

Rain of Fire

Prologue

As I sat by my bedroom window staring out at the sea I replayed in my mind everything that had happened. It had all happened so fast and now it was summer again. School had ended. Fortunately, Damian was here to take care of Julianna or I would never have made it through my Junior year. He was a great father to her. Though, I didn't know what to call her. She wasn't truly related to me in any way. Just as I wasn't truly related to Mama.

When I had found out that my father had raped his own cousin, Rachael, and had produced me, I was not only stunned but also disgusted. It gave my already faltering confidence a shake, knocking it lower. Knowing that I was not only an unwanted child, but also one made against one's will made me nauseous to even think about, even after nearly a year.

I still didn't know my real mother. Some say she died, others claim she is still alive. I believed that she was alive. She had to be alive. If she had killed herself they would have found her. But all that had been found of her was a piece of clothing and a little bit of blood. It convinced some that she was dead. It convinced others, like myself, that she was very much alive. Or at least she was. If she was dead it certainly wasn't by her choice.

So much in my life has changed over the past year. The only people that I know are truly my blood relation I hate with a passion. My father and grandfather are mean, cruel men that seem to lack a most important human organ. Instead of hearts they simply have a single piece of stone in its place. They certainly don't seem to care about anything, least of all me.

My relationship with Damian was a bit difficult. After the single kiss we had shared things became awkward. It had been a spur of the moment thing that had never happened again. I certainly didn't want it to, either. It confused me more than I could ever find the words to tell anybody. I simply ignored that it ever happened and things were fine. He was my friend and I would leave it at that.

Mitch and I had a relationship that was not at all confusing. He was my best friend. The best friend I'd ever had. He was not only my confident but something of a psychiatrist. He helped me make it through the difficulties of my strange family. He never grew angry with me, or disappointed. Whatever happened to me, he was there for me, either celebrating or mourning with me. We'd had plenty of pity parties together, that was for sure.

Between raising a child that wasn't mine, and dealing with that child's father, life was difficult itself. Yet, there were still many secrets to unveil. Many things about the past to find out, many things about myself I didn't know. I needed to know who I was. It became

more and more important to me with every passing minute. The key to the past also unlocked the key to who I really was. It could tell me what really happened all those years ago, and help me move on. And moving on was something I had to do more than anything.

Chapter 1

I had long since decided that complaining about life would get me nowhere, yet that was exactly what Mitch seemed to want me to do. I think he just liked all of the drama because it gave him something to do. So, anything that bothered me would fall onto his ears. Anyone else, however, would simply think nothing got to me. Because that was how I acted now. I didn't like people knowing what made me angry, anymore. If they knew that, then they knew how vulnerable I truly was. My temper flaring only proved that I did have feelings. I didn't want anyone to know I had feelings.

Of course, Damian tried day in and day out to try and convince me that he had changed. I was already convinced of it but my anger at the affair was still there. He had sex with both Mama and Celeste and that was enough to make me sick. I felt I could never forgive him for it. I would not be added to his list of women he'd slept with. My trust issues with him just weren't secure. I loved to see him with Julie but never could I see him in the future with me. Damian and I fought far too often, anyway.

Ella was a happy go lucky woman, even more so now. Ever since Mitch had escaped death, her relief over it had made her the most enthusiastic woman I had ever known. That and my knowing about the past made her talk more about Rachael, my real mother. I could tell she truly loved her more than anything.

"You know," she told me one day as we sat out in her special part of the garden talking. "I always admired your mother. She had a fiery temper and yet she had a way of making the whole world seem so wonderful, even if she was absolutely miserable." She sighed. "I still have no idea why Gerald always treated her the way he did. It confused me. Guess that is something I will never know."

"Was my mother ever in love?" It was something that bothered me all of the time. I wondered if she ever had been in love or if my father had ruined it all for her by raping her. It ate at me to think that he'd, that I'd, ruined it all for the woman that seemed to be a very special person.

Ella smiled brightly then and looked off towards the roses. She seemed lost in her thoughts before she spoke again. "Rachael was very much in love. Melanie Daniels and I were the only ones who ever knew about it, of course. We were the only people she trusted." She laughed. "We often helped her sneak out to meet Brendan. In spite of how rich he was, Gerald found him to be beneath the Parish family and had forbid them to see one another."

Before her last words about my grandfather forbidding my mother could enter my mind, the name Brendan clicked into my head. I sat there letting Ella drift off into her memories, humming softly, while I thought of where I'd heard the name. Then it hit me. Brendan was the name of the young man in the picture with my real mother Rachael! So that was the young man she'd been in love with. Oh, now I was thoroughly convinced that there were so many more secrets. Especially since the past now included a love affair my mother was having.

I always tried to get Mitch to tell me more about my real mother. I wanted to know anything that he knew. After all, he was five years old whenever she left. He had to remember something. Yet, every time I asked him, he claimed all that he could remember was that she was really motherly towards him and he had loved her dearly. I would grow irritated with him and leave, frustrated that he couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me more.

Most of my time, however, was spent with baby Julie. I often told her to call me Mommy, because, all in all, that was who I was to her. I was her mother now. Just as Karen became my mother in heart rather than blood, I became Julianna's. I could now understand why Mama was so attached to me. I didn't have to be her blood for her to love me so much. The love just came naturally. It was something that was special between a child and the woman raising it. Whether or not you birthed the child, it became yours if you're the one raising it. And, though I was only sixteen years old, I was raising Mama and Damian's daughter.

I didn't think a baby could get any more beautiful than Julie. Her dark ruby red hair was thick and, though she was only six months old, it reached her shoulders in little ringlet curls. With every passing day her eyes became more and more emerald green and her smile became more and more like Damian's. She was truly the most beautiful child I had ever laid my eyes on.

Spending so much time with Damian was making me feel so suffocated. I felt that if I let my guard down a little I would start caring for him more than I wanted to. So, I kept up my guard, making rude comments to him at every turn. I didn't want to fall in love with Damian. I wouldn't fall in love with Damian! He had hurt me, twice over, three times if you counted the child of his I now took care of. I wasn't about to let myself fall for him the way Mama and Celeste did. I wouldn't because that would mean getting my heart broken.

But Damian had other plans on his mind. And his jealousy of Mitch was beginning to grate on my nerves badly. Every time I would come out of the library or Garden, where Mitch spent most of his time, Damian would interrogate me about our conversation. Not that I ever answered his probing, annoying questions. He still did it every time.

One day as I walked out of the library, my hair a little messy, Damian was on the attack. "Why do you give into that crippled bastard, but you won't even touch me? You avoid touching me!" He wasn't screaming but he may as well have done so.

This was one of the times I was unable to hide my feelings and my temper. "He's not a crippled bastard, you imbecile! He's a good caring young man. What I do with Mitch is none of your damn business. And for your information we don't do a damn thing that has to do with sex, so get over it!" I hollered, shoving him and walking down the hall to Julianna's nursery. Her smile and laughter could usually cheer me up no matter what.

After a few minutes of playing with Julianna my mood lightened, until Damian walked in. He resembled a puppy that had been kicked and was coming to pout and apologize. He looked rather pathetic to me. He always came to me looking like this, though. And every time I would forgive him. Even if in the beginning I swore I wouldn't.

"I'm sorry, Phoenix, it's just that-" I cut him off.

"I don't want to hear why you're jealous Damian; it'll only aggravate me more." I declared and waved towards the door. "Just get out, please. I don't wish to look at you right now."

"Just listen to me, Phoenix, please!" I hated his begging and I shot a look of daggers his way. He gulped, but, determined as he was, he didn't give up. "Phoenix, I just don't understand why you spend so much time with *him*, confide in *him*, and are so close with *him* and not me. Aren't I as good a friend as he is? I have known you longer!" He whined. I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

"I sometimes wonder, Damian," I began, turning back to Julianna. "If you ever hear how pathetic you sound whenever you whine to me." I looked back up to him. "And for your information, you make one lousy friend. Having sex with my mother and sister and then expect me to fall head over heels in love with you. You expect me to trust you the way I do Mitch?" I laughed. "That'll never happen, Damian. I have no interest in trusting you. I merely am doing a favor for Mama by raising her child."

"They aren't your real mother and sister." He tried to reason, holding his hands out. I shook my head.

"They are my real mother and sister because that is the mother that raised me and the sister that I was raised with. Blood or not, they are still my family. I won't become like them. Give it up, Damian. I'm tired of this!" I picked up Julianna and took her to the rocking chair. It was time for her nap and I was wasting my breath arguing with Damian. Without another word I waved him off. This conversation was over, to me. Though, it wouldn't truly be the end of it. It was the same argument we had time and again. He would never stop.

As I rocked Julianna I heard voices in the hall. One was unmistakably Ella's and the other was Grandfather Gerald's. I stopped singing to Julianna and listened. Ever since I had moved here, I had become nosy, always interested in conversations, hoping to hear a bit of the past. In this conversation, I was not disappointed. Only confused once the voices drifted away.

"Gerald, why don't you just let me explain to her-" I heard Ella begging him. I knew that she wanted to explain something to me. What it was I didn't know, but it had to be something if Ella wanted to tell me.

"I told you not to even bring up that little bitch's name, Ella. Now she knows all about Rachael. That's bad enough. I don't want her poking and prodding even farther. Enough is enough!" He yelled. I could hear his heavy footsteps stop somewhere near the nursery. I held my breath. I didn't want to look at him. I had a hard time looking at him, knowing how he had felt about my mother, his daughter. And knowing how he felt about me.

"She needs to know about who she is, Gerald. Phoenix needs to know about her mother, what really happened." Ella was getting annoyed with him. It didn't shock me. Lately, Ella was always annoyed with him.

"You don't even know what really happened." He grunted.

"Oh, I don't? Well, since you knew her so damn well, I bet you could tell me exactly what happened, right?" She snapped sarcastically. "Give me a break, Gerald. You've always wanted to believe the worst in Rachael."

I could almost see him glaring at her. Not another word was said as I heard him pound his way towards the stairs. Just after his footsteps faded away, there was a soft knock on the door and Ella came in. She smiled at me, her warm sweet smile.

"Hello, Phoenix. How are you and Julie today?" She always had a way of making the war in our house easier to live with. Her warming smile could ease the pain in our hearts. No matter what, she could smile. I admired her for that.

