure, she did think she was God's gift to men, but she was still my mother and I loved her. I sat there, my head resting on my hands and my elbows resting on my knees, staring into the darkness and thinking. Whenever I was in deep thought I could stare at something and analyze any situation for hours.

Josh must have been so annoyed with me that he couldn't sleep because after just a few minutes he sat back up and started talking to me. "I'm not saying she's horrible, Phoenix. She's really fun to be around. I'm just saying she could have done things differently. Please, just go to sleep and stop dwelling on it."

"Why should it bother you if I'm dwelling on it?" I asked. I really was curious. Why should he care if I was sitting there and getting no sleep over it? I'm sure he could sleep fine and not care a bit about what he said to me.

He groaned and plopped back down onto his pillow and covered his head with the blanket. "You worry too much!" His voice came out muffled from under the covers. "I just want you to get some sleep, Phoenix. I never meant to offend you, okay? You need your good health and staying awake all night, picking apart something I said isn't going to help you any!" I smiled. He worried too much about me, but it felt good knowing someone cared that much.

I fell down onto the pillow beside him and pulled the covers up over my own head. I looked at him. "You care too much about me, Josh. I'll go to sleep, and you are forgiven

about what you said about Mama. Thank you for caring about me." I told him, giving him my biggest smile.

He smiled back at me, his eyes glowing. "I couldn't do anything else but care about." He became suddenly serious. "Sometimes I look at you and you look like someone that I know or once knew. I just can't pinpoint who it is. It's weird. It's not like anyone in Aunt Karen's family or your father's family. But just someone." He shook his head; puzzled by the nonstop image he had in his head. The person I reminded him of. "Oh, forget it! I'm tired and I'm babbling. Goodnight!" He said and yanked the covers back down and rolled over so his back was facing me again.

"Goodnight." I said softly and rolled over. I fell asleep smiling. I felt loved .I felt as if I wasn't completely alone in the world. I felt that someone actually did want me around. And it was the best feeling in the world.

The next day we were all rudely awakened by my father's booming voice. "What the hell is this? A flop house!? Every one of you get up now! NOW!" I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. I knew it was early, the sun was just barely shining through the two front windows. I brushed my hair back behind my ears and stared at my father.

Celeste moaned and groaned as she sat up next to me. Her eyes were only cracked open slightly and she leaned heavily against me. "Why do we have to get up, Daddy? It's not like we can sleep in our rooms. It's awful cold for fall and we ain't got no heat!" She moaned.

"She's right, Dad. It's only the start of fall and it's already cold. The windows in the other kids' rooms don't shut right so the cold air comes in and there is no way Josh and I can sleep down in the basement. So, we all sleep in the living room together." I explained. I wasn't trying to mouth him off or anything, I only meant to explain what was going on.

"I didn't ask you. I don't even want to look at you. DON'T MOUTH ME OFF AGAIN!" He screamed. I jumped. Josh was sitting up next to me, his blue eyes looking deadly. Under the blanket he squeezed my hand for encouragement. I looked at him thankfully. I knew that someone was there for me.

"I wasn't mouthing you off, Dad, I was just trying to answer your question." To my surprise and, not to mention, relief I stayed calm and relaxed. I didn't want to fight. I meant only to explain why we were all lying out in the middle of the living room floor.

He stabbed his forefinger in my face. I backed up a little bit and looked up at him in disgust. He must have noticed the look between Josh and me because his black eyes flicked to Josh and then back to me. "Why, you disgusting little slut!" His words threw me off guard for a second before my anger burst through me like a wild fire.

"Slut!? How can you call me that? You know that's not me!" I screamed at him.

"You're no better than your god damned mother. He's your cousin, but don't think that I don't know what you two are doing whenever you are alone." He snapped back at me. My jaw dropped to the floor. It was one thing to accuse me of having a bad attitude with him, because most of the time that was true. But to accuse me of having sex with my own cousin had me so shocked I couldn't say a word.

Fortunately, I didn't have to say anything. This time Josh was up and ready to battle him. "You call us disgusting? Well, you're the nasty one for even thinking things like that! It's not fair of you to accuse the two of us of doing something wrong. Especially Phoenix! You know damned well that you've ruined all chance of her ever even liking guys. You have her scared that every man wants only to control her!" I had never seen Josh that angry. He had always seemed to keep his cool, until now.

"I can't believe I let Karen talk me into letting Kelly's bastard son into my home. I knew from the moment that I laid eyes on you that you were nothing but trouble. But anyone without a father and nothing but a slut for a mother is bound to be trouble." My father quipped.

I know that had I not stepped in then Josh would have hit him. His fists were clenched at his sides and the tips of his ears and his cheeks were red with anger. I quickly stepped up besides Josh and laid a hand on his arm. "Think what you want, Dad. But your only real problem is knowing that Josh is good and listens to everything you say. You hate the fact that he brings home good grades and never gets into trouble. He stands up for me, and not to mention himself, for once and you have a fit. When are you going to grow up?"

I left before anything could happen. I wasn't in the mood to be backhanded. Which is exactly what would have happened had I not walked away from the argument.

The argument passed and eventually my father and I were atleast able to be in the same room with one another. The night seemed to come slower, which was only half of a blessing. It was a blessing because when night came so did the cold. But it was a bad thing because my father wasn't leaving until morning and I wanted morning to come so badly I couldn't see straight.

But he surprised me that night as we all sat around the living room huddled in blankets. I was lying against the wall, miserable. I was wishing to God that it was still summer and I could go down into the basement. I didn't want to be around him. It was unfair that circumstances like this I me breathing the same air as him.

He looked up at me from where he sat in the chair, my mother, shockingly, in his lap, sharing the same blanket as him. "How would you like to be back in California before your fifteenth birthday?" He asked me. My eyes widened and my head shot up to look at him. Was he being honest? Were we really going home?

I was the one who had to ask the question. "Do you mean it, Mikey? We're going home?" Mama asked. I felt sick. I hated how she acted towards him sometimes. Why pretend to

like him? He knew his family hated him. Or at least he knew that I hated him. Mama was good at playing it off as if she really cared about him. I just wanted her to leave him because he wasn't worth all of the misery that we went through.

He nodded and looked at her. He smiled brightly, glad to be getting that sort of attention from her. I rolled my eyes annoyed. His eyes shot back to me, questioningly. "Well?" He asked. "How would you like it?"

For the first time in a really long time I managed to smile at my father. "I'd love it!" I cried happily. I no longer wanted to be in this cold, miserable state where I was nearly always sick. I wanted to go home, where I knew people. Where I was comforted by other family members, such as Grandma Lillie and my mother's adopted sister, Carrissa, and her family. Aunt Carrissa was somebody that I had always remembered. She'd always been there. But my mother never got along with her because she had been the baby up until she was twelve years old and her parents decided to adopt Grandma Lillie's best friend's five year old daughter after she died in a fire that burned her entire house down. I knew that Aunt Carrissa had very few memories of her parents.

I also knew that she was quite childish. She had an immaturity about her that made her out to be one of the most naïve people I knew. But I was happy that I was going to get to see her and her three children. Two were boys and she had a four-month-old daughter that we had never even seen. Though, it never bothered Mama much that she'd never seen her. As far she was concerned Carrissa wasn't family.

Josh wasn't as excited as I was to be going to back to California. He was just starting to adjust with the family and he was afraid that once we got back there Aunt Kelly would take him back to live with her. Now that he was going to be eighteen soon she didn't feel that she would need to take care of him herself, and wouldn't mind having her son live with her.

"It couldn't possibly be that horrible going back to live with your mother if she wants you to, Josh." I told him the next day as we walked to the store across the street to collect boxes for moving. "Wouldn't it be great if you and your mother became close?"

He laughed. "Oh, you would think so, Phoenix. But trust me, she's not somebody I want to be close with. Besides, if I leave who is going to be there for you?"

"Oh, Josh, I did fine without you before. I can take care of myself. It would be good if you and your mother could really get to know each other and maybe become close friends even if you can't become like a real mother and son." I really didn't want him to go but family was important. It would only be right if he went back to his mother.
"Besides, I'll have Victoria whenever I get miserable."

"Oh come on, Phoenix! Get real! You haven't talked to her in forever, the two of you were friends for a short time but you both have gotten on with your lives. Stop pretending to be close with her whenever you know your not."

I knew he was right. I hated the fact that he was right. Victoria's friendship and mine had been over for a really long time now. But that is usually how it went whenever it came to the Internet world.

I didn't want to admit that he was right, but looking down at my hands sadly and avoiding eye contact with him was as good as any admission. "I'll still be okay. Really, I want you and your mother to have a good relationship and you can't stop that from ever happening just because of me!" I shook my head and walked away from him. He was my cousin, and one of the only friends I had. I didn't want to lose him but I also didn't want to ruin any chances of he and his mother becoming close, as they should be.

We went back to California, almost every one of us happy to be leaving that cold and bitter world behind. I didn't want to have anything to do with Wisconsin ever again. It was a chapter out of my life that I wanted to totally forget. I wanted to get on with my life and pretend that everything that had happened there hadn't. I would go back to having the few friends that I'd had before we left and life would be as it had been.

But it wasn't about to be like that. The pathetically small group of friends that I'd had my entire life was gone. I had become non-existent to all of them except one. Though I was happy that my friend Lynna hadn't forgotten all about me I was still depressed. I thought that I had been close with those few other girls I'd known my entire life. I didn't know that it was so easy to forget me in one measly year.

That first year was really tough. We had moved back without thought of where we would live, only hoping that my grandmother would harbor us for a short while. Which she did, in her tiny two bedroom apartment where my entire family was forced to sleep on the living room floor because the second room was used as a storage. The neighborhood she lived in wasn't exactly the best and Dad made sure to keep us all inside of the house as soon as the sun began to make it's descend from the sky. Any potential neighborhood friends we could have made we didn't because my father was paranoid that the neighborhood hoodlums would corrupt his children.

Not that I ever left the apartment long enough to actually make friends. I didn't even get to go to regular school. Since I had missed so much in Wisconsin and my health was so bad I was told that the regular High School refused to take me in. I was sent to an independent studies school called Freedom Alternative High School where I would see a teacher once a week for forty-five minutes.

One good thing about coming back was because of family. Not only did we get to see Mama's adopted sister Carissa, but we also got to see my father's cousin, Lawrence. We had all called him Uncle Lawrence for so long he was more like an uncle rather than a cousin. He, too, was married and had a child on the way. In fact, his son, William, was born the night that we arrived back. We didn't get to see William or Uncle Lawrence very often because his wife and her family didn't like to do anything with his low-life family.

The first day that we were back I woke up to see Aunt Carissa sitting on the couch with her four-month-old daughter, Annie, on her lap. I sat up in the recliner that I had fallen asleep in and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

Carissa smiled at me, her beautiful blue eyes glittering with happiness. "It's so good to see you back, Phoenix. I hope now that you are back we can spend more time together than we did before." She said. I had always loved the soft, melodic tone that Aunt Carissa had. She had such a loving and comforting voice. Sometimes, people thought we were actually related, maybe sisters, because some people said we sounded alike and even looked a little bit alike. I laughed at that. It was impossible since Carissa blood relation.

And it wasn't just her voice that was beautiful, but she had an angelic, sweet beauty. Anyone in pain or misery would feel like smiling and feel comforted just by looking at her. She had that sort of presence about her. She had the softest, dark brown hair that she let grow out just past her shoulders. Her facial features were so small and she looked almost like a porcelain doll because they were perfectly shaped.

That day she wore a wide-brim garden hat with pretty red and white roses that looked very real to me. Probably right out of her garden. She had won awards for the garden that she kept surrounding her cute, small home. She also worse a light blue summer dress that lay gently around her ankles and a pair of brown sandals. I don't know why it is that I remember so well the way my mother's adopted sister looked that day. It was just something that stuck in my mind. For it certainly felt like waking up to see an angel sitting beside you.

I nodded to her. "Yes, hopefully we can spend more time together." I said, my voice hoarse from what I called "morning voice". I sat up in the recliner better and smoothed back my hair. I still felt so groggy. The trip back had been so long; it had seemed never ending. Yet, here we were now.

"This," She said proudly, shifting the baby on her lap and looking down at her lovingly. "Is Annie." She smiled widely, and lifted the baby's hand to make her wave at me. Annie looked at me curiously and then smiled. She was certainly the most beautiful baby I had ever laid my eyes on. Her hair was just growing back in and it was growing back in a dark, rich red. Her eyes were absolutely luminous, they were the same blue as Carissa's and they shined whenever she smiled. I was immediately taken by her. Obviously, so was my mother.

It seemed that as soon as Mama had come in contact with baby Annie she was charmed by her. No longer was there the animosity between Carissa and Mom as there had been before we had left. Annie had taken care of that by simply holding out her tiny arms and smiling that beautiful smile. I was happy about that. Maybe, someday, they could become like the real sisters they should have been years ago.

Family started to become more and more important to me. I wanted so much for my family to be caring and good to one another. I wanted all of the arguing to cease

completely. I never wanted to worry about whether what we were doing was making my father angry or not. I was tired of hearing the words "Dad wouldn't like it" over and over again. Why couldn't things just be simple? Why couldn't he accept who we were, rather than force us all to be something we weren't whenever we were around him?

Whenever my father got the job as a truck driver for J.B. Hunt and started working nights we atleast got those short hours of freedom. They were nothing compared to the freedom we had held in Wisconsin. Maybe that was a good thing. The vacation was over and now it was time to get back to living a semi-normal life. But my life would never be what it was before we had left Wisconsin. It wouldn't be the same as it had been whenever we lived in Wisconsin. No, things were about to change drastically for me. Especially the way I looked and felt about people in my life.

I spent my fifteenth birthday at Aunt Carissa's home. A surprise party that she and Mama had put together for me. The only friend I had there was Lynna. That was okay, though. I had started not to care. The way I went to school there was no hope of me ever having friends. My teacher was fantastic but I had only met her once since we had come back and already I knew that the other teens in my school didn't mingle with one another. We all were to keep to ourselves.

It was only days after that birthday party that we moved out of my grandmother's tiny apartment and into a set of apartment complexes named Fox Hollow. Josh didn't move with us. Instead, he was sent back to southern California with his mother. It was by his choice, really. I had assured him that everything would be all right where I was concerned. I had other family members to protect me now. I had other family members to run to.

We had been told we could have the apartment for two weeks and the day before we moved in Mama was furious to find out that the apartment had barely been cleaned. Clean wasn't exactly the word I would have used for what they had done. It was more like they had hidden all of the dirt from our view. I don't recall ever seeing my mother so angry in all of her life. That day, Mama, Celeste, and I went in there and cleaned it by ourselves. We even bought our own cleaning supplies.

As we cleaned one of the neighbors came over to see how we were doing. She was a short woman who looked to be about in her early to mid-fifties. Her gray hair was short and rather "big" for it stood more like an Afro on her head. Her facial features were manly and far too big for the small shape of her face. The woman also had an indention made in the left side of her head. It gave me the willies looking at it. So, I simply greeted her and turned back to my work on the stove, scraping away old grease and food particles.

Mama greeted the woman, too. Quickly the two became quite friendly with one another. I later found the woman's name was Agatha Martel. We all galled her Aggie. She had three children and a boyfriend that was a truck driver. An over the road truck driver. Maybe that was why my mother became friends with her. Whatever the reason, I, too,

became friends with Aggie and her daughter Regina, who we called Reggie. She was Celeste's age and Celeste knew her from school.

I didn't know what these people would bring about in my family. I wasn't ready for what was about to happen in just a few short months. I don't think anyone could have been ready for the biggest secret that we were yet to keep from my father. No, I was far from ready. But it wasn't something that you could prepare yourself for.

Some things in life are like that. You just have to sit back and wait to see what happens. Sometimes you think you can predict what will happen. But whenever the conclusion hits you are shocked beyond words and can't help thinking about how wrong you really were.

Chapter 4

Maybe it was the fact that nobody else seemed to care about our family packing into the three-bedroom apartment, two bedrooms upstairs and one downstairs just off the kitchen. Maybe it was the fact that Mama longed for female companionship, other than her fifteen-year-old daughter. Whatever the reason Mama was quick to judge Aggie as nothing more than a kind, friendly neighbor with some good gossip about everyone else in the apartment complex.

Oh, there was plenty of gossip. These people made it known that they were practically lower than dirt. I couldn't help feeling uncomfortable around Fox Hollow. They were once beautiful, according to my parents. The white apartments with the dark, chocolate brown edging. It once looked like townhouses that belonged to only the richest of people. But now they housed up to forty-five families that were far too large to live in them and were very much white trash. Most of them were drug addicts and alcoholics. People I most certainly didn't feel comfortable around. They disgusted me. How anyone could live like that was beyond my knowledge, and yet here they were. Living without a care.

Fox Hollow was also known as Pigeon Hell to anyone who actually lived there. That was because up on the high rooftops there were hundreds and hundreds of pigeons. So many that whenever we would get into the car to go anywhere the car was covered in bird droppings. It did no good to keep washing the car because it was a nonstop, vicious cycle. It was almost as if the birds were at war with everyone living there, hoping that they could scare everyone out and take over the townhouses themselves.

Aggie's apartment was across a short path and then across the street from ours. But since our apartment was in a back corner, hidden away from most everyone. Which was a good thing, considering it kept out all of Pigeon Hell's hoodlums.

Aggie's porch, on the other hand, was always packed full because it was right in the view of everyone. Aggie was constantly annoyed with all of them. I never blamed her. They sat out there even whenever she and her kids weren't even there. I didn't blame her for hating it.

I found out that the indentation in her head was caused from a brain tumor that they'd removed from her head. I felt bad for her after that and forced myself to stop feeling nauseated every time I looked at her and saw it. It took awhile but eventually I got used to it being there and it was easy to accept as part of her.

Reggie was rather annoying but could be fun in her own way. Though they said that she was sickly, the entire time that I knew her not once was she ever sick. She always seemed healthy to me. She was just a hypochondriac. Any time that she cut her finger, it seemed, she was rushed to the hospital. I guess her being born prematurely had the entire family on edge, worrying if she was going to live. Sometimes I just wanted to scream "She's alive and she's not going to die. She's past that danger!" But I also knew that it would be pointless. So I kept quiet and I humored them. Why not? It really wasn't my business. I was just going to stay out of it.

Often Sundays would find us at Roller King, the roller skating arena in Modesto, the town next to us. It would be just Lynna, Celeste, Lila, Katie, Reggie, Aggie, Mama, and me. It was sort of like a girl's only thing. All of my sisters got to go. I loved to skate even if I wasn't as good at it as Celeste and Lynna, who were basically attached at the hip most of the time. Eventually, most everyone that worked there began to know us by name. That made it even better.

Usually, Mama would skate around with us for a couple of songs then sit out with Aggie, who didn't ever skate. She said she was so afraid of falling flat on her face that she wasn't about to take the actual chance of doing so. Mama spent equal time with Aggie that way she wouldn't feel left out. They would sit and talk through about two or three songs and then she would come skate for the same amount. Mama was a magnificent skater.

But this Sunday as we all skated around the rink, I noticed that Mama was staying out off the floor far longer than normal. Whenever she had been out through a whole six songs I went searching for her and Aggie. I went to the snack area, which was an area right off of the rink, only to be told that they'd been seen going outside. I assumed that they probably went out to smoke and they'd be back in. I sat down and waited for them to come back.

Whenever they walked in Mama was giggling with Aggie as if they were two teenage girls rather than grown women. I raised my eyebrows in question as I skated up to them. That's when I saw someone come in behind them. I had never seen him before but he couldn't have been much over maybe nineteen with jet-black hair and eyes as green as emeralds. He skated in behind them and wrapped an arm around each one. I stopped skating right in front of them.

"Who is he?" I demanded instantly. I was never one to ask things subtly. I always got straight to the point.

"Oh!" Mama said, flashing her beautiful smile. "This is Aggie's eighteen year old son Damian. Damian, this is my daughter Phoenix." She seemed almost reluctant to introduce

me. I stared at him, sizing him up, not trusting him a bit. Maybe it was all in his cocky grin and the way he held himself. I couldn't quite pinpoint it but I just didn't trust him. Of course, I didn't really trust anyone. But there was something about Damian that just didn't fit right. Or maybe it was the way my mother was smiling up at him worshipfully.

"Pleasure to meet you." He greeted. There was something flirtatious in his eyes that made me want to take the hand he held out towards me and break it. Instead I held out my hand and captured his, never breaking eye contact as I squeezed it. I knew he could feel the challenge that I didn't speak out loud.

"Yes, I am sure you are pleased to meet me." I snapped as I yanked my hand out of his grasp. Instead of wiping the arrogant grin off his face, as I had intended to do, his smile only broadened. He was handsome in a way that made all girls go weak in the knees. His eyes seemed to stare into your very soul and promise you something. His nose was so perfectly straight it looked almost as if he'd had it surgically put there. His lips were full, his bottom just a bit thicker than his top. When he smiled a dimple showed in his right cheek, making him irresistible to normal girls. But I wasn't normal. His good looks only seemed to anger me further. "I'm going to go skating," I said, sending daggers his way before turning and skating away.

Somehow, I knew even then that Damian was about to become a part of my life that I would never forget. I didn't know how, and I didn't know what was going to happen. I just could feel it in my very bones.

Damian started spending time at our apartment after that. Never whenever Dad was home but always whenever he was at work. It became something we all expected. Damian would show up every night. Sometimes he had his guitar with him and he'd play and sing. If he wasn't at our apartment doing that then he was on his front porch singing away while every female in the townhouses stood or sat staring dreamily while they listened to him sing. It irritated me how much they all adored him. Sure he was good looking and talented but he was also arrogant and had no real future. Most of the time he sat around getting drunk with his buddies.

One day as I made my way across the street to Aggie's apartment I had to pass him and his neighbor, George, who was a thirty year old drunk who lived with his sister. I hated doing so. One of the girls, named Amy, who was well known for her promiscuity, stood out alongside Reggie as Damian played the guitar and sang. As I passed by George, who didn't like me and always wanted to do nothing but get my mother into bed with him, rudely belched right at me. The girls and he started laughing.

"Wow, George, you sure are intelligent to think that one up." I bit out in my sarcastically sweet voice. I stopped to look down at him with disgust. "Why don't you go get a job? You like being a loser?" He laughed as if I hadn't insulted, but had made the most hilarious joke of the year. "Okay, it wasn't that funny." I was highly annoyed with him. I knew that adults could be immature, but I never knew that I would meet the king of all idiots.

"Yeah, it was." He stopped laughing and glared at me. "You know, your Mama is one hella fine woman. Too bad she gave birth to somethin' as ugly as you." Then he started laughing again, slapping his leg and wiping tears from his eyes. I tried my hardest not to take it personal. He was just a drunk. I could handle being called ugly. It was no secret that I wasn't absolutely gorgeous like Mama.

Before I could snap my tongue like a whip at him, however, Damian shocked me. "You know, George, I always knew you were a pathetic wreck, but I didn't know that you were so despicably so that you had to go insulting fifteen year old girls. Pretty fifteen-year-old girls, to be exact. Apologize to her." He demanded.

