

# THE SLAYER'S APPRENTICE

Zathyn Priest

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The Slayer's Apprentice

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## Chapter One

*Have you ever desired with passion? I don't mean superficial passion yearned for by most men. No, the passion I'm talking about comes from far deeper within one's soul. Not an aspect of one's spirit, but its very core. It is not something you can switch off and on like the light of so-called love. Passion so all-consuming it feeds off every breath you draw, growing more powerful, seizing the soul in its embrace, never willing, or able, to let it go.*

*It's that final look in their eyes. A final pleading look of confusion, which in that moment erases their fear. A flash of questioning: 'Why me?' 'Why you?' 'Why now?' 'Why?' It's the final time their chest rises... falls... shudders... stops. It's the final moment when, at my will, everything for them ceases to be. It's that final moment which makes the build up, the hunt, the capture, and the deed, culminate into the exhilarating end.*

*So here you are reading this, surrounded by my work and impressed by it. Stimulated, perhaps. It gets the adrenaline pumping, doesn't it? Your mind is already ticking over; I don't have to be there personally to know this. You want me. At this one moment in time, you want me more than anything else you've ever desired. It's a rage building inside you. I won't stop and now you, due to my initiation, will not stop either. You can't.*

*I know how God feels.*

*NOW you desire with the passion I feel, all because I, without even meeting you, have planted the seed. I have the upper hand. I'll do this again, and again, and again, and again. Ad infinitum. You, and dare I say many others, are just along for the ride. In my hands, I hold the reins; in my heart, I hold the lust; in my mind, I hold the key; in my thoughts, I hold my plans; and in my deeds, I hold a captive audience.*

*You won't trace me from this letter. You won't find the blue-eyed, redheaded boy. You won't find peace. You won't find me.*

*Until we meet again.*

*T.C.S*

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Detective Paul Somerset placed the paper into a plastic bag and handed it over to forensics. "T.C.S." He scoffed. "Kitsch."

"That mean something?" inquired a uniformed police officer.

Peering sideways, Paul lifted an eyebrow. “The Crucifix Strangler, The Crucifix Slayer, The Crucifix Stalker, take your pick, Constable Lang. I highly doubt he’s been kind enough to give us his real initials.” He sidestepped the officer and re-entered the master bedroom. “Approximate time of death?”

“Coroner estimates between five and seven last night. You think it’s a ritual killing?”

“Because of the crucifix?” Paul shook his head. “I doubt it. This guy wants notoriety; he wants the media attention, a name for himself. My guess is the crucifix image is nothing more than a calling card.” Folding his arms over his chest, he craned his neck upward. “Drawn upside down on her forehead to signify the Antichrist. But he didn’t compare himself to the Devil, did he? In the letter, he made a comparison with God.”

Eight years working with Sydney’s Criminal Investigation Branch and Paul had never personally encountered a slaying quite so horrifically bizarre. In the back, a German Shepherd dog lay dead on the doorstep. Baited earlier and arranged on its back, its paws were bound with the same thick nylon cord used to strangle the three victims, its muzzle taped shut, its throat cut. In the lounge room, Colin Hilliard sat dead in an armchair, bound and gagged in a perfect replica of the deceased canine. He’d been struck in the back of the head with a blunt object, strangled, and then arranged in the armchair as though he’d died peacefully with a cup of coffee at his side. In the bedroom, his wife, Vanessa Hilliard, hung, stripped down to her underwear with no obvious sign of sexual assault. Her wrists had been slashed with only minimal blood spatter near where the body had been found. She’d then been taken into the bedroom and suspended from an exposed beam above. Unlike her husband, her body showed definite signs of a struggle, with defensive wounds on her hands and bruising across her face.

Most disturbing to Paul was a possible frightening connection between the Hilliard murders and the abduction of thirteen-year-old schoolboy, Dylan Firth, earlier in the day. *‘You won’t find the blue-eyed, redheaded boy.’* It could have been written as a taunt, taking responsibility for another heinous crime in order to boost the killer’s own ego. Paul knew T.C.S. wanted to be noticed. He wanted to play the law and flaunt his ability to elude it. A precursor, Paul feared, for more to come. He’d slain an innocent young couple in their mid-twenties, possibly abducted and murdered a child, boasted of it, and had plans to become Australia’s next most wanted serial killer. The killer had already given himself a name Paul knew he’d fully exploit at a later date. T.C.S. had arrogantly placed himself on a pedestal and likened his first crime to those that had gone down in history as the world’s most notorious. He was intelligent; the eloquent letter showed an educated man, a man who desired the police to immediately recognize this intellect. The murders would not stop until he was caught. Of that Paul could be certain.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Five Years Later*

Melting with night shadows beneath dark clouds threatening a deluge, Phoenix pressed his back against the biting cold bricks and turned his face away from the stench of a nearby dumpster. Eyes firmly closed in a failed attempt to shut out his sordid surroundings, his ears tuned into the rising aggravation in clearly audible male voices around the decrepit building's corner.

"Four hundred you owe me," one voice snarled into the darkness. "Pay up!"

A momentary pause ensued, followed by the sounds of scuffling shoes on wet concrete.

"It was in my pocket!"

Phoenix's heart thumped against his chest and his right hand clenched around a small plastic bag containing eight fifty-dollar notes. Sweat beads gathered over his brow, intermingled with the first drops of rain spattering onto his face.

"One hour!" came the furious reply, matching up with the dull thud of something falling heavily to the ground. "Or I'll spill your blood!"

Situated on the corner of an intersection, nestled in the midst of one of Sydney's poorer suburbs, Dale's Bar catered to the drunk and belligerent. Violence reared its head night after night, spurred on by too much alcohol, illicit drugs, racial conflicts, and oppressive poverty.

A large hand seized Phoenix's arm, startling him into losing his balance. "Get your skinny arse behind the bar where it belongs!"

Phoenix shirked it off and sneered a curt reply. "Fuck off, Dale, I'm on a break!"

Dale Richards ran a loose ship as owner of the seedy bar-and-restaurant; he was a boss abusing employees and dealing in more than drinks. Mousy hair flipped in a comb over, always drenched in sweat that formed wet patches under the arms of his T-shirt and down the front of his protruding stomach, Dale asked for no identification, no employee history, and paid minimum wage under the table.

Phoenix was approaching his fifth month in Dale's employ. He hung around for the easy pickings of wayward wallets and a dire need to keep a roof over his head. Phoenix squatted in run-down apartments, stole handbags from women in the streets, and accosted easy prey at

ATMs. He had taken part-time jobs as a kitchen hand until he had been able to find a permanent position as a bartender.

Phoenix kept no friends. Eighteen years old, five foot six, slim, and he was blessed with a beauty that worked both for and against him. From an early age, he'd been taught how to coerce trust with an angelic appearance and how to portray severed emotions.

Doe brown eyes peered through a long, dark brown fringe worn as one would wear a mask. The rest of his hair was cut short, showing off a piercing in his left ear decorated with a small reverse crucifix. Soft curves flowed around a perfect oval face and full, blush pink lips. Long eyelashes framed eyes others could drown in until they realized they drowned in a void.

“Break’s over! Bar! Now!”

It edged toward three in the morning, the bar’s busiest period. Phoenix passed by two other bartenders; he ignored them and they ignored him. Staff knew not to attempt conversation with him and had long ago given up trying to crack his dour exterior.

A drunken male gestured Phoenix over with a jerk of his head.

“What can I get you?” Phoenix asked curtly.

The drunken patron replied with a laugh and several mocking kisses in his direction. “What are you selling, Love?” The drunk was with a group of men. All of them sniggered, each one thinking it original to use the surname on Phoenix’s badge as a joke.

Phoenix’s skin instantly prickled. “Order a drink or I walk away.”

The instigator did all the talking. “Get us some beers, Love, there’s a good girl.”

Disregarding the glasses sitting washed in ready, Phoenix crouched down to retrieve four glasses from a cupboard. Too busy congratulating themselves on their ridiculing, they didn’t notice Phoenix spitting into each glass. He filled them with beer, set them down on the counter, took the jerks’ money, and walked away. He barely had time to take two steps before he caught sight of the dark-haired man politely grabbing his attention with raised eyebrows and a smile. A peroxide blonde woman left the dark man’s side and staggered toward the bathroom.

The man’s smile broadened. “Hi. Can I have an orange juice, please?”

Well-mannered, an asset generally lacking in the bar. Phoenix nodded, filled his order, and placed it on the bar.

“Thank you.”

“It’s not free, you know.”

“I know. I’ll pay as soon as you give me my wallet.”

Phoenix’s stomach turned. “I don’t have your fucking wallet!”

“Pass it over and we’ll say no more about it. Don’t and I’ll call the police.”

Pale green eyes watched him unerringly. Expensive aftershave wafted off warm skin, momentarily distracting Phoenix’s senses away from the stale stench of the bar. If he denied having the wallet, he had no doubt the man would call the police. If Phoenix admitted to the theft, he could very well renege on his deal and call them anyway. Phoenix had deftness in his actions akin to a magician’s sleight of hand: a flawless pickpocket with skills honed to perfection. Flawless, until now.

The man folded his hands and leaned in closer. “My name’s Daniel Hart. If the police find my wallet in your possession, it’s going to have my identification in it. I don’t want to involve the police, I only want my wallet.”

With no other alternative, Phoenix removed the wallet from his pocket and placed it on the counter.

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Phoenix rented a two-bedroom flat in a nineteen twenties era apartment building costing him his weekly pay. Money for groceries and bills depended on what lined stolen wallets. The apartment represented safety, a place he felt secure, surrounded by belongings he’d collected since moving in; the furniture belonged to the landlord. The front door was fitted, by Phoenix, with a line of five deadbolts and every window hid behind security grills.

Phoenix walked quietly from the kitchen, through the lounge, and to a slightly ajar bedroom door. He peered inside, stepped toward the bed, and bent at the waist to kiss through mussed up blond hair, whispering into a sleeping Echo’s ear, “I’m home.”

Going straight to bed after a night working never resulted in falling asleep. Phoenix needed to wind down and watch television. He glared at the screen, focused fully on the early morning news telecast. A horrified expression on the young reporter’s face mirrored paranoia already ingrained deeply inside the public’s collective soul. A notorious serial killer, who’d evaded capture during a year-long spate of sixteen gruesome murders and then suddenly ended his macabre spree, had left his calling card on the latest murders. Four years of keeping a low profile had come to an end.

Phoenix left the sofa to clean the bathroom.

Half an hour later, he kicked off his shoes and wandered into the bedroom. When sleep took him over, so too did the nightmares, recurring without fail whether he slept deeply or dozed. Swirling with images, making no sense, they left him murmuring into his pillow, "Infinitum. Infinitum. Infinitum."

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Phoenix curled tight in a fetal position, shaking, sweating, crying, and panting in his sleep. The bedroom door flung open and a child dressed in flannelette pajamas ran to Phoenix’s side. Sweat poured down Phoenix’s face in sheets and he trembled with enough force to shake the bed.

Echo lay against his brother's back and wrapped his arm around him. "Shh. Stop crying, Phoenix. Please stop crying. Shh."

Bypassing the terror and hitting Phoenix's subconscious, Echo's soothing finally made an impact, breaking through the vicious nightmares, the burred words, and violent trembling.

Echo pulled the covers up and held tight while Phoenix slept.

They were all they had. Each other, in a world of solitude enforced by Phoenix and nurtured by his obsessions and compulsions.

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Weekends drained Phoenix physically. He couldn't spend daylight hours sleeping when Saturday and Sunday were days he took Echo to the park. Catching the same number bus every time to the same quiet suburb, he kept a hawk-eyed vigil while Echo played. No school meant teaching Echo himself within their home, but it also meant denying Echo peer contact. At the park, Echo made new friends and he caught up with old friends. Phoenix stayed away from other adults watching their children, never letting Echo wander far from where he sat alone on the grass, looking on.

Thursday mornings, they caught a bus together to a shopping mall. Echo held tight to Phoenix's jacket while he purchased groceries and then chose one new book they would read together over the week. Once a month, Phoenix handed Echo thirty dollars to spend in a toy store. Unable to carry everything home on a bus, they caught a taxi to their apartment block.

Echo loved his outings and Phoenix despised them. Anxiety swallowed Phoenix whole from the moment he stepped outside with his brother until the moment he had Echo safely inside the apartment. Phoenix, Echo, a black and white rat named Shakespeare, and a goldfish named Fin-Fin were the only living creatures allowed within the walls.

Phoenix needed order. Everything had a place and stayed in its place. He needed to keep to a schedule. A lost item, or lost time, signified a lapse in concentration Phoenix dare not tempt. He needed cleanliness, something not offered in his work surroundings, but that consumed his personal life. He would use an entire bottle of cleaning agent to scrub a bathroom already at hospital grade sanitation. Phoenix never used the tub; it was off limits to Echo also, and they only used the shower. Yet he scoured the bath every day before leaving for work and again when he returned. The bleach ate through rubber gloves and took skin off his hands. He'd learnt to switch off the sections of his brain dealing with physical pain and reroute it inside his mind. It left his body numb and his personality fractured.

As Thursday drew to a close, Phoenix took his eyes off Echo and stared at his sketchbook. He was a talented artist; most of the page had been filled up with the sketches of a faceless man. He tossed the sketchbook aside and stood, alerted to take dinner from the oven by the sound of the timer and Echo's squeals of excitement. On Thursday night, Phoenix fixed lasagna, Echo's favorite.

Phoenix rolled his eyes and smiled. "Anyone would think I don't feed you! Put your cars away and wash your hands."

"Trains."



Nodding, Phoenix waved a hand toward Echo's bedroom. "Cars, trains, whatever. Put them away, please."

Echo made a pouch with his sweater and piled the trains into it, trotting off to his bedroom to place them inside a large green toy box.

A bowl of fresh salad sat in the center of the table and Echo climbed into a dining room chair with his knife and fork in ready. Phoenix laughed quietly and placed a plate of lasagna in front of him. He then sat on the opposite side of the small table and peered at his plate with little appetite.

Forkfuls of lasagna vanished into Echo's stomach before he broke the silence through a mouthful of tomato sauce and cheese. "Are you gay?"

The question fired out of the blue and resulted in the lasagna on Phoenix's fork missing his mouth and splattering onto the plate. "Echo! What made you ask me that? Do you even know what gay means?"