"We're great, Ella. How are you?" I asked. Though, I already knew how she was. She was irritable and tired of dealing with her cruel husband. But why someone merely three years older than my mother would marry a man so much older was beyond my knowledge. It was just another secret of the past, waiting for me to understand it.

"I could be better." She sighed and sat down. "That man is most impossible, truly he is. I don't know why he hates you so much."

"I do." I replied dryly. "He doesn't like me because I have the guts to stand up to him."

"Well, of course that is part of the problem. But I am convinced that there is more to it than that." I knew Ella wanted to tell me something but Grandfather Gerald didn't want her to tell it. I held my breath, hoping she would say something anyway. "But of course who knows. After all, according to Rachael, he hated her because she was one of the few ready to take him out on a battlefield and challenge him to a duel." She laughed at some memory. Ella was getting more lost in her memories every day. Sometimes, she even slipped and called me Rachael and would keep doing it until I reminded her that I was Phoenix, not Rachael.

I smiled. "Was my mother really like that?" I asked.

Ella's eyes widened at my question. "Oh, yes dear! Your mother was one of the most stubborn, hotheaded people I'd ever met. Even more so than you, I think. She was always getting into argument after argument with Gerald. He truly just didn't like her." She said, shaking her head. Then she slapped my knee gently. "Well, I didn't come in here to jibber jabber!" She cried, standing up. "I was wondering if you'd like to go shopping with me. I've been bored out of my mind lately, and not to mention stressed because of Gerald. I need a shopping buddy and I'd love for you to come with me." She smiled brighter. "And I have a special guest joining us. I think you'll be happy to see her." I didn't know who "her" was, but I quickly got up, placed a sleeping Julianna in her crib and left the room with Ella. The special guest thing had me wanting to go to the car faster. Who was going with us? It had to be somebody I knew. My curiosity was driving me crazy!

When we walked outside to get into the car I was a little shocked to see Melanie Daniels leaning against the car. Her legs were crossed over one another, her brown hair pulled back in a simple pony tail, as it had been the day I had met her, and her make up done maybe a little overly much. But Melanie wasn't one to care about how she appeared to others. She liked the way she looked and, so be it, that was how she was going to go out. I couldn't help but admire her, even if she did dress a little outrageous. But, I would soon find out, she was always in purple, lavender, or violet. It was her color, Ella told me one day. She didn't like anything else but the many colors of purple.

"Hi, Phoenix!" She called, coming over towards Ella and me. When she reached us, to my surprise, she hugged me. "I'm terribly sorry about our first meeting. I know it shocked you to hear what you did, dear. But, please, don't hate the messenger for delivering such horrible news to you." She gave a pout and I smiled. How could anyone hate this outrageous, yet wonderfully friendly woman?

"Of course I don't hate you, Melanie. I am learning to deal with the truth more and more lately" Which was true. It was becoming easier and easier to deal with every passing day.

"That's great, sweetie!" She claimed, pinching my cheek. "Well! Let's go shopping! I'm surprised Ella didn't say something. She used to be so impatient when we were leaving to go shopping!"

Ella simply smiled. "Age and stress changes you, Melanie." Then she laughed. "Well, perhaps not you, dearest friend. But it certainly has me."

"The thing with Rachael has changed me to a certain extent." Melanie admitted, a sad look coming over her pretty but over made-up face. "I just pretend that it doesn't get to me as much as it does" Then, just as quickly as her mood became melancholy, her face lifted to brightness once more. "But let's not think about sadness before shopping. It will lose all of its splendor!"

I enjoyed my day with Melanie and Ella. Both had wonderful stories of my real mother. Evidently she had been the leader of the pack. “She always had some kind of wise crack for everything somebody said. Especially, when arguing.” Melanie told us as we rode on the escalator in the mall.

“Oh yes!” Ella remembered aloud. “I remember so well how well Rachael argued. The only problem was, once she started she just couldn’t stop!” Ella exclaimed, her eyes wide.

Melanie laughed. “Hours after an argument, Rachael would still be complaining about it. And if she had calmed down, every now and then she would start her complaints up again. And she always thought of even more things that she felt she should have said.” Melanie shook her head, her smile wide. “I always told her to remember those things for the next argument.”

I smiled. “My mother really was a pistol just like you’ve told me, wasn’t she, Ella?”

“More than you’ll ever know, sadly.” A frown creased her pretty face. “She would have made one wonderful mother, Phoenix. She wanted you in spite of the fact that Michael had....” She drifted off, but I knew what she was saying. It made my cheeks redden. I knew what people thought. What mother could possibly love a baby of rape? But according to Ella and Melanie, my mother could. She just never got the chance.

When we got to Melanie’s home that day to drop her off, I was saddened. I was definitely enjoying Melanie’s company. She was so outgoing and fun. I didn’t believe anyone could ever be gloomy around her enthusiastic personality. I hated to see this day end. It had been the least stressful day I’d had for over a year. It felt good to laugh and to breathe, knowing that there was nobody looking over your shoulder, ready, waiting to pounce. Of course, I was about to be proven wrong on that point. Someone, no matter how good my day was, was always ready, waiting to pounce.

Ella and I had been home for not much longer than five minutes. I had just finished putting away the few shirts and skirts that were bought for me whenever Grandfather Gerald came through my door. I was annoyed. The man, all too obviously, had to be taught how to knock.

“What do you want?” I demanded, making my way from the closet to the vanity table chair where I sat. I was never one to cower from him, nor did I pretend to like him. I had no respect for him, and I made sure he knew that.

He glowered at me. I was hoping he’d just walk out rather than answer but answer he did. “Jenny came to me and told me.” He declared, looking satisfied, as if he’d caught me doing something I wasn’t supposed to be doing. Which I wasn’t. I never did anything that I wasn’t supposed to. I hated dealing with him.

“What did my wonderful, *aunt* tell you?” My blood was beginning to boil. Jenny was so two faced. She was so nice and friendly to my face, but I knew she talked about me behind my back. Yet, I had thought that her trying to get me into trouble all of the time was over. Evidently, it wasn't.

“She said that the reason you two came home so late last weekend was because you forced her into drinking and ‘hooking up’,” He made quotation marks with his fingers as he said this. “With some boys.” I shook my head and let out a sound of disgust from the back of my throat. What in God's name was she up to now?

Instead of denying it, however, I attacked him. “Are you still on last weekend?” I snapped. “Boy, you really do live in the past.”

“I don't give a damn about you being my granddaughter.” He began to raise his voice. “No matter what Ella says, I can still kick you out of this house, you disobedient little bitch!” He was getting angrier by the second. I could see it in the way the tips of his ears were turning red. It gave me satisfaction to see that I could make him as angry as he made me, and I smiled.

“Of course you can throw me out, Grandfather.” I said nonchalantly, looking over at my nails as if interested in them rather than the conversation. “But would you really? I know you hated my mother, but rumor has it you hated my father much more. God only knows why, others say the two of you used to be like father and son rather than nephew and uncle.” Which was true. People said that my grandfather and father had once been close but something happened and he began to hate my father even more than he hated my mother. And that was saying a lot.

His face flushed red and I congratulated myself on hitting a raw nerve. I smiled wider. “That is none of your damn business, Phoenix. Back off. I've warned you before to keep the past where it is!”

“But you don't!” I cried, thrusting myself up off the seat. “You never leave things in the past! Hell, Grandfather dearest, you live in the past! It's all you think about day and night, especially since I came here to remind you! You all thought that by sending me off with that jackass of a father of mine that I would just disappear like every other mistake you people have made. Out of sight, out of mind, right?” I was getting more frustrated and angry. But it was true. My grandfather lived in the past. The mistakes of the past ate at him, making him an angry and mean man. I almost pitied him rather than hate him. Almost, anyway.

He came toward me at a fast pace and stopped right in front of me. “Don't talk to me like that, Phoenix. I will not put up with your mouth. You've gotten away with it so far, but don't expect too much longer. I will put a stop to it in *any* way that I can.” His threat fell on deaf ears. I wasn't afraid of him. I refused to be afraid of other people. My father and grandfather were as mean as they came, anyway. Minus murderers, but that didn't count.

“Don’t *you* expect me to cower away from you and hide, Grandfather. I’m not afraid of, and I never will be afraid of you. Get over the fact that you cannot intimidate me!” I walked to the door and waved towards it. “Now, please, leave my bedroom. I don’t wish to see you any longer.”

“Don’t *you* expect me to cower away from you and hide, Grandfather. I’m not afraid of, and I never will be afraid of you. Get over the fact that you cannot intimidate me!” I walked to the door and waved towards it. “Now, please, leave my bedroom. I don’t wish to see you any longer.”

He walked to the door slowly. He stopped just before leaving and looked at me. Then, only to my slight surprise, he slapped my across the face. “I won’t have it.” He growled.

I smiled viciously. “Neither will I.”

Chapter 2

Walking down the hall, my heart pounded so hard with anger I was sure it was going to pound right through my chest. I got to Jenny’s door and pounded, not hesitating at all. “Let me in! Right now, Jenny!” I yelled at the door whenever she didn’t answer. Growing impatient, I tried the doorknob. It clicked open and I pushed it wider. She wasn’t in there like I had thought. Or at least I thought she wasn’t until I heard singing coming from her bathroom. She came out dressed to kill, her hair perfect, which was nothing new, and her face made up. I raised my eyebrows.

“What do you want, niece darling?” She smiled sweetly at me and I felt like gagging.

“Don’t call me that Jenny.” I snapped. She looked at me innocently.

“Whatever have I done now, Phoenix? You know, you always go around with a sour look on your face. That’ll give you wrinkles and gray hair early. You really shouldn’t do that.” She smiled as she sat on the side of her bed to put her shoes on.

“Why did you tell your father that the reason we came in late last weekend was because I *forced* you to drink and ‘hook up’ with a couple of boys?” I demanded.

“Oh that?” She asked, laughing. “He wouldn’t stop questioning me about it, Phoenix. And I hate how Daddy gets angry with me, he runs and tells Mother and mother is rather irritating when she says that I am grounded.” She sighed. “Though Daddy never makes me stick to being grounded to the house or anything, I still didn’t want to listen to her ramble on.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’d rather blame you, anyway. He already hates you.” Oh, how matter-of-factly she said that! It made my stomach knot. Why did she have to throw it in my face that my grandfather hated me as much as he hated my mother, if not more?