"No." I said, swallowing back a lump in my throat. Why I suddenly felt like crying was something I couldn't figure out. Yet, whether or not I understood it didn't matter. The tears were still about to come. "He doesn't have to apologize for being honest." I reached for the door handle to Aggie's apartment. "And you don't have to defend me." I opened the door and walked in.

Mama and Aggie looked up. Both of them smiled at me, but Mama's smile quickly faded when she saw the look on my face. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing." I smiled at her as I sat down on Aggie's sofa, grabbing a pillow to hug.

"Come on, Phoenix. You're my daughter, I know you. You can't hide the obvious." She seemed so concerned. Yet, I couldn't whine to her about it. She would only go into talking about how chivalrous Damian was.

I shook my head. "No, Mama. It's really nothing. I'll be fine." I assured her. I sighed and sat back on the couch and looked over at the TV. "What are you watching?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. It was all too obviously a pornography video. My mouth dropped and I jumped up from the couch. "You two are sick!" I said. Both started into a fit of hysterics. I shook my head and quickly left.

Outside, George and the girls had disappeared. "Where did Reggie go?" I asked Damian, who was strumming on his guitar, practicing a few chords.

"She went down to Amy's house. If you ask me she likes that little slut a little too much." He said, sitting back up against the wall and studying his guitar.

"So do most men. Including you. I've seen you staring at her as if you couldn't wait to get her alone." I was always ready with some comment towards Damian. Being nice to him seemed impossible for me.

He stopped looking at his guitar and looked up at me just as I was about to walk away. "What is your problem?"

"I don't trust you. I don't like you. You spend entirely too much time with my mother and flirting with Celeste." I answered honestly. If he was going to be blunt I was going to be, too.

"Ah, I see." He said. He took the guitar off and set it aside against the wall and stood up.
"How can you trust me whenever you don't know me?"

"It's easy to know what kind of person you are. I knew the moment I set eyes on you what you are." I started to make my way across the street but he quickly put a stop to that by following me and grabbing my wrist. I spun around to glare at him. He wasn't about to let my wrist go, no matter how many daggers I shot his way with my eyes.

"What kind of person is that?" He seemed set on knowing my answer. His eyes held mine determinedly.

"The kind that seduces women as a game. You're a heartbreaker, Damian Calvert, and I'm not about to get caught up in your game like Mama and Celeste." I pulled my wrist from his grip. "Don't you ever touch me again." I growled. Then, my heart pounding with anger, I raced across the street and into the safety of the house.

Damian did back off of me after that. He didn't stay away from my family, but he didn't irritate me. And he most certainly didn't touch me. Though, I did argue with him still, and I refused to trust him, there was a certain respect between the two of us. He never made an attempt to play with my heart and mind as he did so many other girls. He never denied being exactly what I claimed him to be, either.

I often found him, with what I considered his "groupies", sitting out on his front porch while he played and they listened. I stopped letting it annoy me, and eventually it became humorous to me. To see the same group of girls, Amy, her friends, and Reggie, listening to him. Reggie was proud to call him her brother. I couldn't help passing by and throwing out a rude, sarcastic comment and laughing my way in to see Aggie.

I made my way over there nightly, but one night it wasn't just the girls sitting out there, but George as well. That put a damper on any humor I could get from seeing the girls staring dreamily at Damian. Especially when George had to make his rude comments.

"Well, look who is coming our way. The queen bitch herself." He quipped as I passed by him and Damian.

Damian looked up at me from where he sat and smiled. "She's getting better." He said.

I shook my head, but couldn't help but smile back. "Getting better at what exactly? Getting better at being rude?" He simply shook his head and went back to his guitar.

I walked into the apartment where Mama and Aggie were talking on the couch. They both looked at me as they often did whenever I walked into the room, but neither smiled.

"Phoenix, please go on out, Aggie and I are having a serious conversation." Mama looked at me, pleading with her eyes for me to understand and leave.

But I couldn't help the feeling of isolation. More and more these days my mother was starting to ignore me. She and Aggie became closer and closer and no longer did she need my friendship. It hurt to have it that way. I couldn't understand why she couldn't have other friends and me, at the same time. Was I that annoying? Did I bug her friends that much? I left without a word, only the miserable feeling of rejection.

George and Damian sat out there alone now. All of the girls had gone, except Amy, Reggie, and Amy's sister April. Amy was flirting with Damian in a highly irritating manner. She had his guitar and was begging him to chase her and get it from her. I rolled my eyes annoyed.

"Gee, Amy, aren't you so mature? Yes, that's it! I would love to sit around and learn a few pointers from someone who is so smart and so mature. Maybe someday we can have a tea party." I felt mean and wanted to attack anyone and anything and she was the closest and most obnoxious thing at the moment.

Amy obviously didn't care about what I said because she continued to jump around carelessly with his three hundred-dollar guitar. I shook my head. The girl was aggravating me. I was so stressed out and her ignoring me was no help at all. I stalked out into the street and ripped the guitar from her hands.

"Hey! Who do you think you are?" She screamed at me.

"I'm closer to God than you, and therefore I get to judge you." I quipped. "And I judge you to be a complete moron."

I had never heard Damian laugh so hard in the entire time I knew him. Obviously neither had Amy. But she didn't find it to be funny in the least bit. He was laughing at her.

"I hate you, Damian! You're a jerk!" Then she jetted down the street, Reggie and April quick on her heels.

"Gee, do you think I upset them?" I feigned innocence as I handed his guitar back to him.

"You're just jealous of them." George now hated me even more than he had before.
"You're jealous because they're hot, sexy girls and you'll never get the attention from men that they do."

"That's enough, George." Damian snapped. I could tell that he was getting angry and, for some reason, was once again defending me.

"Oh, don't tell me you like this little bitch, Damian." George groaned and dramatically slapped his hand to his forehead.

"George, if you don't knock it off right now..." He trailed off, his eyes were dark and threatening as they stared at the drunk imbecile sitting next to him.

"Whatever, I'm out of here." He mumbled. He got up and stumbled his way into his apartment.

"You know" I started as soon as the door shut behind him. "You have no need to defend me. I am plenty capable of doing so myself."

"I know you are." He smiled that irresistible way that made all of the girls around here swoon. "Trust me, I know that you are plenty capable of taking care of yourself. I just thought that maybe you needed a friend to help you out every now and then."

I shook my head and, giving in, I sat down beside him on the porch. "Since when are you my friend?"

He laughed. "I find you to be far more interesting than any of my friends, and far more intelligent. I also find you to be more mature and intelligent than any of the other girls around here. Why wouldn't I want you to be my friend? Anybody with any kind of brains would."

"Don't try to make me start swooning all over you, Damian. I'm not that sort. You can speak all of the sweet words you want, I'm not interested." I was irritated that he would even start making an attempt at winning my affections whenever I thought he knew better. I started to rise from the porch.

"I'm not trying to make you fall head over heels in love with me, Phoenix. I only want to be your friend." He placed his hand on my arm and pushed me back down to sit. "Is that too much to ask? I don't mean to make you feel uncomfortable or make you think that I merely want to just hurt you. I really mean you no harm."

I don't know why I had the strong urge to believe him, to just let my guard down. I wasn't about to, though. Not with him. He was dangerous, and I had promised myself not to get involved.

I shook my head and jumped up. "I'm sorry, but I can't believe you. I promised myself not to get emotionally involved with you and befriending you is getting involved. I can't!" I walked away from him, then. He didn't beg me to stay or chase me, but I felt him watch me.

That night, as I lay there waiting for sleep to wrap around me and take me into the comfortable land where I didn't have to think, my thoughts refused to let me close my eyes. Why couldn't I be just friends? Friends didn't really hurt each other. As long as I never developed a crush I would be fine. I grabbed my pillow and covered my head with it and let out a frustrated scream. No! I had to be wary of him! I couldn't let my guard

down and give him leeway to breaking my heart in any possible way! No! That was my final decision. I wasn't going to befriend him. No way!

It was difficult not to be his friend, though. Even after that night he was still nice to me and still smiled and said hi whenever he saw me. It didn't seem to matter who he was with at the time, if he spotted me he treated me just as he would treat a good friend.

That and the fact that he, Mama, and Celeste were always together. It bothered me. Celeste was fourteen and wouldn't be fifteen until August and she flirted incessantly with him. He was the type that would play with her, too, and I knew what was going to come out of Celeste's obsession with him. It was as inevitable as the sun coming up the next day to produce another day to struggle through happily.

Mama's flirting was just as bad, if not, actually, worse. He flirted back and often I saw them together. It made me physically sick. I knew in the pit of my stomach what they were doing. I knew they were lovers. Damian wasn't about to turn away the attention of an older, beautiful woman who was constantly on him. No, he was going to play with her as much as he was going to play with Celeste. I didn't understand why Mama was doing what she was doing, though, and that was the part that upset me.

In spite of my claim I allowed myself to befriend him. I had no choice over it. That's all he truly became to me. I had no interest in his appeal and charm. I was the type that allowed herself to get hurt. Damian accepted that, and never pursued me as anything more than that.

It was late April whenever we finally got to move. Aunt Carissa has found us a home that was only a couple houses down from hers. Mama and Dad were excited to get the house and within the minute of getting it they were telling everyone. The biggest mistake Mama could have made seemed to be, telling Aggie. For some reason it angered her. Two days after finding out Aggie was spreading rumors about Mama all over the townhouses.

Then it all went down one day as Mama and I got out of our car because we had been out running errands. We had dropped Damian off at the movies and Celeste had gone with him. Aggie began screaming from her doorway. "You slut! You're nothing more than a whore. I know everything about you, you stupid hussy!" I was so shocked I couldn't move. How could anyone start making accusations? But I realized that Aggie knew more about Mama then even I did. What if what she was saying was true? Did Mama truly cheat on my father?

I was so deep in my thoughts I didn't hear any other words exchanged, but suddenly my mother was racing back up the pathway to our apartment. The door slammed shut behind her. I chased after her, fearing the worst. As soon as I got in the door I ran up the stairs to her room. Mama had a bottle of pills and was trying to get them out of the bottle. Her eyes were watering and her hands were shaking so badly it was making it difficult. That meant God must have been on my side that day.

I slammed into my mother, knocking her onto the bed. She had gotten at least five of the pills into her mouth. I was so angry, frustrated, and hurt that I wanted to kill her myself. I straddled her and my hands enclosed around her neck and I pressed my thumbs into the base of her throat.

"Spit them out!" I screamed at her. "Spit them out right now!" She shook her head over and over again, partially to tell me no and partially struggling to free herself, but I was much stronger. I put more pressure on her throat. "I hate you for this, Mama! I hate you!" I moaned through my tears. How could she do this?

My father had come up by this time and took control of things. He mad Mama spit the pills out and I waited until I knew she was safe before I left. I started walking, not really thinking about where I was going. I just needed to get away from there.

I walked along the side of the road, next to one of the elementary schools, crying and wiping, vainly, at my tears. I couldn't understand why she had done this again! She had promised that she would never do it again!

"Phoenix?" I heard Damian call out my name and my head shot up to see the two of them making their way down the street. I ran over to meet them.

"What's going on?" Celeste asked the moment I reach them. Her question brought about a new rack of tears. I buried my face in my hands and leaned up against the school's fence.

Damian, impulsively, pulled me against him. Never had anyone in my life actually held me and comforted me while I cried and though I wanted to push him away, I couldn't. I needed someone to be there for me. Needed it more than I ever wanted to admit.

"It's all right." He said softly in my ear. "What happened, Phoenix?"

Finally my sobs eased and I related to them what had happened in the past forty-five minutes. Celeste wasn't at all compassionate and, since Mama was all too clearly her rival, she felt no sympathy. It didn't bother her at all.

"She's an idiot to even attempt that. I wish she had succeeded." She said.

"Don't be stupid and immature, Celeste. That's your mother!" He still had his arm around me, pulling me to his side. I felt so emotionally drained that I honestly didn't care. I may have been a touch me not but I was too weak to protest any comfort.

Celeste, I could see, wanted to slap him. She was just itching to do so. Instead, however, she glared at both of us and turned on her heels and left.

"Your mother started all of this, Damian. You need to do something about her mouth." I told him. I knew I couldn't tell Aggie because Aggie had felt she'd had a right to say

those awful things. But Damian was different. He was her son and maybe he could find a way to shut her up.

He looked down and we began to walk, but he still kept his arm firmly around my shoulders. "I'm sorry, Phoenix, but there really is nothing that I can do about her. She's, well, not all right in the head. Your mother-no your family should never have put their trust in her."

I finally pulled out of his grasp. "Well, thanks for the warning beforehand!" I snapped. If he knew that my family shouldn't have befriended his mother then why hadn't he spoke up before?

"Oh, yes, I'm going to tell you that you and your family can't trust someone who you considered a valued friend. By the time I met you guys you all were already close with her." He shook his head and looked at the ground. Then he looked back up and stared me into my eyes, as if challenging me. "Would you have even believed me, Phoenix? Would you have believed that you couldn't trust someone who was a friend? After all, she became your safe harbor whenever things got bad in your home."

"I would have believed you." I spat out through gritted teeth. But I couldn't help wondering if I really would have.

"No, you wouldn't have. You didn't, and still don't, trust me. You wouldn't have trusted what I said. You would have found a reason for my saying such things." I knew he was right. There was no denying the obvious. I had so little trust in him even now, whenever he was considered a friend. I would never have believed him.

I ran my fingers through my hair and swallowed. I couldn't breathe, my asthma was acting up because it was spring, now, and not only was I having allergy problems but I had run. The emotional stress wasn't helping any. I tried to take deep breaths but as we walked back it quickly began to progress into a full-blown asthma attack.

We were so close to the apartments, I was sure I could make it in spite of the fact that I was gasping for air. So, instead of letting Damian help me, I pushed him away and told him I'd be fine. Boy, I was wrong. I walked past the apartments that were next to ours, holding the metal fence that surrounded it. I stopped to take in some more air. My lungs burned with the effort and fear and panic were starting to kick in. Tears stung my eyes. My legs weren't going to move anymore. They felt so weak. Just as I began sliding down the fence, letting myself be lead, slowly, into black oblivion, Damian picked me up. I fell limply against him, forcing myself to stay awake.

"It's okay. Just stay awake, Phoenix, you'll be all right." I grasped at his shoulders, gasping, trying to pull air into my lungs. I felt dizzy and my head ached.

"I can't breathe." I moaned. I couldn't help crying. The tears just came. They ran down my cheeks, staining a pattern of descent on them.

Suddenly Damian started running. "Help! Someone help her!" He hollered out. Mama came out of the apartment just as he started making his way up the path. "Karen, she can't breathe, she needs help!"

"Get her into my car quick! I'll go tell Michael I have to take her out there." She turned around to go.

"No!" I gasped. "Mama! No! Just take me! Please, just take me!" I cried. I knew crying wasn't making it any better but I couldn't stop! "I can't wait. I'm going to pass out." I was making myself more tired by yelling but I needed to go. I had no time to wait for her!

I don't remember feeling so tired. Mama had gotten the keys and we had gone out to the hospital but Damian had gone with us. He forced me to stay conscious.

Whenever I got back into the emergency room I struggled to take in the medicine that was given to me. I held tightly to the facemask with one hand, and my other hand was fastened to the railing of the bed. Slowly my grips eased up as my lungs opened and the oxygen and medicine entered them easier and easier. I felt myself give over to sleep without the fear of dying.

Whenever I woke up Mama was the only one in the room. She was reading a book and hadn't noticed that my eyes had opened. I started to push myself up in the bed but a pain shot through my right hand. I cried out and looked to see the IV in my hand.

Mama looked up at me and I asked her "When did they put this in?" I was confused. I hadn't felt it and I didn't remember waking up.

"You passed out. I was worried at first but your Oxygen stats went up and they said you were okay. They put the IV in not long after you fell asleep." She answered. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay, now." I still felt groggy but it wasn't a bad kind of feeling like it had been whenever I hadn't been able to breathe. I lay back against the pillows and sighed. "Are they going to keep me here?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. They might want to. You're far too stressed out, Phoenix. That is why you're here now."

"It's not my fault! I was scared because of you. I can't help it, Mama!" I couldn't stay here. Not with her so depressed. If I weren't there to save her from herself who would be?

Just then Damian walked in and handed Mama a soda. He had a slurpee from 7-11 in his hand. "Oh! You're awake! How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. They might keep me here, though" I pulled myself up higher in the bed. I didn't want to lie down. I was awake now and wanted to stay that way. If I were to stay here then I was going to make her promise me that everything would be fine. Then I would make Damian promise to watch her until I got home.

"Want a drink?" He held the slurpee out for me. I shrugged and reached out for it. He pulled it away. "Nope, you're sick. You need to be cared for. I'll hold it for you." He laughed. He had obviously been worried about me and was relieved that I was okay.

I rolled my eyes, but slipped the mask off for a little bit to take a drink. I sat back against the pillows after putting the mask back on. "Thank you, Damian. I would have died had you not been out there for me." I said.

He looked down. "Well, I was out there. No need to look at the what if's." He flashed a relieved smile at me. "You're okay now."

I was in the hospital for three days straight and I was bored. I wasn't worried about Mama because she had promised that she wouldn't do it again and then I'd had Damian promise that he would watch her. I hated being left there at the hospital whenever I was feeling better. Mama came up to stay with me late at night but left during the early morning while I was asleep. Damian did come in the afternoons to visit me but only for an hour because he had gotten himself a job over at the movie theater whenever he and Celeste had been over there. He was straightening up and becoming more responsible and I was proud to call him my friend. My true friend. After all, enemies didn't save your life.

We began to pack things in the apartment the day that I was removed from the hospital. I couldn't do it because I was so tired but I did manage to help a little. Mama, though, sent me to bed, saying she could do it herself and she'd get help whenever the other kids got home. So I made my way up the stairs and into her room where I crawled on the bed and slept for a lot longer than I assumed I would.

One week later both of my parents were getting antsy. We still had three weeks before we could move in there because there was so much work that had to be done. Mama had packed up most everything that wasn't a necessity. Now, all we had to do was wait. But Mama wasn't about to just wait. We went out and bought paint that very night. Then Celeste, Damian, Mama, and I went out to our new home to paint the walls and clean it up a little. Of course, this job was going to take long than a night but we started that night, anyway.

Celeste was attached to Damian the entire time we were there. Glaring my way every now and then. I couldn't understand what her problem was. If she liked Damian I had no problem. I had no feelings for him that weren't strictly friendship. There was no need for her to be shooting fire from her eyes every time she looked my way.

Whenever she wasn't looking at me, however, she was annoying me with her flirting. She seemed so stupid. She giggled and teased and jumped around him. I tried to hide my

laughter. I couldn't help imagining that flirting was some kind of womanly ritual. Some of them just took it to a most hilarious extent.

My sister did not find anything to be very funny, though, where I came from. "What's your problem, Phoenix? Nobody told you that you could laugh." She snapped at me.

I simply looked up at her and gave her a smile. "No, nobody said I could laugh but I am laughing at my own private thoughts, sister dear. Nobody ever said that you could give me permission not to think and laugh at my thoughts."

Damian made the mistake of laughing. Celeste's anger flared. She threw the paintbrush that she was holding at me. I dodged it, which only made her more angry. She stomped by me towards the front door. "I wish you were still in the hospital! Better yet I wish you had died!" She ran past me, then, fearing my wrath. I jumped up to go after her but Damian grabbed my arm.

"It's not worth it." He said, still watching where my sister exited.

"Not to you, maybe, but it is worth it to me. I'm going to wring her pretty, skinny little neck." I declared, trying to free myself.

He was having a tough time holding me there. We struggled with one another but whenever I was almost out of his grasp he pulled us both to the floor. I fought him, I truly wanted to beat my sister senseless and he wasn't about to let me. I struggled but he was stronger and soon he had me straddled and was holding each of my arms on either side of me.

"Phoenix, I will not let you beat her up. She may deserve it by why exert yourself? You'll end up back in the hospital." He was out of breath and his words were choppy but to me he rang loud and clear. My struggle immediately stopped. I didn't want to go back there but if this kept up I would.

Mama came back into the house from the backyard just then, only to see us in such a position. "What are you two doing?" There was suspicion in her voice and I knew what she thought.

Damian quickly released me. I sat up and rubbed at my wrists. Mama looked down at the two of us, questioning with her eyes, yet trying to keep a cool composure.

I looked up at her. "Nothing is going on, Mama." I was being honest, yet she didn't seem to believe me.

"That didn't look like nothing." I could see the struggle within her. She was trying to get answers without being forward and accusing either of us of anything.

"Really, Karen, there was nothing happening." Damian stood up and reached down to help me to my feet.

"What was that all about, then?" She was nearly yelling now. She was frustrated and jealousy was raging through her veins like a wild fire.

"It was just a silly argument, Mama, that's all. We really weren't doing anything, Damian was just holding me down so I couldn't go after Celeste." I saw the relief flood her eyes and suddenly I was the suspicious one. What was going on? Why was my sister so overly jealous of me, and why did my mother go insane at the thought that Damian and I might have been doing more than what we said. I was confused.

"I'm going to go wait in the car. I think we're finished for tonight." I excused myself and then left. Celeste was already in there and the two of us sat there, not looking at one another, waiting for them to appear in the doorway. We waited twenty minutes before they came out. Mama no longer looked upset in anyway. She was laughing and hanging on Damian. Damian looked over at the car and I looked him straight in the eye. Anger flared in me as I realized what they had been doing that twenty minutes. I was so disgusted.

They got into the car and I didn't say a word on the way home. I didn't understand Celeste's attachment to Damian but I now understood my mother's. I didn't want to understand it but there was no point in denying the truth. The two of them were having an affair. The thought hadn't bothered me before Damian had actually become a closer friend to me. But things were different now and it made my stomach tie in knots.

In bed that night I lay awake thinking for about an hour before sleep claimed me. I stared at the wall, letting things run through my mind. I swallowed hard, trying to stop the tears. I had lost almost all of the trust and faith that I'd had in my mother and that hurt. Right before sleep claimed me I couldn't help fearing what was to come in the next few days, weeks, or months, even. Would it be something to bring me down? I felt the pull of yet another dramatic moment in my life. What would it be this time?

Chapter 5

For the next week as we went daily to paint the house, I watched both my mother's and sister's behavior around Damian. I already knew what he and Mama were doing. But my suspicions flew into high gear whenever it came to Celeste. Something was telling me that what was between them wasn't merely a fourteen year old's crush. I felt sick at the thought, but there was no denying it. I trusted my feelings far too well.

I knew that should I ask Celeste I wouldn't get anything out of her. My sister was never one to confide in me. She definitely wouldn't say anything to me about this. I knew that even if my suspicions were true she'd merely deny them and my prodding would be a waste of breath. So, I decided to confront Damian.

I waited in the back room that sunny spring day. He had left his shoes back there, so I waited on the stairway that lead up to the two bedrooms that had once been an attic. Finally, he came back there to get his shoes. I quickly pulled him by the arm and up the stairs. He didn't fight me but walked behind me, confused.

We got into the first room, what was to be Celeste's room. The afternoon sun came shining through the window to send patterns playing across the floor, the trees just outside making the shadows on the carpet dance. Pieces of dust floated about in the brilliant light that shined through the window.