Phoenix could hear Echo's chubby legs swing back and forth under the table. "Jayden told me."

"Who's Jayden?"

"My friend from the park." Another fork of lasagna met its demise and Echo continued unruffled. "I saw your pictures. You drew a different man. With a face."

Pushing the plate away enough to allow room to fold his hands on the table surface, Phoenix replied with a blank expression. "If you dare look at anything personal of mine again, I'll dig your eyes out of their sockets with a fork and then I'll douse them with petrol and set fire to them with a match. Then..." He leaned even closer. "...once they're cooked, I'll feed them to Shakespeare and you'll be blind for the rest of your life."

Echo smiled a cheeky grin, pushing his dinner from between his teeth like a human pasta maker. "Will not! What's his name?"

"He doesn't have a name. I made him up."

"Did not!"

An insightful five-year-old: there could be nothing more frightening.

Phoenix relented, glancing away. "Daniel Hart. He comes into the bar, that's all."

"Have you kissed him?"

"No! I'm not gay and you shouldn't be talking about shit like that in a playground! You talk about things you don't understand and then you think I'm gay because I drew a picture of a guy!"

Food generally diverted Echo's attention and Phoenix leaned over to pile salad onto his plate. In this instance, it didn't work.

Echo stabbed his fork into a slice of cucumber, pushed it into his mouth along with chewed pasta, and continued. "You drew hearts around him."

This time, Phoenix staged a false laugh. "I was being artistic! I drew hearts because his last name's Hart. Nothing gay about it! Just a picture of a guy called Hart with hearts. Eat and talk about something else or else I'll cut your tongue out and feed that to Shakespeare as well."

## *Chapter Three*

“So what triggered this guy to kill again after four years?” Detective Steve O’Grady, a thirty-two-year-old young gun with only five days on the job with C.I.B., placed his feet up on the desk and his hands behind his head. “Could be a copycat. T.C.S. never left any sign of forced entry, this guy did.”

“Take your feet off my desk, Steven.”

Doing exactly as Paul Somerset asked, Steve removed his feet while covertly rolling his eyes. As partners, they hadn’t hit it off. Steve found forty-six-year-old Paul reticent and unwilling to give him a chance to prove himself, and he knew Paul found him brash, arrogant, and self-important.

“Serial killers seldom stop murdering, Steven. They may find other ways to curb it for a while -- they keep mementos they reminisce over, they fantasize -- but they rarely stop unless they’re incapacitated, jailed for another offense, or dead.” From his right, Paul picked up a copy of the latest letter left at the scene. “Eventually, the urge becomes too strong, they can’t fight it any longer, and they kill again. Only this time, they change their M.O. and the random death of a cyclist riding home from work and found floating in the river may not be random after all. It’s not the serial killer’s fantasy, though. It doesn’t fully satisfy; it’s a substitute for what they really want.”

“Yes I know that,” Steve grumbled.

“It pays to never forget it.” Paul slid the copied letter across the desk and tapped his index finger on the paper. “I know this guy. I know the way he writes. I know the way he kills. I know forensics will scour that house, but we’ll be left with fuck-all to trace him on.”

Sweeping his eyes over the paper, Steve shrugged and read aloud, “‘Have you missed me, Detective Somerset?’ Anyone could’ve written that.”

A pregnant pause followed before Paul replied with a tetchy edge to his voice, “Hmm. However, he signed it, ‘Until we meet again.’ Seeing as that particular signature has never been released to the media, it’d be an amazing coincidence for a copycat to have written the exact words by fluke.”

Two women, Tracy Moreland and Moira Spencer, close friends in their early twenties, colleagues at the same place of work, had arrived home together at approximately six Wednesday evening. They had time to prepare dinner, sit down at the table, and share a bottle of wine.

As both girls were reliable employees, their concerned boss raised the alarm at midday when neither had showed up at the office, nor placed a call explaining their absences. Tracy's worried father drove to his daughter's home, discovered the broken window, and called the police in a panic.

Moira sat dead at the table, strangled with nylon cord, wrists and ankles bound, arranged as though she'd never been disturbed from her meal. In the kitchen, petite Tracy hung from a ceiling fan, strangled and bound like Moira, except her wrists had been slashed with minimal blood spatter and she'd been stripped down to her underwear; there was no sign of sexual assault.

A clean killer in every sense of the word, self-dubbed The Crucifix Slayer, he had drained one victim of blood to the point of death before finishing her off by strangulation. Only female victims, and only one per crime, met this grisly end. Autopsies and forensics proved one thing for certain: hesitation cuts indicated T.C.S. forced his victims to razor their own wrists in a bathtub or shower alcove. He then throttled them, washed them clean, dried them off, redressed them in underwear taken from their own bedrooms, and hung them. He left nothing behind at the scene. Not the clothes he'd removed, not the towel he'd used, not the razor, and not a single fingerprint. Lack of DNA at the scenes established the killer's meticulous attention to detail.

Sixteen murders four years ago and not one had shown forced entry into houses. None of the murders held any connection to the others. Locations ranged from murders taking place in white-collar suburbs with security alarms to poorer suburbs and houses with no security features. Somehow, he'd gained the victims' trust and been invited into the home. He didn't target only women, but he never targeted single men. Husbands and partners were killed swiftly and their wives or girlfriends tortured. Any pets unfortunate enough to be inside the home were killed, bound, and gagged if possible.

T.C.S. had made only one reference to Dylan Firth, written in the letter found at the first crime scene. Not since then had his Modus Operandi included kidnapping a child. Dylan's body had never been found. Police had concluded that the two crimes were not linked, believing T.C.S. had merely taken the credit for another criminal's felony. In fact, the police had not been convinced Dylan had been abducted at all.

Remembered by his teachers as an unsociable loner who frequently endured schoolyard bullying due to his fiery auburn hair and lack of friends, Dylan had not been known for his amiability or his positive demeanor. This had contrasted starkly with his parents' description of their son. They had described him as quiet by nature, shy, and although he had felt outcast by his peers, they refused to believe their only son would have willingly run away. Teachers had refuted this, stating Dylan showed all the traits of a runaway. Although never known to have had a drug or alcohol problem, Dylan had been placed in detention more than once for theft of fellow students belongings, setting fire to school trash cans, and using obscene language. He was also prime suspect in the untimely death of several tropical fish in a large school aquarium only days before he'd gone missing. An additive of acid stolen from the science lab had skinned the fish alive, although Dylan had fervently denied involvement. Mr. and Mrs. Firth had taken their son's side, refusing to believe the accusations. As far as Dylan's prospects were concerned, educators had him pegged as the boy most likely to land in juvenile courts and spend adult time behind bars.

A four-year cooling-off period had in no way cooled Detective Somerset's determination. Sixteen murders over a time span of fifty weeks and T.C.S. had fulfilled his chilling pledge to go down in history as one of the country's worst serial killers. Now his total sat at eighteen, with an unspoken promise of more to come.

"Profile this guy, Steve." Paul removed a pack of mint gum from his desk drawer, threw two pellets in his mouth, and set the packet away without offering any gum to his partner.

Less than a week working with Detective Somerset and Steve already despised the match up. Somerset's reputation preceded him wherever he went: well-respected across the board as a man dedicated to his job and lacking the superiority many detectives were known to have with uniformed police. He'd taken an instant dislike to Steve.

"He's probably in his late thirties, early forties. Educated, organized, probably holds down a respectable job." Steve left his seat and wandered around the small office. "I'd say at least six feet tall, and strong enough to cart around bodies. He doesn't like to follow rules, he likes to set himself apart from rules and march to his own drummer."

"You sure about that?" Rolling his swivel chair away from the desk, Paul placed his feet up on the surface and crossed his ankles, succeeding in aggravating Steve even more.

"You think what he's doing *is* obeying rules?" Steve asked sharply. "How have you reached that conclusion?"

"Think about it, Steven."

Steve hated being called Steven and knew Somerset was fully aware of the fact.

"He's a serial killer obsessed with not only murdering, but he's obsessed with serial killers. The first thing he did was title himself with a name along the lines of Jack the Ripper, The Boston Strangler, The Zodiac Killer, The Yorkshire Ripper, The Night Stalker, Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run, et cetera. Normally, it's the press who make up these names, but this guy did it himself."

Steve interrupted smugly, "The Zodiac Killer named himself."

"Indeed he did, quite right. Why?" Giving no time for Steve to reply, Paul answered his own question. "Because he wanted to build the enigma, the myth, the mystery. They want to be that silhouette on the murder wall with an unknown face and their kitsch name emblazoned above it. So why do I firmly believe he's obsessed with serial killers?" Once more, Paul answered before Steve could. "Because he's not terribly original, Steven. If he were, he'd have come up with a better name, for a start!"

"Arranging corpses to look as though they're peacefully enjoying a meal, watching TV, or surfing the web isn't original?" Superciliously raised eyebrows went with Steve's sarcastic inquiry.

"Oh, sure," Paul agreed. "But I think it's originality for the sake of originality. The same as the reverse crucifix; I doubt it means anything other than letting us know it's he who did the deed. The women stripped to their underwear, making them cut their own wrists, hanging

them -- *that* has a deeper psychological meaning. As does his need to leave as little blood as possible and clean the bathtub or shower alcove afterward. He probably likes to watch the blood flowing, but doesn't like it left there afterwards."

"How does that make you conclude he's obsessed with serial killers?"

"The first letter he left. One double murder does not constitute a serial killer, but in his mind, he already was. I dare say, in his fantasies, he was a serial killer long before he actually killed." Taking his feet off the desk, Paul opened a cardboard file and removed a copy of the letter left at the first crime scene. He slid it across the desk surface, waited until Steve moved forward to pick it up, and continued. "Remarkably similar to Dennis Rader, who signed his letters BTK, code for Bind, Torture, Kill. Rader also named himself; he made it known he'd kill again. He wanted the attention and the media interest right from the start."

Steve couldn't deny the resemblance between T.C.S.' missives and the letters written by Wichita Serial Killer BTK, a.k.a. Dennis Rader. Whereas Dennis Radar had attempted to fool authorities in the 1970s by attempting to write letters indicating a poor grasp of the English language, T.C.S. wanted authorities to know of his intellect.

"Our guy's slicker than Rader."

"Uh-huh, yes, he is. He's not modeling himself on a particular past serial killer. He doesn't want to *be* BTK, or Jack the Ripper, or The Zodiac Killer, but he's done research; he's read about them; they inspire him, to a point he idolizes them. Yet he believes he's smarter than they are. He may even look down his nose at the messy way some of these guy went about their murders. Our guy's meticulously clean; he sure doesn't want to slash randomly and splatter blood from here to Christmas. He's a clean freak, obsessive-compulsive maybe. He'd lead a very ordered home life. He'd be neatly dressed, hair cut regularly, probably clean-shaven, clean car, house, office, etcetera. An expert at simulating human emotions like love and friendship, but he can't truly feel any of those emotions. Superficially charming, able to converse on a wide range of topics, he can set people at ease, and is probably seen as an all-around nice guy. A pathological liar, he lacks empathy; he's a narcissistic psychopath, but not an insane madman. And, unlike some other well-known serial killers, he has no intention of trying to fool us with the cover of insanity on the off chance he's caught and needs to plead that angle in court. He thinks he's untouchable, so why pre-plan an insanity plea? He doesn't want us to think he's insane; he wants us, and the public, to exalt his superior intellect." Paul pointed his pen toward Steve. "Sum him up in a nutshell for me."

"He's fucking dangerous."

## *Chapter Four*

As if taunting him and his already bad mood, patrons coming into the bar proved to be more obnoxious this Friday than they normally were and Phoenix's mood grew darker by the second.

Dale caught his arm as he headed through the kitchen toward the bathroom. "Kylie's called in sick. I need a waiter for the restaurant."

"For fuck sake, can't Simon do it?"

"I know how much you hate waiting tables." Dale grinned, showing off yellow, tobacco-stained teeth. "Hurry up, it's full in there tonight."

He snatched an order pad from Dale's hand. "I wish you'd burn in hell!"

"I'll meet you there, you little bastard!"

Going from one table to the next, Phoenix took orders and returned with food. He made no attempt at small talk and refused to participate in chit-chat if someone tried to pry it from him. Whenever a diner made a derogatory comment, or attempted to touch him in any way, they received spit in their meal as a side dish.

Phoenix placed plates in front of two suited businessmen, took his order pad from his pocket, his pen, and walked to the next table. He saw the blonde first and Daniel second.

The blonde stood gingerly, swaying on high heels, slurring as she spoke. "Can you order for me, Dan?"

She staggered toward the bathroom, and only then did Daniel peer up and extend his warm smile. "Hello. What do you recommend?"

"The restaurant five blocks away."

Daniel laughed. "I don't even know what Rachel wants. Sorry, I know you're busy, if you want to come back..."

"I don't mind."

"Got the night off from the bar?"

"Yeah. Well... only until the restaurant closes."

While Daniel chatted, Phoenix doodled on the order pad and offered short, non-conversational replies. Small talk rarely sat well with Phoenix under any circumstances.

Daniel gestured Phoenix closer with his index finger, whispering a quick question. “So the food here isn’t fit for human consumption?”

Phoenix was closer now to Daniel than he had ever been. Leaning in, smelling the aftershave on Daniel’s neck, he was able to peer down the open collar of Daniel’s shirt. “I wouldn’t eat it.”

Daniel leaned in even closer, his breath teased Phoenix’s ear. “In that case, nothing for me and whatever’s the least likely to cause food poisoning for Rachel.”

Fifteen minutes later, Phoenix took a plate through from the kitchen toward Daniel’s table, resisting the urge to dress the salad with his signature additive of dislike. Green eyes watched him while Rachel dismissed everyone except the man opposite her. Her arm extended over the table and her fingers clamped around Daniel’s hand. It was then Phoenix noticed a diamond engagement ring. He dropped the plate in front of her, ignored Daniel’s “Thank you,” and stormed away.

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The apartment reverberated beneath the slammed front door, startling Echo from sleep and sending him scurrying bleary eyed into the kitchen. Phoenix crouched in front of a cupboard beneath the sink, reaching for a bottle of bleach. Quietly, Echo approached his brother, knowing from past experience that Phoenix startled easily when worked into this state. A state of anger mixed with frustration, harmfully expressed in dangerous ways and frightening for Echo to witness. During these times, Echo needed to show maturity children his age shouldn’t have had to.