Instead of feeling defeated, though, her claim that she made so easily only made me angrier. “You should have told him the truth about how I told you to not drink and you didn’t anyway. And how about telling him how I pulled *you* and only *you* away from two boys? Huh? I really would rather you tell him that!” I yelled.

“Oh, Phoenix, you know I can’t tell him that!” She whined. “And, really, must you yell?”

I walked over to her and grabbed her by the ear. “Ouch!” She screamed. “Let me go, right now, Phoenix! Or else I’ll tell Daddy!”

“You go ahead and tell him. He’ll see it first hand, though. I’m taking you down to him right now so you can tell him the truth and if you don’t, I’m going to beat you. You need a good beating anyway, you spoiled little brat!” And with that I dragged her out of the room and down to where my Grandfather sat in the den reading his newspaper, with her whimpering, complaining, and making threats all the way there.

I thrust her into the room. He looked up, shocked to see us standing there so suddenly. “Go ahead, Jenny! Tell him!” I demanded. The adrenaline in me was pumping, feeding my anger at her. If I had to, I’d beat her right in front of her beloved daddy.

“Now, what the hell is this all about, Phoenix?” He hated me enough. Doing this to his precious daughter was bound to make him even angrier with me. But caring whether or not he was angry with me didn’t seem to be something I ever worried about.

“Jenny has something to tell you about last weekend, Grandfather. I won’t let her lie about me the way she did. She’s definitely no little angel being forced to drink!” I hollered.

“Daddy, Phoenix just wants a way out of-“ She cried out in pain as I walked up behind her and grabbed a fistful of her hair.

“Now, what were you saying, Jenny?” I hissed into her ear.

“Let her go, right now, Phoenix, or you will be paying a dear price!” Grandfather Gerald screamed at me, jumping to his feet.

“My life, Grandfather?” I asked sarcastically. “Please, say it’s my life, because I find that I truly have nothing to live for around here. My grandfather and father hate me, my mother is some mysterious runaway, and I’m mothering my stepmother’s mistake child. Gee, how peachy. Really, Grandfather,” I insisted. “There is nothing you can do to make things worse.”

“Phoenix!” I suddenly heard from the doorway. I let go of Jenny and turned to see Mitch sitting there. “What on earth are you doing?” He looked shocked and I knew I must look completely insane.

“I just...I’m not going to let Jenny use his hate against me by telling him lie!” I suddenly felt like crying, the anger in me melting to nothing but ashes. Mitch always had that affect on me.

“Come on, Phoenix. Give it up.” Mitch said, shaking his head. He held his hand out, hoping I’d take it and give up the futile fight. I nodded.

I turned back to Jenny and Grandfather Gerald. They stood glaring at me. Jenny was rubbing the back of her head where I’d grabbed her hair and leaning on her father, half whining, and half shooting daggers at me with her eyes. Grandfather Gerald had his arm wrapped around her protectively as he looked at me with anger and disgust. I waved at them as if waving away flies. “Just...forget about it.” I walked out of the room, pushing Mitch down the hall.

We made our way into the library. He watched me as I stormed to the large windows looking over the ocean. I stared down at the sea’s waves lifting, hitting ferociously against the rocks, and then falling back down to mix with the rest of the water once more. I didn’t realize I was crying until I felt a teardrop fall onto my hand. I looked down at it and then wiped it away.

“Phoenix,” Mitch began, wheeling towards me. “Is it really that important that he knows that Jenny lied and you are the good girl and not her?” I knew he was right, but I wasn’t ready to give in yet.

“Of course it is! He’s my grandfather. Shouldn’t he care about me?” I moaned, sitting in one of the nearest chairs.

“He didn’t, or couldn’t, care for his own daughter, Phoenix.” He shook his head, as he often did when trying to make me see reason and was getting frustrated. It was his only sign of frustration, though. Mitch never raised his voice.

“I don’t think the man cares about anything but Jenny.” I pouted, setting my elbow on the table and placing my cheek in my hand.

“I’m not sure he even cares about Jenny. I think he just finds her easier to deal with. She’s usually out of his hair if he just gives her what she wants.” I nodded, remembering what I had told Grandfather Gerald earlier.

“Out of sight, out of mind.” I muttered, sitting my hands in my lap, and staring down at them.

“What?” He asked. “Out of sight, out of mind? What are you talking about?”

I sighed. “It’s what I told Grandfather Gerald about me earlier. As long as I was out of sight, he could forget that I existed. Do you think that’s what he does with Jenny, only in

a different way?" I didn't want to sound hopeful, yet I was. What gave her the right to be so loved by him, and not me?

"I know that's what it is. How often do you see him actually spend time with her or my mother?" He reasoned. I shook my head. I really had never seen him spend any time with them, except at dinner. "He's just not a family man, Phoenix. He just doesn't know how to love."

"Maybe I am more like him than I think, then." I said sadly. "I certainly have his temper. I can't get rid of it, though, I don't want them to see what makes me angry, I just can't stop myself!" I looked up at him, trying not to burst into tears again. "And I'm not sure I know how to love either. It's so confusing anymore. Without anyone to love me, how can I possibly know how to love?" It was a depressing thought. A thought that Mitch snuffed out quickly.

"Who doesn't love you, Phoenix?" He demanded. "Your grandfather? Your father? My sister?" He smiled as if I had gone completely insane. "What do they matter whenever so many people do love you. My mother loves you, Julie loves you, Damian loves you, and Melanie loves you!" He cried. "Everyone adores you, Phoenix. They know you're good, *loving* person. You're not that much like him."

"What about you, Mitch? You said they all loved me but you didn't say if you did or not." I didn't know why I had to go ask that but I wanted to. I knew what I meant, though. I knew Mitch loved me. But how much did he really love me?

Something in his blue eyes darkened for a second, becoming more serious. "Phoenix--"

I cut him off. "Don't you love me, too, Mitch?"

"Of course I do." He smiled, lightening up the conversation. He didn't want to get in that deep with me, evidently, and I wasn't going to push it. I got up from my seat and smiled.

"I have to check on Julie." I said, excusing myself. "Thank you for cheering me up and making me feel better again, Mitch. You're good at that!"

He gave me his most charming, irresistible smile. "That's what I am here for, Phoenix. I'm your friend. I'm supposed to make you smile rather than frown, right?"

I nodded and left. I was happy, yet there was something in me nagging me to go back to him and get back into that conversation. There was no denying Mitch had feelings for me that were by far stronger than friendship. The question was, did I feel the same way? I wasn't sure, but I knew that the answer leaned more towards yes rather than no.

I walked into the nursery in time to see Damian lifting Julie out of her crib. I smiled. It was such a sweet sight to see. He was a good father and would make some woman very

happy someday. But it just wouldn't be me, even if he did want it. I had my reasons, other women just didn't.

"Hey," He said, smiling broadly at me. I smiled back. "You okay? I heard some yelling earlier. I didn't want to get into it, though."

"I'm fine. Just Jenny acting up again. It shouldn't surprise me, though. Jenny is two faced like that." I sighed and walked over to play with one of Julie's curls. I sighed as I thought of Mitch's and my conversation. He was so very right. All of these people really did love me. And, blood related or not, they were my family. They cared for me more than anyone else in the world. And all of them, in some way, depended on me

"I'm glad you're fine." He smiled at me, his green eyes glittering suspiciously. "I was thinking," he began. "Why don't we take Julie on a trip and we go see Karen and everyone?" His smile was mischievous but I smiled back. I needed a break from here and to see the look on their faces wouldn't be so bad. Besides, it had been so long since I had seen them. I actually missed them!

Two days later I had Damian's, Julie's, and my stuff packed up to go. I kept checking over the car and through our suitcases to make sure we had everything. I had never traveled as a family, and, as much as I hated to think of it as that, we were doing just that. We were taking a *family* vacation. What a strange family we were, I thought to myself.

Mitch sat on the front steps of the house, watching me go over our things for the fifth time. He wheeled himself down the ramp and came up to me. "Phoenix, everything is going to be just fine. You have everything. You know you do!"

I sat down on the trunk of the car. "Oh, Mitch. I can't help but wonder if this trip is a mistake!" I groaned.

"It's only a mistake if you don't come back." He said softly, looking at me so seriously and so tenderly. I knew he was nervous about my going back home. But didn't he realize that this was now my home? This was the only place that I felt safe now. That was why I was having second thoughts about going back there. I was afraid of being uncomfortable in their presence.

"Of course I'll come back, Mitch. I have no reason not to. This is my home, now, really. That is why I am having second thoughts!" I assured him, patting his hand gently. "Trust me, you can't get rid of me that easily!" I teased.

He laughed. "I know, I know. I'm just a little nervous. I know you'll be back. There is no reason for you to stay there, now, right?"

"No reason at all. I wouldn't want to be so far away from my best friend anyway." I claimed, jumping down from the trunk and leaning down to kiss his cheek.

“Are we ready to go?” Damian hollered from the doorway, holding a sleeping Julie on his shoulder. I smiled at Mitch one more time and then rushed up to Damian. Suddenly, I felt so torn between the two.

“Yes, we are all set to go.” I told Damian as I took Julie from him. I bent down and put her in her car seat. Damian came up behind me and grabbed my behind and I cried out and jumped, smacking my head on the ceiling of the car. I pulled out of the car, turned around and smacked him.

“Don’t do that again!” I yelled at him, rubbing my head. “It was uncalled for!”

“I’m sorry, Phoenix.” He apologized sheepishly, his eyes glimmering. “It’s just so-“ He held his hands out and motioned as if holding my butt in his hands.

I slapped his arm. “You’re a sick pervert.” I pushed him and made my way around the car. Mitch obviously didn’t find Damian too amusing. He grabbed my wrist just as I went to pass him.

“He’s a jerk, Phoenix, but charming all the same. Watch yourself around him.” He warned. His eyes were dark, as if he were seeing something that I wasn’t.

“There is nothing to fear, Mitch. If he were going to charm me, it would have worked already.” He nodded and I leaned down to kiss him on the cheek once more. “I’ll miss you, Mitch! Love ya!” I cried and got into the car beside Damian.