I left him standing at the top of the stairs, beside the long closet. I walked towards the large three windows with my arms crossed under my breasts. I didn't know where to begin. How did one ask one's friend if they were having a sexual affair with their sister? It was difficult to swallow and I instinctively reached up and wrapped one of my hands nervously about my throat.

Finally, the words floated from my lips, as if they had been caged up in my heart for too long and had finally broke free. "I know that you and Mama have been having an affair, Damian." I began, still staring out the window. "It disgusts me in ways that no words in the world can express but I suppose anyone can fall for Mama's charms. Just thought that my own friend was above that. The thought of you two never bothered me before we formed this friendship."

"Yes, Phoenix, we have been having an affair. I'm sorry that it bothers you so much. I'll put a stop to it if you want. I just couldn't help it. She offered and...Oh forget it. I'm not going to make excuses for myself." He muttered.

"I don't need confirmation on what I already know, Damian. I need confirmation about what I don't know and what I truly fear." I felt anger building up in me like a campfire out of control. I spun around to stare at him as I threw out my interrogation. ""What is going on between you and Celeste? Why is she so jealous of me? And what makes her so attached to you?"

I could tell by how pale he suddenly became that my worst fears were, in fact, the truth. I felt the tears of disappointment choke me and burn my eyes. I shook my head and ran my fingers through my hair in frustration. "Okay," I choked out hoarsely. "Okay, then. If that is how it is going to be. If this is how it is going to be, then you are no friend, Damian. You are no better than any other man alive and not worthy for even my friendship." I took a deep breath, trying to collect myself. It was a vain attempt. My voice still shook as I spoke.

"To have an affair with my mother is one thing, but my sister as well? How could you do something like that?" I shook my head, the anger raging through my veins. "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know what you were thinking." I past him and went down the stairs without so much as a backwards glance at him. My heart felt heavy. It was my fault that I

had allowed myself to befriend him but I wouldn't let this get to me. I wouldn't be friends with someone that pigheaded. No way.

Damian stayed away after that day. I knew Mama blamed me. She knew that I had said something to him and I could only assume that he had told her. But she had no idea about the Celeste situation. I think that maybe I could have forgiven him for the affair with Mama but not with my little sister. That had me far more sickened.

Mama and I finished moving boxes over to the house during the week whenever all of my siblings were in school. It was hard because of the silent treatment she was giving me. She refused to look my way unless she absolutely had to. I couldn't understand her anger at me! She had no right! I was upset about her ignoring me but I was angry that she had the nerve to be mad at me.

I decided to confront her on it as we moved the last few boxes into the living room of our new house. I set the box I had cradling in my arms and stood up. She had just walked into the living room from the kitchen and I stood there, staring at her. She was annoyed and tried to pass me but I blocked the doorway.

"I don't have time for games, Phoenix." She tried to shove me out of her way but I stood my ground.

"Stop ignoring me, Mother!" I reached behind me to hold the screen door shut so she couldn't push me out it.

"I'm not ignoring you. I have a lot to do to get us moved in here. Now move!" She made, yet another, attempt to move me.

"No! I won't move! I confronted him because I had to, Mama; it's not my fault that he decided to stop coming around you. Don't you think it is for the better, anyway?" I was hurt by the fact that she could be angrier with me than with him. Then I had to stop and remind myself that she had no idea about Celeste. I lips itched to just spit the truth out to her. Why couldn't she see what I saw?

"Phoenix, please!" Tears shone in her eyes, the misery was all too plain in the depths of them. "It's not just because he has stopped coming around me. He put a stop to the affair not too long ago."

"Then what's wrong?" My heart pounded in anticipation. What was she about to tell me? I felt almost faint with expectation.

"I'm pregnant, Phoenix and its most certainly not by your father." Her announcement was made with not only sadness but with fear as well. I felt the same feelings come crashing down around me. My eyes widened.

"Are-are you sure?" I was trying to hold my cool, wanting to comfort her and assure her that everything would be fine. I didn't have enough confidence to tell her that. I felt as if my lungs had collapsed and I waited for my heart to just stop beating.

"I'm positive. It's why I couldn't talk to you. I know that you are already disappointed in me, but this would just make it worse." Finally, she let the tears fall from her eyes. "I never thought it would be like this with Michael! Never!"

"We'll just have to cover it up." I announced. I had no idea how I was going to help her with this but I decided that I had to. "Is there any way it could be Dad's? I mean, technically, that way he wouldn't think anything of it."

To my horror she shook her head. "We haven't had sex for three months. He refuses to lay a finger on me."

"I'll find a way to get you out of this, Mama, I promise that I will." My disgust and anger at her seemed to just evaporate right there. All of it flying back into the oblivion just waiting for another moment whenever it would come back and let me use it as my fire to give somebody a tongue lashing they'd never forget.

Mama was one month pregnant that April, which gave me a few months before I decided on a course of action. Whenever I finally decided I did so nervously. How was I going to do this? How would I put my plan together and come out the same kind of strong and respectful person that I had been before? Would I lose all of my dignity just for her? The answer was all too obvious. I loved my mother dearly and I would do anything for her no matter what the cost.

Finally, a month later, in mid-may, I told my mother what I had planned. "Mama, I'll be pregnant for you." At first she looked at me confused, not quite understanding. I took a deep breath and made my explanation. "By the time the baby is born I will be sixteen, old enough to take care of the baby. Not that anyone will know. You will run away, go live with a friend somewhere until the baby is born. I will go live somewhere, also, until the baby is born. I'll pretend that I'm the pregnant one."

"Oh, no, Phoenix, I could never allow you to do that!" She cried, sitting down on the couch slowly.

"You have no choice, Mama. Eventually, you'll come back and beg his forgiveness for leaving him and he will forgive you."

"What about you?" She asked.

"I will come back, but I will come back months after you and with a baby." I was scared to death. How would I be able to become the mother of my own younger half sibling? I wasn't even sixteen yet! "I'll leave before you, leaving a note declaring that I am pregnant and that I had to leave rather than disgrace the family." I thought for a second

and then added. "I'll keep you informed through emails somehow where I am, that way you can run right when you start showing. I'm guessing that you can stay here until about your sixth month. Then you can come to me wherever I am."

She nodded slowly. "I don't want to burden you with this child, Phoenix. I can handle your father."

"No! Mama! You know he'd kill you!" I cried. He would kill her. "Then he'd go to jail and we'd all be separated and put into foster care. You know it's true!"

Her bottom lip trembled. She knew it was all true. Then she nodded again, only this time more vigorously. "All right, but, I'll know where you are."

I looked at her, my turn to be confused. "You can go stay with some relatives of your father's. They'd never tell; they hate him. He is your great-uncle and his young wife is my very own cousin Ella Marie Stanhope Benson Parish. She's been married a couple of times. She is not much older than I am, though. Much younger than your father's uncle. You'll be well taken care of there. I'll explain the entire situation to Ella." She seemed more comfortable with the idea the more she thought about it.

"But" She began. "I won't let you leave this house for another month! We have time before you have to go and I don't want you to go just yet. You're really the only person I can trust or rely on." She sighed and then rose to her feet. "I guess I'd better go call Ella and tell her what to expect." She left me standing there in the living room, my knees shaking and my stomach doing flip-flops. What had I gotten myself into?

I tossed and turned in bed that night. Fortunately, I was no longer sharing a room with anyone else they would have been just as restless as me. My bed made an annoying squeak with every move I made. The thought that I had just volunteered to become a mother just didn't sit well with me. How could I do this? Fear and nervousness sat in the pit of my stomach, which was doing as many flip-flops as I was.

Mama was happier the next day, she was whistling and throwing smiles my way. She had become rather happy about our plan. Whenever I asked her about how well she had slept the night before her only answer was "Fantastic! I haven't slept so great in weeks. Why do you ask?"

I never answered her. I just left the room. She held none of the trepidation in her eyes, nor her heart, that I had witnessed yesterday whenever I had proposed the plan. She looked more content than she had in a long time. No wonder, I thought to myself, she's getting out of her own mistake. For the millionth time I thought to myself, what am I doing? Why am I taking on her responsibilities? How could I do this? I blocked the thoughts out. After all, I thought, on the bright side I would get out of here and away from my father. I had promised myself long ago that I would get away from him no matter what it took. I couldn't back out now. I wouldn't back out now.

The most miserable thought that I had in my mind, though, was the thought that my mother was happy that she could so easily push off her mistakes on me. What would she do once I was no longer there for her to do so? Sometimes I wished the worst for her, she could be so heartless and conceited. Other times I was confused because I loved her so much that I felt guilty for thinking anything bad about her.

Nobody in the family knew of our plan. Only Mama, my father's family that would let Mama and me live with them, and I knew. That meant Celeste would assume me to be really pregnant. For some reason I wanted to assure her that Damian and I had merely been friends. I wanted to be able to explain what we were doing. I didn't understand because she had never been anything but cruel to me. But I could tell that she had really cared about Damian and the thought that I may have been with him would drive her crazy. I almost felt guilty about what we were going to make her believe. Funny, I thought, I felt like the Virgin Mary herself. After all, I was about to become a mother and I was still as innocent as the day I had been born. The thought gave me a chill up my spine.

I had always known my family was different, I just never realized just how demented we were. And I was demented for doing this. "Carrying" my mother's child? Covering up her mistakes? What was I thinking? I must have gone completely insane.

I was convinced that I had gone crazy whenever two weeks later the plane ticket to go to Los Angeles came in the mail. I sat in my room, staring at it. In just two more weeks I'd be flying down there. I would be swept into another home where I didn't know anyone. Fear made my heart pound heavily and the blood race through my veins. I was so confused and scared.

My whole plan was to never tell anyone to their face. I was afraid that I couldn't get the words out. But one day whenever Celeste was looking for something in my room she found the plane ticket that I had stashed in my dresser drawer. She came down the stairs and onto the front porch and thrust the ticket into my face.

"What is this?" she demanded. Her eyes were glittering with suspicion. I knew that I had to tell her, now. I would leave a note for everyone else but I would tell Celeste.

"I am going away, Celeste." I told her. I waited for her to demand why and where I was going. I didn't have to wait long.

"Why? Is there something wrong with you? Where are you going?"

"To visit some people that I know. I'm pregnant, Celeste." Her face paled and I thought her heart had completely stopped beating.

"By who?" She was trying vainly to keep her voice steady. She knew though. She knew what I was going to say before I said it.

Still, it was difficult to get the words out of my throat. "Damian." I choked. With that one word, that one name I saw my sister's complete life go out of her. She had cared for him so much and yet she had never actually known him. She shook her head, the tears shined in her eyes.

"NO!" she screeched and ran into the house. Mama and Lila came out of Mama's bedroom. They were the only others home. They came out just in time for Mama to grab Celeste who had gone into the kitchen and grabbed a knife and was attempting to cut her wrist open.

"What is going on?!" Mama cried. She had ripped the knife from Celeste's hand but was having a hard time restraining her. I quickly helped by getting in back of Celeste and wrapping my arms around her entire body. Both of us were a good five feet eight inches, being the same height had its advantages, this was one of them.

"I wanna die! I wanna die!" She moaned over and over, trying to fight me. I held her tightly as she wiggled and bit and did everything.

Within the next hour my mother had her committed into the local mental institution. It's what Celeste truly needed, as sad as it was. My father didn't understand what was going on but, to my surprise, he accepted what was. I was shocked, but didn't tell him so. In fact my last week there I barely even looked at him and I couldn't help feeling relieved that I was at least escaping him. Once I left I never wanted to come back. I just couldn't help but wonder what I was going to do with my mother's child! I eventually stopped thinking about it for the moment. I still had a few months left to worry. The baby wouldn't be born until December.

I didn't see Celeste again before I boarded the plane and left. I had left a simple note to everyone saying that I was pregnant and I would be leaving so I would not disgrace the family. Everyone would be shocked. My mother was a fantastic actress and would be able to play her part well, that I was sure about.

The flight was short and whenever it landed the nervous pitter-patter in the pit of my stomach worsened. I didn't know these people I would be living with, family or not. I wasn't sure if they would like me, or accept me. I didn't know what to expect. But what I set my eyes on shocked me more than anything. There stood two people, a tall older man in what appeared to be chauffeur uniform and shorter strawberry blonde woman in a dark violet three-piece suit stood next to him. The man held up a sign with the name Phoenix sprawled across it. Though the sign was obviously not needed. The moment the woman saw me her face paled and her hand flew to her neck as if she were trying not to choke on something.

She waved me over to them and I quickly walked over. She looked me up and then down with her soft, almond shaped golden brown eyes. She bit her lower lip, which was much fuller than the top. Soft patches of freckles covered her small nose and her cheeks. She nodded to herself. Then she met my eyes. "You look just like her."

"Who?" I asked, confused. I certainly didn't look Mama, so who was she talking about?

"Racheal. Your m- I mean your father's cousin." She smiled nervously. "I'm your mother's cousin, Ella. Sorry, I almost slipped and said Racheal was your mother's cousin." She let out a nervous laugh. "Pleasure to finally meet you. I am more than happy to welcome you into my home!" She clapped her hands together and held them covering her mouth and nose as she peered at me over her fingers. She sighed. "This is going to be great having you home. At my home!" Ella was strange but there was something kind about her that made me smile and feel slightly less nervous than before. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

We were lead out by the chauffeur, whose name, I found out on the way outside, was Carl. The long, luxurious creamy white limousine sat parked outside with the windows darkly tinted. How could this part of the family be so rich and my family be so poor? It confused me but I tried not to think about it as I climbed in slowly, looking around at the interior which was violet. Purple must be her favorite color, I thought.

As if she was reading my mind she quickly spoke. "This is my very own limousine, I love the cream color and the soft violet. It's just so beautiful! I had the entire thing painted and decorated to my liking, just like everything in our home. I do hope you enjoy the way I had your room set up and decorated!" There was excitement in those beautiful golden eyes, as if she hadn't been this excited in years. At least I bring something to someone's life, I thought bitterly.

"And just wait until you see the house!" She babbled on. "It's so grand! Oh I just know you'll love it! I was so shocked to see it the very first time, after all, my mother and I didn't have any money whenever we moved in to this grand home!" She sighed and stared out the window. I waited anxiously to see this grand home that she spoke so highly about.

And what a house it turned out to be! We had twisted and turned so many corners I was sure that civilization was miles and miles away, but no wonder. My great uncle, according to Ella, owned many, many acres of land. But the house that sat on the very edge of that land, with the sea as it's backdrop was miraculous. It was a pink-peach color with white trimming. There were so many windows all over, as if you had to be able to see out of every room. Four great, white columns stood at the front of the house where the giant oak doors stood with their brass knockers and doorknobs. The steps up the front were white but there was a pink-peach carpet that was right in the center of the stairs. My eyes widened at the sight. Never in my life had I witnessed a house so large! How could I ever call this place my home? Would it be possible? Only time would tell.

Ella led me into the house, walking up the carpet as if it were actually normal to have a carpet out of your house like you were royalty. Of course, I reminded myself, it was normal to her. I had a silly fear about walking on that carpet. I just didn't feel as if my feet were clean enough to do so. What if I got something on it?

Ella turned at the top of the steps, her hands on her hips. "Well? Are you coming or not?" She smiled brightly. "Come on, Phoenix, no need to be scared. Once your parents were very accustomed to this sort of life, just as all of their children should have been."

I nodded and followed her up. A butler opened the door, as if he had been peering out one of the two side windows that were on either side of the doors. He opened both doors dramatically and smiled. "Welcome home, Madame." He made it seem as if Ella had been gone for a long time, and not just a couple of hours going to get her niece, and not to mention, step-granddaughter.

The entry hall to the house was so immaculate and beautiful I couldn't begin to imagine what the rest of the house looked like. The floor was a golden brown marble. It matched the color of Ella's eyes. Huge columns painted gold, or maybe they were real, went up to the high domed ceiling. A chandelier hung from the top and cast light about the room giving it even more of a dramatic effect. The domed ceiling was glass and you could see the sky outside of it. It was beyond beautiful! There was a grand staircase that was also made of marble, but down the center of both set of stairs were golden carpets. I felt as if I had entered some grand hotel.

Ella seemed to enjoy my reaction and smiled brightly at me. "Isn't it wonderful?" She cried excitedly. "Come now, I have to show you the rest of the house!" House? I thought to myself. This was no house. This was a modern day castle!

She led me through a door to the left of the front doors. We entered a long hallway that was only dimly lit by sconces on the walls every other picture. There were huge pictures of old family members on the walls all the way down. The walls were dark blue with wood trim and the floor was hard wood. The sounds of our footsteps echoed down the hall. I would soon learn that most of the house was dark and almost gloomy. There were shadows in every corner, as if ghosts were lurking there just waiting to jump out and frighten you to death. Ella told me that my great uncle didn't like the light much and so she made sure that everywhere that he usually was in the house was dark. She gave me a quick glimpse of his office but I barely saw anything other than the dark mahogany desk. We passed quickly down the hallway.

"That hall has given me the creeps ever since I first moved here." She explained. When we came out of the hall we enter the first parlor which was bigger and brighter. "Your uncle hardly ever spends any time in here." The room was painted a soft light blue and cream colored curtains graced the large bay windows that looked out over a beautiful garden. There was a large dark purple throw rug in the center of the room. The floor itself was hard light oak. There was a fireplace in between the two large windows. The sofa and love seat were the same matching sapphire color. A glass coffee table sat in between the two. There was a huge glass case that sat against the back wall and inside was many family photos and on the top shelf was a clock made of complete gold. The room held a certain comfort to it and yet it was beautiful and glamorous all together. Most of the other rooms were much the same. When she led me into the dining room I was stunned by the size of it, not to mention the glamor of it.

The family dining room had a table that seats up to twenty-five people! It was made out of dark oak and it filled up half the room. The tables were all made of the same dark oak and they all were high-backed chairs. The backs of the chairs had a pretty, vine sort of design on them and the seats of the chairs had soft, plush blood-red velvet cushions on them tripped with gold. The walls of the room were made of the same color of the cushions and were also trimmed with gold.

Through a door on the other side of the room Ella led me into the grand dining room that was used for parties. There were six tables much like the one in the family dining room and every one of them held up to forty-five people! I couldn't imagine knowing that many people! Yet Ella informed me that during every party the entire dining room was filled and sometimes there were even more tables set out! This dining room looked like the family dining room but instead of red with gold it was blue with white.

Right through another door in the grand dining room was the ballroom. It was magnificent! The floor was light cream colored marble and the walls were pale peach trimmed with white. On the far side of the room there were no walls only giant windows that reached the ceiling and looked out over part of the garden where three fountains stood, the sunlight sparkling through the water spouting from them. Three large chandeliers hung from the ceiling from one end of the room, the center of the room, to the other end of the room.

I turned around to look at Ella. "I can't believe all of this. It's just so beautiful. How can I ever call such a giant, glamorous place my home?"

She laughed. "You haven't even seen your rooms yet! I'm glad you've enjoy the tour of the bottom half of the house. Let's go view the top." She led me to a short hallway and to a door that I wouldn't have seen. "This door leads up to the top half of the house. It's very narrow stairway and not many people know of it. The first owner of the house had it built for his secret rendezvous. Since it is well hidden not many people notice it whenever they are going from here to the back door that leads to the garden at the end of this hall. Nobody would ever think anything of it. Should anyone come back here, they would merely assume they were going to the garden. But this was built for the purpose of meeting upstairs. Anyone that was having an affair with him at the time knew of the door." She explained as we went up the stairs. So my ancestors were cheaters. Go figure, I thought glumly to myself.

We reached the top of the stairs and came out another door at the top of the stairs that was closer to the hall. At the end of the hall were two huge double dark oak doors. I noticed that farther down the hall the doors were all white with gold trim. "Is that the master bedroom?" I asked curiously.

"Yes. He purposely made sure that the stairs led closest to where he would be that way it would be less likely that anyone would see them. He didn't know that his wife often used the stairway as well." She laughed.

She quickly ushered me down the hall to the doors that would be mine. She threw them open with a big "viola!" and a smile. We walked in and my eyes tried to devour everything all at once.

The bed was far too big for only me! The comforter was a dark rose color. The pillows were a mix of rose, white, and ivory. The bedroom floor was a myriad of those three colors as well. The walls were painted rose and trimmed with ivory. The four-poster bed was made of light oak. And everything in the rooms matched. The dresser and vanity table were both made of light oak and the brushes and such things were made of rose, white, or ivory. There were two windows each on either side of the bed. The curtains for each were white and not very heavy. All were pulled back and the windows were opened to allow air into the room. Yet the room had a distinctive smell to it, like roses and vanilla. I quickly asked about that.

"Well, since I did the room with the colors I did I also added a certain perfume to it; that being a rose, vanilla scent. All of your bathroom products, such as your perfume, body wash, lotion, and so on are of that scent." She smiled. "If you don't like it I can have everything changed."

"No! I love it! It's all so beautiful!" I cried out. I walked over to the bed and sat down slowly on the edge. I was afraid that if I plopped down it would all burst and I'd wake up back in my bed at home, waiting to be awakened by my screaming father. "It's really all mine?"

"Yes, including your very own sitting room!" She said with a smile as she walked over to the door that was on my left wall. She opened it to reveal a sitting room with a rose colored carpet and walls. The soft, chair, and love seat were all the same matching ivory and in front of the fireplace there was a white, furry throw rug.

"I love it all!" I told her. "I just can't believe I am here. I just wish I wasn't here under these sort of circumstances."

"Me too. I wish my cousin were more responsible and you could be here because this is where you belong, not because you are saving her." I looked at her. What she had said was so strange.

"Where I belong?" I asked, confused. Already I realized that Ella rarely ever made sense. Or, atleast she didn't make much sense to me.

"Oh, forget it, dear." She said quickly, walking out of the room. Just before she shut the door she faced me. "I do hope you enjoy your rooms. They are not far from my daughter Jenny's. Maybe the two of you will get along." The way she said it didn't seem very hopeful. It was more like she had said it out of duty. But I wanted to get along with Jenny! I wanted to get along well here, maybe they would let me stay and I wouldn't have to go back to that abusive place.

"If you want you may take a nap before dinner. I'll wake you up an hour before we eat and pick out something for you to wear." With that she left the room.

I stood in the middle of the sitting room and then made my way into the bedroom where I sat on the bed. I thought that I was so exhausted that I would pass out before my head even hit the pillow. Yet, that wasn't to be true, for my overactive mind took control and I became more curious about my newfound, and obviously very rich, relatives. I had yet to meet my great uncle and my cousin Jenny. Ella was a confusing woman who spoke of things that confused me but wouldn't answer whenever I asked about them. What would the other two be like?

I suddenly had the urge to get fresh air. I felt stifled and there was no way I was going to be able to fall asleep. I wanted to explore this house and become accustomed to it quickly. If this was to be my home I didn't wish to be constantly lost in it.

I rose off the bed and into the hallway. Even with servants buzzing about the house it held an eerie silence. I padded down the soft blue carpeted hall. Somehow I managed to find my way down to a stairway. It didn't lead down into the entrance of the house but it did lead down into another hallway, one that I had been shown. I went down there and I passed the small room that Ella had called the study. Nobody really spent any time in there unless they had some friends over and then that was where the men went to smoke and drink after dinner, Ella had informed me.