His chubby arms wrapped around Phoenix’s neck. One thing Phoenix couldn’t be accused of was underfeeding him. Echo loved his food and it showed in his extra pounds of puppy fat.

“Don’t clean it now. We can have brekkie instead.”

Phoenix peeled off Echo’s arms, flushed in the face, clutching tightly to the bleach bottle and a bucket filled with sponges and scouring pads. “I have to do it now.”

“Please? I’ll make toast.”

Trying to restrain Phoenix from his compulsions never worked permanently; however, there were times Echo managed to stem the behavior long enough to ease his brother’s distress. Lowering his anxiety levels, even if only for a moment, could sometimes be the difference between Phoenix cleaning with a semblance of rationale and cleaning in a manic craze.

Ten minutes later, Echo presented his brother with burnt toast slathered with vegemite and a glass of orange juice. He set another plate and glass on the other side of the table and sat down. Phoenix placed the bleach on the counter and joined him.

“Did you see Daniel?”



Daniel was clearly the last person Phoenix wanted to discuss and it showed in his grunted reply. "Thanks for making breakfast."

"Is he gay, too?"

"Echo! I'm not... I don't know why..." Phoenix pushed the toast around his plate. "He's engaged to a cheap slut called Rachel, so it doesn't matter anyway. I should've rammed the plate down her throat and watched her turn blue while she choked on it!"

Echo downed a huge slurp of orange juice and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Pausing to think through what his brother had said like a mini Freud, Phoenix watched him with lifted brows and a smirk.

Clasping two tiny hands together, Echo peered into large brown eyes, his mouth twisted to the side. "Maybe he doesn't love Rachel. Maybe he loves you like you love him."

"I doubt it!" Phoenix dipped his chin and peered up through long eyelashes. "I'm not in love with him."

Echo shrugged and took a great bite from his slice of toast. "Where does Daniel live? You can visit and say hello."

Black eyebrows lifted higher. "I don't know where he lives. I see him at the bar."

"Do you say hello?"

"When he says hello."

Echo nodded, thinking, looking around the kitchen. "Jayden liked a girl called Brittany. He said hello to her, too, but she didn't say hello back. One day, Jayden asked if she wanted to share his chips. She said yes. Jayden asked every time she was at the park if she wanted to share his food and she said yes. Then she let him kiss her. You should ask Daniel if he wants your food and he might let you kiss him."

A dark curtain of hair fell over Phoenix's face as he lowered his head and laughed.

"I don't think that plan will work. It would take more than food for an engaged, straight guy to kiss me."

"What's a straight guy?"

"A guy who isn't gay."

"You can write him a note and I could pass it to him. Jayden writes Brittany notes and I pass them to her. Then she kisses him."

"Thanks, but no."

Echo's fingers made a pyramid and his lips pursed over fingertips. "I need to think about this a bit more."

Shaking his head, Phoenix stood up and took pair of gloves from under the sink. "You think while I clean the bathroom, and then I'm going to bed for a while."

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Seven hours later, Phoenix lay on his side and flicked his eyes open, startling at the sight of Echo staring back at him. "Shit! You scared the crap out of me!"

A little hand gripped tightly onto his wrist. "You were crying again."

"Sorry. Have you brushed your teeth?"

"Yes."

"Fed Fin-Fin and Shakespeare?"

Echo jumped out of bed and headed for the door. "I forgot Fin-Fin!"

Taking off after him, Shakespeare bounded like a puppy, filling the apartment with Echo's squeals of delight. Both of them hurtled around the apartment, chasing one another while Phoenix wandered into the kitchen for a caffeine hit. Making coffee, and pouring juice for Echo, he joined the excited child and rat playing hide and seek in the lounge room.

Shakespeare raced away toward his food bowl, stopping their games and allowing Echo a moment to join his brother on the sofa.

"Can we get ice cream?"

"Can we go tomorrow instead?" Phoenix's pleading question to avoid leaving the house only resulted in Echo pouting with his bottom lip almost resting on his tiny running shoes.

Giving in with a sigh, Phoenix nodded half-heartedly. "Let me finish this first."

Echo bounded off the sofa. "Yay!"

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An hour later, Phoenix locked up the apartment, held tight to Echo's hand, and caught a bus to the shopping mall outside of their dingy suburb. They wandered through the mall until they reached the only ice cream parlor Phoenix agreed to take his brother to. Phoenix needed familiarity in destinations as much as much he needed cleanliness and security. He ordered two sundaes and chose the table nearest to the entrance.

Echo pointed over Phoenix's shoulder into the mall. "There's a policeman over there. I bet he's a got gun."

“Behave yourself or he’ll blow your brains out and I don’t feel like cleaning them off the wall.”

Chocolate sauce stained Echo’s lips. “A policeman and police lady. They want to take that man to jail. Maybe they have police horses.”

“The police horses are roaming off by themselves for the moment, are they?”

“I patted a police horse once at the park, remember? There was a policeman on him. His name was Firestorm.”

“Funny name for a cop.”

Echo giggled. “Not the policeman. The police horse was called Firestorm!”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay, they didn’t take the man to jail or shoot him.”

Intrigued by the police drawing nearer, fascinated by the blue uniforms, Echo gave a second-by-second update on everything they did. Echo mortified Phoenix when he beamed a huge smile and waved, and he grew even more excited when they waved back.

The last thing Phoenix wanted was to endure two cops at their table, drawing unwanted attention, participating in public relations by stopping to talk to a boy awestruck by anything to do with the police force.

Fulfilling his tense prediction, they entered the ice cream parlor to acknowledge the waving child. They stood behind Phoenix, who kept his face averted slightly, so he was able to only see the uniforms in his peripheral vision.

The policewoman spoke a greeting and Echo eagerly replied. “Hello! I’m Echo. I’m five and a half. He’s Phoenix. He’s my brother! He’s eighteen!”

The next voice belonged to the male officer. “Hello, Phoenix.”

Phoenix’s eyes, obscured by his hand, widened into saucers and his stomach plummeted. He peered up, snapping an obvious question. “You’re a cop?”

Daniel probably hadn’t needed Echo’s introduction, no doubt recognizing Phoenix immediately by his inflamed hands, even before he’d raised his face.

“The uniform gave it away, right?” Daniel replied with a wry smile.

Echo swung his legs under the table, grinning happily, thrilled to be the center of the police officers’ attention, and ignoring Phoenix’s horrified expression. “I want to be a policeman when I grow up. What’s your name, Mr. Policeman?”

“Daniel.”

Echo yanked excitedly on Phoenix's sleeve. "His name's Daniel, too!" Ice cream dripped off the spoon Echo waved at Daniel. "Phoenix is in love with Daniel Hart, but he's engaged to a cheap slut called Rachel."

If Phoenix could have only one wish granted at that moment, it would have been for the ground to crack open and drag him into obscurity. He didn't need to glance up to know Rachel was glaring furiously and he didn't want to match Daniel's silence with the look on his face.

Rachel cleared her throat in obvious annoyance. "We have to go."

Daniel spoke next. "Enjoy your ice cream, Echo. See you later, Phoenix."

## *Chapter Five*

Saturday nights were the busiest at Dale's Bar. By ten o'clock, Phoenix already felt as though he'd worked a full shift. His feet ached, his back ached, and his temper flared. Taking a glass from under the counter, he spat inside it, filled it with beer, and took an obnoxiously rude man's money. He handed change over, waited until the man looked away, and deftly pocketed the guy's wallet. It was a good night on that account; he'd already thieved three beforehand and tucked them away in his backpack.

Congratulating himself on another theft well done, Phoenix stepped away and his smugness changed to horror. Saturday night and Daniel stood at the bar, minus Rachel, beckoning him over with his index finger. If he'd been watching, he'd have seen Phoenix take the wallet as shrewdly as he'd noticed his own take a walk a week before.

Thinking the worst, Phoenix warily approached and stood with no expression. Daniel placed his hands on the bar, leaning forward to be heard over the noise. A waft of aftershave lifted Phoenix's pulse despite fearing he'd been caught.

"Have you ever spat in my drink?"

To hear properly, Phoenix also needed to lean over. "No. What can I get you?"

"Nothing actually, I can't stay." Daniel leaned over further until his mouth rested beside Phoenix's ear. "Can I take you out for dinner?"

Sure he must've have misunderstood, knowing he hadn't by the way Daniel remained close waiting for an answer, Phoenix didn't hesitate a second with his reply. "No."

Daniel pressed his lips together, gave a sharp nod, and stepped away from the bar, clearly unprepared to hang around for another dose of rejection. "I won't bother you again." He walked away without a glance, through the crowd, out the door, and out of sight.

Left standing staring at the space where Daniel had been, Phoenix instantly regretted the refusal and wished in vain for the moment to rewind. He tossed a hand towel aside, threw open the bar hutch, and ran for the door.

Outside, the sidewalk was crowded with people, faces blended into one, and Daniel seemed to have vanished. Left or right, Phoenix didn't know which direction to go and he knew whichever he chose would be the wrong one.

He slammed his hand over his eyes, stifled a scream, and swore loudly enough to send wary people nearby scurrying away. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Phoenix's right foot struck the pavement hard. Spinning on his heel toward the bar entrance, he caught a glimpse of Daniel further down the sidewalk talking to a group of three men and two women. He wavered only briefly before making a snap decision to run the thirty meters in Daniel's direction and figure out what to say once he got there.

Weaving in between people, Phoenix accelerated his pace when he saw Daniel step away and raise his hand in a gesture of goodbye. Two meters from the group, Phoenix slammed on the brakes. The sole of one shoe slipped on a squashed burger, his legs flew forward, he flew backward, and a whoosh of air carried him airborne through the center of the six. One strong arm caught him before he hit the pavement. If the encounter with Echo hadn't mortified him enough, followed by sharply refusing Daniel's dinner invite, slipping on a squashed burger and being caught mid-air topped the humiliation cake.

Daniel scarcely missed a beat, keeping his arm around Phoenix while he lay stunned and practically horizontal in Daniel's arms. "Hello, Phoenix, just passing through?"

Scrambling to his feet, flaming scarlet across his cheeks, Phoenix heard Daniel's friends chuckling over the incident. "No. Can I..." Hesitant nervousness returned now that the first bolt of adrenaline had petered out.

"Can you what?"

"Talk to you. For a minute."

Two women took a hint, bade their farewell, and the group left Daniel's company. "Did you throw yourself at my feet for a particular reason?"

The comment might have been funny if it hadn't been said abruptly. Daniel's height and curt tone intimidated Phoenix. Given the fact he'd had a dinner invitation thrown in his face, Phoenix figured Daniel had reason to be miffed.

"I can't go to dinner with you."

Daniel smiled. In no way was it warm and friendly as on other occasions. "Yes, I got the message the first time. I got the wrong idea. I apologize. I have to go."

"No! Wait!"

"I have somewhere else I need to be." Clearly, he was not a man who took rejection well.

"I don't know why you're asking me out when you're engaged to Rachel."

"She's engaged, but not to me!"

Wherever she fit into the picture, it didn't include a walk down the aisle with Daniel, and for that Phoenix said a silent prayer of gratitude. He was also grateful for Daniel's softer expression and a smile that now showed amusement instead of resentment.

A heavy sigh vibrated over Daniel's lips. "Now we've got that mix up sorted, I'm going to give this another shot. Can I take you out for dinner?"

Phoenix nodded slowly. “No.”

Daniel’s head fell back and he laughed with frustration. “Do you have a multiple personality thing going on?”

“I can’t go *out* for dinner, ‘cause I have Echo. He lives with me and I don’t want to leave him with a babysitter.”

Dipping his head, Daniel peered through his eyelashes. “Who’s babysitting him now?”

It was a question Phoenix should’ve seen coming a mile off, but hadn’t. “A... a... neighbor. But, she’s old. Really old. She doesn’t like doing it... often.”

“Yes or no, Phoenix. Are you interested in a date with me or not? Please synchronize the yes or no with the appropriate nodding or shaking of the head action.”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to come to my place one night? Bring Echo with you. When he gets tired, he can sleep in my spare room and we can have a late dinner.”

Going to a stranger’s house didn’t fit into Phoenix’s safety net. Nor did inviting a stranger to their apartment. Out of the two, he felt safer in his own environment.

“Or... I can cook you dinner and you can come to my place.”

“Deal! What’s your phone number? I’ll call you tomorrow.”

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Thursday, Phoenix rose earlier than normal to complete the grocery shopping and take care of bills. Jubilation faded into doubts. Daniel was a stranger, someone Phoenix knew only from a sleazy bar. Echo looked forward to their guest. People never came to their home and, more than ever, Echo wanted Phoenix paired up with a hero policeman, too young to understand the fears held by his brother.

The bell rang promptly at seven and Echo scrambled for the door with Phoenix in hot pursuit. As excited as a kid on Christmas morning, Echo flushed with disappointment to see Daniel out of uniform. “Did you drive the police car?”

An appreciative gaze gave Phoenix a not so subtle once over. “No. Not tonight. I’ll take you for a spin in it another day.” Daniel’s gaze pasted onto his date. “Hi, Phoenix. You look gorgeous.” Daniel passed over a bottle of wine. “For you.”

“Thank you. Come in.”

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At the bar, Phoenix came across as coarse and cold. Daniel noticed a whole different side to him with Echo. Smitten first by Phoenix's looks, he'd then been intrigued over a conflicting personality who swore at patrons one moment and backed away nervously the next. Phoenix Love was a fascinating twist of traits, one Daniel felt compelled to unravel.

Taut chat went on between them while Echo ran around the apartment in a state of hyperactivity.

"I can't open the wine until Echo goes to bed. I don't like him around alcohol. I can get you something else. Coffee? Juice? Soda?"

"Coffee, thanks, Phoenix. Did you know there's a rat in here?"

It sat, munching from a food bowl.

"Fuck! Sorry! I'll get rid of him. Shakespeare!"

Daniel crouched down, scratching Shakespeare on the back. "Don't worry about it."

"You sure? I know a lot of people don't like rats."

"I don't like the feral ones, but these kind are fine."

Echo reappeared, tugging at Daniel's arm, trying to haul his six-foot three-inch frame away from the kitchen toward the lounge room. "Come see Fin-Fin!"