After I had gotten settled in my seat, I couldn’t help but replay Mitch’s words in my head. Was he right? Did I truly have to watch myself around Damian? Did he have the ability to charm even me? I shuddered. I couldn’t let that happen. Damian broke hearts after he got what he wanted. Love ‘em and leave ‘em was his motto. It would be no different with me.

But I was immune to Damian’s charms. I had gotten through being charmed before hadn’t I? I wasn’t going to let him make me fall in love with him. You have to have a certain caring. I was numb to Damian. I was!

Then why was it, I felt as if I was a dead animal in the desert ready for the picking, and Damian was the vulture?

Chapter 3

When we arrived at the house that had once been my home, my heart began to pound beneath my breasts. It actually hurt it was pounding so hard. What was I doing? Why was I here? It wasn’t like I had any urge to see my father, especially now. And Mama...Mama could act her part out well, I knew that. She had before. However, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to act mine. And what about my younger half siblings? Celeste certainly didn’t want to have anything to do with me and my showing up with Damian would really scratch at

her nerves. As far as I was concerned, though, Celeste deserved it for treating me like some creature below her for so many years.

I don't know how I managed to drag myself out of the car. I don't know how I managed to get up those brick porch steps with such shaky legs, without falling. But suddenly I was at the door, my fist raised to knock. Yet, I was unable to knock. I wanted to turn right back around, get into that car, and go home. For this was no longer my home and family. No, my family was back in southern California. Whether my grandfather liked it or not.

I didn't get the choice to tell Damian we should leave, however. Before I could lower my fist, the door was thrust open and there stood my fifteen year old sister, Celeste. She looked older than that, but that didn't surprise me. Neither did the fact that she was absolutely beautiful. Her hair shined the same golden red as Mama's. I was sure that she was an identical replica of Mama when she was her age. Her eyes were the same green violet color, and they looked absolutely disgusted by my appearance.

Neither of us spoke as we eyed one another. Before she said anything, for I certainly had nothing to say, Lila appeared in the doorway beside her. And Lila had become an absolute in only one year. The ten-year-old was already blooming just as quickly as Celeste, yet made more of an attempt to hide it. Her hair had darkened to the same dark red as Julianna's. Her eyes were black, just as mine were. In fact, the older Lila got, the more she looked like my real mother, Rachael. It made me smile. Lila was a red headed replica of somebody my father didn't want to remember, and yet, no matter what, he would have to look at her day in and day out because his pretty young daughter looked just like her.

"Wow, Phoenix! We haven't seen you in over a year! I've missed you!" She cried and shoved Celeste out of the way to tackle me with a hug. She was already nearly as tall as me. I was happy that at least one person in this household was excited to see me. Maybe Katie and Andrew, who were now nine and eight years old, would be just as excited to see me. Though I doubted it. The two of them were always lost in their own world.

"It's good to see you, too, Lila." I said stoking her hair and holding on tightly to her. I didn't want this moment to end. I wanted to stay right here like this, where I was safe. Lila loved me, always had. I knew that nobody else's "welcome" would match hers.

Celeste had stalked off to pout somewhere, I'm sure, as Lila helped get our stuff inside. She grew excited as Damian set Julianna down on the floor in her car seat. She was wide-awake and looked around curiously. She was always a curious baby, but she was also often scared of things. Especially new surroundings.

"Her hair is the same color as mine!" Lila exclaimed. To my surprise Julianna, who seemed to fear new people, smiled and grabbed hold of Lila's hand. "She likes me." She whispered in awe.

"I'm surprised, Lila. Julie often gets scared of new people. I'm glad that she likes you, though." I smiled at her. I was so nervous about being at this place, this house of memories. At least back home, there were no memories to haunt me. Nothing like here. I suddenly knew how Mama must have felt going back to my grandfather's house. There were many memories of her own there. Many things that she would rather not remember, but did.

It was as if Mama knew I was thinking of her, for she seemed to just float into the living room from the kitchen. Nothing in her face could show that she knew this child, had been the one who had given birth to her. It was truly as if she were meeting Julie for the first time. And suddenly, I was absolutely disgusted with her. How could she just stand there and pretend that she hadn't carried this beautiful baby for nine months? I didn't understand how she could simply pretend that nothing that had happened, happened.

"Hello, Mama." I said, staring at her.

"Hello, Phoenix. It's so good to see you after over a year. I thought you were gone for good." And with that she began to cry and if I was Celeste and Lila I'd believe it was a real cry of a mother happy to see her daughter. Yet, I had the distinct feeling that she wasn't exactly happy about my presence. For her eyes, when they did look up at me again, were darker, almost warning me that I should leave. That she didn't want me here. I was no longer needed, nor a part of this family.

Lila ran over to comfort Mama and Celeste just sat back and rolled her eyes in annoyance. It was one of the only times I could actually agree with Celeste. But Mama was irritating me to the point of making me want to scream the whole damn situation out. I was still a virgin for god sake! I wanted to scream "this is Mama and Damian's baby! Not Damian's and mine! Not mine!" But I didn't. The words were stuck in my throat. Where they belonged as far as Mama was concerned.

Somehow I managed to get through the day. I saw Katie and Andrew but as quickly as they were there they were gone again. They honestly didn't care if I were there or not. For some reason, that didn't bother me any. Maybe it was because as children they didn't really particularly care if I were around or not, either. As long as the two had each other, every one else in their family was nonexistent. But could I honestly blame them?

Then, it was time for my father to rise from sleeping. I knew in a couple of hours he would be leaving for work, but the fact that I would still have to see him had my heart racing. I swallowed hard whenever I heard the all-too-familiar sound of his heavy footsteps in the bedroom. I knew I was shaking. It wasn't out of fear, though. It was out of anger. How could I get through this without killing the bastard for what he had done to my mother, his own cousin?

When he saw me, I was almost sure he was going to growl and bare his teeth much like a ferocious beast. I looked him dead in the eye, letting him know through my eyes exactly how I felt. At least we could agree that we weren't happy to see each other. With my

absence he seemed to hate me even more than he had before. But I didn't care. I wished the bastard would just die, anyway.

Neither of us said a word before he left for work. I had no need to say anything to him. I knew that had I said anything to him this time, the whole truth would come out. There was an anger in me that even I had never known was there. I knew now. I definitely knew now.

Mama didn't give a damn about us being there. An hour after my father left she was out the door herself, all decked out and looking gorgeous. Some friends of hers were picking her up. I knew Mama was back to her old ways. She would certainly never grow up. That night it would be just Celeste, Lila, Damian, Julie, and me.

Lila was content just playing with the baby. She loved to talk and I loved listening to her pretty musical voice, especially whenever she sang to Julie. It brought a wide smile of appreciation to my face. Lila was going to be absolutely beautiful, in many ways.

Celeste, on the other hand, couldn't wait to attack me. At first she stayed pretty quiet, hardly uttering a sound. She didn't really have to say anything, the fire in her eyes said it all. She hated me. She would forever hate me. Somehow, that made me miserable. It was Mama's fault I didn't get along with my own sister, half or not. If only Celeste knew the truth, I thought to myself.

I had just laid Julie down in the portable playpen that we had brought here to use as a bed and I was sitting in the living room when she came up behind me. Damian and everyone else had been sleeping and I had planned on staying up to read. I had assumed that she was also sleeping, but I was wrong. I sat reading when Celeste finally said in a whisper "You're nothing more than a whore, how are you going to explain that to your daughter?" I jumped at the sound of her voice and then jerked around to face her. She looked evil standing there, the hallway light illuminating her. For the first time in my life I was afraid of what Celeste might do.

I tried not to be angry as I stared at her, at a complete loss of words. But what could I say? I did look like I was no better than the next pregnant teenage girl. How could I possibly defend myself? I swallowed and looked at her. "I'm not a whore, Celeste. Maybe someday I can explain it to you, or maybe Mama. But I am definitely not a whore."

To my surprise she sat on the couch and began to cry. She buried her face in her hands. I stood watching her, unable to believe my eyes. This was the least of what I expected. Celeste never broke down and cried like this during an argument with me. Finally, she rubbed at her swollen, wet eyes. She was still sobbing softly, but her sobs had eased, but she still didn't look at me. She stared ahead. "You have everything, Phoenix. At least the one thing that I wanted. I admit, I don't want a kid, but I want that baby's father more than words can say."

“Don’t tell me you’re still obsessed with him, Celeste!” I cried. “After over a year?” She still wanted him. I didn’t know if it was because she loved him or if it was because I supposedly had him. Celeste had always wanted everything that I had.

She turned to look at me, glaring daggers once again. “Why wouldn’t I want him? I may be considered nothing but a whore, but I would marry him, Phoenix. I could make him happy, you could never! I know you two can’t be happy together!” She was somewhat right, and then again, she was so very wrong. Damian was happy, he just wasn’t happy because I refused to become more than his friend and the woman who took care of his child.

“Damian and I are happy with what we have, Celeste. Don’t think that we are not.” At least that wasn’t a lie. I knew Damian wanted more, but he was content with the way things were going right now. He wasn’t truly unhappy, and neither was I. Not really. Or maybe I was more unhappy than I liked to admit. But it was none of Celeste’s business. This was supposed to be a visit to see my family, not fight with someone who had terrible jealousy issues.

I left the room, not letting her say another word. Mama had let Celeste sleep in her bedroom while our father worked at night, and we got her room, my old room. I made my way up the stairs and into what had once been my room. I laid down beside Damian. It felt awkward. I had never slept with a man before. Somehow, though, I managed to fall asleep.

When I woke up, Damian was already awake. I was happy about that. I would feel uncomfortable enough later on in the day when seeing him, having slept in the same bed with him, but if I had waken up with him, it would have felt too intimate. And though the other women in my family may want to be intimate with Damian, I certainly didn’t want to be quite that intimate. He just wasn’t the right one for me to be like that with. I had no secret, young woman fantasies about Damian. We would never be anything more than what we were now. That was hard enough to explain.

When I walked downstairs, I walked dead on into a storm. Mama and my father were arguing. If you could call it that. He was screaming at her at the top of his lungs about the house again. Which, was absolutely no surprise to me.

“God damn it, Karen, why can’t you ever just clean the damn house up? Is it too much to ask?” His eyes were blazing. Evidently he had just woke up himself. I knew it was early for him, being only eleven in the morning. His hair was a wreck, sticking up in all directions, his eyes were bloodshot, and his face still had the pale color of sleep.