I walked down the hall a little bit more confidant about myself. It seemed big enough to get lost in but it would be easier getting to know my new home than I had thought. I sighed with relief and walked a little faster.

I should have been paying more attention because I had just gotten into my new surroundings and I wasn't used to the rooms off to the sides of the hallway. Just as I was bout to get to the parlor that led out into the garden someone came out of a door off to the right and I tripped over him. Or more like I tripped over a wheelchair.

"Are you all right?" The young man sitting in the chair asked as he held a hand down towards me to help me up. I ignored it and pushed myself to my feet.

"I'm fine. I am sorry, I didn't mean to run into you. I should have been paying more attention." I felt like a complete dunce. How could I run over someone?

He smiled at me. It was the friendliest smile I had ever seen. Chestnut hair fell over his brow and hung to almost to his shoulders and bright blue eyes stared up at me curiously but friendly. "I'm Mitchell Branch. Ella's crippled son." I opened my mouth to introduce myself but he quickly stopped me with a wave of his hand. "I already know who you are, Phoenix. No need to introduce yourself, you're my cousin. Funny, I didn't know that I had any."

"Oh. Well, then let me ask the first question that came into my mind whenever you introduced yourself." I never seemed to be able to shut myself up. I rambled on like an idiot until I realized what I was doing. It always happened that way whenever someone was friendly to me. "Why isn't your last name Parish like my great uncle's?"

"Because I am not his son and he refused to adopt some other man's child. I don't find it to be an insult, though. I couldn't care less about what that man thought. He spends most of his time doting upon my lovely, spoiled rotten younger half sister, his daughter Jenny." He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and then quickly changed the subject. "Where were you in such a hurry to, anyway?"

"I was going out to the garden. I needed some fresh air. I feel so..." I thought for a moment "suffocated by all of this." Why did it seem so easy to talk to this stranger? He was my cousin but a stranger all the same. Yet, I felt comfortable enough to stand there talking to him. I didn't feel threatened by him at all.

"I understand. I was only three years old whenever my father died and my mother married up with your great uncle only three months later. The home we had lived in had been smaller by far. I had nightmares the first two weeks I was here." He wheeled himself alongside me as we made our way towards the garden.

"How can you remember that far back?" I was astounded. I couldn't remember much of anything up until the age of eight. Of course, I probably had blocked out everything else.

"Intelligence." He laughed. "I was always my mother's 'little old man'. I was always treated older than what I am and I just developed a sense of independence and maturity at a very young age."

"I wish that were the only reason I felt so old." I muttered. Then that part of me that loved to keep everything about me well hidden started kicking me in the head. Why was I saying things that would open a conversation about my life? He was a complete stranger!

"I'll not pry. You have the look on your face as if you wished you hadn't said that, meaning you probably don't want to share your life story with me." He smiled. "It's quite all right. I'm just curious as to why you are here. Mother never informed me about why a dear unknown cousin was coming to stay with us for awhile."

I took a deep breath and then related the story to him. The true story. I wanted to stop lying so badly and what was the danger of telling anyone the truth around here?

After I was finished he let out a low whistle. He thought for a moment, as he was trying to gather up the right words. "How could you even think about covering for your mother? She made the mistake of cheating on her husband and yet here you are getting her out of her own mess." He was as blunt as I was, I thought bitterly. I preferred honesty from people but he was slapping me in the face with harsh reality. I had thought much the same things that he had said but hearing them from someone else made my head pound.

"In all honesty I have no idea what I was thinking at the time. I almost backed out but I have my reasons why I didn't." I took a deep breath and turned to go back into the house and into the safety of my new room before I said too much of what I didn't really want to say. "I'm getting a bit tired. Nice meeting you, Mitchell." I quickly ran into the house.

"It's Mitch!" I heard him call after me. I turned, waved, and then quickly found my way back up my room where I fell onto the bed and fell into a deep sleep, not giving myself time to think.

Chapter 6

I felt myself being shaken and from a distance I heard someone calling my name over and over again. I groaned and turned over, only the voice didn't go away and neither did the shaking. The voice merely got louder and the shaking more fervent. That's whenever I finally realized that someone was trying to wake me.

I opened my eyes and blinked. I sat up and smoothed down my hair and then rubbed at my eyes. I looked about the room and then turned to see Ella staring straight at me. I nearly jumped out of my skin. I hadn't expected to see her sitting so close.

She laughed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you." She apologized quickly and then got up from the bed. "I told you I'd wake you up an hour before dinner. I decided to let you sleep for another half-hour. I already chose what you'll wear and I had you a bath made."

"Wow." I mumbled groggily. "I never even heard you moving around in here."

"Well, you were so deeply in sleep and breathing so shallow I was certain you had died!" She cried, her hand pressed to her heart. "You certainly gave me a scare." She turned to the chair sitting at the vanity table. "Oh! I looked through all of your clothes. We will have to go shopping for you tomorrow. You had nothing nice to wear to dinner so I got you something from Racheal's closet. You appear to be the same size she was when she was your age."

It was the second time she had mentioned Racheal and I couldn't stop myself from asking, "Who is Racheal?"

"Racheal was a good friend of mine. Actually, she was my stepsister and then my stepdaughter. She disappeared not long after I married your great uncle. She is your great uncle's daughter from his first marriage. His only true heir other than Jenny. Racheal never met Jenny."

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say and it was the first thing to escape my lips. "I'm sorry you lost your friend."

"Well, enough talk about that!" Ella obviously was much like an ostrich and liked to bury her head in the sand. "Go on! Take your bath and then I will help you dress for dinner." She smiled and then left the room.

I got up from the bed and walked into the bathroom that was in the same colors as the other rooms were. The rose vanilla scent was stronger and I could tell she must have added some kind of scented oil to the bath.

I feared getting into that bath and drowning after falling back to sleep. My eyes barely managed to stay open. They burned from my effort to stay awake. I rubbed at them and stepped into the bath. I sat there for ten minutes and washed my hair and body. Then I got out and wrapped myself in the rose colored terry cloth robe hanging on the door. I wound my hair up into a towel of the same color.

Whenever I walked out of the bathroom Ella was waiting for me beside the vanity table. I raised my eyebrows at her. I had thought these rooms to be mine, yet I felt as if she had to be one of the nosiest people in the world. She could have waited until I was out of the bath. And I could most certainly dress myself.

She stuck out her hand to hand me the dress that lay over her arm. I picked up the maroon colored dress. It had three quarter inch sleeves with white lace that hung to the wrists. Its skirt looked rather long and the bottom of the dress was edged with white lace. The squared off collar also was edged in the same white lace.

It was obvious she wasn't going to leave me alone so I went back into the bathroom to get dressed. I slipped the dress over my head and pulled it down around my waist. It fit me around my hips and waist but my breasts were a little too large for it and were pushed up a bit out of the top. I walked out of the bathroom to Ella.

"Unzip it! It's too small. I can't wear this!" I claimed. I felt so uncomfortable in it.

"No, dear, it fits perfectly! You look ravishing in it!" She clapped her hands together enthusiastically then grabbed me by my elbow and shoved me into the vanity chair. "Now we'll do your hair. When your uncle sees you he will most certainly see his daughter." Why was she comparing me to this Racheal all of the time? How could I look so much like her if I was only distantly related?

Ella fixed my hair just as she claimed. She dried it with a towel until it was just barely damp and then she brushed it out until it was completely dry. "I know we're going to be late for dinner, but that is just as well. Everyone else is normally late, anyway." She curled the bottom of my hair and pulled it back into a beret. She fluffed my hair around my face and then helped me out the chair. She smiled at the work she had done. "Has anyone ever told you just how beautiful you are?"

I shook my head. "I am not beautiful, Ella. But thank you." I looked down at my feet. She had given me a pair of black dress shoes. I absent mindedly kicked at the carpet.

"Oh but you are! You have a special beauty, Phoenix. To me, you shine from the inside out."

I didn't want to be complimented any longer. Compliments made me nervous. "We better get down to dinner." I said. I flashed her a quick smile and left the room. I waited for her half way down the hall, forgetting how to get to the dining room. She caught up with me quickly and led me to where we would be eating.

When we entered my great uncle was sitting at the head of the table looking like a king. His dark hair, the same color as mine, had streaks of gray running through it. To my utter surprise he looked like my father, only older. His nose had a slight bump at the top as if it had once been broken. He turned to look at me and his eyes were just as black. He looked as shocked to see me as I was to see him. He looked me up and down, looking shocked to see me. Did I really resemble his daughter that much?

He quickly regained his composure. "You're late." He snapped. "Where is everyone? Mitchell isn't even in here. That boy isn't much of anything but trouble."

I expected Ella to defend her son, but she completely ignored her husbands comment. "Now, dear, Phoenix and I had to work on her hair. It would have been done but the jet lag made her very tired and I allowed her to sleep."

"Oh." He glared his black eyes at me. "Don't let it happen again." He growled, his full, thick lips pursed together for the rest of the evening.

I took the seat that Ella assigned for me on the left side of Uncle Gerald. On my right there was an empty seat and across from me sat Jenny. She had just come into the room and sat whenever I lifted up my head. She wore a pretty light blue dress and her red curls were pulled back on top of her head. Her eyes were the same black as mine, as my uncle's, and as my father's. Yet, against her pale skin, which held the same pale tone as mine, and red hair her eyes seemed much more exotic, especially since they were almond-shaped like her mother's.

She smiled charmingly at Uncle Gerald. "Hello, Daddy. Sorry I am late! I just wanted to make sure I looked beautiful just for you!"

His face softened and he smiled warmly at her. "It's quite all right, dear. Let's just get to eating."

With that the meal began and I couldn't help wondering why we had waited for Jenny but we couldn't wait for Mitch. Was he truly that much of an outcast in his own family? Is that why my instincts told me to trust him?

We had been having dinner whenever Mitch wheeled himself through the doors. "Thanks for somebody waking me up to tell me it was time for dinner." He snapped, glaring icily at his mother.

Ella merely smiled at him. "I'm sorry, dear, I had no idea that you were sleeping." She didn't seem actually apologetic before she went back to the plate in front of her.

"You shouldn't be sleeping in the middle of the day, anyway." My uncle's eyes were on me as he said this. But, just as I had never cowered from my father, I would not cower from him.

"I'm sorry." Mitch spit through gritted teeth. "If I didn't have to take pain medications I wouldn't find myself feeling so weak." And it was obvious he was having a hard time wheeling himself. That's when I pushed myself away from the table and got up to walk towards him. I grabbed the handles of his chair and began to push.

"Where do you sit?" I asked.

"You're going to make an enemy in your uncle if you become my alibi." He whispered to me as he pointed to the seat next to mine. Did they have to make things difficult on him?

"I don't care." I whispered back. "I'm in need of friends and I have a feeling I am not about to be treated the same way as your half sister."

"You'll be treated worse if you are friends with me."

"I have a mind and will of my own." I quipped. He seemed reluctant to befriend me, yet he had seemed enthusiastic earlier that day.

I pushed him up to the table at the spot beside me. Nobody really paid much attention and we all went back to our food. I said not a word, nor did Mitch say anything. We sat eating silently, listening to Jenny ramble on about her newest boyfriend and Ella becoming excited and taking about a shopping spree. They giggled and laughed excitedly and the entire time my uncle ignored them. He sat, chewed, and grunted at questions asked of him.

Whenever dinner was finished I rose last from the table. I watched as servants came in to take dishes away and into the kitchen. I couldn't help wondering if I could ever get used to depending on servants. These people took care of this grand house without even the slightest of complaints. They didn't get paid as much as they deserved to be paid.

I left the dining room and walked out to the garden. It was cool, especially for a California spring night. Summer was just around the corner. I wasn't yet out of school but Ella was already enrolling me into school. I was nervous. It was the end of my sophomore year, and I hadn't been to regular school since the eighth grade. I didn't know what I was going to do. How would I ever fit in?

I jumped at the sound of a twig cracking and spun around. Mitch was wheeling himself out of one of the mazes of flowers. Every one of the bushes in the garden were at least six feet tall and all were surrounded by flowers. The deeper into the garden you went the

more confusing it was. It seemed, though, that Mitch knew his way around the garden well.

"You scared me." I said, stepping up beside him.

He smiled up at me. "I didn't know you were out here. I'm sorry for scaring you."

I licked my lips and thought a moment before I proceeded to ask him what was on my mind. I took a deep breath. "Why does my uncle treat you just a shade above a servant?"

"Because I am not his child, and I resemble nothing of a Parish, nor do I resemble my mother. I look like a man he hated. That and I am, what he considers, weak. It is not my bronze, obviously, that I work with, but my brains. The man is all about physical force. I cannot be part of his family because I am crippled and cannot walk." He wheeled over by the nearest bench and ushered me to sit down. I did so quickly.

"Well, you haven't always been in a wheelchair have you?" I knew I was prying. I was being far nosier than what was normal for me. But I was curious about my family, especially the part of my family that seemed lonely and lost. He was an outcast like me.

He didn't seem unwilling to talk, though. "No, I have only been in the wheelchair for two years. But even before then I wasn't always in fights as he was. I wasn't social, I strayed away from parties and I hid like a hermit in my room. I do not fit into his family. He has finally accepted that he will only produce girls and so Jenny, his actual third daughter, is his heiress."

"Third daughter? But I have only heard of two." I was confused. There was Racheal and there was Jenny. Who else was there?

"You know his second daughter who is a mere three years older than me and five years older than you." He answered with a smile. I raised my eyebrows. What was this?

"Who?" If I was finding out secrets about my family already I couldn't imagine what I would find the longer I lived here. I felt a chill rush up and down my spine. I was afraid of what I might find.

"Carrissa." At first I wasn't sure that I had heard him right. How could that be right? Carrissa's parents were dead. Weren't they?

"But, how can that be?"

"Carrissa was only five years old whenever she left here with my Great Aunt Lillian. Her mother had been dead for a year. My father was still alive then and my mother refused to take care of her because she had me. Your uncle was furious that his second wife had given him another girl. He didn't need another girl, he had his hands full with his "full of attitude" daughter he had at the time. So, Aunt Lillian took her with her whenever she

moved up north. Lillian's family had gone bankrupt, but had been hidden well by her name until her husband died. Karen married Michael, thinking she would become rich with the Parish fortune he would inherit. But something happened, I'm not sure what, and Michael was disowned and she and Michael quickly followed up to northern California not long after you were born." I just stared at him. Why had they lied to everyone then? Was it to save Carrissa of the embarrassment, because her father didn't want her?

"So," He began "I have revealed a lot about the family tonight that you had no idea about. You owe me, Phoenix." I could feel his eyes on me and my head shot up to look at him. "What are you running from? What has made you decide to get your mother out of trouble?"

"My father." I almost whispered. "He'll kill her if he ever finds out. But most of all I just couldn't stay there. I don't know what I am going to do after that baby is born and my uncle kicks me out."

"You'll stay here after the baby is born, Phoenix. You'll stay here because I won't let him throw you back to the place you seem to fear. There aren't many people who show me kindness the way you have, so I'll give you kindness in return." That night I made a special bond with Mitch. He became the first true friend I'd ever had. "It is late so I am going to head on to my room. Would you mind pushing me?" He smiled charmingly and I smiled back and stood up. I took the handles of his wheelchair in my hands and listened to him as he gave me directions to where he felt the safest in the world. Barely a word was uttered between the two of us as we made our way to his room and parted at the door. We said our goodnights and then I walked away. But no real words were needed. We had proved to each other that we were worthy of the other's friendship. I just prayed that it lasted forever and not just a few short months.

I spent my first night in my new room tossing and turning. My miserable thoughts plagued me all night long. I had gotten away from my father and yet I still felt him hovering over me, ready to raise his fist the moment I said something he didn't like. What would happen if he ever found out what Mama and I were doing? Then I felt like smacking myself. I knew what would happen. I didn't want to think about what he would do.

When the morning light burst cruelly through my window the next morning I groaned and yanked the comforter over my head. Why did there have to be a window on that specific side of the bedroom, aiming right at me? I threw the blanket off of me just as a tiny maid stepped in. She carried a silver tray that looked far too big and heavy for her mousy body to hold. I went to get up, she caught me in mid motion, though, and told me she had everything under control.

She got to my bed and laid the tray on my bedside table. She smiled warmly at me. "I'm Patsy" She introduced herself. Her brown hair was held tightly back in a bun on top of her head and her she had high cheekbones. Her face and body were rather gaunt, as if she

were under nourished. Friendly gray eyes smiled at me for a moment before walking into the large bathroom.

"What are you doing?" I asked. I was curious about why it was eight in the morning and I was suddenly having breakfast in bed.

"I'm your personal maid, dear, I'll be waiting on you. All of the ladies in the house have breakfast in bed and stay in their rooms until about noon or so. I am also making you a bath at the moment, unless you plan to have one later." She stood in the doorway of the bathroom with a bottle of bath bubbles in her hands.

I was at a loss for words. I had never been waited on and treated like such a princess. It was highly confusing to me. "Well, I, uhm, I'm not quite used to this sort of treatment. But I think I'll take a bath right after I eat. You really don't have to do this, though."

"Yes I do, miss." She called from in the bathroom where I heard the water rushing from the faucet into the giant ivory tub. "It's my job."

Her voice held no argument in it. Then I thought about it. Were I to refuse her she would lose her job and not be paid. That's when it hit me that these people chose this job. They were paid for waiting on me and the rest of this strange family. I shrugged my shoulders and began my meal.

Afterward, I did just as I told Patsy I was going to. I got into the bathtub. I sighed as I slid down beneath the water. It was so relaxing. There was only a small window here in the bathroom, and rose colored, lacy curtains covered it. Only a slight bit of the morning sun was shining through.

The scent of roses and vanilla filled my senses completely. Suddenly it went from just relaxing to a giant bed of water. Before I knew it I was waking up again and the water was chilly and the bubbles had all but melted into the water. Shocked I sat up and rubbed at my eyes. I was always "good" at sleeping but never once had I fallen asleep in the bathtub. I quickly washed myself off and washed my hair and got out.

Whenever I walked out I glanced at the clock to see that already it was eleven in the morning. I had been asleep in there for a good two hours! How could I have allowed myself to sleep like that? Couldn't be jet lag. I was still in the same state.

I noticed the outfit on the bed before I noticed the note attached to it. I walked over and peered down to see in the nicest, most elegant hand writing I'd ever seen on stationary that was just as feminine and elegant. On the small, pretty paper, was written:

Phoenix,

This is what I have out for you to wear today while we shop. It's just an old suit of Racheal's. She wore it whenever she was about your age and you both are about the same size. Be dressed and down at the car by one. Thanks a bunch!

Ella.

There was almost a ghostly presence about the suit. It was pretty and I thought a bit too fancy to go shopping in. Black slacks with a white shirt and black vest lay there. The sleeves of the shirt flared out at the wrists and the buttons were hidden not only by the black vest but also by an extra cloth put over them. She had once worn it, I thought to myself. My father's cousin. One I'd never met but felt a strange connection with. Or maybe it was all in my mind. Ella had been comparing me to her since I had arrived yesterday.

I slipped into the suit and to my utter surprise Ella had been correct. It fit me perfectly. I picked up my hair and twisted it into a bun. I pinned it quickly and slid into the shoes that had also been left with the suit. They were a slight too big, but I didn't care. I was about to get more clothes and shoes than I'd ever had in my possession before. I was positive about that.

I made my way down the stairs and was a little spooked by the silence of the house. The only noises were from the servants cleaning and dusting things that really had no need to be cleaned or dusted. I made my way back up the stairs, decidedly feeling safer up there. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, though, and suddenly I was standing in the middle of what was too obviously the library. Tall shelves lined the walls of the room except the west wall, which wasn't truly a wall at all. Just like in the ballroom the "wall" was a giant window that started at the ceiling and made its way to the floor. It curved at the bottom, though, to give a rather dramatic affect. The scene outside was breathtakingly beautiful. It was completely the deep blue green sea. It felt as if I were on a grand ship. I walked over to the window and peered out.

I looked down at the part of the floor that had been made part of the window. Nothing but water was beneath me and it did give me a feeling of fear. Yet, it was so beautiful to look at. The sea rolled gently beneath the window, as if greeting me. I laughed out loud to myself.

"Beautiful view is it not?" I spun around to see Mitch wheeling up to me.

"I-I didn't know anyone else was in here." I felt as if I had been caught looking completely insane laughing to myself. My face felt terribly hot was embarrassment.

"Welcome to my haven, Phoenix. Nobody ever comes in here except for the servants that I allow to enter every morning to clean." He swept an arm out dramatically, a smile on his handsome face.

"I'm sorry if I intruded into your private place, Mitch. I didn't know where I was going and suddenly I ended up here." His smile was warm and welcoming.

"No, it's all right. I don't mind you being in here unless you have no appreciate for books. You see, after the lovely, mysterious Racheal left nobody ever used the library. By the time I was four years old I knew how to read and this became my place. Racheal actually taught me to read. After she left, this place didn't quite seem the same." His smile became sad suddenly.

"You knew her?" I was curious to know more about her. She seemed to be what had given this house life at one point in time. Why I knew that I didn't understand. I just knew it.

"Yes, for a brief while I did. She left only a couple years after my mother married your uncle. She was always depressed unless she was with me. Though, I heard, once she was not a sad beauty but a fiery one. She had a passion for everything that she did. Then one day it was taken from her. Last time I saw her was in here. She was standing right where you are now, the sun was setting and I was five years old. She promised to come back and see me one day whenever I was grown up. I would always be her friend, she said." He sighed. "I believed her at the time but not any longer. I don't look up expectantly every time the doorbell chimes throughout the house."

"She was very motherly to you wasn't she?" This mystery cousin fascinated me. What had she been like?

"Yes, more so than my mother was to me at the time. But according to some of the rumors I hear, she had lost a child in childbirth. It was only natural for her to take to me as she did." Suddenly I heard a gentle tapping on the door. Mitch and I both looked to the door just as Ella peaked in.

"Oh, just the person I was looking for!" She exclaimed. "I had come in to ask Mitch if he'd seen you." Her smile, as always, was brilliant. "You look beautiful in the outfit. Come, let's go shopping!" She cried and left the room in a rather dramatic sweep.

Mitch shook his head with a smile. "My mother, the drama queen." He said. "Have fun." He then wheeled himself out of my sight. He was rather fast on those wheels. And quiet. One minute he was there the next he had all but disappeared. I quickly followed Ella's lead and left the library.

That day I was dragged in and out of so many shopping centers that I couldn't remember the names of any of them. But suddenly I was dressed in the most fashionable and expensive clothing that had ever touched my skin. Ella insisted on some make up, though I told her I probably wouldn't ever wear it. "Just for special occasions." She insisted. So I shrugged and went along.

Along the way she bought me not only nice pajamas and night gowns, make up, school clothes, for I would be going to regular high school here, but I was also fitted into five evening gowns. My favorite that was bought was a dark, wine red dress that reached my ankles. The top half was somewhat tight and it crisscrossed in the back and then swooped down in the front. It was tight until it reached my hips where the skirt fell into thin, loose material that hung a little higher in the front than the back. Ella bought a pair of red heels to match. For once I actually liked the way something like that fit me. I didn't feel fat or ugly in it but actually beautiful.