Echo didn't stop with showing off the goldfish bowl. It graduated into showing Daniel nearly every toy in the green toy box, every DVD in the cabinet, and a never-ending stream of picture books. Phoenix might have been playing the role of mother and father, but Daniel couldn't see a single thing Echo could want for. He had plenty of toys, although Daniel noticed most were educational. Phoenix lived in an apartment exceeding his financial means, supported a child, was the one who paid the bills, and suddenly the thieving of wallets made sense. Phoenix could not afford to live the way he did, or to provide for a child in the way he did, on a measly bartender's wage.

Lined neatly on the mantel were photographs of Echo, but no photographs of any other person Daniel could presume to be family. A rock solid bond between two brothers couldn't have been cemented any stronger. That's where family connections appeared to end. There were no single photographs of Phoenix displayed. If a speck of dust resided anywhere inside the apartment, Daniel thought it probably was hiding for its life in this hygienically sanitary environment. A lingering odor of bleach hung in the air. As soon as Daniel finished his coffee, Phoenix swept up the mug, took it to the kitchen, washed it, and put it away in the cupboard. More than simply a clean freak, Phoenix seemed to push the line into fixated. More than security conscious, he pushed the line into paranoid. It only made Daniel more determined to delve into the whys and wherefores.

An hour gone and Daniel had hardly spoken to Phoenix in any depth. He breathed a sigh of relief when Phoenix nudged Echo off his lap and stood.

"Put your pajamas on, please, brush your teeth, and get ready for bed."



When told to do something, Echo did it without argument.

Phoenix stepped toward the kitchen. "I'll put dinner on. You must be bored stupid."

"Not at all." He watched Phoenix bustle around the oven and took a long look when Phoenix bent over.

Straightening up, Phoenix ran his hands down the outside of his thighs and it looked like he was trying to think of a conversation starter. "He goes to bed about now. Umm... I brought a bottle of wine from work. I'll let you choose which one to open first."

"Dale sells wine this good?" Daniel asked while reading the label.

"Not often. He didn't sell that one either."

Daniel saw Phoenix's face fall and laughed. "Five finger discount, was it?"

"I've got the quickest five fingers in the country. Gone in the blink of an eye!"

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Clearing his throat, Phoenix dropped his face, and prayed for Echo to run in and save him before he said something resulting in an arrest.

"You must've had an off night when you took my wallet."

Knowing now that he hadn't condemned himself, Phoenix lifted an eyebrow and smirked. "I must've been, Constable Hart." The words cooed seductively in Daniel's direction.

Taking the bait, Daniel sauntered closer. "Senior Constable Hart."

"Excuse me, Senior Constable! What's the difference?"

"The difference is I get *two* stripes!"

The closer he came, the faster Phoenix's heart beat and the more the anxious voice in his mind wanted to end it before Daniel presumed he could pick up the heat. "How important. No wonder you caught me."

Daniel left barely any space between them and placed his hands on the edge of the bench, on either side of Phoenix's hips. "I have a sharp eye."

It was too close for comfort. Phoenix spied Echo in the lounge room, placed his hands on Daniel's wrists, and maneuvered out of his reach. Halfway across the kitchen, he turned around, held out his arm, opened his closed fist, and dangling between his fingers, Daniel's watch reflected the overhead light.

Clearly shocked speechless, Daniel reflexively checked his left wrist and broke into laughter. "Damn! Very scary, but very impressive!"

Phoenix gave him the watch and winked. “Fastest fingers in the country.”

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Thirty minutes after eight, Phoenix had Echo tucked away in bed and dinner served. He sat down when Daniel pulled a chair out for him and reached for the glass of wine.

Daniel watched the wine vanish quickly down Phoenix’s throat, smiled, and filled in the silence with small talk. “Working again tomorrow night?”

Phoenix nodded, finishing off the remaining contents of his glass and replying while Daniel refilled it. “Yeah. I normally don’t work nights at all, but the last couple of months, Dale’s been one short and won’t hire anyone else. Will you be there tomorrow with Rachel?”

Daniel grinned. “Ah, the cheap slut Rachel? Fuck that was funny! I would’ve laughed then, only I was floored by Echo’s other comment. Pleasantly floored.” A flirtatious flick of his eyebrow followed. “I’m gay, Phoenix, not bisexual. I had a girlfriend in high school, but the relationship was doomed.”

Phoenix’s smile widened.

“Rachel’s fiancé’s been screwing around behind her back. She found a note in his jacket pocket and it said something about meeting this woman at Dale’s on Friday. Rachel, being the drama queen she is, wants to hunt her down and have one almighty bitch fight to end all bitch fights.”

“She wants to slit her throat and watch the bitch die, does she? Can’t say I blame her really; I’d kill the whore as well, if she screwed around with my fiancé. She’d be lying in the morgue with a toe tag.”

The way Phoenix said it glibly, followed by a sip of wine, had goosebumps rising over Daniel’s skin. He cleared his throat, figuring it was a crass attempt at humor spurred on by alcohol. “I guess I wouldn’t be impressed either!” He forced a smile. “Anyway, I went with her because I figured she’d need someone to cry with, if she did find the woman.”

Over the course of the meal, conversation flowed ever more freely, coupled with liberal doses of laughter. Pleasantly tipsy after four glasses of wine to Daniel’s two, Phoenix apparently drew a line with the drinking. Wine freed up his reserved conversation, but at the end of the meal, it hadn’t halted the compulsion to clean everything before retiring into the lounge.

Finally, the kitchen sparkled to Phoenix’s satisfaction. Daniel’s suggestion to leave the television off in favor of soft music went over well. When Phoenix kicked off his shoes, Daniel took the lead and followed. He waited until Phoenix sat down first, in a calculated move to sit close beside him.

Stretching his arm over the back of the couch, Daniel didn’t waste any time caressing Phoenix’s shoulder. “From the first time I saw you, I couldn’t help thinking you look familiar.”

Brown eyes darted away. “I get that a lot. I don’t know why. Just got one of those run of the mill faces that looks like other people I guess.”

“There’s nothing run of the mill about your face.”

“You might have seen me at the mall before. I always shop there.”

Daniel’s station included the mall in its jurisdiction. Many times, he and Rachel had been called to arrest shoplifters and tend to minor disturbances.

“If I had, I’m sure I would’ve remembered a beauty like you.”

Unused to flattery that didn’t tip the scales into sleaze, Phoenix blushed and Daniel smiled at his well-placed, smooth spoken compliment. Like Rachel had played on Phoenix’s mind, Echo played on Daniel’s. He needed to satisfy his curiosity.

“Echo’s a good kid.” Daniel’s fingers stroked the nape of Phoenix’s neck. “Can I ask why he lives with you?”

“Dad ran off with another woman before Echo was born. Mum died of a brain hemorrhage six months ago.”

Edging closer, Daniel folded Phoenix’s hand in his, aware of the red raw skin and trying not to hurt in his offer of comfort. “Shit... I’m sorry, darlin’. Do you have any other family?”

“No. Just us.”

Daniel’s brow creased. It could have been an attempt to withhold emotion, to not crumble into tears near someone he barely knew, but Daniel noticed Phoenix spoke abruptly, coldly, and with little feeling.

“Must be tough on you, Phoenix. Raising a child at your age.”

“I’m twenty-four,” Phoenix answered swiftly. “Old enough to take care of him.”

The crease in Daniel’s brow ironed out when he widened his eyes. “Umm... no... you’re eighteen. Echo already told me, remember? Even if he hadn’t, I wouldn’t believe you’re twenty-four!”

Flustered, Phoenix shifted away. “Sorry.”

“You’re not comfortable with this, are you?”

“What?”

“This. You and me alone.”

Daniel knew everything about him exuded astute confidence. If he wanted an answer to a question, he asked. If he didn’t trust the reply, he pushed.

Phoenix shook his head. "I don't date. I look after Echo, I work six days a week, I have a home to run; Echo is always my first priority. He's only five. He needs me. I look after him."

Daniel nodded. "You do a fantastic job, I can see that. He obviously loves you very much and you love him."

"I do love him. He doesn't have any parents."

"Neither do you, honey." Daniel said softly. "I'm just saying it's got to be tough on you to have this much responsibility."

Phoenix glared challengingly. "I'm more than capable of taking care of my brother! I don't let anyone hurt him! I have a nice home for him so he always feels safe and he knows I'll never leave him. I look after him. *Me!* That's why I couldn't go to a restaurant; I won't leave Echo with anyone. No one! I know people might think I can't take care of him, but I can! He's better off with me than in foster care! No one will ever take him from me! Not ever!"

Phoenix had lied again and it looked like the alcohol had revealed it without him knowing he'd spilled the beans. A neighbor didn't take care of Echo when Phoenix worked nightshift and Daniel had a horrible suspicion the child spent those nights alone in this apartment, due to Phoenix's deep fear of someone separating them when his back was turned. That alone called for welfare to step in and, if Daniel revealed the information to anyone else, Phoenix would have Echo ripped from his life.

"You can't leave Echo alone all night three nights a week."

It seemed it was then Phoenix realized what he'd said and his face paled to gray. "I don't *want* to leave him alone! I put locks on the door to keep him safe. I'm looking for another job. I've applied for other jobs. I'm trying!"

It grew worse by the second.

"He doesn't go to school, does he?"

"You're gonna screw me over aren't you? Take Echo away from me? I'm the only person who can keep him safe. I keep him safe!"

Daniel shuffled closer, shaking his head, holding Phoenix's face in his hands. "No, I promise I won't screw you over, Phoenix. We'll sort this, okay? I need you to put some trust in me though, darlin'. I don't want see you and Echo separated." He pushed the dark hair off Phoenix's brow and set it behind his ear. "Will you let me help you?"

"What do you think you're gonna get out of it? You think I'm gonna fuck you tonight? I'm not gonna fuck you, Daniel. That's all you want from me isn't it?"

"I didn't ask you out for a one-night stand. I almost didn't ask you out at all. I'm ten years older than you and, to be completely honest, you're way too young for me. But, I swear to you, Phoenix, if you want to see where this goes as much as I do, sex doesn't have to enter into it until you want it to. I can live with the age difference if you can."

“Do you honestly expect me to believe that?” The same mask of nothingness fell across Phoenix’s face in an exact replica of the expression worn when he spoke of the loss of his parents. It dropped the temperature of Daniel’s blood to look into such a young, beautiful face that appeared carved in cold, lifeless wax.

“I hope you’ll believe me.” Daniel regarded his date closely, attempting to read something from those unresponsive brown eyes. “But, I don’t *expect* you to believe anything I tell you. You don’t know me well enough for that yet. The more you *get* to know me, if that’s what you want to do, trust will happen naturally.”

“Have you thought about kissing me?” Phoenix asked him.

“Yes.”

The monochrome hue in Phoenix’s face enhanced his waxen expression tenfold and Daniel frowned in reflex.

“If you want me to be completely truthful, I’m thinking about it right now. It doesn’t mean I’ll act on it though.”

“Live on the wild side, Daniel. I dare you to.” The edge of Phoenix’s mouth lifted in a challenging smirk. “Take a chance on kissing me and risk your balls been broken.” The smirk accompanied a raised eyebrow. “Or, take a chance on kissing me, ‘cause that’s what you think I really want you to do.”

“Damn!” Despite Phoenix’s icy, unchanging expression, Daniel laughed nervously and raked his fingers through his hair. “You’re a spitfire, aren’t you? So I have a fifty-fifty chance of getting this right?”

“Probably far less.”

Leaning in, Daniel bypassed Phoenix’s mouth and kissed him lightly on the neck. Phoenix shivered beneath his lips and a breathy whisper sounded near Daniel’s ear. Phoenix’s eyes rolled up behind his lids and his head lolled to the side. Daniel tracked up his neck with light kisses, over his jaw, and to his chin. Reaching Phoenix’s mouth, he paused to take in the sensation of Phoenix parting his lips, remaining there for teasing seconds, feeling a rush of heady exhilaration as intoxicating as the rush Phoenix no doubt felt. Savoring the moment until he couldn’t wait any longer, he found Phoenix’s tongue with the tip of his own, electrified by Phoenix’s taste and his trembling. Pressing in, spurred on by a heated need to be closer, Daniel cradled Phoenix’s head in his hand, cosseting a deeper kiss. He was rewarded immediately.

## Chapter Six

*Salutations, Detective Somerset.*

*I would hate to waste your time and so let me assure you the postmark on the envelope is nowhere near me. Not anymore.*

*Let's pick up the heat, shall we? I've chosen my next victims. Within seven days, they'll be dead. Both are brunettes, in their mid-twenties, single white females. They're easy targets with highly predictable routines.*

*May I suggest a press release? It may alter their fates if the young brunettes of our fair city take heed. You can rest assured I'll carry out my plans if they don't. This is no mere threat and I believe you know me well enough not to call my bluff.*

*If I inhale deeply, I can already smell it. It's true what they say. Fear has a distinctive, intoxicating aroma and is the fragrance of pre-death. I've always found scent highly stimulating. The way perfume or cologne warms on a person and combines with the natural tang of human skin, altering slightly depending on mood or emotions.*

*I digress. Consider this letter a warning.*

*Until we meet again.  
T.C.S.*

\*\*\*

“Son of a fucking bitch!” A small, tidy bin met with the toe of Paul Somerset’s shoe and flew into the office wall, narrowly missing Steve in the process.

“A press release will give him exactly what he wants.”

Stalking from the office with Steve tailing behind, Paul glared over his shoulder. “Well deduced, Sherlock!” Paul halted in his tracks, turned, and met a searing glare fired back in his direction. “He’s got us over a fucking barrel and he knows there’s not a God damned thing we can do about it!”

Colleagues exchanged glances, stepping away from the confrontation, unused to witnessing the usually mild-mannered Paul Somerset being openly boorish. A combination of work-related stress and a new partner who continuously rubbed him the wrong way turned Paul into a tyrant.

“The last two victims aren’t even buried yet and he’s planning to add another two to his list! Which will make a grand total of twenty victims and we still have no clue even *hinting* to who this guy is!” He took a step forward and Steve held his ground. “What would be your suggestion, Steven? You believe he’s bluffing?”

“No, I don’t believe he’s bluffing.” If a face off was what Paul wanted, Steve was willing partake in it. “How about you try working with me instead of taking me for an idiot? I didn’t get a free pass into C.I.B. out of a cereal packet and it’s not my fault your other partner had a heart attack. Though God knows I can see why he did!”

Covert smirks passed from one colleague to another.

“You have to prove yourself, Steven, before anyone here will take you seriously. So far, you’ve yet to do that.”