Mama was sitting down on the couch, one leg crossed over the other, her foot tapping wildly as it often did when she was irritated. “You don’t give me any credit, Michael! I do a lot in this house but nobody ever helps me! I can’t do it all on my own!” It had been a year since I had heard those words uttered, and yet they still grated on my nerves. I

knew damn well that she was helped. She was the one who gave nobody else credit. Not to side with that incredulous piece of work that was my father, but it was too true.

He gave her a sarcastic look around the house and let out a few sounds of disbelief. “I work hard to feed your fucking face! The only thing I expect is this house be clean when I get home!”

Mama began to cry and moan and groan some more. I stood just in side the doorway off to the side. For some reason I wanted to listen to this. I wanted to know what was going on. Of course, I was always nosey like this, however, usually I would butt in. I feared what I might say if I did it this time.

“Oh! Give me a break, Karen! I don’t care. The only company we have is that whore of a daughter of yours sleeping upstairs. Her sleeping habits still haven’t changed.” He grumbled, running his hand through his hair. I had to literally bite down on my tongue to stop myself from blowing up.

“My daughter?!” Mama laughed at him and shook her head. “No, Michael. You have it all wrong. She isn’t my daughter, she’s yours. Yours and Rachael’s. I think you need to come to terms with the fact of who she is. Maybe then you won’t be such an ass to her. After all,” She threw back at him as she rose from the couch and walked into the hallway towards her bedroom “you did make her.”

He followed he into the bedroom where the arguing continued but I no longer listened. What I’d heard had already chilled me to my very core. How long had she been throwing that up in his face whenever I hadn’t been around? I thought silently to myself. How long had she been torturing him about who I was? Maybe that was the real reason he hated me so much. She reminded him, and I reminded him, of his mistake.

For the most part the house was quiet. Celeste had gone out with friends for the day, or however long, according to Mama who said Celeste was never home anymore. That bothered me. Where was the discipline? Why did Celeste get to go out and do whatever she wanted? Didn’t they care if she got hurt or not? I decided not to bother asking. It was no longer part of my business. I would leave soon, sooner than I had planned, I decided. There was no way I could stay out of it for a whole week.

Damian had gone off to visit his family, people I had no interest in seeing. He had taken Julie and Lila with him. So, all day, it was just Mama and myself. And it felt so incredibly strange to be around her now. I didn’t want to be. I felt suffocated by her presence. I felt angry with her. She had made me a mother at sixteen years old. She had, in some ways, ruined my life. I hated her for it and I had a hard time not telling her just that. So I did my best to avoid her.

When Damian got back to the house he came upstairs and set the car seat down. He smiled at me and I suddenly felt safe. As long as he was around my family couldn’t hurt me. He would protect me from it all. I realized then that I just needed a friendly, familiar

face. And these people, these people that I had grown up around, were no longer familiar to me. I needed Damian to be there.

He sat down beside me on the bed and put his arm around me. “You don’t look so good, Phoenix. Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m not okay. I don’t want to be here. Coming here was a mistake and when we leave I’m never coming back. The only person that wants me here is Lila, anyway.

He patted my hand gently and I looked at him. I wanted to cry, but I kept my tears for Mitch only, most of the time. He was the only one who seemed to know how to get rid of them. So I swallowed them back and finally smiled. “There you go. Maybe you’re right, though. It really was a mistake coming here. Nobody wants us here anymore. Let’s go home tomorrow okay?”

I shook my head again. “No, I have to stay longer than that. At least for Lila.”

“Then let’s get out of here tonight, Phoenix. Let’s go do something, have fun. I won’t let you sit around here feeling miserable. I hate to see those black eyes of yours look so miserable!”

Though I told him yes, we would go do something, I felt butterflies in the pit of my stomach. What was this? A date? I didn’t know what was going on. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe he really did just want to get me out of the house. Whatever it was, I was nervous about it, but happy to leave the house. As soon as we were back in the car and on our way to a small amusement park called Camelot in Salida, California, I felt as if a dark cloud had been lifted. But, somehow, I felt, that it hadn’t been lifted all the way. I hated that feeling of dread. I just never knew how to get rid of it.

Damian and I got to the park and put Julie into her stroller. He got us all day passes even though we didn’t really need them. But we would stay until it closed, he had decided. Besides, it was cheaper than buying for all of the stuff that we wanted to do.

Lila was with us so she kept an eye on Julie when Damian and I did stuff together. We gave her some money so she could buy some tokens for the arcade. With that she was off, pushing the stroller in front of her excitedly.

When Damian and I were alone we both felt strange. I could feel it. Whenever Julie was around, we had an excuse to be around one another. Without her there, we had no excuse to be with each other. Not really. And this felt incredibly like a date. Not that I knew what a date even felt like. I had only been kissed once and that was by Damian himself. Which wasn’t something that either of us ever brought up, but it was something that I thought about whenever I was around him now.

“So,” He said, breaking the odd silence. He was rocking back and forth on his heels and swinging his arms and clapping his hands together. “What do you want to do first?” He asked. I looked around the park. I saw the go carts and smiled. Definitely.

The line was long, but it went by quickly. When I got into the car I grew excited. The strange feelings between Damian and I disappeared after that. We were suddenly just being ourselves and having fun.

One of the last things we did was the bumper boats. I laughed as I sprayed him with the squirter that was on the small, one person, round boat. We kept getting each other and other people and for once in my life I felt normal. I was having fun and being free of all the worried that held me normally. It felt so good to break out of my own torturous cage.

Damian got out first and then waited for me to finally pull my boat over. We were both soaking wet from head to toe. It felt good, though, since it was a pretty warm night. I stood up to get out of the boat and though Damian was helping me out, the boat slipped out from beneath me and I fell. Fell right into Damian that is. He caught me and held onto me so tightly. More tightly than necessary, I thought. But, no matter, it felt good to be held like this.

Though the teenager working there was looking at us funny, I couldn't pull my eyes away from his nor could he pull his from mine. Finally he balanced me to stand up straight. But he didn't exactly let me go. He held onto my hand. He seemed nervous at first but more comfortable and confident when I didn't pull away from him. He squeezed my hand and looked down at me. I smiled at him and then looked away. This was going to be hard for me, but I wasn't going to fight it. Damian and I would be forever linked, no matter what happened. Why couldn't I give it a try? And perhaps he really had changed, right?

The rest of my time at what used to be home wasn't bad. The only time I argued was whenever Celeste was actually home. She hated me and made it known. She refused to even look in Julie's direction and would stare at Damian wistfully. Something nobody was supposed to catch her doing, I'm sure.

I thought it would all go smoothly. We were leaving now. I was packing the car. I was grateful that my father hadn't said a word in my direction. I felt safe that nothing would go wrong now and I could go home, happy that I'd had a pretty good trip. Of course, I was wrong.

I had just set the last bag into the trunk when I turned to see my father standing next to Celeste on the porch. I needed to go in and get Julie but I did not want to pass either of those two. I decided that I had to anyway and I did pass them. I had just passed them whenever I heard my father mutter “A slut no better than her mother.”

The anger had been bottling up the entire time I was here burst out of me like lava out of a volcano. I spun around and glared at him. “How dare you say that about my mother?” I screamed. “She wasn't a slut, or a whore, or whatever you want to call her! She wasn't

like that! I know she wasn't, I've been told! You raped her you son of a bitch! You did it! And now I am here so face it! It's your fault!"

He wasn't stunned long enough for me to walk away. He was up in a flash, his hand encircling my neck. He picked me up and slammed me against the side of the house. I don't know why I thought about the doorbell that kept ringing. It was still somehow amusing to me even though he was about to choke me to death. What an odd thought for your last thoughts.

"You stupid little bitch! Don't you ever talk to me like that again! Don't you ever mention that again!" He screamed, pounding me harder against the doorbell.

"Let her go!" I heard come from someone. I didn't know who it was. My mind was spinning from lack of oxygen. I needed my asthma medicine something awful. I was choking, dying.

Though, I did see Damian pull him off of me and felt myself drop to the hard, cold ground with a thump, I didn't get any rush of life saving air. Sure, I did get some air, which I gasped for. But, I couldn't breathe. I kept wildly trying to pull in air, but my lungs wouldn't do it. I coughed and choked and began to cry. I couldn't die now. Please, please! I begged God. Don't let me die like this! Then I passed out for the very first time in my life.

Chapter 4

I woke up confused and dazed. I looked around a very familiar hospital room, however. Damian sat by me, a worried frown creasing his forehead. I groaned and sat up.

"What's going on?" I asked. I remembered the asthma attack but nothing else.

Damian came over to the bedside quickly and sat down, taking my hand in his. "Are you okay?" He asked, instead of answering my question.

I took a deep breath and then nodded. "Yes, I am okay now."

"Good. I was afraid. You've been out for hours!" He cried, holding tightly to my hand.

"Where is everyone?" I finally asked. Why was Damian the only one here whenever I was supposed to be visiting my family? Didn't they care about me?

"Lila and Karen are taking care of Julie. Celeste and the others are all off doing their own thing. Celeste hates you more now."

I shook my head confused. "Why does she hate me more now?"

“Karen was forced to tell everyone the truth about you. You being only her half sister makes her hate you more itself. But that’s not the reason.” He positioned himself so he could be more comfortable. “Karen called the cops on Michael. He was taken to jail. Chances are he’ll get a few years in prison.”

The bastard was in jail? My life long tormentor? I almost cried out in happiness. Please, God, I begged silently, please, let him stay there. Don’t let him out.

“He had tried to kill me!” I cried, remembering everything now.

“And he nearly succeeded.” Damian said. I shook from his words. I could have died? He could have killed me? Oh my God! “Karen saw what was going on and called out for me to help. I beat the hell out of him, Phoenix. Then when I saw you I was so damn scared.” He sighed and looked away. Then looked back to me. “But you’re okay now, and not dead. Thank God.”

We left the hospital a day later. They had kept me in over night to make sure I was all right. Over night, however, decisions were made without me. Decisions I never thought would be made.

It was decided that if my father was sentenced to a few years in prison, Julie would stay with her rightful mother. I knew I truly had no right to say no. I had no blood relation to the baby girl. Yet, I felt a loss in me a week later as my father was sentenced. Seven years in prison. Julie would stay here.