The other four dresses were of similar styles, one was an elegant-looking form fitting dark purple dress. I was afraid I'd never wear it, though. I had a little bit of a pudge in my lower stomach area and something like that I just didn't feel comfortable in. I personally thought that Ella bought it because she liked it and hoped to wear it. I didn't care, nobody but Ella and the lady in the store would ever see it on me anyway. Then two of the dresses were black, one sparkled when in the light just right and the other was made of velvet and was strapless with a full billowing skirt that touched mid-calf. The last of them was blue velvet and absolutely beautiful. Just like most of the other dresses, it had a full billowing skirt that fell to my ankles. The sleeves on it were made of silk and were thin and transparent. They hung loosely off of my shoulders. Then an extra cover of the transparent silk hung around the skirt. It dazzled me, that dress, my other favorite out of all five evening gowns.

When we finally got home it was only an hour before dinnertime. All of my things were taken to my room and hung up. I stood before my closet just staring in awe of all of the clothes that were in there. Never in my life had I so many clothes. I wasn't sure if I'd ever even wear all of them!

I was shocked by the tapping on my door and before I could even go open it or tell the person to come in it was thrust open by my cousin Jenny. She stood in front of me, her black eyes looking at me from head to toe. "Well, let me see what my mother got you." She demanded as she rushed over to stand beside me and go through my closet. "I must make sure all of your things are right for school and you won't embarrass me." She began pulling out clothes and holding them up to her. She raised her eyebrows to some of the clothes and scoffed at others.

"Most of these will do, I'll even borrow some for myself." She said as she held up a nice black shirt and stared at herself in the full-length mirror. "Some I never want to even see on you, though."

"I have awhile to worry about school." I said. I was scared to think about school. I hadn't been in regular school in so long that the thought of actually going had my stomach in knots.

"Summer flies by. Before you know it you're hearing that oh so familiar, annoying bell ring, announcing your next class." She was still standing in front of my mirror grabbing clothes from my closet and holding them up to her to see how they would look.

"What is the school like?" I somehow knew not to trust Jenny but I would be going to school with her. I needed to know what would be happening.

"It's just the average public school." She turned to look at me then. "What, you've never been to school? You're supposed to be a junior aren't you?"

I nodded. "But, I haven't been to regular school since eighth grade because of my health."

She smiled incredulously. "You've never been in a highschool?" She raised her eyebrows, as she often did, I would soon find out, whenever she came up with an idea. Her smile, though luminous, was frightening. "The boys are going to have a blast with you." She laughed as she left my room. I didn't understand why she wanted to make me miserable, but evidently she was excited to see me hurt by some high school boy. I smiled. That would never happen because I wouldn't allow myself to get that close to some highschool boy.

Dinner was the same as it had been the night before. My great uncle barely uttered a word, my aunt and cousin babbled incessantly and Mitch was late. I would soon find out Mitch was always late because, in spite of his handicap, he had a room upstairs and had the hardest time getting down the stairs, even with a servant or two. I felt horrible for him and the next night before dinner I got dressed early and went down to his room.

I knocked on the door softly and heard him holler "Come in!" I pushed the door open and walked in .The room was very large and everything in the room was actually dark. The carpet was dark, blood red, and there was a large brown, almost black, rug in the middle of the room where the large, dark oak, four poster bed sat. He was sitting before his mirror just finishing dressing for dinner. He smiled whenever he saw my reflection in the mirror. He spun around.

"May I help you?" He asked. I could smell the sweet, yet very male cologne drifting from him.

"That depends on if you let me help you." I answered. He raised his eyebrows in question. He didn't have to ask before I was rambling off my answer. "I know you have a hard time getting downstairs, because the idiots in this family have put you in an upstairs room and yet expect you to be on time for dinner. So," I don't know why I was suddenly blushing but I felt my face redden. "I have come to help you."

His smile broadened and lit up his blue eyes. "And what happens if you're late with me?" He was challenging me, telling me in his own way to back off because if I didn't this family would treat me as they treated him.

"Then that is my problem." I snapped.

He laughed at my determination. "Then so be it," He said softly, his smile warm. "Well? Shall we sit here bantering back and forth or are we going down to the dining room?"

Without a word I stepped behind his wheelchair and began wheeling him down the hall to the stairs. One of the maids helped me as I helped him and his damned chair down the stairs. Oh how difficult it was but in the end, for the first time since his accident, Mitch was in the dining room on time. Everyone was shocked but pretty soon, dinner went on as it had the last two nights. As we all sat there I looked over at Mitch, whose eyes I could feel on me, and smiled. There was no way around it. We were friends and would be for a long time. There wasn't any way I'd let him push me away. Besides, in a way we were both misfits. Especially, in this family.

The next week seemed to fly right past me. Already I was annoyed by Jenny's spoiled, self-centered acts. I knew she didn't want me there. I was another female, the very same age as her, even though she was three months older. I had no intention of winning over her dear father, though over that first week I caught him staring at me with the strangest look on his face. He always looked at me as if I were a ghost. Jenny didn't like the fact that she ever caught him looking at me and often she would start her routine about something that she wanted, taking his attention immediately away from me.

Jenny also liked to pull pranks on me. I didn't realize it was her putting gum in my hair, or pushpins in my shoes, or worms in my bed, at first. But one day I decided to follow her whenever I thought she was looking a little suspicious. I followed her straight into my room where I saw her dump a whole thing of what looked like red fruit punch all over three of my white shirts. I watched her do it and she didn't even notice me there until she turned from the closet and saw me standing there, my hands on my hips.

"Is it even safe for me to ask what in God's name you're doing?" I felt the anger growing deep within me, so much anger that I couldn't even yell.

To my surprise she had the audacity to smile. "I'm making your life a living hell. But don't worry, this is just the beginning of it."

"The beginning? Why would you even want to do the things you've been doing to me over the past week? What is your problem?" I demanded.

"I don't like you. Nothing personal, really. It's just that your goody two shoes act annoys me." With that she left my room, not allowing me another word in. My blood was boiling. I grabbed my shirts and stomped down the halls and to the study where I knew my uncle often sat after dinner.

His head shot up as I slammed into the room, not caring to walk in or knock softly as I had been taught to do by Ella. "It is rude to enter a room without knocking." He growled.

"Look at what your precious, spoiled daughter did to three of my brand new shirts." I growled back, thrusting the shirts out at him. I had learned long ago not to be afraid of anyone in my family. I had put up with my father I could certainly put up with his uncle.

"Is that it?" He looked at me as if I had gone completely insane.

"No!" Then I began rambling off all of the things she'd been doing for the past week. "And I'm dead tired of waking up with gum in my hair!" I finished. I felt like tearing out my hair because of the look on his face.

"Do you have proof Jenny even did any of this stuff? I don't know you, you might just be trying to get her into trouble and doing these things yourself." He was in complete denial about his daughter's guilt!

I let out a frustrated cry. "I watched her poor bright red fruit juice on my brand new shirts! I haven't even worn them yet!"

"I'll just have Ella buy you new shirts, no big deal." He said as he settled back down into his chair and held up the newspaper. "Now get out of here. I don't want to listen to you slander my angel's name any longer."

"Angel?" I cried incredulously. "You call that monster an angel?" I couldn't believe my own ears. My cousin was no angel. She was definitely a devil.

Before he had time to reply I felt someone grab my arm and yank me out of the room. I was thrust into Mitch's lap as the door slammed shut. I was shocked at first and then realized what had happened. I shot up from my sitting position and spun around. "What's wrong with you?" He demanded before I could even say anything to him. "Are you so hot tempered that you don't even know when to shut up? I know my stepfather, Phoenix, and he is a dangerous man. I suggest you do not make accusations about my sister, whether they are true or not. He'll never believe them."

"Hot tempered?" I felt like beating someone and if that someone had to be Mitch so be it! "I watched your sister ruin three of my brand new shirts." Suddenly my shoulders fell. I was fighting for nothing. Shirts could be replaced and I just had to make sure to lock my door and keep her from ever going in it.

Which is exactly what Mitch said as he turned his wheelchair and began making his way toward the garden, where he spent his evenings until he went to bed each night. "It's pointless to argue with him, Phoenix. The Parish blood keeps him from listening to anything he doesn't want to hear." He smiled at me then, a smile so charming any other girl would swoon. Even I was won over by that sweet, warm smile. "I'm sure you know all about that, though, Phoenix." He laughed. "Come on, let's go take a walk in the garden." I didn't even correct him. We both knew I would walk and push him through the mazes of flowers. Why even voice it?

The summer night was cool and sounds of the ocean were faint where we stood. As we drifted farther into the garden the scent of the sea wafted up and the sounds became louder. There was something calming about it. I felt my nerves relax. Already I had been in this place a week and already my emotions were on edge. Was there any place on earth where things in my life wouldn't be so emotionally draining? I had a feeling the answer was no.

Mitch and I barely said a word to each other as I pushed him through the garden. There wasn't much to say. All in all, it was nice just being in the company of someone you felt comfortable with. At least part of my family didn't hate me in some way, I thought bitterly. My mother's younger cousin seemed to be the only one who actually cared about my thoughts and feelings. I was glad for that, but why couldn't my family just be normal? Why couldn't I have a good, loving family where little things were dealt with quickly and lies were only myths? I suppose that lying was part of every family and my dream of such a family without them was the true myth.

It seemed as if I was doomed to forever live with a family that could hardly stand me. I seemed to remind Ella of her long lost friend and it was becoming painfully clear that my presence bothered not only her, but my great-uncle as well. Everyone knew how Jenny felt about me. Her hatred wasn't something she hid from me. She was more than willing to tell me how much she hated me. It was no better here than it had been living with my parents and siblings. I wasn't worth much to either family.

Not that Ella was ever mean to me. No, that wasn't true at all. She was very kind to me, unless a fight broke out amongst Jenny and myself and then she always took Jenny's side. Mitch said that was because she felt it was her duty to stand up for Jenny. Mitch also said that it was clear that his mother favored me over Jenny because I reminded her of the mysterious Racheal. She just couldn't stand by my side whenever Jenny and I were battling one another; which we seemed to do often enough. Before I knew it a whole month had past and Jenny and I had been in more fights than Celeste and I had ever been in.

I decided, finally, one day, that I had to confront Ella about Jenny's behavior. I walked into the garden and zigzagged my way through the flowers until I found my spot at the clearing. The clearing there was hidden for a good reason. It was there for Ella and Jenny to go tanning, either nude or with bathing suits on. Already I was used to the lack of modesty Ella had. I was used to seeing her nude and didn't care if she was sprawled out in a lawn chair completely naked.

"Ella," I began sitting at the table, under the giant umbrella. There was a pitcher of lemonade and an extra glass, for anyone who joined her, sitting at the table. "We need to talk about Jenny."

It was almost humorous, the fact that the only thing she was wearing were sun glasses, from which she peered over at me. "What has my trouble making daughter done this time?" She asked.

"Nothing as of right now." I crossed my left leg over my right one and cradled my chin in my right hand. "But I don't want her to do anything! Ella, there has to be some way you can keep her from pestering me all of the time. Hasn't she ever been disciplined?"

She sighed and laid back, pushing her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. "Of course not. My daughter? Disciplined? HA! That child doesn't even understand the word. Mitch

does, but never Jenny. I've never had a hand in Jenny's upbringing. I've always been her friend rather than her mother. If I dared to discipline her in any way he attacked me for it so I never did it. Funny thing is, he was much harder on Racheal." Ella always brought up Racheal whenever I talked to her. She compared every female she knew to the mysterious young woman who was beginning to annoy me. Hearing about how beautiful and wonderful she was irritated me. Sometimes I wanted to shoot Ella for saying that damned name.

"I'm not worried about how tough he was on Racheal. I'm tired of being treated badly by Jenny and my adoring great-uncle. I've never done anything to either of them, Ella. Please, talk to him, do something!" I was begging now. I was tired of finding my clothing ruined and tacks in my shoes and gum in my hair whenever I woke up in the mornings. Her childish pranks were grating on my nerves and I was close to blowing up.

She sighed again, shaking her head back and forth and rising from her chair. She walked toward me and poured more lemonade in the glass she held in her hand. She lifted her lavender silk robe from where it lay across the table and wrapped it around her slender, perfect body. Any woman would kill to have that sort of perfection, especially at that age, naturally. As far as I knew Ella had never had any plastic surgery. Her beauty came right from birth.

"If I could do something to put a stop to my daughter's tormenting you, Phoenix, I would. But there is simply nothing I can do. You know who runs the house around here." She seemed almost sad. I didn't really know that reasons for why she was married to a man that she didn't really care for. I knew there was a lot about this family I didn't know, a lot I was interested in knowing but too scared to ask about. I knew that Ella was my mother's cousin and her husband was my father's uncle. How did these two families become connected like this whenever Ella wasn't much older than Mama, maybe a year or two older at the most. It confused me but I didn't bother asking, for I feared what kind of pain, what kind of sheer agony, bringing up the past would bring to the people who had lived it.

When I left Ella there I knew she was completely right. There was simply nothing that she could do about Jenny. If she even tried Jenny would run to her father and all hell would break lose and I would be at fault again for starting trouble. Mitch had told me my Uncle wouldn't throw me out, but something told me he was dead wrong. If I irritated Jenny enough my dear great uncle just might throw me out and then where would I go? Could I ever face that family back there again? I didn't want to, that was for certain.

I wasn't quite sure what was about to happen in this family. I was expecting Mama would be here within the next month or so to have Damian's baby. Maybe I'd feel more comfortable with somebody from my past back here. But the thought that Mama just might be different here in the world she'd been brought up in than she was back at home made me pause. Would she be different? Or could I confide in her? Why would I even want to whenever I didn't even trust her? I had never confided in her, really, before. Yet, this was different. Here I had only my crippled cousin to confide in and, sometimes, I

didn't want his too wise advice. I just wanted to rant and rave and pretty much be ignored. Mitch never ignored what I said, though. He merely analyzed my feelings and tried to help me out. I felt bad for being angry with him for that. All he wanted to do was be my friend and help me out with all of my mixed emotions. But still, I wanted to just go off on somebody and I could never stay angry enough to actually go on a rampage whenever he was there. His friendly, heart-warming, sympathetic smile always stopped me dead in my tracks.

As I walked and thought more about it I decided that whatever happened would happen. There was no way of preventing the inevitable whether it was good or bad. So, why worry over it? Yet, even while I thought that, my thoughts drifted back to their normal gloom and doom. There were many reasons to worry about it. Many! Why not worry about what was to come? I knew that I was rightfully scared, I always trusted my instinctive feelings. The inevitable, new drama in my life was about to begin. The question was; was I really ever going to be ready for it?

Chapter 7

I was sitting in my bedroom reading quietly to myself the day my mother finally arrived at her cousins, my great-uncles, home. My mother was just starting her fourth month of pregnancy whenever she came. I heard some talking in the hallway and, with the sound of footsteps, the voices grew louder. Whenever I recognized Mama's I jumped from the bed and flung the bedroom door open. Ella was showing her down the hall, but Mama seemed to know where she was going.

Mama stopped before she even spotted me in the doorway and looked to Ella. "You did have my old guest room fixed up for me, right? I mean, sure it was just a guest room but I liked it." She seemed different to me in this house, already. Or was it my imagination? Whatever it was, she just seemed snootier here in this house and only a couple of sentences had burst from her lips.

Ella nodded her head quickly and Mama turned to walk down the hall. That was when she saw me standing there. Her smile seemed almost pasted on at the last minute, for it didn't reach her eyes and at first she didn't seem to recognize me. Actually, she recognized me, but it looked like she had seen a ghost and had forgotten who I was, then remembered at the last minute.

"Well, long time no see, huh?" She laughed, nervously it seemed. "It's good to see you again, Phoenix. The house just didn't feel right without you there." Finally, she seemed genuine about something she said and I eased a little bit and smiled back at her.

"It's good to see you, too, Mama. How are you feeling?" It seemed odd to be suddenly talking to her. I then realized that I had become so accustomed to this family that suddenly she was the fish out of water and I was just another member of this family.

"Good, actually. Not much morning sickness. I've been secretly seeing the doctor and he's told me that everything is going fine and the baby is healthy." She almost seemed disappointed that the baby was healthy, as if she wanted to just lose it and not have to deal with all of this. Of course, how could she feel that way whenever she wasn't dealing with much of anything? I was taking responsibility for her actions. So, technically, it was my child she was wishing were unhealthy.

"That's good." I was holding the bottom of my t-shirt and twisting it in my hands, something I often did whenever I was nervous. I just didn't feel right talking to her. She noticed what I was doing with my shirt and for some reason her eyes widened and she paled a little bit. I knew that she had seen me do it before so I didn't understand what had gotten to her. I looked down at my hands, tangled in the bottom of my shirt and quickly pulled them free.

"Well, uhm, I'd better get to my room. I am feeling a bit weak and tired." She didn't give me a chance to even nod in her direction. She walked quickly past me. I watched her walk down the hall and turn the corner and then I turned to Ella who looked after my mother, looking actually sympathetic.

"What was that all about?" I found her behavior very odd. Why was she acting so strangely towards me?

"I-I'm not sure. She's probably just tired and worn out from the plane ride and the pregnancy. Really, I'm sure when she sees you later everything will be fine." Then Ella quickly followed in Mama's footsteps, leaving me standing, dumbfounded, in the hall. I shook my head and went back into my room shutting the door.

Just as I had thought, things with my mother were going to be different. She was already different towards me and she'd only seen me for a few minutes. I shrugged my shoulders to myself and laid back on my bed to read. I ended up falling asleep and almost sleeping through dinner.

Which I would have done until voices in the hall woke me up. When I opened my eyes the sun had begun to go down and my room was getting dark. I sat up, confused and disoriented until I heard what sounded like my mother's voice snapping at someone. I walked quickly, but quietly, to my door and cracked it open. What made me want to eavesdrop I didn't know, but I wanted to and so I did.

"I can't believe you gave her that room, Ella. There are a million other rooms in this house and you gave her *her* room? What is wrong with you?" Her room? What was my mother talking about? "It brought back too many memories whenever I saw her standing there and doing that twisty thing with her shirt."

"Well, I just thought it would be proper..." Ella began.

"Proper? Putting her in Racheal's old room is proper?" My mother's voice grew louder, close to yelling.

"It is proper!" Ella cried back in defense. "You know it is, Karen. You know." She said in almost a whisper. I suddenly didn't want to hear anymore. I stepped out of the room. Both looked at me, looking horrified.

"What did you hear?" Mama demanded immediately.

"Not really much. Just you being concerned about my being in Racheal's old room. I'm sorry, Mama, I didn't know I was even in her old room and I didn't know it would bother you so much." I said. I was being honest. I didn't understand what it was about me being in this room that bothered her so much. And Ella had never notified me that this was Racheal's room. Once again I felt spooked out. Of course, according to Mitch, the chances of Racheal actually being dead were slim, but still. This had been her room. Her place. Wasn't I invading?

"Well," Mama said, quickly regaining a look of cool and calm about her. "It's just that I wasn't very fond of Racheal. I would prefer it if you weren't in there but since it is where you settled there is no reason to move you to a different room." With that, she passed me, Ella quick on her heels, leaving me feeling dazed and confused.

I went back into my room and just as I turned around I spotted the clock above my bed and realized that it was almost dinnertime. I only had ten minutes to get dressed! I rushed about the room grabbing one of my nice dinner dresses; managing to get it on while it was still buttoned up the back. I ran a brush through my hair quickly, braiding it quickly and twisting it into a knot at my neck. I pulled nylons and shoes on and splashed water on my face to get rid of the look of sleep in my eyes. I knew how Uncle Gerald hated people sleeping in the middle of the day. I rushed out of my door and flipped right over Mitch.

"Jesus, Mitch, do you always have to trip me?" I cried pulling myself to my feet and pulling the skirt of my dress down and smoothing it out.

"You're the one who likes to come flying out of doorways like a bat out of hell!" He laughed, looking at me. "Gerald is going to have a fit when he sees you. You don't exactly look very classy this evening."

"Yes, I know, but I wasted five minutes of my fifteen minute dressing time trying to analyze what my mother's problem is." I shook my head. "I know, I'm a giant mess, but what am I supposed to do?"

He glanced at his wristwatch and bit the inside of mouth. "We have five minutes to get down to dinner. But, we're usually late, anyway, so I'm going to help you. Lean down here."

I did as he said, leaning down over him. He immediately spun me around and made me kneel in front of him, my back to him. He undid the knotted braid and then took it out completely. Then, taking the hair tie I'd used to tie my hair back he pulled my hair into a pony tail, letting it just hang. "All right, get up." He demanded. I did, once again, as he said, and rose and tuned around. "That's some improvement. But you still look so tired. Pinch your cheeks some so you don't look so pale." With that he began wheeling past me.

The two of us entered the dining room, exactly eight minutes late. It had taken us forever, it had seemed, to get Mitch down the stairs. Uncle Gerald couldn't wait to let us know how late we were and how horrible I looked. As I took my seat next to Mitch, Uncle Gerald looked between Mitch and me suspiciously.

"You look like hell, Phoenix. And why are you late, Mitch? I always wondered why the hell you two always seem to be late together and always come in together. And why the hell do you always look like a mess, Phoenix?" I felt myself blush realizing just what he meant.

But embarrassment quickly turned into anger, and once more I could not hold my tongue. "Do you even know what you're suggesting, you nasty, horrible man?" I spit out angrily his way. Mama looked completely shocked by my instant attack. As if she had never heard me fight with an authority figure, I thought. What was her problem anyway? Why was she so different here?

"Yes, I'm suggesting you to be just as much of a slut as your mother!" Mama looked about to pass out and Ella quickly rose from the table and went to sit beside her and fan her off with her hand. I knew my face was red with my own anger.

"Mitch is my friend, my cousin, the only person in this damned household that I can actually trust and like! God knows how everyone just adores Jenny! Any time Jenny and I get into a fight you and your wife always blame it on me. Well, it's pathetic! I hate you and if I had the chance I'd have let Mama deal with this pregnancy thing herself and I'd have never come here!" My voice slowly began to grow louder and by the time I was done having my say I was nearly screaming at him.

Mitch, who normally could calm me down, could only stare at me, all color gone from his face, his blue eyes wide with utter disbelief at my outburst. I looked back at him and he shook his head as if to tell me "you shouldn't have done that". Which he was right about. Before I could even think to apologize, which I had no intention of doing, Uncle Gerald shot out of his seat. The words had taken a moment to sink in but the back of his hand came to slam into my cheek and knock me right out of my chair and onto the floor. I looked up at him defiantly as he stood over me, glaring. Everyone at the table looked at the two of us, all unmoving. It was as if time was at a complete standstill. They all waited to see what would happen next.