“Leak the information to the press. The letter went missing, it didn’t land on your desk, your personal secretary opened it, the cleaning lady stumbled across it -- there’s a hundred different scenarios.”

Shifting his weight, Paul folded his arms over his chest and cocked his head to the side. “Go on.”

Reacting to Paul’s change of tone, Steve altered his own tone. “Then *I* make a press statement. Chances are he’s not going to fall for it but it could plant the seed of doubt in his mind.”

“Why should you make the statement?” Paul asked.

“Because it’s you he wants to deal with, not me. Yes, he has got us over a barrel, but do we have to let him believe he’s calling the shots? If I make the statement, it’s not going to sit well with his ego. He wants the top man on the job at his beck and call, not a green new guy.”

“It could backfire and make him angry.” Paul’s reply held no contempt.

“Unless some miracle strikes out of the blue, and we catch this guy yesterday, he’s going to kill those two girls. It’s a fact. Press release, no press release, it’s going to happen. If not those two, it’ll be another two.” Steve moved forward and stood at Paul’s side. “All I’m saying is, we need to mess with his head like he’s trying to mess with ours. Put that seed of doubt in his mind and see what he does with it. It might make him angry, but an angry man is more likely to screw up than a calm one.”

The corner of Paul’s mouth lifted in a barely visible smile. “Now *that*, Detective O’Grady, is what I’ve been talking about.” He rested a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Putting your money where your mouth is and proving yourself. There’s hope for you yet!”

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By noon, every newspaper across the country, and every television station, headlined the so-called leaked information The Crucifix Slayer had sent in a letter addressed to Detective Somerset. In reaction, the public flew into a panic.

Press crammed into a small media room, microphones and cameras at the ready, eager to squeeze every drop of information possible from a live statement simultaneously reaching each television network at once. Steve O'Grady strode confidently across a low platform, placed a sheet of paper on a lectern, and faced the impatient reporters. Out of sight, Paul watched on.

"At approximately ten o'clock this morning, it came to our attention, as it came to yours, that a letter was intercepted before reaching its intended target of Detective Somerset. We have every reason to believe, at this point, the letter was indeed written by the man carrying out the murders."

O'Grady deliberately refused to refer to T.C.S. by his chosen title. Reporters shouted questions, pushing and hustling each other out the way. Paul smiled. O'Grady handled himself, and the situation, like a pro.

*"Did the letter contain anything else?" shouted a reporter able to drown out the others with a deep, baritone voice. "Quote, 'I've chosen my next victims. Within seven days they'll be dead. Both are brunettes, in their mid-twenties, single white females. They're easy targets with highly predictable routines.' Unquote. Was this all there was?"*

"Yes," Steve lied.

"Was the information leaked by a C.I.B. insider?"

"The letter was intercepted before reaching C.I.B. headquarters," Steve lied again smoothly.

"Is it possible The Crucifix Slayer made the initial call to the newsroom?"

Each question fired from a different direction.

"No. He did not make the call."

"How can you be certain?"

"We're already aware of who intercepted the letter and are taking the appropriate actions." Steve raised his hand, not succeeding in hushing the media completely, but able to lower the frenzy somewhat. "The letter is now in the hands of forensics and we have every reason to believe we have a lead. We urge all citizens, not just twenty-something brunette women, to make sure their homes are securely locked when they leave and to search for any sign of forced entry before they re-enter the premises. If anything looks suspicious, do not enter the house. Call the police immediately. If at all possible, change your routine if you have one."

"A well-respected retired criminal psychologist has profiled The Crucifix Slayer as..." An audacious young woman in the center of the mob lowered her head and read from a sheet of paper. "...a well-educated, well-spoken man in his mid-forties, neatly dressed..."

Steve allowed her to finish and nodded. "Yes, that's an accurate description of the suspect."



Impressed, Paul stepped away from his spot near the doorway and answered an incoming call on his mobile. Steve didn't need his critical eye, as he appeared to be handling the conference effortlessly.

"Detective Paul Somerset speaking."

"Hello, Detective Somerset."

"Who's this?" he asked while blocking his other ear with his index finger, unable to place the young male voice, struggling to hear over background noise.

"This is highly entertaining viewing."

His brow creased. "I suggest you tell me who I'm talking to, son, or I'll hang up."

"You don't have a suspect, Detective Somerset, and you don't have a lead. And *if* my letter went missing, the only fingerprints you'll find on it will belong the one who 'intercepted' it."

Crank callers and telemarketers, Paul hated them equally. He sighed and rolled his eyes. "Shouldn't you be in school instead of wasting my time masquerading as a serial killer?"

Mobile and home phone numbers left carelessly lying within reach of friends or colleague's family members occasionally landed in the hands of teenagers prepared to place the prank calls for the thrill of it.

"Mid-forties? You need a new criminal profiler."

"I'm hanging up now. Don't call this number again, because calls to mobiles can be traced you know," Paul said with a knowing smirk.

"I'm calling from a stolen mobile. You can trace the call, but it will only trace back to the hapless owner."

"What you're doing is an offense, son. Placing crank calls to the authorities is against the law."

"As is murder, but it's yet to phase me. Let's make it within four days, not seven."

"Grow up! Innocent people are dying horrifically."

Even more than crank callers and telemarketers, Paul abhorred smart-mouthed teenagers who glorified macabre crime as a game.

"*I'm* giving you the leads, Detective Somerset. *I'm* going out of my way to help you out here because, quite frankly, you're beginning to bore me with your ineptitude and I prefer a challenge."

"Quite frankly, you're..."

Giving Paul no time to finish, the caller interrupted curtly. “Four days, or less. If I inhale deeply, I can already smell it. The fragrance of pre-death. Until we meet again, Detective Somerset.”

Paul’s hand clamped around the mobile, his complexion drained white, and the line went dead.

## *Chapter Seven*

Taking his cap off and tossing into the backseat of the police car, Daniel climbed behind the wheel while Rachel settled into the passenger side. “Let’s get a coffee somewhere and then I need to call in and see Phoenix.”

A folder in her hand tilted with her surprise, spilling pages out onto the floor of the car. “Phoenix, who called me a cheap slut and spits in people’s drinks?”

“His spit tastes pretty damn good.”

“Dan! Have you lost your mind?” She twisted in her seat and, with her hand in a loose fist, she knocked on the side of his head. “Hello? Is there any sense in there? Unless you’ve forgotten, he’s a kid and you’re pushing thirty!”

“It’s not like he’s underage and I’m confined to a wheelchair.”

Dismay mutated into anger, her voice rose to demonstrate her annoyance. “Eighteen! Pfft! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“Shut up, Rachel, I don’t care what you think.”

Giving Daniel the silent treatment on the journey to the apartment block, Rachel waited sulkily in the car as he took the stairwell two steps at a time.

With one press of the bell, Daniel heard the deadlocks open, and Echo flashed passed Phoenix, heading for the stairs, only stopping when Daniel seized the back of his shirt. “Hey, get back here before I handcuff you.”

“I want to see the police car!”

He marched Echo inside and shut the door behind him. “You’ll have to wait.”

Daniel took his gaze off Echo and let it linger on Phoenix, standing in denim jeans, a black shirt, bare feet, and wet hair pushed off his face.

He lowered his voice into a hoarse growl. “By God, you’re gorgeous!”

Smiling, Phoenix tentatively hung back, clearly unsure of how to greet him.

Saving him from making the decision, Daniel turned to Echo. “Run into your room and get that fire engine you showed me last night.”

Off Echo went, scurrying to do exactly as asked. The second he vanished from view, Daniel circled Phoenix's waist with his arm, kissing Phoenix with ten minutes worth of passion packaged into ten seconds. Without having had any time to think about it, Phoenix kissed him in return with as much enthusiasm.

As soon as Daniel heard Echo's feet padding back into the kitchen, he ended the kiss and took hold of Phoenix's chin. Knowing Echo watched on he bent down and peered closely at Phoenix's mouth. "Well, I've a good look in there and so far as I can tell, your tonsils are fine."

After a playful slap to Phoenix rear, he stepped away. Daniel had a mischievous side he bet Phoenix hadn't predicted.

Echo narrowed his eyes. "You were kissing."

"No, we weren't, kissing isn't allowed while I'm on duty."

"You were! I know you were because Phoenix doesn't have tonsils. I know he doesn't have tonsils because he told me he doesn't have tonsils."

Guiding Phoenix with a hand resting on the small of his back, Daniel led him toward the lounge room with Echo trotting along behind. "Really? I'll have to have another look before I go."

They sat side by side on the sofa. Everything about Daniel oozed confidence and control.

"There's two reasons I'm here. The first is 'cause I wrote you a poem and I wanted to deliver it personally."

Black eyebrows lifted, Phoenix clearly unsure of the seriousness in Daniel's voice.

Daniel took a sealed envelope from his pocket. "I'm a romantic fool."

Phoenix opened the envelope, unfolded a sheet of paper, read the four lines and raised his eyebrows higher.

"Do you like it?"

Phoenix tilted his head and read aloud. "Roses are red, violets are blue, I think you're hot, and I want you."

"Okay, it needs work."

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Forgetting that Echo sat wide-eyed, watching on, Phoenix let his head tilt further to the side, moving in to lay his lips softly on Daniel's. The moment was quickly broken by Echo's teasing oohs and ahs.

Daniel peered over his shoulder. "I need to talk to Phoenix alone for a moment."

Echo climbed all over Daniel like a monkey scaling treetops. “You want to kiss him again! Can I wear your police hat?”

“If you give me a moment with your drop-dead beautiful brother, yes, you can.”

“Why do you wear this hat? Other policemen wear a baseball hat.”

“That one makes me look sexier.”

The traditional peaked military style cap certainly set off flutters in Phoenix’s chest when Daniel wore it, complete with the rest of the uniform Phoenix had once despised.

“Put the hat on and disappear into your room for a bit, short stuff. When we’re done talking, I’ll show you the police car.”

The moment Echo was out of earshot, Daniel removed a bulkier envelope from his inside jacket pocket. “This is for you, too. Open it and have a look.” Going by Daniel’s expression, the envelope contained more than a poorly written love poem.

Phoenix hesitantly tore it open and gasped. “What the fuck is all this?” A thick wad of cash bound by a rubber band stared back at him.

“Over six thousand dollars. I paid Dale a visit when I left here last night.”

\*\*\*

Far from crooked, Daniel nevertheless showed flexibility within the law; he wasn’t afraid to bend the rules at the expense of criminals to benefit those he thought worthy of a break in life. Those on Daniel’s good side could ask for no one more loyal or more willing to fight in their corner, those on his bad side kept their distance rather than take up battle in a fight they knew they’d lose.

“You couldn’t keep working at Dale’s while leaving Echo alone.” Daniel tapped his finger on the envelope. “There’s a glowing reference in there, touting you as the world’s best bar manager and head waiter. I wasn’t expecting that much but apparently Dale’s as stupid as he looks and keeps a shit load of drug money on the premises.”

“You stole Dale’s drug money?”

Daniel mouth twisted to the side. “It was more like extortion.”

“Daniel!” Any wider and Phoenix’s eyes would have dropped out and joined the cash in the envelope. “Are you crazy? You’re a cop, for Christ sake!”

“That’s why I was able to scare the crap out of him. Once I threatened to arrest him, he handed it over without too much fuss at all.” He shrugged. “Think of it as a severance package, cupcake. Don’t worry about being unemployed, there’s enough there to cover your expenses until I find you another job. I’ll take care of you.”

\*\*\*

Taking on the duty of driving the following day, Rachel parked on a quiet street. For three and a half hours, deafening silence was broken by only curt work-related talk. Then she flipped a plastic lid off a take away cardboard cup, sipped, and glared to her left. "How's your boyfriend? See him last night or did he have homework to do?"

Daniel leaned his arm out the open window and tapped the roof of the car with his hand. "What do you put in that coffee? Two teaspoons of bitch powder?" A good working relationship had turned bitterly sour.

"You do know we're supposed to set an example, don't you? Or have you forgotten that, Dan? Standing by the car yesterday, in uniform, carrying on with your boytoy for the whole place to see."

He slapped the car roof hard with his hand and turned on her. "I kissed him on the cheek, Rachel, I didn't fuck him against the car!"

Daniel's mobile on the center console rang; Phoenix's name lit up the screen.

She snared it before he could. "Perhaps he's ready to be picked up from day care."

Mentally banishing Rachel from the car, Daniel answered the call, knowing she listened in attentively. "Hi darlin'." Daniel throttled the phone, his face drained of color, and he spoke in a panicked rush. "Don't hang up!" Tearing the coffee from Rachel's hand he threw it out the window. "Phoenix's place, now!"

Screaming police sirens had neighbors running either outside to ogle or inside to take cover. Daniel sprinted up the apartment block stairwell with Rachel in tow. There were five deadlocks bolting the door closed, no accessible window, and Echo crying through the mobile glued to his ear. Dread flooded through Daniel's body. He could hear Phoenix wailing in the background, yet Echo said his brother wouldn't wake up. No matter how high Daniel's panic rose, he needed to keep calm for Echo.

"I'm outside the door. Do you know where the keys are?" He paced in short steps with the heel of his hand pushed to his brow, listening to the fractured answers of a terrified five-year-old. "Well done! Get one of the chairs so you can reach the locks."

He heard the patter of tiny feet, whimpering, and the chair being dragged along the floor. In between, he heard Phoenix screaming in stops and starts.

Daniel slapped Rachel's hand from the police radio. "No! Let me this handle this."

If Rachel called for backup, the incident would be reported. Echo said Phoenix wasn't hurt and wasn't bleeding. Daniel could hear him crying and therefore knew he hadn't lost consciousness.

Cursing the onlookers, Daniel concentrated solely on giving Echo instructions. "Be careful on the chair; don't fall off. How many keys are there? Can you count?"

He prayed there were five, but Echo announced that there were ten. Ten keys probably meant Phoenix had placed five deadlocks on the balcony door, too, doubling the time it would take for Echo to find the right ones.

Echo said five of the keys were blue and five were green. Phoenix had color coded them. Daniel heaved a grateful sigh of relief for small blessings.

“Good boy! Are you standing on the chair?”

Phoenix howled so loudly he could be heard from the outside. Rachel ushered the more audaciously inquisitive away, clearly still fearing whatever was happening inside needed more than two police officers and possibly an ambulance.