As would Damian now. I had all of my stuff packed the day I was leaving. I waited at the train station and Damian waited with me. I felt so miserable as they called my train number. I was losing two important people in my life. How could this happen?

As I picked up the two carry on bags I was taking with me, Damian got up to help me. I turned to face him. “No, Damian, please, don’t help get rid of me. You’ve already helped take that little girl away. You’re also taking away our friendship as well. But, you’ve done so before, haven’t? Karen is divorcing my father. I hope the two of you live happily ever after.” I said coldly as I walked away, not facing him, not letting him see the hurt in me.

I rode the train home and when I got off and saw Ella and Jenny standing there, the sight of the two lightened my spirits. Jenny may dislike me but we were family all the same. She couldn’t deny it. She had missed me and being able to blame stuff on me. Maybe she didn’t hate me after all.

I met up with them, giving both of them a big hug each. Jenny looked absolutely shocked as I pulled away. “What’s wrong with you?” She snapped.

“I’m just so happy to be home, Jenny, that I realized I missed even you!” I cried. We all got into the car without another word.

Jenny ran into the house whenever we got home but Ella and I sat out in the car. She got out of the car and held out her hand. "Let's go take a walk, Phoenix." She said, obviously knowing I would need to talk.

We walked through the garden, neither saying anything at first. I was just comforted by her presence.

Finally, she broke the silence. "I'm sorry that Damian and Karen decided that they would give it a try and be parents to Julianna. I know how much you love that baby."

I shook my head, willing the tears to go away. "It's no big deal, I guess. I suppose my heart knew that going back there would be a mistake. I just didn't listen to the warnings."

She nodded. "It's not a big deal, Phoenix. It's truly time that you just relax and not worry about anything. You don't have to be a mother now until you have your own children. That's a good thing, sweetie."

I smiled at her. "I know. Everything will be all right. I am willing to forget and go on." I smiled wider. "They asked me to stay there, too" I told her.

"Oh? Why did you come back then?" She asked. I could tell she was now fearing that I would decide to go back and I had only come to tell them all goodbye.

"I told them that this is my home now, and I don't want their out of control life." I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "You're my family now, Ella. I don't need them."

"Are you positive you feel that way, Phoenix?" She asked. I knew she was just scared that she could lose me back to the mad house that had once been my family.

"Yes, I am. I've never felt more like a stranger in my life, not even when I first came here."

I knew Mitch was happy that Damian was gone, but I couldn't hide from him the fact that I missed him. I feared hurting Mitch's feelings by telling him what had happened when I had been there. I mean, nothing had truly happened, not even a kiss. Yet, something had happened, a spark had hot through both of us. There were feelings between Damian and I. I had felt it and so had he. At least that is what I thought until I heard Mama was divorcing my father and her and Damian were going to give it a shot and raise Julie together. That was what broke my heart the most.

"You miss him, don't you?" Mitch asked me one day while I sat in the library just staring out the large, floor-length windows.

I jumped, shocked by the sudden sound of his voice. "Miss who?" I knew he was talking about Damian. I was just trying to play stupid.

His eyes were darker than I had ever seen them before as he looked at me, disgust written clearly on his face. “You know damned straight who I am talking about, Phoenix. I knew he’d charm you. I can see it in your eyes.” He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe my actions. “I warned you, but I knew it was pointless to do so. You couldn’t help yourself. Just like your sister and Karen couldn’t help themselves, neither could you.”

He began to roll out of the room, but by this time I was angry beyond words. How could he sit there and be angry at me for developing feelings for Damian? Just because he was jealous he had a right to treat me like this? I didn’t think so.

I walked up behind him and spun his chair around to make him face me. “Listen hear, Mitchell Branch, I am not going to let you treat me like some whore just because you’re jealous! I won’t allow you to make me feel as I’ve done something wrong when I’ve done nothing!”

He just smiled as if I was a complete idiot and shook his head. “You’re only trying to defend yourself against something that’s obvious.” He shoved my hands off the arms of his chair. “I’m not treating you as a whore. I’m just telling you, Phoenix. You were a fool and now you’re hurting because you didn’t listen to me. You were my friend. I thought you trusted what I had to say and my warnings. I guess not even you can resist and man’s charms, right?”

This time I let him leave. He had hit where it hurt and he knew it. I hated him for knowing my feelings and thoughts. I hated knowing that I couldn’t hide the turmoil in my heart from him. He was my friend, sure, but he had become somebody that I didn’t even know. He was so jealous it was disgusting. I used to love having somebody know and care about me that much. Now he was using that against me because of his anger over the fact that for once I didn’t listen to his warnings.

Yet, my heart knew, he was right. All this time I was convinced I was immune to some man’s charms and I hadn’t been. I had fallen for Damian just as the other women in my family had. Just as they had let themselves fall under Damian’s deadly charms, I had. It scared me to know that I could be charmed in such a way. I had always been convinced that I would love when I trusted. I certainly didn’t trust Damian. So, what exactly did I feel for him? It wasn’t a question I felt like delving too far into for the answer. The answer frightened me.

The thing with Damian being on my mind constantly faded quickly. Soon, he was far from my thoughts. Sadly, so was Julie. But she wasn’t my daughter. I had other things to worry about other than love affairs and children. The past was a major thing to think about. I still had a million questions about my mother.

I also had questions about Ella and Grandfather Gerald. I watched them drift even farther apart daily. Not that they had ever been close, but Ella was drifting into herself and into the past. Sure, she looked like Ella on the outside, but she was so vacant. She looked

empty and sometimes she would slip and forget the time and place. She would be young again, best friends with my mother and Melanie. I worried about her immensely.

I worried even more after passing by her room one afternoon to see her sitting on her bed, crying. I was about to go in and talk to her when she looked up towards something or someone. “No! You can’t make me marry you!” She screamed. She was so shrill and upset I jumped. Yet, when I turned at more of an angle I saw no one there.

My eyes widened as I watched her scream and fight with an imaginary person. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me.” She snapped.

She shook her head vigorously, the tears shimmering on her cheeks flying across her face madly. It frightened me to see her like this. Suddenly she stopped shaking her head and she spotted me. At first I thought that she was recognizing me and realizing what she was doing. Then her eyes opened frighteningly wide and her mouth opened in shock. “Rachael? Rachael? What are you doing here? You’re dead! No! No! It wasn’t my fault! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!”

I ran then. I didn’t know what she was talking about but it had my heart racing. I wasn’t Rachael! I was Phoenix! But I feared saying anything. All I could do was run from the room, not turning to look back.

I slammed into the library and leaned against the door. Mitch was sitting by the big windows and he turned around quickly, stunned to have somebody come in so dramatically. He looked like the old Mitch to me, concerned about what was wrong. And I definitely needed to tell him.

He rolled his chair over to me quickly. “What’s wrong? What’s going on?” I shook my head and put my hand up. I needed to catch my breath before going into that. I walked over to one of the many chairs and sat down and breathed deeply. He came over beside me and stroked my back gently, trying to calm me.

Finally, after using my inhaler a few times, I could breathe again. “Oh my god, Mitch!” Was the only thing I could utter. What I had seen had chilled my bones. I quickly calmed myself again and breathed deeply. “She was just sitting there on the bed talking to herself and saying the most strange things!” I was still breathing heavily and having a difficult time telling him what had happened, what I had seen.

“Okay, Phoenix, you need to calm down and explain to me what’s going on. I can’t understand you.” He was concerned about what was wrong, but I knew he was also intrigued. What could possibly make me this way?

I nodded and began telling him everything that I had heard Ella say and how she had reacted when she saw me. His eyes went as wide as I imagined mine had been. “My God! here really is something wrong with her. I don’t know what to do.”

“Me either, Mitch. I was so scared. I’ve never seen anyone act like that and Ella is always so cool and calm....I just never expected something like that from her!” I cried. I was scared for her. Why was she going crazy like this? And why had she said my mother was dead? She told me she believed that she was alive.

“I don’t know what’s going on, Phoenix. But we do need to get her help. I think I’m going to talk to Gerald about getting a doctor to come out and see her. And if he doesn’t, then I’ll get one.” Mitch assured me.

Two days later, after fighting with Grandfather Gerald about it, we didn’t have the choice but to call an ambulance.

I was sitting in my room, fuming about Grandfather Gerald being so against getting help for Ella when I heard the shrill, fearful scream come from Ella’s room. I was the first to arrive in her room. Jenny was next and both of us stood there, too stunned to move. Neither of could move. All we could do was stare, both too scared to move even an inch.

Ella sat at her vanity table, screaming as loud as possible and pounding her vanity table mirror. The mirror was in pieces, the glass lying everywhere, and yet she still pounded at the glass. It was as if she wanted to destroy the glass until she could no longer see her image. She just pounded and pounded with her fists. Her tiny fists and wrists were bloody but I didn’t think she could feel any pain. Her hair was in a wild disarray and her face didn’t have a stitch of make up on. Her skin was an unnaturally pale yellow color.

“Oh my God!” I murmured. I turned to Jenny, finally. “Go call an ambulance right now! I have to try to calm her down and I’m stronger than you.” Jenny nodded and quickly ran, trying to flee from the horrendous scene in front of us.

I rushed in the room after that and tried to talk to Ella. “Ella, come on, you need to calm down. Tell me what’s wrong.” I tried to negotiate reason with her but when she looked at me, she got that look of horror on her face again.

“I’m so sorry, Rachael! I’m sorry! I tried to stop it, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t! Please, believe me! I loved you! You were my best friend. Please! Don’t hurt me! I didn’t mean it! I didn’t! I swear!” As she said this she rose from her chair with a long shard of glass in her hand and took a step near me. Tears were running down her cheeks, making her eyes red and puffy.

I took a step back when she tried to stab me with the piece of glass but she let out a growl of frustration and anger and before I knew it was pinned against the wall. I cried out in shock at her outstanding display of strength. She aimed blindly, trying to stab me. I twisted and moved out of her way but the glass still caught me a few times. I was cut across my shoulder and in my arms, wrists, and hands. I was only cut on my wrists and hands because of my struggle to get away.

Just when she had me where she wanted me and I had no where to move, though, Mitch and Jenny came in. Jenny screamed this time, shock and fear written all over her pretty features.