With only anger, not a single tear in my eyes, I rose, deadly calm, from my position on the floor. I smoothed out my dress and picked up my chair. Uncle Gerald watched me the whole time, his black eyes blazing with anger. I lifted my chin and pulled my shoulders back. Only after I had pushed my chair up to the table, did I look at him. My eyes glared right into his and a mocking, degrading smile appeared on my lips. "Do you, honestly, think that by hitting me you will accomplish a damn thing?" My voice was low, calm, and yet vicious. "I'm sorry but I have gone fifteen nearly sixteen years of your nephew's abuse and you could pound me until I was black and blue, just as he has, and I wouldn't give a damn. You and your abusive nephew mean absolutely nothing to me. You never will. So, I suggest that, if you would like to keep your dignity, you never lay a hand on me like that again." With that I left the room, my head held high. Everyone sat, Uncle Gerald the only one standing, gaping after me. Every single one of them was shocked by my words. Yet I knew that at least Mama and Mitch knew that I meant them. Especially, Mama. She had seen my temper blow up before. She knew that I meant what I had said.

I sat up in my bedroom, letting my anger sit in the pit of my stomach as I thought of all of the things that I wished I had really said to him. Doing that only made me angrier but I didn't care. I had a right to be angry. My left cheek was still throbbing and when I looked in the mirror it was beat red. I expected that it probably would bruise, he had backhanded me so hard. Pain was also shooting up my back from where and how I had fallen to the floor. I rubbed the small of my back and groaned just as there was a knock on my door. I rose, almost expecting him to be there to make threats on me. Threats I didn't fear in the least bit. So I walked to the door ready for them.

When I opened the door, however, Mitch was there. In his lap was an ice pack. Without a word I stood back and let him enter. "You shouldn't be up here. He'll have something nasty to say about it." I said, though without any conviction. I wanted him here. He was the only person I could run and cry to.

"I don't care, and you know that you don't either." He stated simply and waved his hand to me, encouraging me to sit in front of him on the edge of the bed. I did so quickly, facing him, my head down. The anger in me was gone now and only sadness had been left behind.

He placed his forefinger under my chin and forced me to look up at him. His lips curved into a smile, slowly at first, as if almost afraid to. And then wider, until it reached his bright blue eyes. Then, to my surprise, he laughed. "I have never in my life witnessed someone let that difficult, mean man have exactly what he deserves." He pushed my head to the right so he could look at my cheek. "I'm proud of you, Phoenix Parish. Very proud of you." He said, the laughter gone from his voice. The smile stayed until he placed two fingers on my cheeks and I grimaced. "He hit you really hard. Harder than I thought. That will definitely bruise."

I nodded. "My lower back hurts, too, from falling the way I did." I rubbed at it as another pain shot up it, as if to remind me to say something.

"Yeah, I figured you'd be in some considerable pain from the fall, too." He said nodding.
"But, for the most part, are you all right?"

I smiled bitterly, letting the first tears into my eyes, knowing there was no way of stopping them. "Just another emotional scar." My voice cracked and then the tears came rolling down my cheeks. He pulled me to him, stroking my hair gently.

"I'm sorry, Phoenix, I really am. Had I been able to do anything..." I pulled away from him.

"It's not your fault you couldn't, Mitch. Besides, if I hadn't said anything, then I wouldn't be in any pain right now. I'd be eating dinner and my stomach wouldn't be growling." I moaned lying down on my stomach, resting my head in my arms. I peered over at him. "What's my problem, Mitch? Why do I have to say anything?"

"Because you stand up for yourself. There is nothing wrong with that. You feel that if you don't defend yourself who is going to?" He shook his head and smiled. "That is definitely a trait to be admired, Phoenix. Not many people are like that."

"But, it seems as if speaking my mind and defending myself seems to be far more painful than shutting my mouth and just allowing whoever walk all over me." I felt so bitter and miserable. I, once again, blamed myself for yet another argument; an argument that very well could have been prevented. Of course, most arguments that involved me could be prevented. I just didn't know when to stop "defending myself" as Mitch had put it.

"Letting people walk on you is the easy way out, Phoenix. That's just being weak. This family has been weak for too long, letting the king downstairs rule over all of us. We've needed someone like you to come change things. I needed you to come change things and be my friend, the only one I really have. You're strength in this household. A strength that has been needed for a long time. Don't let him, or anyone else, make you think that you are weak. You are not weak. You are far from it. Never change, Phoenix. Never change." He placed the ice pack on my lower back and then wheeled out of my bedroom without another word, leaving me to think about everything he had said. Right before I fell asleep from emotional exhaustion, I decided that he was right and I had to stay strong. For if I became like the rest, allowing myself to be ordered around I would be weak. And weakness was not something I looked at kindly. Weakness was one of the things I feared most in my life.

I woke when I felt the presence of another person, a few hours later. I curled up into a tighter ball, but squinted into the darkness to make out a shadowy figure. Then I heard the familiar sound of my mother biting out a curse and the sound of dishes clanking together. I sat up quickly and leaned over to turn the nightstand light on.

She had gotten her balance back by the time I had flicked the light on and she looked at me with relief in her eyes. "Thank you!" She cried out as she made her way to my bed where she sat my food down and sat beside me on the bed. "That nasty old bastard would

have a fit if he knew I brought this to you." She said motioning with her head towards the tray that I had already begun to pick at. "But you need to eat, and you're still my child. I still have the responsibility of taking care of you."

"Thank you for risking his wrath to bring this to me." I said softly. I felt comfortable with her now. More so than I had since she had arrived earlier. She now seemed more like herself, maybe even more motherly than usual. It didn't matter. I was just grateful to have her acting like my mother, and not somebody I didn't know.

"I'm also sorry about the way I acted earlier. I know I wasn't acting myself, but this house does things to people. It changes them. I'm feeling more like myself, now, really." She picked at imaginary lint on my bed, not looking me in the eyes. Somehow, I knew her motherly behavior had something to do with Ella.

"It's all right, Mama. But, why were you angry with me being in here? It really is a lovely room. I like it." I wanted to know what it was that made her eyes turn dark at the mention of Racheal's name.

She sighed before answering and then she looked up at me. "Racheal was absolutely beautiful, Phoenix. She didn't even realize her beauty, though, and it seemed to attract men; men that I wanted. Now that she is long gone I'll admit that I was jealous of her. I couldn't stand her. She was the epitome of female perfection and it annoyed me. She was a good girl, never did anything wrong. That is what bugged me most about her." She shook her head, cradling her forehead into the palm of her hand for a second and then ran her hand through her hair. "It has nothing to do with you, though, so don't you worry about it, really. In the end, Racheal turned out to be the smart one, running away and breaking off all ties with this incredulous family."

I just sat there, staring at her. Mama was so beautiful, how in the world could she be jealous of someone? What man in his right mind would choose another woman over the affections of my mother? I had never thought it possible before, especially when she was younger. Yet, here she was telling me that's exactly how it had been. "Why would you think she was so perfect, Mama?"

"Because she was perfect. She was perfect because she didn't know she was perfect, she was simply herself." She stood up and I could tell she was finished with this conversation. "You go ahead and eat. I'm sure your maid will take your plates down in the morning. Gerald won't pay any attention." She leaned down and kissed me on the forehead, something she hadn't done since I was a little girl. "Finish eating and sleep well, sweetie. I love you. Goodnight." Then she left my room without a glance back at me.

I knew before I let myself drift off to sleep that night, that the more I got to know this family, the deeper entangled in its web I became. What was it that made them all so strange? I knew something had to have happened in this family not long before I was born. Something that was never brought to my knowledge because there was no reason to

let me know something about a family I didn't even know. But I knew them now. I knew them now and I would soon find out more and more about this family. I just hoped and prayed it didn't bring me down to their level. I did realize something else, though, and that was this family's problems seemed to all center around one word, one person. That was Racheal.

The next morning as I got ready to start another emotional draining day, I began to think about "my" bedroom really being Racheal's. Did that mean there was things about the room that were hers, or did they get rid of all semblance of her? For the first time since I had gotten there, two months before, I actually researched my room, hunting for things that could have been hers. I had no idea what this supposed beauty even looked like because I knew Uncle Gerald had made Ella get rid of every picture in the house of her. So when I found out that the vanity table's top lifted up and I found the old photo inside, with the words Racheal and Brendan scrawled on the back, I grew excited.

When I looked at the girl in the picture I immediately saw why Ella constantly compared me to her. I reminded her of her every time she looked at me! It looked like a picture of me, only with slight differences. Such as, I thought, my nose was a little sharper, a little longer than hers and her eyes were a different shape than mine, but they were the same Parish color. In the picture she was smiling broadly, looking genuinely happy and she was embracing a very handsome young man. His eyes were a strange blue violet and he had long eyelashes. His nose was absolutely, perfectly straight and his lips were curved into a slight smile. They, too, had perfect shape, his lower lip a bit fuller than his top. I could only assume that the two of them were together, possibly lovers. They looked happy together, though.

I could easily understand Mama's jealousy of her. Though I did look like my father's cousin, there was something special about her that made her extra beautiful. She seemed to shine from the inside out. She was amazingly beautiful, innocently beautiful, I thought to myself. She looked so happy in the picture I couldn't comprehend why she would run away from here. Why would she leave if she looked so happy? Tears came to my eyes. Something happened, I decided. Something that involved everyone in this house, and maybe more people I had yet to meet. Something made this beautiful young woman escape from a living hell. It had to be that way. I had heard enough of her to know that she had the Parish temper and was just as stubborn. She was desperate to get away from them.

"I'll find out what happened, Racheal." I promised the picture I held in my hands. "I promise you, that if you are dead now because of your escape from them, I will find out what happened and make things right." After finding the picture, which I quickly put back in its hiding place under the vanity table, I no longer felt spooked to be in her room. I felt a strange kinship with her and I wanted to help her. I just had to help her.

I didn't even tell Mitch that I had found that picture of her. I was afraid that somehow, someone would find out about it and take it away from me. I knew that she must have hidden the picture for a reason. What the reason was I didn't know and I wished

desperately that someone could tell me. But asking about it meant telling someone about it. If they took that and burned that, as they had her other pictures, somehow, I knew that if she found out about it, she would be hurt. That picture held some importance and I had to keep it a secret.

I had been here two months before Mama and with her living in the house now it felt so strange. This had become my life style, they had become my family. Mama hanging around seemed awkward and I could tell that she could feel the awkwardness I felt towards her. This was a whole new life for me and, really, she was my past that I had somehow managed to let myself forget about until she had come here. I found it difficult to talk to her because of the fact that she was four months pregnant with a child that shouldn't even have to be born. I couldn't help but wonder if Mama had even bothered to tell Damian about it or not.

"Mama?" I began one day as I sat in her room, applying make up and doing her hair. Ella and her had decided to have lunch that day. Just the two of them.

"Yes?" She didn't stop to look at me, just kept pulling at strands of her hair, trying to reach the perfection that she wanted.

"I was just curious, but did you ever tell Damian about the baby?" I knew the answer before her lie could escape her lips. Her face had paled and she slowly set the curling iron down. Finally, after a few moments she turned to me.

"What would make you ask that?" She smiled charmingly at me, the color having returned to her face. She was now an actress, ready to let lies fall from her lips as if it were the honest to God truth.

"Well, I was just thinking that maybe Damian might like to know that he has a child on the way. Wouldn't you think it's right to tell him?" Her eyes glittered almost angrily in spite of the sweet smile she had frozen on her face.

"Of course I told him. He just didn't care. He said he wanted to have nothing to do with the baby!" She began to cry and I couldn't help but want to applaud her for such a grand act. I knew damn well that she hadn't told him. Damian had once confessed to me that more than anything in the world he wanted children. I would have thought that meant illegitimately or not.

"When exactly did you say anything him?" The question that I'd meant to be innocently asked came out challenging and she shot me a look full of fire.

"Do you not believe me? You think I am a liar?" She demanded. I almost laughed. I wanted to say "Yes, Mother, you *are* a liar." But I kept my mouth sewn shut to those tempting words.

"I was just curious as to when you asked him, Mama, that's all." If she could act so well I had to have been able to inherit the talent from her. I feigned my innocence just as she feigned her own.

"Well, I told him right before I left." She began crying again, burying her head in her hands. "He took advantage of me, Phoenix! He used me and I loved him!"

I rolled my eyes, trying not to laugh at her. Of course he used her for sex. What else would a married woman with five children, one almost his own age, be used for? He certainly had no intentions of marrying her. She was already taken! Besides, he was too young to be a stepfather.

"Don't worry about it, Mama. Someday you'll find someone to love, appreciate, and respect you." I managed to choke out my "comforting" words, though it was difficult to do so. If she wanted love, appreciation, and respect first she had to leave my father. She was too stupid and weak to think of that, though.

"Oh, thank you, sweetie. I know you're right, of course." She smiled and wiped at her over dramatic display of tears. "I'd better finish getting ready!" She turned back to the mirror and I knew that the conversation was over. I had been dismissed. I left the room, shaking my head.

I walked along the beach only minutes later, deep in thought. According to Ella, pieces of Racheal's clothing and drops of her blood had been found out here. I stopped to look out at the water that roared upon the shore. The wind was picking up and lifting strands of my hair. The ocean had a tale to tell, I thought to myself. It knew what really happened to her. It had witnessed everything. If only the water could speak.

I also knew that Ella, who had been her best friend. She knew things about Racheal. She had to have known her enemies, had to have known why someone would want to harm her best friend. Ella was hiding something about Racheal. I was convinced that she was hiding something that nobody else knew about. Of course, after the miscarriage she'd had, Ella had told me, Racheal had just turned into herself. She had refused to talk to anyone about anything. One could only assume that she had killed herself in her misery.

But had she actually killed herself, then why would drops of blood and pieces of clothing be found out here, but no body? Where was Racheal really? Was she really even dead? I could easily see why Ella held onto her hope that her best friend was alive. A few drops of blood didn't mean that she was dead. It could mean a million things. I just wished there were someone else I could talk to that had known her. I had so many questions to ask but nobody to ask.

Then I thought about it. My parents had left here after Racheal had disappeared, hadn't they? Maybe, just maybe, in spite of her hatred and jealousy, Mama knew something about Racheal. Maybe, somehow, Mama had some information that could send me on the right track. I knew I had to ask Mama about it. I just had to find a way to do it without her

really knowing that I was interested in Racheal's past. I smiled to myself. The only way to really get anything out of Mama was to be interested in her and only her. If I worded my questions the right way, there was a possibility that I could get answers that I needed and wanted from the past.

As I made my way back up to the house I saw Mama and Ella coming down the steps to leave. Mama's pregnancy still had yet to become evident and she looked absolutely luminous in the white pantsuit that she was wearing. Her figure was still absolutely perfect, no way of knowing that she was carrying an illegitimate child.

I past them as I walked up the front steps and Ella flashed a smile at me. "Why don't you come with us, Phoenix?" She asked.

I thought about it. I would have said no if I hadn't seen the look of irritation on Mama's face at the thought of me going. So I smiled at Ella and said "I'd love to, Ella! Do I look all right to go with you?"

"You always look beautiful, dear. Come on!" Ella grabbed hold of my hand and tugged me back down the stairs. Mama looked so annoyed by my going I couldn't help but laugh and smile. Did I really bug her that much? She really should be careful, I thought to myself, after all, I was the one getting her out of the jam she had gotten herself into by cheating on my father.

We went out to a nice Chinese food restaurant and Ella and I did most of the talking that day. Mama sat fuming because I had gone. She ate her food in silence only nodding or saying something if she were forced to do so. I decided that while she had her mouth so zipped closed, this was the perfect chance for me to ask Ella more about Racheal.

"Ella, you've told me so much about Racheal, but you've never told me anything about the whole miscarriage thing, really." Mama choked on her food and Ella and I looked over at her, I was more shocked, Ella seemed shocked by my question.

"Why would you want to know more about that?" Ella asked, instead of really telling me anything.

"Well, was she married? I've never heard of her having a husband. And how old was she exactly? Did she have many friends?" The questions began to flow freely, as if they had been locked up for years rather than weeks.

"Whoa, wait up there, Phoenix. Where is this interest in Racheal suddenly coming from?" Mama demanded. Her eyes were blazing with a strange light. She seemed angry yet disappointed and really upset at the same time.

"Well, since I am in her room, I just thought I'd like to know more about her. Besides, she seemed to be such an important member of the family. I'm just curious." I offered as my explanation.

"Well, all right." Ella said, deciding that she would answer my questions. Mama, on the other hand, didn't seem to want me to know anything about her or the past. "No, Racheal was not married. She wanted to marry a young man that she was very much in love with but Gerald forbid it because he thought him to be, in spite of the young man's wealth, below the Parish family." Mama looked away. I could almost see the memories welling up in her eyes.

"Racheal was a very good, and caring person, unless you made her angry. She had a horrible temper and was not afraid to do battle with anyone, whether it was physically or verbally. She didn't have many friends, though, because she kept everyone at a distance. I was one of her few friends."

Mama let out a sigh and finally put in her two cents. "Though I was highly jealous of Racheal, she considered me a good friend." She looked down sadly. "I was a horrible friend. Anything she ever told me always managed to get back to Gerald. But I didn't care; I wanted to hurt her. I feel so responsible, damn it!" She got up from the table and walked away, but not before I got a glimpse of the tears in her eyes.

"So, Mama and Racheal were friends?" I asked. That was new information to me.

Ella nodded. "Karen and Racheal always seemed to be close to everyone. In fact, for awhile I was jealous of Karen because she seemed to have taken away the only really good, true, honest friend I'd ever had. When I found out it was Karen telling Gerald everything about Racheal I was so angry at her. There was a huge fight." She shook her head. "Anyway, to answer the other question you asked, she was nineteen years old when she lost her baby. Her depression kept her from being the Racheal we all knew so well. The only time she ever seemed to be content or happy was whenever she was with Mitch. She wanted a child, her own child, so badly. It was all she ever dreamed about. Then that dream was taken away from her." Ella was trying not to let her own tears loose. "The night she disappeared, her and Gerald got into a huge fight and he beat her up. She told me that she couldn't handle it anymore, and ran to her room and shut herself in. The next day we found that she was missing. It's why I think she is still alive. She ran away, Phoenix. She can't possibly be dead!"

I was stunned into complete silence. I had found out a lot more about Racheal than I knew before. Ella was right. Racheal must have run away and she must have done it not long after she had locked herself in her bedroom. Since the windows in the bedroom gave a perfect view of the ocean, I could only assume she climbed out the window and that was where the clothing and the blood had come from. Ella must have decided that, too. Yet, her own father had declared her dead and forgotten all about her, going as far as burning anything that would remind anyone about her.

Nobody spoke on the way home. I was lost in my own thoughts and I knew Ella and Mama were lost in memories of a girl that had once been a friend to both of them, in spite of Mama's jealousy. I knew what I'd heard about Racheal was, no matter how much I had heard, only the beginning to a very long and sad story. There was much more about it

to discover. The more I heard, though, the more I wanted, no, needed to know. There was so much about the past that had been kept hidden until now. Now, I decided, it was time for me to find the truth about what had happened and give them all the peace they needed. They needed to get rid of the burden about Racheal's disappearance. I had to find out more about her before I could find out what happened to her. I would find out about what happened to her, though. Someday. I just had to look hard and listen to the story that everyone was willing to tell.

At the time, I certainly didn't realize that the truth about Racheal's disappearance was just at my finger tips. At the time I didn't know that soon more and more truths would begin to fall down around me and, whether I liked it or not, things about myself were about to be revealed. There was no question about it. I was not ready for what was about to happen.

Chapter 8

I had thought the information that I'd been given would be easy to keep to myself but the moment I got into the house I wanted to tell Mitch. I needed someone to confide in. Though he knew nothing about my search to find the truth about the infamous Racheal, to just tell him would let it off my chest. I needed to tell someone the things I now knew. It excited me that I had found out more about her than I had thought I would find. I had assumed asking questions about her would make Mama and Ella stop talking or even get angry at me and tell me to keep to my own business.

I knew I must have been smiling about my newfound information as I walked down the hallway towards the library where I knew Mitch had himself holed up, because as I began to turn the corner I heard a most familiar and irritating voice call out to me.

"What the hell are you so happy about?" Jenny asked from the doorway of her bedroom. She was dressed in a pair of faded blue jeans that were cut far too low on her hips and a pink top that looked more like she had cut out a piece of cloth, sewed it in the back, put it on and called it a shirt. You'd think with her being so rich she'd dress better, I thought to myself.

"Why does it matter to you what has me smiling?" I snapped, though the smile remained on my face. "You don't like me and the same goes for me not liking you. So why ask me? Besides," I said rambling on because it was obviously annoying her. "I wouldn't ever answer a question so rudely asked."

"I asked you because I need to find a way to wipe the smile off of your face." Her black eyes glared at me defiantly. I shook my head. I still had yet to figure out why she hated me so much.

Instead of getting angry and making a vicious attack in words, I smiled sweetly at her. "That is all the more reason for me not to tell you, now isn't it?" I turned my back on her with her eyes shooting daggers my way as I made my way down to the library.

I entered the library, calling out for Mitch. When he didn't answer back I found it kind of odd. I looked about the library calling for him but I couldn't find him anywhere. I decided he must be in his bedroom or in the garden and quickly left the library to go searching. But when I found that he wasn't in the garden or his bedroom fear began to make my heart pound fiercely in my chest. It wasn't like Mitch to just disappear.

Worry sent me to Jenny's door. I knew she was just like Uncle Gerald and thought disgusting thoughts about my friendship with her brother but I didn't care. I was honestly worried about him.

I knocked softly on the door and when I heard her call out "Come in, Penny!" I entered. She was on the phone, lying on her bed and when she saw it was me instead of her maid she shot me a look of irritation. "What do you want?" She demanded instantly. "No, not you, Melissa. Hold on a sec." She said to the girl on the phone. She raised her eyebrows. "Well?"

"Have you seen Mitch at all today, Jenny?" I asked. I wasn't going to be rude to her. I needed to know that she had seen him and that he was fine, just had gone out somewhere. The chances of that being the case, though, were very slight.

She looked at me with disgust and rolled her eyes. "No, I haven't seen my brother today. He's probably hiding to escape you. I'm sure he's tired of you fawning over him like some obsessed girl."

"It's not that, Jenny." I was too worried to get into an argument, but I was willing to do so. Of course, I was always willing to do so.

"Then what is it?" She snapped. Then she held up her forefinger to hush me. "I'll call you back, Melissa." Then she hung up the phone.

"Mitch is usually in three places of this house, the library, the garden, and his bedroom. He's not in any of the three and it worries me. Mitch rarely ever leaves the library during the day." She thought about it for a second and I saw the slight signs of worry in the black depths of her eyes.

"Well, he has to be around here somewhere!" She rose from the bed. "We need to find him. Last time this happened he had a seizure and stopped breathing." Suddenly fear became panic and Jenny had become my partner. We began searching the house, telling the servants to look for him as well.

It felt as if we had looked for him for hours when we found him whenever it had been a mere twenty minutes. He was in the library off in a corner of the room, lying on the floor. When I found him there I cried out to Jenny to get help then rushed to his side.

"Mitch," I cried, turning him over onto his back. "Mitch, wake up, please. Wake up!" I demanded. He was breathing but he wasn't waking up. I saw the cut on his forehead

where he had hit it in something. I could only assume he must have had a seizure like Jenny had thought and had fallen from the chair. "You have to get up, Mitch. I don't understand what's going on." Tears were burning my eyes. I had never been so scared in my life. Just then Jenny came back into the room alone.