Beads of sweat collected over Daniel’s forehead. “Take one of the blue keys and see if it will fit into any of the locks.” He heard keys jangling and weeping snivels.

Rachel snatched a handful of his shirtsleeve. “This is insane, Dan! For all we know, Phoenix could be about to put a gun to his head and blow his own brains out!”

Shifting the phone from his mouth, he hissed in a low voice to avoid their audience listening in. “He’s a sleepwalker!”

It was a completely inappropriate time to make an underhanded comment and yet she took the opportunity. “How do you know? I thought you hadn’t slept with him yet!” She didn’t keep her voice down, announcing it loudly enough for all watching to hear.

“He *told* me!”

Phoenix hadn’t gone into detail on his sleepwalking, except to say he had a habit of it, telling a story over dinner about times he’d woken washing dishes or cleaning the bathroom and leaving out the finer points of how distressing his parasomnia no doubt was.

The blue key fit in none of the locks and the exercise needed repeating with the green keys. Seconds dragged on like minutes and the minutes elapsed like hours.

In the third lock, the key fit and Daniel heard the comforting sound of one click. “Good boy! You opened it, well done! Do the same thing with one of the other green ones. Try not to mix up the keys.”

This was exactly what Daniel had feared could happen with Phoenix’s security paranoia. By barricading himself and Echo indoors, he also kept help out in an emergency. If Echo had gotten into any trouble during the nights he’d been left alone, he’d have been a prisoner. Phoenix had inadvertently made the apartment a death trap.

Three locks down and Echo fumbled with the last two. He put the mobile phone down on the chair every time he tried another key and then picked it up again to let Daniel know he’d opened another. Echo may never have been to school, but Phoenix had raised one very sharp little boy.

After what felt like an eternity, the door opened. Daniel praised Echo's effort and handed him into Rachel's care. Running through the apartment into Phoenix's bedroom, he stopped so abruptly at the door that his shoes slid several feet.

Rachel held Echo in her arms, shielding his eyes with her hand, gaping at the scene before her. "Oh my God!"

"Get Echo out of here!"

"Dan!"

"Get out!"

Cries of distress from Phoenix overpowered the whimpering cries from Echo. Naked except for boxer shorts, Phoenix sat huddled in a corner, rocking back and forth, left hand clutching at his hair, right hand clutching a thick black marker. Clearly trapped inside a nightmare he couldn't escape from, he was unable to be roused, and terrified. Graffiti covered every wall in his bedroom: a reversed crucifix in black on white. It was repeated on the floors, a mirror, the dresser, and sheets. Written over his legs, arm, and torso, the black ink mixed with perspiration and smeared into his skin.

Daniel approached cautiously. He crouched down and blinked with surprise. Phoenix's dark brown eyes were a startling sapphire blue.

Dark hair knotted inside Phoenix's severe grip and if Daniel tried to release Phoenix's fingers, he knew Phoenix could panic and tear hair from his scalp. At the touch of Daniel's hand, Phoenix kicked out and hit Daniel hard in the shin. Throwing his head back with an ear-piercing howl, he struck the wall with a sickening crack that Daniel felt painfully.

Somehow, Daniel had to break through Phoenix's sub-consciousness, but it couldn't be done physically. If he touched Phoenix again, the chances of him seriously injuring himself were high. Phoenix obviously thought he was somewhere else, somewhere fearsome; Daniel couldn't get through to him unless he spoke on some level inside that place.

A tremble through Phoenix's limbs increased to violent shaking; he panted in short rapid breaths. On the side of his neck, Daniel saw blood pumping hard through his jugular. His stomach muscles contracted as he panted and his hand twisted hair around his fingers. Glassy eyes stared wide with horror-struck dilated pupils.

Phoenix ceased panting and drew in one long breath; his eyes rolled behind his lids, and he began muttering, "Infinitum. Infinitum. Infinitum."

Phoenix released the strangle hold he had on his hair, pushed away from the wall onto his hands and knees, and crawled passed Daniel, muttering continuously, drawing the reversed crucifix furiously on the floor. Daniel moved with him and Phoenix ceased drawing, freezing as though waiting for retribution. He cowered, his right hand and black marker hovering around his face.

Aghast, Daniel stared with a slack jaw and his mind reeling. His blood ran cold, his legs weakened, and the trembling coursing through Phoenix's body transferred to him. Unnoticed



in his panic when he'd first entered the bedroom, Daniel now saw a deep, cruel scar encircling Phoenix's narrow wrist. He quickly shifted his eyes to another matching perfectly on Phoenix's left wrist and around his ankles.

A broken jigsaw of pieces scattered in all directions fused together. Like the rippled waves in a lake distorting a reflection, Phoenix's face changed. Daniel couldn't conceive the horror Phoenix saw inside his mind. He couldn't fathom the pain, the terror, or the ordeal Phoenix had endured.

"It's okay, darlin', keep drawing, I won't stop you." His words whispered as closely to Phoenix's face as he dared move.

Permission given, Phoenix scrawled. Whether he knew who Daniel was or not, it seemed he no longer found Daniel's presence a threat. He heard Daniel's voice, reacted to it, started incorporating it into whatever he saw in his sleepwalking. Daniel knew parasomnia could last seconds or cruelly drag on for an hour. By the amount of graffiti on the walls, Phoenix must have been at it for a while. Daniel had arrived less than three minutes after the call, so he guessed Phoenix had to snap out of the altered state soon.

Ink from the marker dried up, though it made no difference to the frantic scribbling. Phoenix was crying, sobbing while he drew. Tears slid off Phoenix's cheeks and splashed onto the floorboards. Rocking back and forth on his hands and knees, he shivered through profuse sweating.

"Tell me his name, Phoenix!" Daniel urged in desperation. "Can you tell me his..."

"Quiet. Quiet."

After giving the command, Phoenix covered his mouth with his left hand, revealing the order hadn't been given to Daniel but to himself. He was keeping a shadowy secret even in his sleep, a secret clearly tearing him apart. It had to be a secret so shocking it had been banished from consciousness and relegated to an underworld of unconsciousness where, even there, it cryptically shape-shifted.

Phoenix jolted awake, frightened, staring accusingly at Daniel for an explanation. Bewildered blue eyes took in the graffiti on the walls, the floor, the sheets, and his own body. "How did you get inside? Where's Echo?" Phoenix spoke in broken gasps.

"Echo's in the lounge room with Rachel."

"Rachel's here?" He slapped Daniel's hand away from his leg. "Don't touch me!"

Torn, Daniel raised his hands. "I won't."

"Tell me how you got inside!" Phoenix's voice rose in distressed confusion.

"Echo phoned me. I talked him through opening the door and he's perfectly okay with Rachel. I'm worried about *you*."

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When Daniel finally emerged from Phoenix's room, Rachel shot him a filthy glare frozen in silence. Echo ran with arms open, needing reassurance; he was given it.

"You should be proud of yourself, you've been very brave and did exactly the right thing when you called me." Daniel gestured to the bedroom with a nod. "I think Phoenix needs a big hug from his little brother."

Rachel watched Echo leave the room and rose to her feet. "I'm calling welfare!" She jabbed her index finger toward the bedroom. "Jesus Christ, Dan, he's completely mental! Reverse crucifixes all over the place? All over him! He's probably some freak Satanist!"

Grabbing a rough hold of her elbow, Daniel led her away from the lounge room and deposited her in the kitchen. Not wanting either Echo or Phoenix to overhear an argument, his voice remained even but forceful. "Listen to me, I need to..."

"No! If you stopped thinking with your crotch you'd acknowledge he's crazy! Yes, he's a hot little number, fuck him a few times if you have to, but don't get involved!"

"Has it crossed your mind Phoenix is the one in trouble?" His words shook. "He has scars around his wrists and his ankles. Deep scars, Rachel!" With a snap, he held his palms together in a mock demonstration. "That's the only way someone would get scars like that! He's been tied up by the wrists and by the ankles for an extended period of time! Long enough for the rope, or whatever the hell was used, to cut through his skin!" His arms fell to his side. "His eyes aren't brown, they're blue. Picture him younger, plumper, and with red hair. If you *really* look at him closely you can tell. His name isn't Phoenix Love, it's Dylan Firth."

"Dylan Ffff..." She backed away, speaking in a shudder. "...then who the hell is Echo? Dylan Firth didn't have a brother! He's kidnapped a child!"

## *Chapter Eight*

“Take a seat, Daniel.”

Daniel sat down in an interview room separate to Phoenix. In the more comfortable surroundings of Detective Somerset’s office, Rachel watched over Echo.

“What’s going to happen?” Daniel inquired anxiously.

“Good question.” Paul replied, heaving an exaggerated sigh. “A DNA test will prove it, but we’re fairly certain Echo is really Toby Griffith. He was snatched from his stroller just over four years ago. His mother left him outside on the pavement while she went inside to get cigarettes. She was a streetwalker, well known around King’s Cross. Who Toby’s father is remains one of those great, unsolved mysteries. There are no other known relatives.”

“*Was* a streetwalker?”

“She’s dead. Drug overdose about three months after Toby was taken.”

Daniel dropped his chin to his chest and ran shaky fingers through his hair. “Now what? Phoenix loses him and Echo gets put into the foster system?” He let his hand fall helplessly to his lap. “You only have to look at Echo, only have to talk to him, and it’s obvious how well-looked-after he is. Phoenix would give his life for Echo.”

Photographs, taken by Rachel, of the graffiti adorning Phoenix’s bedroom walls sat printed and were laid out across Paul’s desk. Rather than question Phoenix on familiar territory, he’d been brought into C.I.B. Subdued and refusing to communicate, Phoenix was personally escorted to the interview room by Paul. There had been no sign of aggression and no struggle until Echo was removed from his company. Phoenix’s temper took a swift turn for the worse, and he began verbally abusing both Paul and Steve, threatening to see them dead should anything happen to his pseudo-brother, snarling and hissing obscenities through gritted teeth.

“A child psychologist will have a word with Echo. We’ll take it from there.” Gathering up the photographs, Paul set them to one side. “Do you know where Phoenix was at around noon today?”

The phone call received during the press conference had been kept under wraps. Only Paul and Steven knew about it.

Daniel narrowed his eyes. “He was at home. Asleep.”

At home without an alibi, except in a five-year-old child, Phoenix could have easily placed the phone call prior to Daniel showing up.

Nodding, Paul stood and pointed toward a coffee machine. "If you want to hang around, help yourself to a coffee. If not, I'll get in touch with you."

Like every other police officer in the force, Daniel wanted T.C.S. behind bars for the term of his natural life. However, his priorities favored Phoenix. "I'm not going anywhere!"

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Entering interview room number two, Paul smiled in Phoenix's direction and asked a hushed question of his partner. "He said anything?"

"Not a word."

Keeping his demeanor pleasant, Paul approached a small desk and sat down. Phoenix kept his eyes and face lowered, refusing to acknowledge his presence.

"Hi, Phoenix. Just so you know, Echo's fine; he's still with Rachel." Pausing for a reply, and receiving none, Paul continued. "You do understand Echo isn't your brother, don't you?"

Suspect or not, Paul Somerset questioned Phoenix's mental stability and equally questioned his ability to rationalize. A brief talk with Constable Rachel Young confirmed Phoenix still possessed the anti-social qualities he'd shown as schoolboy, traits she'd witnessed him show whilst working at Dale's Bar and a rude comment spoken by Echo who could only have repeated what Phoenix said to him.

"He *is* my brother." Gazing at the floor, Phoenix barely flinched as he replied listlessly.

"No, Phoenix, he isn't. We're not accusing you..."

"Like fuck you're not!" His head snapped upward and his mouth twisted in a sneer. "You ask him! You ask him and he'll tell you I've never hit him! I've never hurt him! I keep him safe! I'm the only one who can keep him safe!"

"From T.C.S.?"

"From everything!" Phoenix shrieked. "Infinitum! Everything! Infinitum!"

The last thing Paul wanted to do was increase Phoenix's agitation. Without some sense of calm, they wouldn't begin to even scratch the surface.

"We know you were abducted, Phoenix. What we need you to do is tell us everything you can about the man who took you. Every detail. Did he ever tell you his name?"

"I can't remember." Sweat beaded across Phoenix's brow.

"Can you give me a description of him?"

"I... can't... remember!" Each word was drawled slowly as though Paul were incapable of understanding English.

Standing back, Steve observed with narrowed eyes.

“Is there anything you can remember?” Paul asked without accusation. “Do you remember how you got the scars around your wrists and your ankles?”

“No.”

“They’re brutal scars, Phoenix.” Genuine concern creased Paul’s forehead.

“How would you know? You haven’t seen them.”

“Daniel described them to me.”

“Daniel?” Menacingly, Phoenix leaned across the desk, raising his index finger and pointing it directly into Paul’s face. “Senior Constable Daniel Hart who hangs around sleazy bars off duty and gets a piece of arse wherever he can?”

Paul sat still, kept up a strong level of eye contact, and let Phoenix speak. He tried to categorically match Phoenix’s voice to that of the earlier phone call, but was unable to. Background noise at the press conference had made hearing the caller unclear. There were definite similarities, but nothing more conclusive than a similar pitch and tone to many teenagers his age.

“Did he tell you that? Did he tell you he’s a fag? Came around to my place the other day, while he was on duty, left Rachel in the car so he could get a bit on his lunch break.” Phoenix leaned away and settled into the chair with arms folded across his chest. “That’s what Senior Constable Daniel Hart is like, Detective Somerset. And I know for a fact he fucks under-aged boys. Do you want to know how I know?”

Not trusting a word Phoenix spoke, Paul nodded.

“Because he asked me how old I was. When I was working one night, he asked me.” Phoenix reeled off the information without batting an eyelash. “I figured he thought I was an under-aged bartender so I made a joke -- said I was sixteen. Guess what?”

“What?” Paul replied calmly.

“He asked me out. And then he comes around today, uninvited, coerces Echo into letting him in, and then finds out I’m not really sixteen, I’m eighteen, and he calls the cops on me! On *me*! He’s the pedophile and he’s trying to set me up!”

The only one trying to do the setting up was Phoenix, a fact Paul was well aware of. Phoenix was clearly diverting the attention away from himself, away from talk of T.C.S., pinning all blame onto Daniel in an effort to shift the topic.

“How long has Echo been in your care?” Playing Phoenix’s game wasn’t on Paul’s agenda.