Mitch wheeled himself over to me faster than I had ever seen him wheel around in his chair. He grabbed Ella by the back of her hair and slammed her back against the bed. I took a deep, yet agonizing breath. That's when I realized she had gotten me across my right side. And I was bleeding heavily.

The paramedics and some other people came in. I really wasn't paying much attention because the pain in my shoulders, arms, and side were so severe. A couple of paramedics helped me onto a gurney and I was taken to the hospital where I ended up with ten stitches in my left shoulder, seven in my left, five in one cut on my arm, and fifteen in my side. When I went home my body was killing me. Mitch kept checking on me, though I assured him each time that I was fine, just in a little bit of pain. He was really overly worried.

Ella was taken to the nearest "behavioral center". It was something they called the mental institution to soften the blow of what it was. All they could tell us is that something in her conscience had been weighing heavily on her for a long time and it had just taken over her mind. They put her on tranquilizers and continued to humor her. She wasn't getting any better and the doctor doubted that she would ever leave the world that her mind was in. The tranquilizers calmed her down to where she wasn't going crazy, but she still spoke to people as if they were there and all of them were from the past. Especially some girl named Rachael, according to the doctor.

It frightened me how she talked about Rachael so often. It wasn't the fact that she talked about her. It was the fact that she talked *to* her and how she talked to her. What she said was frightening. It was almost as if Ella had something to do with my mother's disappearance. But why would she? Everyone knew that Ella loved my mother. They had been best friends. Even Mama had said so.

Even if Ella didn't know us, Mitch and I went to see her. Though, more often than not, I didn't get to say in there. Even on her tranquilizers she became crazy, throwing tantrums and apologizing while trying to attack me. Only she wasn't attacking me. She was attacking Rachael. I couldn't hate Ella for her attacks. I just didn't understand them and it hurt. She had been a good friend to me, somebody who cared and understood. Or so I thought she understood.

Mitch always left there so upset. Though his mother hadn't been motherly towards him his entire life, she was still his mother and he loved her a great deal. She had never been mean to him. She had more or less ignored him. But she had still loved him. Admired him. Jealous of him, I thought. Jealous of the fact that in spite of living under the same roof as all of them, he had a choice to be there. And he had his own way of escaping when she didn't. The house, and the people in it, had finally driven her completely insane.

After Ella had been in a week without really any change in her, I began to worry. I knew doctors often told you that people had little chance of recovery and recovered all of the way. It was something that I had been hoping for. But as a week past, I began to realize that Ella was never going to be the same again. Never would she stroke my hair lovingly and be caring and understanding to my feelings. I had never realized how much I had come to depend on her. She had become a good friend.

Even though what had happened to Ella wasn't a good thing, it had brought Mitch and I back to being friends. We didn't talk about Damian or Julianna. We pretended as if they didn't exist. I had missed his friendship. Damian had torn it apart by coming. Mitch and I had just seemed to drift apart when before we had become close. We had become friends right away. We were two outcasts that just didn't seem to belong anywhere in our families. It seemed to draw us together. And I was thankful that we were back to being us again.

The things Ella had said were something that ran through my mind like a wildfire. They brought about horrible nightmares, too. Ella made so many attempts to attack Rachael, I couldn't imagine that she had never done just that. What if she was the true reason for her disappearance? It bothered me to think that way after hearing Ella speak so highly about her. I had never assumed Ella would want to get rid of her.

I tossed and turned wildly in my bed a few weeks later. I wasn't having an easy time sleeping at all. The nightmares kept coming and this one had been the most frightening.

At first it was my mother out in the garden with Ella. Ella was normal, friendly. They were talking about something but I couldn't quite hear what they were saying. But suddenly I had become my mother. We were the same person, talking normally to a friend when Ella's eyes began to glow with a jealous rage. She began yelling and screaming much the way she had the other times he had attacked me. Then she pulled a butcher knife from somewhere and began chasing me with it. Just as I had fallen and she was about to stab me, I woke up. I sat upright in my bed, looking around. Fear was still pumping through me. It had been so frightening.

After that I was unable to get back to sleep. Thoughts plagued me constantly. And all of them were suspicions that Ella had something to do with my mother disappearing. I now had little hope that she was alive. If she was, she had been running from Ella. And if she wasn't, I was almost positive Ella had something, or even everything, to do with her death.

Chapter 5

Summer went by so quickly my head spun. before I knew what was happening, it was winter, nearly Christmas, and I had been in school for nearly four months. Jenny and her friends had a tendency to ignore me now, not bothering to even start rumors. I really had no friends. Not that it mattered. I couldn't wait until Christmas break whenever I'd get to be home again for two weeks.

All of my teachers were good to me. They were never rude or anything, even though I didn't get the best of grades. I tried and in English and history I did get A's. But in Math and Science I did horribly. I was almost failing in both classes. I needed tutoring badly in both classes.

I wanted help. But I didn't want to seem stupid. The last day before Christmas break I went up to both my math and science teacher after their classes ended and told them I didn't want to look like a fool and go get tutoring. Both smiled and said they'd discuss my problems over break and see what happened after we came back. They didn't want me to mess up. This was my senior year!

I was so glad when the school day ended. It wasn't that I didn't love to learn. No. That wasn't the case. I loved to learn. I just hated feeling as if I were being suffocated by the millions of other teenagers around me. I had always felt uncomfortable around other teenagers. They all seemed so stupid and immature to me. They made their own drama to make their uninteresting lives exciting. Most of the time they just wound up in trouble. And if they needed to, they'd get someone else in trouble to cover themselves and watch the other person suffer. It was ridiculous. Something I didn't want to have anything to do with.

When I got home I rushed to my room and turned on my stereo. As always, a way to relieve my stress was to sing. And sing I did. I loved to do it, just never in front of anyone. I didn't want to feel as if I were showing off or want anyone to think I was horrible at it. So I sang to myself, never to anyone. I felt more comfortable that way. I didn't even take choir anymore because I feared people thinking me stupid sounding.

But today wasn't going to be stress free. I heard the pounding on my bedroom door from my bathroom. I rushed out and into the bedroom to open the door. Grandfather Gerald stood there, glaring at me as if I were some lower form of specimen. It didn't matter. I looked at him the same way.

"They want to release Ella from the hospital." He announced. The fight left me and I became curious and confused.

"Why do they want to do that?" I couldn't understand. Sure, she wasn't getting any better, but wasn't that place supposed to make her comfortable? His answer was about to make me very angry.

"They keep wanting money to keep her there. I stopped paying. I'm not going to pay for an act Ella is putting on." I looked at him completely stunned. An act? She had attacked and tried to kill his granddaughter and it had been an act? I certainly didn't agree with that.

"It's not an act, you imbecile! She's sick. She can't grasp reality anymore! And part of it is your fault! The least you could do is pay for her comfort in a place that will help keep

her alive!" I knew I was screaming. I couldn't stop myself, though. Ella needed special help. We couldn't bring her home yet if ever!

His eyes held an angry fire as they stared at me. I expected him to hit me. I had become used to him raising his hand to me any time I spoke back with any sort of attitude. But instead he simply said in a low, dangerous voice, "She is coming home and that's it." Then he left my bedroom doorway.

I was shaking with nervousness as Grandfather Gerald got into the limousine to pick up his wife. Ella needed tranquilizers to be calm, and even with them she had a tendency to attack me. It was frightening to have somebody like that in your house, whether you knew and loved them or not. I was afraid of somebody I once trusted. I hated that thought. But I was. Who would stop her if she tried to kill me again?

Mitch tried desperately to calm my nerves. As we sat in the library and he tried his best to calm me, I couldn't help but laugh. I was suddenly reminded of the time I had broken Celeste's arm and my cousin Josh had been trying to calm me much the same way because I was scared of my father. At the time it hadn't been funny, but looking back on it now it was. That's when I realized who Mitch reminded me of. He was so much like Josh at times. It made me stop laughing and just smile.

Mitch raised his eyebrows at my sudden switch of moods. I just shook my head at his questioning glance and leaned over to pat his hand. "Thanks for being a good friend, Mitch. I haven't had one for a few years."

"Oh, I see. Only a few years? So, I'm not your first good, true friend?" He teased.

I laughed. "Nope! My, well the person I thought to be now that I think about my true identity, cousin, Josh, was a good friend of mine. He always calmed my nerves down when they were a bit frazzled. That's all." I explained. I didn't know why I felt the need to explain. Or the reason I had to emphasize that all that was between us was strictly friendship. Of course, at the time I had thought he was my cousin. But still, sometimes there is something beneath the friendship facade when your heart knows that you're not truly related to someone.

It was there with Mitch, I realized with a start. I had always had feelings for Mitch. He was somebody that was gentle but honest towards me. I wasn't always in the right and he showed me that.

I knew the smile must have faded from my face while I stared at Mitch. My mood turned serious. "Honestly, I've never had a friend like you before, Mitch. Nobody that ever cared about me the way you do." I said in just above a whisper. I leaned a little closer towards him, resting my elbows on my knees. How could this be happening? He was my friend! My mind was screaming at me, telling me that this was wrong. But it wasn't. It didn't feel wrong.

“The way I care about you?” He was teasing, yet with only a slight smile that made my heart race in a way that I had never felt before. “And how do I care about you?”

I swallowed a little bit and turned my face away. He quickly brought his hand to my cheek and gently turned my head back around so my eyes met his blue ones. “How do I care about you, Phoenix?” He asked again, far more seriously. It was as if he was hoping I knew how he felt. Perhaps I did. But I needed to know for sure.

“Maybe you should tell me that, Mitch. How do you feel about me?” I said, changing the word care to feel.

“I’m not sure exactly what I feel. All I know is that, I’ve been wanting to do this since I first saw you.” And before I could ask what he kissed me. His lips were pressed so gently against mine, urging mine to move. It was by far different than the kiss I had experienced with Damian. It was more gentle, and less urgent. I felt as if I were floating.

When he pulled away from me it was only slightly. We were still just inches away from one another. “Don’t hate me for that, Phoenix, if you don’t feel the same way.” He seemed worried that I would hate him for kissing me.

I smiled. “I do feel the same way. And I could never be angry or hate you because you kissed me. I wanted you to, anyway.” It was a realization that hit me as the words left my lips. I had wanted him to kiss me.

Suddenly he laughed. “Now what do we do? It seems so strange, awkward.”