"I called an ambulance, they should be here in a few minutes." She said, coming over to stand next to me. "He'll be all right. He was last time."

"I didn't know anything was wrong with him." I looked up at her. "He never told me that he had seizures.

"He started having them after the accident. They gave him medication for it and it helps but there have been a few times it hasn't helped." The paramedics came in through the library doors at that moment and Jenny rushed over to lead them to where Mitch lay.

Hours later we all sat in the halls of the hospital, all urging Mitch to open his pretty bright blue eyes, smile, and tell us everything would be all right. I wanted to hear that he would be fine. I hated knowing that one of the only friends I'd ever had, one of the only people I'd ever trusted was so close to death. The doctor had told us that there was no telling how long he'd been out and how long the coma would last.

Though all of us were sad and depressed over Mitch being in the coma, Ella was certainly the one closest to losing her mind. She sat hours and hours up at the hospital, begging him not to die. It was a depressing sight to see her sitting besides him, talking to him, silent tears making paths down her cheeks.

After four days of sitting there besides him, Ella looked like she had just gone to hell and was still trying to come back. Her hair hadn't been brushed in day and her eyes had heavy bags beneath them. Her eyes, themselves, were red rimmed from crying so much. She had cried so much that I didn't think there were any tears left in her, for she sat there just staring at her son without any tears in her eyes. I was miserable myself but I couldn't stand to see Ella, who always kept up her appearance so well, look so horrible. I wanted to see her pretty bright smile again and her make up and hair done to perfection. I didn't want to see her misery because it tore at my heart.

"Ella," I began on the fifth day "Come on, let's get you home. You need some sleep and rest." I told her, as I tugged gently on her arm, trying to make her rise from the seat beside his bed.

"No!" She cried out. It was almost as if I had told her that there was no hope and he would never open his eyes again. "I can't leave him. What if he were to wake up while I was gone?"

"I'll stay here with him, then." I promised her, "Please, Ella, I don't want you to get sick. You have to go home and rest some. You have to be strong for Mitch."

"You'll stay with him?" She looked almost child-like as she looked up at me with her wide golden colored eyes.

"Of course I will, Ella. He's my friend, and I love him dearly. Why wouldn't I?" Why did she seem so shocked that she wasn't the only one that cared about him? I quickly got my answer.

"Well, for so long I've been the only one to take care of him and love him. I just never thought that..." She trailed off and tears came into eyes that I had thought couldn't cry anymore.

"Well, it is different now, Ella." I assured her. "Now, if he wakes up while you are gone, I'll be sure to tell him that you have been here the whole time." Though, I highly doubted that he would wake up while she was gone.

She finally nodded her head after what seemed like an eternity. I was certain that she had gotten so lost in her thoughts that she had forgotten that I was standing right beside her. "All right." She said and rose slowly. "I'll go home and take a bath and get some sleep." I lead her out of the hospital and helped her into the car, making sure to promise her a dozen, or so, times that I would take care of him while she was unable to.

For hours I sat besides Mitch's bed that day just staring at him. I wasn't going to beg him to wake up, it would have been a waste of my breath and I knew that. So, I just sat and stared, praying in my heart that the next time I blinked and opened my eyes two blue ones would be staring back at me. I still didn't understand. I didn't know that he had been taking any sort of medication for epilepsy. I didn't know that he suffered from chronic seizures. Maybe if I had known I would have been better prepared for something like this.

Then I thought more about it. Nobody could be prepared for somebody they care about going into a coma and being so close to death. Nobody could ever be prepared to deal with death, or almost death. Death was something you dealt with when it happened, not something you dealt with before and just expected so much that you were prepared for it. You can't be prepared for it.

I ran my fingers across Mitch's cheek and through his thick chestnut hair. He certainly was handsome, I thought to myself. How could any girl not ever see that and just dismiss him because of the wheelchair he sat in. His lashes were long and curled up, making me awful jealous. I laughed out loud. "Oh, Mitch, how could I be jealous of those eyelashes of yours at this moment in time?" It felt good to laugh and I laughed out loud some more. But my laughing was quite hysterical and soon it turned to sobs that shook my entire body. "I promised myself I wouldn't beg you to wake up, but please, please wake up! Don't leave me, yet, you're the only person I trust, Mitch!"

Finally, my sobs quieted and, eventually, stopped completely. I wiped continuously at my eyes to get rid of the tears that threatened to fall. I wouldn't cry any longer. I didn't want

to. I wanted to be strong for him, not cry and whine and beg for him to stay alive. If he were to die then that meant it was just time for him to go, didn't it?

I fought with my emotions late into the day and into the night. Finally, Ella walked through the door looking well rested, though sadness darkened her pretty eyes, she looked healthier than before. Though, she wore not a stitch of make up, the dark circles under her eyes were gone and her hair was brushed.

"You better go on home, Phoenix. I'll stay with him, now." She spoke calmly and I could tell that she was fighting her tears and her own emotions that threatened to take over her body and throw her farther into a black pit of despair. She smiled sadly at me. "Thank you for watching over him." She choked on sobs that got stuck in her throat. "Part of me was hoping that when I walked in here he would be sitting up talking to you, asking when I would be coming back." My own tears began to flow again, and this time I was unable to stop them.

"I wish that he would have been up asking me that when you walked in, Ella." I cried. I rose from my chair and went to her, throwing my arms about her. We stood there, holding onto each other, crying so hard that were we to let go of one another we would certainly fall apart.

Finally, after another hour of sitting with Ella and Mitch, I went home. It seemed that everyone in the house either didn't care or didn't want to think about what was going on with Mitch. Jenny was certainly like an ostrich, sticking her head into the sand and ignoring the fact that her brother was almost dead. She ignored me as I walked right past her in the hallway, sticking her nose up in the air at me. Uncle Gerald just didn't give a damn whether his stepson lived or died. Of course, my great uncle was a mean man who thought the weaker people of the world should all be dead anyhow. Mama just didn't know Mitch well enough to be saddened by it, so she kept to herself, never visiting the hospital or comforting her best friend. I honestly didn't care if anyone comforted me, especially Mama, but Mama was supposed to be Ella's friend and cousin and she wasn't doing very well playing her role as the concerned family member. After all, Mitch was still her young cousin. She should care a little bit.

I chose to ignore the three of them as I made my way to my bedroom where I curled up into my bed without a thought to putting on pajamas. I merely kicked off my shoes and socks and lay back on my bed. As I laid there, I thought about my mysterious older cousin, my father's cousin. It seemed to me that Mama had been friends with Racheal just so she could earn her trust and then take her down. Jealousy had made her plot against her. Yet, why was Mama so upset by her actions? Had she been torn? Had she really cared about her? It confused me. Why had she told on her and purposely made her life a live hell, and yet seemed to care about her, too. Why was Mama really jealous of Racheal? I knew that Mama had to be hiding something from me, not telling me the real reason why she was jealous of her.

The questions about Mama and Racheal's relationship flew through my mind at a fast pace, making my head spin. I knew I just had to find the answers to all of these questions. I knew that I *would* find the answers. But it would take some time doing so. I would have to be patient. I fell asleep knowing that the answers to all of my questions would be unveiled sooner or later, probably sooner rather than later.

Sadness, I decided, had a way of taking pity on you. Whenever you think you've had just about enough misery, and you were ready to say forget life, it gave you something to live for. It gave you something to smile about. Happiness would come back into your life and make you *want* to live again.

Which is exactly what happened the next morning when I woke to the sound of the phone beside my bed ringing, annoyingly, over and over again, mighty early in the morning. The sun had just begun to rise over the horizon when the phone began to ring nonstop.

Finally, deciding whoever it was wasn't going to hang up, I reached over, groping the table for the phone. I picked it up and practically snapped a "Hello?" into the phone. Yet, the voice on the other line had me sitting straight up, wide awake in my bed, excitement making my heart pound.

"You have to get down to the hospital right away, Phoenix!" Ella cried into the phone. She sounded happy, excited. "I think he's going to open his eyes soon. Come! Quickly!" She didn't give me a chance to ask why she thought that, she just hung up the phone. It took a second for what she said to sink into my groggy brain but when it did I jumped from my bed, took a quick shower, got dressed, and rushed to the hospital.

I sped down the halls of the hospital; my shoes making plenty of noise on the linoleum floor as I practically ran. When I got to Mitch's room Ella sat besides him, her hand in his, her eyes shining luminously, a smile wide upon her pretty face. "What's happened?" I demanded immediately, sitting down on Mitch's bed beside him.

"He squeezed my hand, Phoenix! He's alive! He's not going to die!" A smile as broad as Ella's crossed my lips and tears of happiness came to my eyes.

"Oh Ella! That's wonderful! He's really not going to leave us!" I exclaimed, grabbing hold of Mitch's other hand.

Ella and I sat beside Mitch for the rest of the day and half of the next, talking to him, urging him to pull himself all the way awake. Several times he squeezed our hands and I knew that he was alive and fighting to pull his eyes open. Every time I felt the slight pressure of him weakly squeezing my hand, I would squeeze back and urge him on even more.

By the next day, our hopes and spirits raised, Ella and I decided that if we left him just long enough to go to the cafeteria to eat, it wouldn't hurt any. Both of us, I knew, were hoping in our hearts that when we arrived back in the room his eyes might be open,

looking about his surroundings confused, but alive, very alive. That's all I wanted, to see those vibrant blue eyes looking so bright and alive again. Mitch had always seemed so alive before, in spite of the fact that being in a wheelchair should depress him drastically. Yet, he never seemed depressed, but always happy. That is how I wanted to see him again; bright and happy, forever happy.

As we sat in the cafeteria, eating a well-deserved meal, Ella and I spoke excitedly. There were no longer any doubts in my mind about whether he would live or not. Now all we had to do was wait for those blue eyes to open up again. The waiting would be the most difficult part, I decided.

There were very few other people in the cafeteria other than us. So, whenever the sound of shoes hitting linoleum at a quick pace came to fill the room both Ella and I quit talking and glanced over to the doorway. Both of us were shocked to see Mama rushing at us at a fast pace, looking excited, a smile wide across her lips. She hadn't even stopped before she was calling out to us. "Ella, Phoenix, you're never going to believe it!" She arrived at the table, and before either of us could ask her what was going on she had an iron grip on both of our arms and was dragging us towards the door.

Finally, I pressed my feet firmly to the floor, refusing to move a muscle before I knew what was going on. "Mama, I'm not moving until you tell me why you are so damn happy you have to drag us out of here without explaining!"

My words didn't pierce the smile on her face at all. "Oh, it's too wonderful for the two of you to explain. You really must see for yourself!" I finally gave in and followed her quickly down the hall to Mitch's room. Her excitement was suddenly making my heart pound and making me feel lightheaded. Suddenly she thrust us into Mitch's room.

The sight before me had me in tears of sheer happiness. A nurse sat beside Mitch, who was now sitting up with his eyes open! She was trying to give him a drink of juice from a straw, he was having a difficult time but he was managing. I wasn't paying much attention at all to what was going on, however. All that was going through my mind was the fact that he was alive! He was not only alive, but awake and sitting up! I had to stop myself from running over and throwing my arms about him. Yet, I couldn't stop my tears.

"Oh, Mitch! You're all right!" I choked out and rushed to his bedside. "Are you okay? Do you remember me?" My questions rushed out. I looked back at Ella who was so stunned that even in her happiness she couldn't move at all.

Mitch's eyes, which look tired and drained, seemed to be laughing at me all the same. "Oh, Phoenix, I was in a coma, I don't have amnesia!" His voice was hoarse and it seemed to pain him to say those few words. He reached for his throat and closed his eyes in pain as he rubbed it. The nurse quickly placed the straw to his lips.

Ella was at his bedside, now, her own tears silently making their way down her cheeks. She made no move to brush them away. Mitch looked up at her and smiled weakly. "Hi, Mama." He whispered hoarsely. It was the first time I'd ever heard him call her that. Within seconds fo the words coming out of his mouth, Mitch was in Ella's arms. She sat beside him on his bed, rocking him gently back and forth, yet holding onto him as if she were holding his very life within him.

Though Mitch had to stay in the hospital a week for recovery, just knowing he was alive brought me comfort. The sleep deprivation I had suffered from before had left me go of it's sleepless grasp. I now slept through the night, but made sure to get up early and go to the hospital to check on Mitch. It brought me such happiness to see him recover. While I sat hours up at the hospital with him I discussed Racheal with him.

"You are really fascinated by her, aren't you?" He asked. His eyes stared at me intently, waiting for me to answer.

"I somehow feel close to her. Maybe because I am always compared to her by Ella, or maybe because I am in her room. Of course, I think your mother could take a girl off of the streets and compare her to her Racheal." I laughed.

"Maybe so." Mitch said, his head cocked to the side. "Or maybe you really are just like her."

"You would know, wouldn't you? I mean, you did know her." Maybe Mitch, even if he had been a child when she had run off, for that is what I assumed she had done, knew something.

"I was too young to remember anything but her kindness towards me. Everything else I know about her I only know through things I have heard people say about her." My hopes raised higher. Maybe he'd heard something helpful.

"People?" I asked curiously. "The only one that I ever hear talk about her is Ella."

He smiled charmingly at me. "You may have only met the family, Phoenix, but this family has many friends that you have yet to meet. Many people who knew Racheal. Some are content with the thought that she is dead. Others...." He trailed off and I raised my eyebrows in question.

"Others what?" I demanded instantly. My heart was pounding. Why was it so important that I knew things about Racheal? I didn't understand anymore what I was aiming for truly. All I knew is that I was obsessed with finding out the truth.

"Others find her death hard to believe, just as you do." He reluctantly told me. Why was he so reluctant? I knew Mitch knew more than he was letting on. But why? Confusion was becoming more and more like my best friend. He sighed and shook his head. "Leave it alone, Phoenix. Digging up the past is only going to drive you crazy. You won't be

happy just finding out some things, but you'll have to bring up the whole thing. It's been long dead and buried. Why can't you leave it peacefully in its grave?" He seemed rather bitter to the past. What exactly did he know?

"Mitch, there is something out there just waiting for me to uncover it. You want me to leave it alone, but I can't. That is what everyone else has done. Please, if you can't, or won't, tell me something, tell me somebody who can!" I was begging now. My need to know more really was going to drive me insane, I thought. Maybe he was right. Maybe I should just leave it alone.

"I'm not getting into this, Phoenix. I care about you a great deal. You really are my best friend. But I'm not getting into it." He said. He looked into my eyes and I silently begged him to please tell me something. Anything! I had to know. He sighed deeply and looked away. "All right. Give me a pen and piece of paper." He said, his shoulders drooping in defeat. Excitedly, I grabbed a pen and a piece of paper and handed them to him. He scrawled out an address across the paper and handed it to me. "You cannot let your mother, my mother, or Gerald see the address on that paper. They'll know where you got it and there will be hell to pay." He said.

Excitement pounded through me as I looked down at the address. The name on it was Melanie Daniels. I looked up at Mitch. "Who is this exactly?" I asked.

"She was an old friend of Racheal's. Somebody who won't think of Racheal as being dead. She refuses to believe it just as you do. Whenever she comes over to the house for parties and such things she always frustrated Gerald by asking if Racheal has come home yet." He noticed how surprised I was by someone purposely frustrating my uncle. He laughed. "Yes, she enjoys irritating my mother's husband." The smile disappeared from his face and his eyes became intense. "Be careful, Phoenix, okay? You never know what you're going to find out."

After promising to be careful I went home to get ready for dinner. I hid the address with the picture under the vanity table. I couldn't wait to meet this Melanie. She could have a lot of secrets of the past to open up for me. The simple slip of paper that Mitch had written on had become a most cherished gift. I didn't know what it would bring me, but I couldn't wait to find out.

That night at dinner I managed to keep from arguing with anyone. Ella was in an absolutely great mood because soon she would have her son home, Mama was suffering from a nauseous stomach and wasn't even at dinner, and Jenny had managed to skip dinner to go out on a date. Gerald sat quietly eating, as he always did, not glancing even slightly at me. We all sat quietly, content with everything going on. It felt good to feel so comfortable for once.

Later that night, long after everyone had gone to bed, I lay wide-awake, unable to sleep. I couldn't wait to go see Melanie Daniels. Tomorrow just wasn't coming soon enough. And I did plan on seeing her as soon as possible tomorrow. If I could that was. I was

going to call her first, Mitch had told me to do so and had quickly written her phone number on the paper before I left.

Unable to sleep, I shot a look at the clock over my bedroom door. Fortunately, the clock ran on batteries, because a summer storm that had come up from nowhere had knocked the electricity out and I wouldn't be able to see that it was three thirty in the morning. Too restless to sleep, I got up and lit a candle to see my way into the kitchen. I wanted to get some milk to help me sleep, but I knew that without the halls dimly lit by the wall sconces there was no way I'd make it into the kitchen in the dark!

In nothing but a short silk nightgown and robe that Ella had bought for me, I slipped my way down the hall. Since I had no intention of running into anyone I had simply slipped into the robe and left it open, flowing gently behind me as I walked. The house, in its darkness, gave me the chills and made me jump every time the soft lavender silk of the robe hit my calves, making me wish I had taken the time to shut it and tie it tightly.

The storm was still roaring outside, making the ocean slap viciously against the waves. I could hear it clearly, and every now and then lightning would flash and light up the room to make shadows dance on the walls. In spite of how well-built my uncle's home was, a bit of the wind outside was managing to get in slightly and it made my candle flicker fiercely. Just as I entered the kitchen the candle snuffed out and I was left in complete darkness, except for the flashes of lightning every now and then.

Even though I was nearly sixteen years old I was still scared of the dark something awful. I felt my way around until I hit the nearest counter and I set my candle on top of it. I backed up against the counter, hoping and praying for the lights to turn back on or the lightning to flash so I could get some quick glimpse of light. Nature won out and the lightning flashed across the sky, sending shadows every which way. Including the outline of a person. I let out a low, frightened cry as whoever it was played with the door handle. Finally, the person outside managed to fight the wind and pull the door open and be thrust into the room. The door slammed behind him, for it was most certainly a man, making me jump. I prayed that in the darkness, he could not see me. Yet, my prayers went unanswered as a flash of lightning hit the sky once again, illuminating the two of us.

"Whoever is there, can you possibly light a candle?" A young man's voice said softly. "It's awful dark in here and I'd like to see the face of the person I am speaking to." *He* wanted to see *my* face? What about *me* wanting to see *his*?

In spite of how scared I was remembered the lighter I had set in the slit of a pocket on my robe. I wanted to see who this stranger was and my curiosity won over my fear. I fumbled for the lighter and quickly lit my candle.

The young man who stood before me was dreadfully handsome and familiar in spite of being soaking wet. The only thing that had managed to stay dry were his pants that were covered by his ankle length rain coat. Yet whenever he took it off, the shirt beneath it was soaked as well. His jet-black hair was wet and matted down to his head. Familiar green

eyes peered at me and smiled. Oh, why hadn't I recognized that voice? There stood Damian right before me.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded immediately. "And why in the world are you coming through that door rather than knocking or ringing the bell. You're acting like a damn thief!" I cried out. I remembered quickly what I was wearing and pulled my robe tightly around my body.

"I was hoping to come convince you of leaving here. When I met up with Celeste and she told me that you had run off because you were pregnant with my child and your mother has run off because she was too upset to deal with things, I could only imagine the story you two concocted up. We never had sex, Phoenix, so how would you be pregnant with my child?" He was laughing, yet his question was asked seriously.

"It's none of your business what is going on, Damian." I said and went to open the door and demand he leave.

"Like Hell it's not!" His voice raised and then quickly lowered. "It is my business whenever you are claiming that you are carrying my child whenever you are not." He said, coming to stand just inches away from me. My candle snuffed out again, my being too close to the door let the wind blow it out again. When lightning hit the sky once again I was able to see his familiar green eyes pleading with me for an answer. I sighed, lit the candle again, and then pulled him up the stairs and into my sitting room where I lit the fire for some form of warmth.

"You had better get out of that shirt before you get sick." I said, turning around to him. "I'll get you a blanket."

"You're dawdling to draw things out, Phoenix. I just want to know what is going on!" He was getting impatient but I would tell him on my own time.

"I owe you nothing, Damian. You owe me something. That something, at the moment, would be patience. Now get out of that wet shirt and let me get you a blanket." I demanded, staring him in the eyes.

He shrugged out of his shirt and sat down on the couch beside the fireplace. I grabbed a blanket for him and handed it over to him. As much as I hated to admit it, Damian was handsome. I had a hard time dealing with even looking at him, however, because of his affair with both my mother and sister. The thought of it was clawing wildly at my insides, driving me insane. Looking at him brought images of Celeste and Mama in his arms. I shivered with disgust and sat down on the side of the fireplace, letting the heat warm me. The feel of the burning fire against my body, making my nightgown grow almost unbearably hot, took my mind off of Damian's affair with my two family members.

I let him sit and squirm for awhile. I knew what I had to tell him was eating at him horribly and I loved it. I wanted him to feel as if I was dangling something over his head,

making him jump to get it, only bringing it higher with every jump. I wanted him to feel a sense of dread. The same sense of dread I had felt when the realization of his sexual encounters with Mama and Celeste hit me like a ton of bricks.

Though, it was killing him to know the answers to his questions, he didn't ask again. I could almost feel his guilt and it made me smile. I wanted to hurt him, I suddenly realized. I wanted to scream and holler at him and make him feel as if his world were crumbling down. But his world would crumble, the thought entered my mind at a rapid pace. He was the father of a child, whether he wanted to be or not. He was the father of my youngest sibling.

I turned then and looked at him. His eyes looked at me with sincere curiosity and nervousness. I could almost see the butterflies in his stomach in the green depths. Finally, I began. "You told me of your affair with Mama and Celeste, Damian. What *you* weren't told was that Mama is pregnant with your child." I concluded. His jaw dropped to the floor.

"How can either of you be sure that the baby is even mine?" He nearly growled after he got over the shock. Anger was left in its place, and it was shining in his eyes like a green wildfire.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I demanded. I somehow knew what he meant, yet I wanted hear him say it. I needed a reason to attack somebody.

"You know as well as I do, Phoenix, that your mother is no more than a whore willing to give it out to anyone. That baby could be anyone's child." He declared and as much as I didn't want to think about it, I knew he was right. There was no proof of Mama's baby being his at all. And yet, I defended her with a passion.

"Don't lie to yourself, Damian. The times all match up right. You're going to be a father whether you want to be or not, so take a little bit of responsibility for it!" I was up in a flash, my hands on my hips.

"Just like your mother is taking responsibility for it, Phoenix?" He snapped back in response. Suddenly, my tongue had no words to whip out. "You're taking responsibility for her mistakes. Don't you realize that?" I closed my eyes and dropped my head in defeat. I bit my bottom lip, trying my damnedest not to cry.

Then he was in front of me again, near inches from me. I looked up at him, wanting him to understand. "He'd kill her, Damian, if I didn't do something." I choked on my words, but forced them out.