“I’ve looked after him since he was a baby!” With the topic back to Echo, Phoenix let the accusations regarding Daniel slide as though he’d never made them. “I keep him safe. I’ve never hurt him!”

“Do you remember when Echo was a baby?”

“I know I’ve never hurt him!”

“So you don’t remember *how* he came to be in your care?”

“He was given to me.”

“Given to you?” Paul’s eyebrows rose and his eyes widened. “You mean, like a gift? Somebody literally handed him to you and said, ‘Here’s a baby brother for you to raise’?”

Veiling his face, the dark curtain of hair obscured Phoenix’s expression from Paul, but couldn’t hide the altered tone in his voice. His shoulders and body slumped. “He’s mine! My brother, not yours!”

Seconds ticked by and Paul watched Phoenix, while exchanging intermittent glances with Steve. Phoenix was a liar, he was manipulative, and he was in possession of a child who had been stolen from his stroller. However, Paul did not believe Phoenix had perpetrated the kidnapping of Toby Griffith. T.C.S. had indeed abducted another child and quite possibly Phoenix did truly think Echo was his blood brother. It hadn’t made sense why a serial killer preying predominantly on women, who prided himself on displaying his murderous handiwork, had abducted a thirteen-year-old on his way home from school, possibly killed him, and hidden the body. Therefore the deduction that the delinquent Dylan Firth had run away, and T.C.S. was merely taking credit for another crime, had been made. Now, as Paul thought back to the contents of the first letter T.C.S. had left, the sordid puzzle fit together.

“Where were you around noon today?”

“Asleep.”

“Why do wear a reverse crucifix in your ear?”

Lifting his face, Phoenix stared toward the ceiling. “Are you Christian?”

“Catholic.”

“Same shit.” Phoenix scoffed menacingly. “Does the reverse crucifix offend you, Detective Somerset?”

“Not really, Phoenix, no.”

“Well, let me tell you something.” He leaned forward over the desk and smiled angelically. “An upright crucifix offends me.”

“Why?”

“Because people say Jesus saves, when in actual fact, Jesus saves no one. God saves no one. The bible is fictional and if God exists, He’s a sadist. He plays favorites. This reverse crucifix in my ear gives people, especially bible bashers, the right idea.”

“What is the right idea?”

“To keep the fuck away from me!” Phoenix shouted. “I hate people! I hate you!” He jabbed a finger at Steve. “I hate him! I hate Daniel fucking pedophile Hart and I hate God!”

“I’ve spoken with Daniel.” Paul’s brow furrowed. “Not at any time has he made an accusation against you. In fact, he’s staunchly fighting in your corner. From what I can make out, his relationship with you is important to him. It isn’t something he seems willing to throw away easily.”

Clearly unmoved, Phoenix rolled his eyes and said nothing in response.

“And yet, despite Daniel’s determination to defend you, you’re determined to paint him as pedophile who’s taken advantage of you.”

“That’d be right,” Phoenix mumbled. “All of you piss in each other’s pockets.”

“It’s not a matter of pocket-pissing. Senior Constable Hart has been a model police officer for eight years; that’s a fact.”

“He’s a pedophile! *That’s* a fact!”

“I don’t believe you, Phoenix.” Paul replied smoothly, shaking his head. “What I’m starting to believe is you have an obsession with men taking advantage of young boys.” He held his hands out palms up, a non-threatening gesture of understanding. “Fair enough, too; pedophiles deserve contempt, I agree with you one hundred percent on that level. But why try and tar Daniel with that brush and not... oh, I don’t know... try and set him up for police brutality, for example? Usually, that’s the common choice for people trying to undermine an officer.”

Peering through long black eyelashes, glaring defiantly, Phoenix answered slowly and deliberately. “I’m not trying to ‘set him up,’ Detective Somerset; I’m telling you he screws underage boys because he does.”

“In that case, Phoenix, you certainly took a major risk inviting him to your home for dinner, didn’t you?” Paul replied briskly. “Personally, if I knew for a fact, as you claim you do, that a man was a pedophile, I sure wouldn’t invite him inside an apartment where a five-year-old boy lived with me. Doesn’t make sense does it?”

“Are you gonna charge me or what?” Phoenix spat.

“Why didn’t you go home?” Ignoring the question, Paul changed the subject. “Why haven’t you contacted your parents to let them know you’re all right?”

“He said he’d kill me! He knew where I lived!” Distress replaced anger.

“You mean T.C.S.?”

“Yes!”

“I thought you said you couldn’t remember him.”

Slamming his hands to his head, Phoenix screamed back at Paul. “I can’t! You want me to give you his name, tell you what he looks like, where he lives, what he does, and I can’t fucking remember! I don’t know! Huge... huge chunks of my memory have gone! Just... gone! It’s like someone went inside my head and hit the delete button! You want me to tell you shit I can’t remember! How can I do that? How can I tell you things I don’t know?” His right hand left his head and pressed against his chest. “Please! Don’t take Echo away from me! I’m the only one who can keep him safe! He’s mine and he loves me!”

Pushing his chair backward, Paul gave Phoenix a smile and gestured Steve toward the door. “Sit tight, Phoenix, I’ll be back in a moment.”

They exited the room and stood facing one another in a narrow hall.

“What do you make it?” Steve asked Paul.

From memory, Paul quoted the first letter. ““And when I die -- as all of us must in the end -- there will be no end. My legacy will live on in the hands of another, and then another, and then another. Infinitum.”” He shook his head with dismay and revulsion. “He took Dylan Firth to train as a serial killer. Dylan was The Slayer’s apprentice. Toby was Dylan’s apprentice. At least, he was meant to be.” Paul peered through a one-way window into the interview room. “Consider this scenario, Steve.” He looked away and into Steve’s eyes. “T.C.S. used Dylan to gain entry into his victim’s homes. A distraught boy, whose face had been plastered across every newspaper and television station as a kid T.C.S. may have taken, shows up on their doorstep showing obvious signs of physical abuse. He’s crying, distressed, because he knows why he’s really there, but they don’t. They open the door and before they know what’s hit them, T.C.S. is inside.”

“Without Dylan to gain easy access, he now has to force entry.”

“Exactly. He didn’t let Dylan go willingly. Somehow, Dylan got away and took Echo with him. My guess is he was a prisoner for a year, escaped, and T.C.S. panicked and laid low. He would’ve been scared Dylan would go to the police. Problem is, did T.C.S. find him before we did?”

“You think Dylan’s still involved?”

“Sitting in there is one majorly messed up kid who spent at least twelve months being abused, possibly sexually as well, considering his obsession with pedophiles, and forced to partake in sixteen brutal murders. If Phoenix wasn’t sexually abused, then it was threatened on him time and time again. Even if all he did was get T.C.S. the access he needed into the houses, Dylan would’ve witnessed everything. He’s got every reason to be terrified of this guy, every reason to believe Echo’s in danger, as well as himself. And I think, under those circumstances and considering what he was being trained to do for a year, he would be at our Slayer’s beck and call if it meant protecting Echo.”



“In that case, he’s an accessory. Let’s face it, Paul, he wouldn’t be the first teenager to freely assist in a murder. Look at his history.”

“I know.” From his jacket pocket, Paul removed a packet of gum, took two pellets for himself and offered the pack to Steve. “He could’ve gone into it freely and then it all turned sour for him.” He slipped the gum packet back into his pocket. “If T.C.S. took Phoenix by force, or if he went along willingly, T.C.S. knew he had a history of delinquency. He took a boy he thought showed all the traits he wanted in an apprentice. So perhaps we do have a lead, Steve. Our killer could very well be someone Phoenix already knew.”

Stretching the gum with his tongue, Steve pursed his lips, blew a pathetic bubble, popped it, and replied. “I suppose we keep him here, keep questioning him, and hope he cracks if he is lying about not remembering.”

“Or we send him home, watch him like a hawk, and tail him wherever he goes.”

“And what about Echo?”

“I’m not sure yet. Did you notice at no time did Phoenix actually say he loves Echo? He said Echo was his and Echo loved him.”

“Weird.”

“Perfectly normal for a psychopathic personality.”

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Thirty minutes of deep conversation with the child psychologist and Paul felt slightly more at ease. She’d reported a happy, well-adjusted child. There were no signs of abuse, Echo was plainly well-fed, eloquent for a five-year-old and surprisingly more educated than other children his age. When he spoke of Phoenix, he did it with a smile, his brown eyes wide with adoration. He told of a bedroom filled with toys and books, a warm bed to sleep in, and plenty of doting hugs and kisses. Echo was not being mistreated. Her opinion was to leave him where he felt safe and loved rather than distress him by tearing him away from Phoenix and placing him into the foster system.

Paul made his decision. Echo would stay where he was, so long as Phoenix obeyed the rules and no longer left him unattended. A twenty-four hour a day, seven day a week watch would be placed on Phoenix and he’d been told welfare would check in on his brother randomly throughout the day until further notice. Although annoyed with the arrangement, and blatantly angry over the intrusion, Phoenix agreed. If it meant keeping Echo, Paul believed he’d toe the line. There was also another reason he wanted Echo to remain where he was: to dramatically change Phoenix’s routine, to rip away his pseudo-brother, could flip Phoenix from emotionally unstable into a full mental breakdown. If they were to find T.C.S., they needed Phoenix.

Closing his office door behind him, Paul met Daniel half way across the floor.

“Can I see Phoenix now?”

“Have a seat again for a moment, Daniel.” Leaning against his desk, Paul waited for Daniel to sit. “I have to inform you that Phoenix tried everything possible during the interview to discredit you.”

Paul could tell it was a kick to Daniel’s stomach, the way his face fell. “In what way?” He asked, clearly on edge.

He listened without interruption until Paul finished filling him in on all the accusations in gory detail. His expression changed from anxious concern for Phoenix’s well being into furious anger. He stood, took his jacket off the back of the chair and headed for the door. “Get someone else to take them home. Tell Phoenix not to contact me again!”

## *Chapter Nine*

Channel surfing until midnight did nothing to shift Daniel's focus off Phoenix and the grubby lies he'd spun. He lay on the sofa with his forearm covering his eyes and his other hand dangling loosely to the floor. Part of him understood Phoenix's fear and desperation, knew it might have been what prompted Phoenix to make the sordid allegations. Mostly, Daniel felt betrayed, angry, and deeply hurt.

At twelve-thirty, he switched off the television and retired to bed. A change of scenery didn't change his thoughts. Instead of lying on the couch staring at the screen, he now lay on his back, staring into the darkness. He rolled over onto his side and took to staring at the wall. He was unaware another thirty minutes had elapsed until he heard a clock in the hall chime the hour.

After one in the morning and Daniel was nowhere near sleeping; he left his bed to roam the townhouse aimlessly and returned to drown in the same thoughts. He sat on the side of the mattress with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

When the phone rang, he glared as Phoenix's name light up the screen. Instinctively, he turned away until Echo flashed into his mind. Stubbornness and fury meant he could ignore Phoenix, but he couldn't ignore a child if indeed Echo needed his help once more.

He picked up the phone a moment before the incessant ringing halted. "Daniel Hart speaking."

"Did I wake you?" Phoenix spoke as if from miles away, voice listless and empty.

"Well now, Phoenix, it's after one in the morning, what do you think?" he snapped venomously. "I thought you were told not to contact me again."

Whispering into the phone, Phoenix's voice was full of confusion. "I'm sorry."

Daniel flicked on the bedroom light and paced the floor. "You're sorry? Hmm, I guess that makes it all okay, then? Yeah, sure, why not? Hey, apology accepted and absolutely no hard feelings that you tried to get me struck off the force as a child molester!"

"I don't know why I said that."

"Could it be 'cause you're a conniving bastard?" Sarcasm dripped liked acidic honey from his words.

"Fine. For what it's worth, I really am sorry."

“Why didn’t you tell them I extorted drug money out of Dale? Huh?” Daniel growled. “That would’ve been the truth and it would have gotten me suspended, charged, and kicked off the force! I’ll tell you why you didn’t tell them.” A track in the bedroom carpet followed the line of Daniel’s pacing. “Because if you had, they’d have taken the money off you! Good work, Phoenix, look out for number one and fuck anyone else in the world who did actually have good intentions!”

“No!” The pitch in Phoenix’s tone rose to match Daniel’s. “I didn’t tell them about the money ‘cause if I had, they’d have been able to prove it! You *would* have got in trouble!”

“Bullshit!”

“Are you forgetting you betrayed me? I trusted you and you called the cops on me! I could’ve lost Echo ‘cause of you!”

Clenching his fists to his side, Daniel face flushed with temper. “Strike three, Phoenix, you’re out!” He ended the call and hurled the phone into the pillows.

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Phoenix sat staring into a mug of hot chocolate that had turned icy cold. His eyes felt heavy with lack of sleep combined with stress. In his bedroom, Echo slept peacefully. Excitement over his day spent with the police had exhausted him. To Echo, it had been a day of adventure; he was completely unaware of how close he’d come to being ripped from his home and his brother’s life.

When the phone rang, Phoenix jumped, snatching it before it woke Echo. “It goes both ways, Daniel, don’t call me again either!”

“I’m in the parking lot.” Daniel said coolly. “I can turn around and go home and this will be last you ever hear from me, or you can invite me in and try to explain why you did what you did.”

“Why are you even bothering?”

“Don’t think I haven’t repeatedly asked myself that question on the drive over here!”

“If this is going to turn into an argument, you can forget it. Echo’s asleep and I don’t want him disturbed.”

“If it turns into an argument, it’ll be you who starts it. All I want from you is an explanation. You damn well owe me that much!”

Leaving the lounge room, Phoenix walked tentatively toward the door. “Don’t ring the bell. Knock quietly and I’ll let you in.”

Less than a minute later, Phoenix opened the door when he heard the knock and instantly regretted his decision. Daniel’s six-foot-three frame looked even more imposing and his pale green eyes no longer looked enchanting, but harsh and cold instead.

Stalking through the kitchen toward the lounge room, Daniel opted for an armchair rather than sit beside Phoenix on the sofa. Leaning forward, he clasped his hands tightly together, glared across the space between them, and lifted his eyebrows. "Start talking."

Prickling, Phoenix returned Daniel's hostile glare. "I said I was sorry! I don't know what else you expect me to say."

"You could start by explaining!" Daniel kept his voice low, but Phoenix could see it took an effort.

"So could you! I thought I could trust you and you..."