I let out a sigh. “I know. If I had an answer about what we do, I’d tell you. But I guess we just stay the way we were with one another before this kiss. I mean not completely, because I do want....” I blushed. I wanted a relationship with him but I was embarrassed. I had never been in a relationship. Not one like this, especially.

He nodded. It ended the topic and there was a silent agreement between us. We had agreed with that simple kiss that we were much more than friends. What we were to each other I didn’t know. I didn’t need to put a word to it, however. I was just content to be happy with the one person that made me extremely happy.

When Grandfather Gerald brought Ella into the house, Jenny, Mitch, and I watched from the upstairs hallway, where we could look down and see the entryway. Ella looked scared and unsure about what was going on. She stared around the grand foyer as if it were the first time she had ever seen it. It shocked me to see her so, empty and confused. She truly was lost.

What shocked me ten folds, however, was the gentle way my grandfather handled her. He had his arm around her waist and with his other he held her hand, helping her walk through the house. He was also acting as if he was giving her a tour of her “new” home. I had never seen the man seem so caring and nice. It was a sweet scene, but a confusing

one. How could this man who could be so cruel at times, be so gentle and wonderful to his mentally sick wife? What made him change towards her? Or had he changed at all? Maybe he was always this way with her when he thought no one else was around. For the first time I was happy to have him as my grandfather. Maybe he wasn't such a monster after all.

After Ella was settled back into her room, with anything dangerous far out of her reach, Mitch went in to see her. When he came back out to where I stood with Jenny waiting in the hallway, he shook his head sadly.

"She'll never be the same again. She didn't know who I was. She thought I was just some servant boy coming to aid her and unpack her things from her long journey." He frowned at the thought. Mitch wasn't spoiled, but he certainly couldn't live outside of the rich world.

Jenny scoffed. "Who cares anymore? She's crazy. I certainly won't be bringing any of my friends over any longer. I don't want them to know that my mother is a psycho."

"Jenny!" I cried. "She isn't psycho. This is just her way of dealing with things that have happened to her that were traumatizing. She kept things bottled up for so long they've driven her into her own world. That's all."

Both Jenny and Mitch looked at me with disbelief as I spout these words out. Both looked skeptical about my believing such a thing. I let out a sigh of frustration.

"It's true!" I insisted. "She's been through some traumatizing experiences and they've led her to be a sort of vegetable. At least, that's how the doctor explained it to me."

Jenny gave a fake yawn. "I, honestly, don't care." She said, turning and walking towards her bedroom. "I'm still not bringing my friends around my *traumatized* mother." She called back and then disappeared around the corner.

I cried out in frustration between clenched teeth. "God! I can't stand your sister! She's so uncaring and snobby!" I didn't give him a chance to answer. I stomped down the stairs and into the garden. I sat down on a bench. I was so angry that Jenny couldn't care less about what was wrong with her own mother. If I had children like that, God help me, I was going to just commit suicide!

Mitch wheeled himself over to me about ten minutes later. It took him longer to get down the stairs, but I knew he'd follow me. He always did whenever I got into these moods.

"Why do you let her get to you like that?" He asked. It wasn't accusingly or annoyed, it was just a simple question. One that I couldn't answer. I couldn't explain why she got to me so much. I tried anyway.

“She’s just so, aggravating, Mitch! She doesn’t care and it bothers me that a child can be so cruel on matters concerning her own mother. Ella isn’t crazy, she’s sick.” I wanted to believe that Ella was just sick, she would get better. But we both knew that she had gone insane.

He took my hand in his and squeezed it. “It’s how she was raised, Phoenix. You can’t change her.” He pulled himself out of his chair to sit on the bench beside me. “Besides, if she is that careless it is not just your grandfather’s fault. It’s my mother’s, too.”

My head lowered to my chest. I knew he was right. But it hurt to see somebody not care about their own family. I had always been so family oriented, even if my family was chaotic. Family had still been very important to me. Without your family, you were truly nothing. I couldn’t imagine being a real hermit. I wouldn’t want to be an outcast to the entire world.

“It’s not your problem to worry about, Phoenix. Forget about it.” He insisted. “It’s cold out here. I don’t want you to get sick. Come on, let’s go back inside.” He tugged on my hand as he pulled his chair closer to the bench.

I shook my head and looked at him. “I’ll be fine. I don’t really feel like going back in there right now.” I didn’t understand why I was suddenly so depressed. Yet, it was there, nagging me, stroking my heart with its ice cold fingers.

“What’s wrong, Phoenix? What’s been bothering you?” His eyes held concern as he gently raised his hand and began to stroke my hair.

I shrugged. “I guess it’s this whole thing with Ella. It bothers me so much. I hate that she really has gone crazy and that Jenny is right. She is psycho.” It all just came pouring out of me. “I hate the fact that just when I think I am getting closer to finding out the truth about my mother, Ella begins to babble and do things that say that everything I’ve been told about her disappearance is a lie.” I sighed. “It just scares me!” I cried.

He nodded. “I understand. I’m confused about Rachael’s disappearance now. I just don’t understand. There really is so much more to the past than either of us thought. I guess we’ll never truly know. To really know what happened back then, you have to know the thoughts and feelings of certain people.”

“I need to know the thoughts and feelings of your mother. She had something to do with her disappearance and maybe even death. I don’t know what. But, Mitch, your mother isn’t the innocent bystander as she claims.” I knew in my heart that if my mother was dead Ella had been a big part of her death. She had attacked me on too many occasions for that not to be true. The question was, why would she want to harm someone that was supposed to have been her best friend?

He shook his head, “It’s all too confusing right now for me to make assumptions.” Which I knew was a lie. There were many reasons to make assumptions. But for Mitch to be able to fathom his mother a killer, was difficult. He couldn’t do it.

I didn’t go near Ella’s room. I wouldn’t do it. I feared what she would do if she spotted me. I didn’t want her to go into one of her tantrums. They frightened me and, usually, they ended up with her trying to attack me, thinking I was my mother. Yet, I was still curious. I wanted to know why she wanted to attack my mother. Yet, there was only one person in the house that could really tell me what her problem was. And going to my grandfather was something that was very hard for me to do.

I approached him very carefully in the dining room that night. Mitch wasn’t feeling well and was eating his dinner in his bedroom and Jenny was at a friend’s house so it was the perfect time for me to ask. At first we ate in silence. Then I sat there for a few minutes, contemplating how to ask my questions. Finally, I looked up, only to see him staring at me. It was the first time I ever caught him looking at me lovingly and it gave me the confidence I needed, even if the look was only there for a split second.

“Why does Ella keep attacking me, thinking I’m my mother? Why would she attack my mother?” I asked, still cautiously.

To my surprise, he didn’t get angry and go into a fit of anger at my questions. He simply sighed and began to answer. “Ella always had a problem with Rachael. When they first met, Ella went to her mother, my fiancée at the time, and told her that she didn’t like Rachael. She thought someone as beautiful as your mother, ten times more beautiful than her, was too snobby and pretty to be a younger sister to her.” He shook his head.

“When Ella’s mother, Kylie, told me that, I couldn’t believe it. I insisted that the girls spend more time together, get to know each other more. Rachael was far from snobby, and she certainly didn’t think she was very beautiful. She had thought much the same thing of Ella. It was the reason for Rachael’s attitude towards her at first.”

“They started to get to know each other and they seemed to be becoming friends. I didn’t know. I wasn’t close with Rachael, so I never really knew what was going on in her life. We fought more than anything. She was too much like her mother in that aspect.”

He paused for a minute and sat thinking. I knew that he was losing himself in the past, remembering what had happened, and what could have been.

I wanted to urge him to continue, but I didn’t. I was afraid that he would start snapping at me. We fought so often. But I didn’t have to urge him, he continued on his own.

“You’re a lot like Rachael and your grandmother. Everyone says it’s the Parish temper that Rachael had, that you have, but no. Parish’s don’t use their wit to argue with somebody. If they get into an argument it almost always ends up in fists.”

“Anyway, one night whenever I sat lounging in front of the fireplace in the front parlor Rachael came to me. I had been married to Kylie for four years and I was rather moody because she had given me another daughter. We had a three year old that I just didn’t want. I didn’t really believe she was even mine anyway. Rachael was seventeen years old by this time. I thought everything between her and Ella were fine, but evidently they weren’t.”

“ ‘Dad,’ She began. She seemed afraid to tell me what she had to. ‘Ella has been doing crazy things to me. Sometimes she’ll be my best friend and then other times she looks absolutely crazy and begins complimenting me while she strokes my hair. Which is fine, she says she loves my hair. But she starts pulling on it and then she’ll bite me and all kinds of stuff like that.’ I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. I simply told her to stop making up lies and get back to bed. I did, however, talk to Kylie about it.”

“Kylie admitted that she had once had to Ella into a mental institution due to jealousy. Ella had nearly killed some girl at school that she was terribly jealous of. She was put onto some heavy medications for it.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I just pretended not to care when Rachael kept coming to me for help. I liked to shove my head in the sand and pretend everything was fine. Rachael knew how to take care of herself. It was something that her mother had taught her from seemingly birth. Rachael never depended on anyone.”

“Ella had gotten married and wasn’t too much of a worry. Except that the man she married was lower than scum and they were living in this house. They had Mitch but, just as I had suspected, Roger Branch didn’t live up to expectations. Sure, the kid was good looking, Mitch looks just like him, but he took off with some woman, leaving Ella behind. Ella went into an emotional breakdown, and started doing more mean things to Rachael.”

“So?” I said, after he had finished. “You think maybe Ella had something to do with my mother’s disappearance?”

He nodded. “I know she did. She hated the thought of having a step daughter merely three years younger than her and by far more beautiful, and not to mention single. Rachael would have everything that Ella couldn’t, which bothered her more.”

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “I only married Ella because Kylie was scared for her. Kylie always took a lot of precautions with her daughter, so when she became sick and knew she was dying she begged me to marry Ella and give her and Mitch a good home life. So I force Ella into marrying me. I don’t think she even knows why.”

When I left the dining room that night, I left with far more knowledge than I had ever gotten. I knew more about the family, things that had never been told to me. Of course, the reasoning for that was because these were things Ella wasn’t going to tell me. I just

had one question plaguing me. It kept me up for the rest of the night trying to figure it out. Why would Ella pretend to love and adore my mother so much if she truly hated her?

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