"That's not your affair, Phoenix. You don't even realize it." I was confused by what he meant. It was my family, my mother. How was it none of my affair? I was about to get the answer I never thought I would get. The answer that would shock me down to my toes. But Damian wasn't about to tell me just yet. Before I could ask, his lips were

suddenly inches away from mine. I wanted to pull away from his kiss, I wanted to kick and scream out how much I hated and distrusted him. Yet, I just stood there and let his lips capture mine. Instead of a scream from my throat came a soft moan, and instead of kicking, I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back with a passion that was shocking to both of us. I had never been kissed before this night.

We pulled apart and he seemed just as shocked by his actions as I was by mine. Yet, we seemed unable to stop it. His lips were on mine again, only harder and by far more passionate this time. I was crushed to his body in an oddly comfortable way.

That's when we heard the pound of my door hitting the wall with a force that left a hole in the wall where the door knob met the wall. Damian quickly thrust me back and then grabbed me back before I could fall back into the fireplace. Both of us stood there, stunned by the big man in the doorway, glowering at us. Glowering, especially, at me.

Uncle Gerald stood in the doorway looking as if Satan himself had just entered the room. The look of condemnation on his face sent a chill up my spine and made me want to hide and never had I wanted to hide from anyone. With the glowing red of the fire behind us he was a mere shadow with a face, only lightened by the candle he held in his own hand, as evil as Hell.

He pointed his finger at me as if he were condemning me to an eternity of Hell. "I knew it!" He screamed in declaration. "You're no better than your whoring mother! No better than she was!" His words, though frightening, also confused me. I couldn't help but demand back in spite of fear.

"Than she *was*?" I asked in a voice that was pathetically only above a whisper.

He let out a frightening laugh as he entered the room, closer to me. "Are you that much of an idiot girl! Don't you realize who your mother is?" When I stood there looking confused he laughed his wicked laugh again. I shot a look at Damian, who didn't look confused, but sad. He quickly shifted his eyes away and I looked back to Uncle Gerald. "You don't even realize who I am, do you, you little moron?" His laughter haulted as he realized I truly had no idea what he was talking about.

"What are you talking about, Uncle Gerald?" I was almost in tears. I was so confused and it was frustrating me to the point of crying.

"He's not your uncle Phoenix." Damian suddenly piped up. I spun to face him fully and he shook his head. "He's your grandfather."

Chapter 9

I wasn't quite sure I was hearing Damian correctly and yet, I knew that I had. Uncle Gerald was my grandfather? But how could that be? I looked over to the man who had just been declared as my grandfather, wanting answers and wanting them badly.

But Damian kept going, instead of letting Uncle Gerald say a word. "When your mother and I were having an affair she confided in me that you weren't her daughter but the daughter of her husbands uncle. She said that your real mother was so much of a whore that she even had sex with her cousin and got pregnant." I felt sick to my stomach. I knew that he was talking about Racheal. But Ella had told me such good things about her, how could she be the promiscuous person they were claiming her to be?

Unfortunately, the man who I knew now as my grandfather, concluded that what he said was true. "It's why I disowned the little hussy, and why I didn't want her spawn of evil in my god damned house. But Ella insisted and now here you are. You can stay here but don't you dare bring your men into this house!" He screamed at me, making me jump.

Ella and Mama came into the room, then. Mama looked as if she was about to pass out at the sight of Damian and Ella was thoroughly confused. Though, it didn't take much to confuse the woman I now knew was my step grandmother, I could understand.

"What in God's name is going in here?" Ella asked my grandfather.

"She knows, Ella." Mama whispered. "They told her about Racheal. I heard it all!" She shook her head from side to side, the tears sliding down her cheeks. "Why did you have to tell her?" She screamed. "She was my daughter! Mine!" She left the room then, running from everyone. Running from the truth, I knew. She wasn't my real mother, she wasn't even blood related. Neither was Ella, I thought sadly. And she was such a good woman, how could I not be sad over the thought of not truly being related to her?

Ella looked at Damian for a split second, her face confused about who he was, but she ignored him. Never had I seen such fire in her eyes whenever she looked at her husband, though. She looked as if she wanted to rip his head from his shoulders.

"How could you tell her?" She bit out quietly, yet viciously. "You promised that you wouldn't. Racheal gave birth to her but Karen raised her. How can you take so many years away from both of them? You're nothing but a cold, heartless brute!"

"Ah, shut up! It was the boy here that the little slut brought in that told her. I just told her what was in her blood. Warning her to stay away from men." Ella looked highly skeptical about his last sentence. She shot another quick glance at Damain and back to my grandfather.

"Why did you have to tell her that what he said was true? Why couldn't you say otherwise, Gerald? There was no reason for it. You're just a mean and nasty man who doesn't care about what others feel!" With that, Ella left the room.

My grandfather looked at me as if wanting to say something. Then, deciding against it, he shook his head and left the room, muttering about the house and how crazy the people who lived in it were.

"You'd better go find somewhere to sleep." I told Damian without looking at him. I made my way to the adjoining door that lead to my bedroom. "The lights have come back on so finding a guest room can't be too difficult." I said as I entered my bedroom and shut the door quietly behind me. I was confused and afraid of what tomorrow would bring. Sleep was so much of a blessing that night as I fell to my pillow into a dreamless sleep.

When I woke the next morning it was late morning and nearly early afternoon. The night before I had drained me emotionally and I had not wanted to wake up. I knew that as confused as I was before, there was only more to come. There were so many new questions to be answered! And finding out about Racheal was even more important now, knowing that she was my birth mother.

I got up and took a slow shower, taking as much time to wash my hair and body as possible. I had no immediate urge to see anyone in the family today. I was hoping that by the time I went down there Ella and Mama would be up and gone. I didn't want to confront them about the night before. It was entirely too stressful.

Fortunately, my prayers were answered. Nobody was home. Or at least I thought. While I sat in the dining room eating Damian came in. I had forgotten all about him being there. Funny, I thought, how could I forget whenever he was the one who told me the truth about myself? I didn't understand why he knew for so long and I hadn't known anything about it. Was I truly as much of an idiot as my grandfather had said?

Damian didn't say a word to me as he sat down and waited for his food. He barely looked at me. After all, there wasn't just what he told me that made us uncomfortable. Before my grandfather had burst through the door, something had been happening. Damian's feelings for me confused me, but, even more so, my feelings for him had me all mixed up.

Whenever I finished eating I got up and began to leave the dining room. But just as I went to pass by Damian he grabbed my wrist. "You don't have to ignore me, you know." He said.

"I'm not ignoring you." I told him, trying to pull my wrist out of his grip. "I just don't want to talk about last night. I want to forget any of it ever happened, and go on with my life."

"Forget all of it?" He seemed almost hurt by the fact that I wanted to disregard what had happened between us. "Forget even what happened with me before...?"

"Yes! I want to forget that the most!" I cried and finally pulled away, leaving the kitchen in a hurry. Remembering what had happened between us was the worst memory ever. He'd had Mama and Celeste. I couldn't let him have me, too! Was he so spoiled, self centered, and cruel that he had to play with the hearts of every female in my family? I thought bitterly. Well, I'd be damned if I let him play with mine. I couldn't let it happen.

Though I didn't want to confront anyone in the house about it, I did want to continue my search of Racheal. Especially now that I knew she was my mother, I felt that she needed me to do it. I picked up the phone in my sitting room and dialed the number scrawled across the slip of paper. I waited until someone answered. It seemed like an eternity before I actually heard a voice on the other line. Whenever I heard a man's voice say the right greeting, I quickly asked for Melanie Daniels.

When I heard the melodic voice saying the friendliest hello I'd ever heard, anticipation had my heart pounding. I almost didn't answer back. Finally, I choked out "Hello."

"May I ask who is calling? I was just on my way out the door whenever you called! Not that I mind phone calls, I don't get them often, but I'm sure you don't feel like hearing about that!" Melanie Daniels had to be the most talkative, friendly person I'd ever met! Her voice never seemed to lose its sweetness.

"This is Phoenix Parish. I'm-" That's when it hit me. I was Racheal's daughter. Not Karen's! I was confused but finally managed to let the words roll off of my tongue. "I'm Racheal's daughter."

The pause on the other line nearly convinced me that she had hung up. Then I heard the low whistle on the other side of the phone lines and then the sigh. "Her daughter? Phoenix? How old are you?" She quizzed me quickly.

"I'm fifteen, I'll be sixteen in October." I answered. "I've never known my mother because I was raised by my father, Michael Parish, and his wife Karen. I just found out that Racheal is my mother, and I just want to know more about her. A friend of mine told me to go to you." I needed to talk to this woman, I realized. I needed someone who had known Racheal and could give me the answers I needed. I needed to know more about my true mother.

"That sounds about right," Though her voice held its gentle melody, it wasn't nearly as happy and hyper as it had been before she had heard who I was. I didn't know what her reaction was. "Well, I was going to go out to lunch, but I think I'll be canceling my plans. Would you like to come over? I think, if you're just now finding out about it all, that it's time for you to know more about the woman who carried you and birthed you." She was offering to tell me the things I needed to know! I wanted to cry out with joy.

"Oh, I'd love to come over! I'll take a cab right away!" I cried into the phone.

"You have my address?" She asked. For some reason I told her no. I didn't want her to feel weird because I had it. She quickly told me and within an hour I was walking up the front porch stairs and into her home.

Her home was as beautiful as my grandfather's was and just as large. It was, oddly, painted lavender. There was a giant garden surrounding the entire house. There were

giant floor to ceiling stained-glass windows on either side of the entryway door. It absolutely took my breath away.

When the door was opened I was rushed down the hall by the butler, and into the back garden. Melanie Daniels sat in a lawn chair, one leg crossed over the other. She wore a purple sun dress that went to about mid thigh. She certainly didn't look like any other rich woman I'd seen. She wore no shoes on her feet, her dirty blonde hair was pulled back in a pony tail and her dress wasn't the classy, uptight dress that I'd seen the other women I'd met wear. And certainly the other women wouldn't flaunt their bosom as Melanie did. Her rather large bosom was pressing against the fabric of her dress so tightly I was sure that were she to move it would rip. She was not a small woman in the least bit, but rather curvaceous and almost could be considered chunky.

When she turned to look at me, she first seemed a little shocked by my being there. Then she smiled the most beautiful I'd ever seen on anyone. She motioned for me to sit in the chair beside her. I did but neither of us spoke for awhile. She poured both of us some lemonade that was sitting on the table between us. She gave me mine and I drank slowly, but I wasn't thirsty. I was nervous. I had waited so long to unwrap the mystery of my father's cousin, my real mother. Now here I was. Perhaps about to unravel all of the past.

Finally, Melanie spoke. "You look just like her. I have no doubt about your claim to be Racheal's daughter. You're just as pretty." I felt myself blush.

"Thank you." I said softly. "I didn't know until last night that she was my mother. Before, I had thought she was just my cousin." I admitted. I was hoping to open the conversation that would lead to revelations.

She nodded. "Of course they would want to keep it secret. Especially, Karen. Racheal would have more than willingly told them all the truth, but Gerald Parish wouldn't have it. He locked her up in her room until you were born. She was allowed to name you but was told you were dead not long after you were taken from her."

"So, my mother thought I was dead?" I asked incredulously. How could they be so cruel to tell her that I was dead?"

"What exactly were you told about both your mother, your real mother, and your father?" She seemed curious to know, that way she couldn't slip and tell me something she wasn't supposed to. Could I be wrong? Could she just be adding to more lies? Somehow, I doubted it.

"I was told that my mother was rather promiscuous. So much that she had sex with her own cousin, my father, and got pregnant." I answered.

Melanie shook her head from side to side and looked to the ground. "They would all make it seem like her fault. But let me tell you. Racheal was the least promiscuous female in that family. Things had happened to her before she even got pregnant with you. She

lived a tough life in spite of being so rich. I tried to help her as much as possible. She told me all of it after you'd been taken from her."

"What is all of it?" I finally asked. I didn't want to keep playing cat and mouse. I didn't want to chase the answers any longer. I was here now and I wanted to know now.

She was quiet for a long time, as if contemplating whether she should tell me or not. I sat waiting, wanting to squirm in my chair, but not doing so. Finally, the words spilled from her mouth, making me physically sick. "Michael Parish raped your mother."

Chapter 10

As I left Melanie's house, I felt nauseated and I was finding it difficult to breathe because the emotional stress was making my asthma act up horribly. It didn't surprise me that he had raped her, and yet, knowing that I was the production of that made me sick. The more I thought about it the more sick I became. Halfway home I had the driver pull over. I got out of the car and vomited on the side of the road. I was a baby of rape? She hadn't expected me, or willingly made me? The thought of my mother being no more than a slut and willingly creating my life, rather than being forced to do it. It hurt to know that she had unwillingly given birth to me.

Instead of going home, however, I told the driver to take me to the hospital. I seemed to fly down the halls to Mitch's room. He was the only one I trusted and I needed to talk to someone. I needed to confide in someone my confusion and pain. He would be the only one to understand. He wouldn't sit there and look at me with disgust because I was born from not only incest, but rape. Or would he? Would he be disgusted with me? I didn't care. I needed to tell somebody what I was feeling or I was going to burst. And I certainly wasn't going to run to Damian. What had happened between us was a one-time mistake that would never happen again. That I was certain about.

When I entered he had just finished his own lunch and was shoving it away. Whenever he looked at me, I could tell he saw something was wrong. His eyes darkened and his forehead wrinkled in concern. Yet, he didn't ask as I came farther into the room and sat down beside him on the bed. Without a word, the tears just suddenly started flowing, and I began to cry tears of frustration, anger, confusion, and hurt. Mitch wrapped his arms around me gently, holding me to him and stroking my hair.

"Calm down, Phoenix. You have to calm down and then tell me what happened." He whispered directly into my ear. I gasped for breath but, finally, the tears eased. I still was gasping for air, but at least the tears had stopped.

As I pulled away and looked at Mitch, his blue eyes urged me, willed me to explain what happened, to just get it off of my chest. I nodded and took the tissue he offered. Finally, I began to describe the night before and what had happened today. "And all I could think about on the way over here is that I'm truly a nobody. I truly am a mistake. My mother made me against her will!" I concluded, the tears threatening to overflow again.

I could tell by the look on Mitch's face, however, that he must have known something that I didn't know. It stopped the tears from letting loose. Instead, my temper began to flare up. I could feel the fire in me burning its way through my veins.

"You knew something didn't you?" I demanded, my eyes holding his, though he tried to look away.

"I only knew bits and pieces." He replied lamely. I shook my head, smiling incredulously.

"You knew something and didn't tell me!" I cried.

"I told you that I wasn't going to be brought into it, Phoenix. What you need and want to know about the past is your search. I can't interfere whenever it isn't my place!" He threw out in his defense. Though his words were true, I was still angry.

"I know you didn't want to get involved, Mitch, but the least you could have done was tell me a little something of what you knew!" I paused and took a deep breath. Then I calmly asked him "What do you know, exactly?"

He was quiet awhile before answering. After I thought the silence would go on forever he decided to tell me. "I knew Racheal was your mother and had been raped by your father."

"So you knew all of this time that Mama wasn't really my mother and that your mother really isn't my cousin? They aren't really my family? You knew that and yet you let me believe otherwise, just like everyone else?" I shook my head and stood up. "You claimed to be my friend and yet you have lied to me just like they have." I suddenly felt so alone, so damned alone. Wasn't there anyone I could trust?

"Look, Phoenix, don't leave. Sit down. Please." He didn't touch me but his eyes begged me to sit back down and listen to his explanation. Instead I stood right where I was, not sitting down, but not leaving either. After he realized that I wasn't going to sit back down, he sighed loudly and began to explain. "I didn't want to get involved. I didn't want to tell you the truth about these people that you've always thought were your family. My mother loves you just as much as if you were truly her blood, and, trust me, you really are Karen's world, even if she is immature at times and doesn't show how much she really loves you. I couldn't take years away from your life just by telling you about Racheal. I let someone else do that."

I sat back down on the bed slowly. He had done what he had felt was right. And perhaps it was right. After all, my life was now a jumble of confusion. It no longer made any sense to me at all. My whole life had been an entire lie. And, though I had been abused, I loved my family. I loved Mama. He knew that and had decided not to take that away from me. I would have found out soon enough, obviously.

"I don't even want to look at anyone in the house, now." I sighed, my head bent, looking down at the floor.

"I know what you mean. It has to be difficult for you. But, truly, Phoenix, Racheal may have created you against her will, but she certainly didn't want to get rid of you. You were her child, against her will or not. You were born and then taken away from her. She couldn't handle the stress. It's why nobody truly knows what happened to her. She just seemed to disappear. I suggest you stop the search, though. You're really never going to find her." I shook my head and looked up at him.

"I will find her, Mitch. I have to find her. She needs to know that I am alive and well. I want her in my life. It might kill Mama but I think I need her. I've always felt connected to her and now it makes more sense. She needs me. She has always needed me. That's why she ran away." It hit me then. My mother wasn't dead. If she was it happened while she was running away. But she most certainly hadn't killed herself. She had run away from the pain and agony of losing her child and of dealing with her horrendous monster of a father.

When I left Mitch that evening, I felt a bit better about seeing the people in my family. When I entered the house it was still quiet, so I decided to go sit in the garden to think. Ever since I had arrived the garden seemed to help me think and calm down. Maybe it was the scent of all of the flowers that relaxed me so much.

As I sat contemplating the last hours, starting from the night before, I heard a door shut and looked over just in time to see Mama making her way through the garden. She had her arms wrapped around her, as if trying to hold herself together. Her pregnancy was becoming more evident now, but she looked beautiful, not at all fat. She looked so sad in the light of the setting sun. She looked as if her whole world had been torn apart. But, then again, it had been torn apart, I thought bitterly. I looked away and stared at my hands in my lap.

I felt awkward around her and she was standing feet away from me. Not even close enough for a conversation, unless we were yelling over at one another. Just knowing that all of those years she spent raising me and all along she knew I was not her true daughter. I was the daughter of the woman she was so jealous of. The woman her very husband had raped. It made me sad to think about.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I hadn't heard her walking up to me. But suddenly two bare feet were in my view. I looked up at her and she smiled the saddest smile I had ever seen on her face. She seemed so aged.

"You know, I never wanted you to know that Racheal even existed. I didn't want you to know anything about her. And now look" She sat down beside me, her shoulders slumped, looking defeated and miserable.

"I partially wish that I had never heard of her. I wish that I didn't know now what I didn't know then. You've always been my mother and now," I sighed. "Now it's just awkward knowing that you aren't."

"Oh, but, sweetie, I am your mother. Racheal may have carried you for nine months and birthed you, but I raised you. I helped create what you are today. She didn't. I'm still, and always will be your mother." I looked up at her and saw the tears shining in her eyes.

"Sometimes it was so easy to forget that I hadn't carried you and given birth to you. It was so easy to pretend that I remembered being pregnant with you, and remembered your delivery. I was the one sitting for hours in a hospital room when you were a baby, hoping that you'd make it through each sickness without dying on me. I needed you, as strange as it is. I needed you more than I needed my flesh and blood children!" She cried out.

I threw my arms around her, and the tears began again. Never had a cried so much in a single day! "Oh, Mama, I wish I had never even heard of her. I wish Damian had never come into our lives, and I wish that everything was still the same!" I cried, holding tightly to her.

"Oh, honey, I wish all of that, too. But, there is nothing we can do, really. Things change. I knew that, no matter what, you'd find out the truth someday. I couldn't hold it back from the doorway at all times." I pulled away and looked into her eyes. "Sometimes, I expected your father to scream it out at you, just to be mean and nasty to you. I always assured you that he didn't hate you, but, Phoenix, he did. You were one of his major mistakes and he hated caring for you. You weren't meant to be born and he hated the fact that I took you in and made you mine."

It didn't hurt me that my father didn't love me and I told her so. "Mama, that bastard can die and go to hell at this very second and I wouldn't care. I want to know more about Racheal. I hate him for hurting both of you! I don't care if he loves me or not!"

She nodded. "I may have helped create what you are, but there is no disguising who your real mother is. Anybody who knew Racheal could take one look at you and hear you speak to know you were hers. You're so much like her. I'm glad, though. I prefer you to be like her rather than him. As much as I hate him, though, I'm going to go back to him. I made my bed now I have to lie in it." She declared, pulling me close to her again. "But don't you worry, you'll forever be safe here, I promise. Ella will permanently take care of you from now on." She promised, rocking me gently.

I nodded. "Good." I said. "I definitely couldn't stand to go back home now."

She shook her head and cuddled me close to her. "You are home, Phoenix. This is where you belong. I knew that someday you'd find your way back here. It was your destiny to do so. You really had no choice. I'm glad you have, though I never thought I would be."

"I just want us to be happy, Mama. Maybe now that I know the truth we can be happy again?" I looked at her hopefully, wanting her to tell me that, truly, everything would be just fine.

She smiled, the light in her eyes brightening. "Oh, yes, Phoenix. Yes. We'll be happy now." She vowed just as the sun finally finished its decent from the sky.

Epilogue

Maybe finding out the truth was the best thing that had ever happened to Mama's and my relationship. Somehow, we became closer. She became nicer to me and we held together the fragile thread that kept us as mother and daughter in spite of the lack of blood. In both of our hearts we would always be mother and daughter. We'd spent too many years as such to just give it all up now.

I stopped looking for more secrets of my past for awhile. I decided that I needed to take a break from the emotional stress. Finding out that Racheal was my real mother, mother by rape, rather than choice, was enough to last me awhile. But I vowed that I wouldn't stop looking for her until I found out what happened to her. I was praying that she was alive. Only she could tell me about the past honestly. I still felt as if there were secrets surrounding me. But, I wasn't about to go diving into more, not for a little while, anyway.

My grandfather still refused to talk to me, but had allowed Ella to throw me a small birthday party. Mama, Ella, Mitch, Damian, who had decided to stay there until the baby was born and take some responsibility, and even Jenny were there. And every one of them had gotten me a gift. Mama had given me the least expensive, but one of the most precious. It was a framed picture of her and me together whenever I was about five years old at Disneyland.

Ella got me a new ring that said "special step granddaughter" on it. I laughed. She was far too young to be my grandmother, but, she was married to my grandfather! Damian bought me a new dress he said he thought would look good on me. Jenny got me a new sweater, make up, and hair ties and clips for school. We were getting along much better even if we did ignore each other at school.

But Mitch's gift was the most special to me. It was a heart-shaped diamond necklace that read "Best friend" in rubies. I knew it was expensive but he was proud to give it to me. I accepted it, knowing it would hurt him if I gave it back and told him it was too expensive.

In December Mama's and Damian's baby daughter, Julianna, was born. She was beautiful, with ruby red hair and green eyes. A week after she was born Mama left. In spite of my relationship with her she seemed as if she couldn't wait to get away from her mistake. I was disappointed in her but didn't say anything. I would raise Julianna. But I wouldn't do it alone.

Damian was my friend and would remain only that. But we would raise Julianna together. He loved the little girl that was his daughter and it made me smile to see them together. He regretted the affair with Mama and Celeste but never would he regret the baby produced from his and Mama's affair.

Life had a way of bringing up surprises. Good or bad, no matter what, we couldn't stop the little unexpectant surprises of life. But we could accept them and go with them. We just had to be strong enough to handle the stress. I knew now that I was. I would never be

ready for the surprises but I would be able to deal with them. And I would never, truly, be alone.

© Sarah Conklin