"Stop right there!" Daniel snapped and raised a hand. "Don't turn this around on me! I'm a cop, a fact you were well aware of before I asked you out. I had no choice other than to report it. I couldn't turn a blind eye to the fact I realized you were a missing person, feared dead, possibly abducted by a serial killer!"

"And now I'm a suspect! You could've..."

"Stop it, Phoenix!" Daniel interrupted sharply. "Stop trying to twist everything around to make me look like the bad guy! Yes, I reported it, but I stuck up for you. Not once did I say anything to point the finger at you. I sat in that room while Paul was talking to you, wishing I were with you, praying they were going easy on you, and trying to think of some way I could ease all this for you once I got you back here. Then in waltzed Paul and he told me what you said. Have I laid a hand on you, Phoenix? Have I tried to touch you? Grope you? Forced you into the bedroom and... what was it you said?" With a scoff, he answered his own question. "Oh, that's right, get me a piece of arse wherever I can!"

"I panicked." Phoenix's hushed words whispered into the quiet surrounds of the apartment. "What I did was wrong, I know that. I'm not trying to make excuses for what I said, but the truth is I didn't know what you were saying to Detective Somerset. Before I knew what hit me, I was taken in for questioning, Echo was taken away, you were taken away, and they were telling me I kidnapped my brother. Paul wanted me to tell him about the guy who took me and I can't! I panicked and I said what I said and I'm sorry. For what it's worth, I wish I could rewind it and take it back."

"When you lie all the time, people don't know when to believe you." Nothing about Daniel's expression had softened. "You lied to me about your parents, you tried to lie about your age, you've stolen from me and you've slandered me." Shaking his head with obvious frustration, Daniel left the armchair and roamed aimlessly around the lounge room. "If you were anyone else, I'd see you in hell before I forgave you for what you did today."

Phoenix followed Daniel around the room with a steady gaze and a lowered chin, peering through his eyelashes.

"The difference with you is I know you're a victim." Daniel halted near the coffee table, arms folded over his chest. "It haunts me to think what he put you through and I don't, not for a second, believe you killed anyone or aided in killing anyone. Not then and not now."

Phoenix dropped his gaze to the carpet.

“The odds are stacked against you. All you did today, by lying like you did, was make it worse for yourself. Those scars around your wrists and ankles prove he abused you at some stage. At *some stage*, Phoenix! They don’t prove you didn’t choose to run away with T.C.S. and they don’t prove you didn’t partake in the murders. Did Paul question you about the phone call he received during the press conference?”

“Yes. I didn’t make any calls to that detective. I don’t even know his number.”

“You can’t prove it, can you?”

“I guess not.” Phoenix replied with a shrug.

“You guess not? That type of flippant attitude isn’t doing you any favors! Make a mental note of this: you had a delinquent reputation for arson, theft, verbal abuse, truancy, and a six-foot tank of tropical fish so happened to be eaten alive by acid after you’d been told to clean the tank as punishment for setting fire to school trash cans!”

“I didn’t kill those fish!” Phoenix defended sharply.

“Can you prove it?”

“I guess not.”

Daniel sat with a thud onto the coffee table. “Let’s continue, shall we? A background check on you showed you haven’t ever been arrested for anything, but I bet any staff member at Dale’s could tell police you were anti-social, never spoke to them, spat in people’s food and drinks, and they’ll probably accuse you of stealing their belongings. You have no utilities connected under your name here, this apartment is rented lease free, you have no tax file number, no social security details, you use stolen pre-paid mobile phones and you go by a fake name.”

“I do not use stolen mobile phones!” Phoenix snapped.

“Yes, you do! For Christ sake, Phoenix!” Daniel hissed through clenched teeth, obviously trying not to give into the urge to yell. “When I came over here for dinner the other night I saw your mobile on the kitchen bench. Strangely enough, it wasn’t the mobile Echo had when he called me. *And...*” He pointed to a small table beside the sofa. “...lo and behold, there’s another one! How many phones does one person need? Not one of them is connected under your name because they’re disposable, aren’t they? Once the owner reports it stolen, it’s useless to you and you nab yourself another. Sooner or later, and I’m guessing sooner, I’m going to call the number you gave me and it’ll be disconnected. I’ve seen you in action, you’re one hell of a pickpocket and that doesn’t look good for you either. Am I getting through to you in any way, shape, or form?”

Phoenix shrugged in a non-committal manner.

“Right.” Pushing off the coffee table, Daniel grabbed his wallet and car keys. “I’m trying to help you, but I’m obviously wasting my time.”

Jumping from the sofa, Phoenix snatched Daniel's sleeve before he strode out of range.  
"Wait!"

"For what?"

"I don't want you to go!" Pleadingly, he stepped nearer and searched Daniel's peridot eyes.  
"I'm scared! I don't want to be here by myself."

"There's two cops outside watching this place; you're safe." Daniel replied as glibly as Phoenix had done prior.

"What about us?"

"Are you serious?" Daniel's eyebrows rose. "There is no 'us,' Phoenix! You saw to that when you tried to screw me over today. I came over here to get an explanation and to try to give you some advice, I didn't come over here to play happy couples!"

"You don't know what it's like!" The dismissive offhandedness promptly altered. Tears filled Phoenix's eyes and streamed down his cheeks. "Every second looking over your shoulder! Not remembering anything, but remembering the pain! Painting one picture after another of the same man without a face. Not being able sleep without reliving it all again and then waking up and he *still* has no face! I *still* can't remember! I'm *still* terrified. I can't stop cleaning! I can't stop checking doors, windows, making sure everything's locked and secure!" He held out quaking hands. "Look at this! Look what I've done to myself! It doesn't matter how much it hurts, Daniel, it doesn't matter how much skin the bleach takes off, it can't stop me cleaning! I don't know why I do it, but I can't stop it!" Withdrawing his hands, he placed them against his head instead. "I'm sorry! What I did was wrong, very wrong, and I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say to you to make you believe me."

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Either Phoenix was a master schemer or every ounce of emotion he portrayed rang true. Daniel needed to decide which to trust and then trust in his decision. Empathy for Phoenix outweighed his anger. As much as he wanted to walk away and not look back, he couldn't blank out the desperation in Phoenix's voice or the way Phoenix's cries chipped at his resolve.

"I must be crazy! If it'll make you feel safer, I'll stay here until morning." As he made the offer, he prayed he wasn't falling into a trap. "I'll sleep on the sofa. You and me, Phoenix?" Daniel shook his head. "There is no you and me anymore."

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Jamming his hands deeply inside his pockets to ward off the early morning chill, Steve nodded a quick greeting. "Glad you could join us!"

Shooting his partner a sideways glance, Paul strode beside Steve, facing the front door of a small two-story house surrounded by uniformed police and laced with yellow crime scene tape. "Flat tire. Who called it in?"

“Next door neighbor. She woke up at around two this morning and noticed the kitchen light still on. Said she knew the girls well, they weren’t night owls and they never left lights on in the house.” Allowing Paul to walk inside first, Steve continued with the rundown. “She got concerned, tried to call them and there was no answer. When she looked over the back fence, she noticed the laundry window broken and called the police.”

“Time of death?”

“Coroner estimates between five and seven last night.”

“Brunettes?”

“Blonde twins. Michelle and Casey Jones. Twenty-three.”

“Fucker!”

Following Steve down the hall, weaving through uniformed police and forensics, Paul accepted a pair of latex gloves handed to him and snapped them on. Striding directly toward the woman’s body, which hung from the staircase banister, he hooked his finger inside the elastic of her panties, looked, and stepped away. “Not natural blondes. How did he know that?”

Sheepish that he hadn’t thought of checking in such a way, Steve gestured toward the kitchen. “He’s been creative with the other body.”

From the hall, they entered the kitchen. Paul halted by the door, surveyed the scene, and slowly turned his head to meet with Steve’s widened eyes. Propped up against the wall, Casey sat with the house phone handset wedged between her shoulder and ear as though in the middle of a call. Her legs were straight out in front of her and her ankles bound with nylon cord. Although her wrists were tied, she held a can of cat food in her left hand and a spoon in her right. Lying bound by their filled food bowls were two dead tabby cats.

“Has Dylan moved?”

“No.” Steve replied. “Daniel Hart turned up at his place about half an hour ago.”

Surprised, Paul cocked his head to the side. “Really? That’s odd, considering how furious he was when he left C.I.B.”

“He spoke with the cops watching the place before he went inside. He didn’t try and sneak around it. Maybe he was horny.”

Paul smirked. “Professional investigative assumption there, Detective O’Grady!”

Steve returned the smile with a shrug.

“Then again, you could be onto something. Dylan’s a very good looking boy and, quite possibly, Daniel’s being taken for a ride.”

“Figuratively speaking, of course!” Steve chuckled.



“Where’s my letter?”

“Left on the stairs. All he wrote was, ‘I’ll call you in the morning,’ and then signed it in his usual way.

“Fucker!”

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Soft footsteps roused Daniel’s attention immediately; he was ready and waiting for Phoenix to sleepwalk and therefore was keeping a sharp-eared vigil. The clock on the mantel showed four-thirty in the morning.

He sat up and saw Phoenix’s silhouette. “Are you okay?” He waited for a bizarre reply and instead got clarity.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Rubbing the grit from sleep-deprived eyes, Daniel struggled to see through the darkness. “I wasn’t asleep.”

“I can’t sleep either.” Pausing long enough to give Daniel ample time to reply, Phoenix relented and moved away. “I’ll leave you alone.”

Listening until Phoenix’s footsteps reached the far end of the lounge room, Daniel sighed heavily and broke the quiet. “Phoenix?”

Retracing his steps across the room toward the sofa, Phoenix stood silently beside the coffee table, head lowered.

“Sit down.”

Hesitating, Phoenix sat and let his face fall into his hands in an image of pure exhaustion. “I am really, *really* sorry.”

Going against everything his sane mind cautioned, Daniel circled his palm in soothing circles between Phoenix’s shoulders. “Lie down if you want and try to sleep.”

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Phoenix slipped onto his side. Aftershave lingered on Daniel’s neck, teasing Phoenix’s senses. Closing his eyes, he breathed in the stimulating scent. Lifting his chin slightly, he placed his face close to Daniel’s neck, taking one long, deep breath after another.

Each time Phoenix exhaled, Daniel stirred under the sensation. Daniel’s eyes flickered open and he stared at the ceiling. “I meant what I said, Phoenix.” He shifted away a little. “Back off.”

Ignoring the warning completely, Phoenix strategically placed his lips on Daniel's neck. Kissing him once, twice, and three times before Daniel jerked away.

"Phoenix! This isn't gonna..."

Muffling the words into extinction by covering Daniel's mouth with his, Phoenix felt a moment of resistance and then the full force of his kiss returned. He sidled in closer, pressing in against Daniel's body and feeling strong arms wrap around him. One hand disappeared beneath Daniel's shirt, roaming over his abdomen, up over his chest, feeling each muscle contract beneath his touch. In response, Daniel pushed into the touches.

From beneath the fabric, Phoenix tracked his fingers below Daniel's navel, over the front of his jeans and between his legs. Arching his back, and disengaging his mouth from Phoenix, Daniel stifled a groan and smothered another swiftly when once again zealous lips enshrouded him. His right hand clamped behind Phoenix's knee, easing his leg over, replacing his hand on Phoenix's rear, and pressing Phoenix's pelvis against his.

Phoenix rocked his pelvis hard against Daniel's groin. His tongue teased the inside Daniel's mouth, and he sighed and moaned quietly in reaction to a hand reaching between his legs. But there was one thing Phoenix couldn't act out.

Daniel withdrew his hand from Phoenix's crotch and broke away. "You don't really want to do this, do you?"

"Yes, I do." Phoenix murmured, going for seductive.

Taking a gentle hold of Phoenix's wrist, Daniel eased his hand away from working the jeans' buttons. "If you did, you'd be as hard as I am and you're not. If I went along with it, I'd only be taking advantage of you."

Under the forgiving cover of darkness, Phoenix fell silent and sat up with his face buried in his hands. Seconds later, he felt Daniel's lips on his neck.

"Answer this truthfully. Please, don't lie." There wasn't any animosity in Daniel's voice, only concern and a need to know. "Did you initiate that because you wanted to be close to me or was there another agenda?"

"I don't want you to break up with me. I didn't want to be alone; I wanted to be with you. I feel safe when you're with me. I wanted you to kiss me and forgive me."

"I don't want to break up with you either, Phoenix."

"You don't?"

"I have a temper and I don't like being crossed. More than that, Phoenix, what you did hurt. It hurt badly." He ran his hand soothingly over Phoenix's head. "This isn't going to work unless you put some faith in me. I'm on *your* side. I know you're terrified, I know you've been through hell, and I know that hell hasn't ended for you. Even when we do catch this guy, it'll never end for you." Daniel brushed his lips over Phoenix's. "When we have sex, it has to be for the right reasons. You have to want it as much as I do or I won't go along with it."

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?”

Rolling his eyes, Phoenix shrugged and shook his head. “Doesn’t matter.”

“This is what I’m talking about. Trust me enough to tell me what you’re thinking. It’s how a relationship works.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” Daniel coaxed.

“No, I really can’t! There’s something wrong with me and I can’t... it won’t... it’s not that you don’t make me hot, you do, but... there’s something wrong with me. I can’t get it up.”

One arm wound around Phoenix’s waist. “It would be highly unlikely for an eighteen-year-old to be medically impotent. Considering everything you’ve been through, there’s a damn good reason why you can’t get it up. It’s psychological, Phoenix. There’s nothing physically wrong with you, darlin’. When the time’s right, when you actually are ready to move into a sexual relationship, this little problem doesn’t necessarily have to affect it.” Daniel smiled slyly and winked. “I’m strictly an arse man.”

Morning light had begun filtering between the drawn curtains and plainly showed Phoenix’s lips parting and his face losing all expression. “What? You expect *me* to fuck *you*?”

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Doubling over, Daniel cracked up laughing and the tension left in the room broke momentarily. He was laughing more at the horrified look in Phoenix’s eyes than his equally as horrified question. “The other way around, muffin!”

“Fucking hell, you nearly gave me heart failure!”

Straightening up, Daniel slipped his hand behind Phoenix’s neck, moved in and ended the conversation with an unhurried kiss. When it ended, he inched away and searched deeply into those doe eyes he adored. “Can I ask you a favor?”

Phoenix nodded.

“I so badly want to fall in love with you, Phoenix. Please let me.”

## *Chapter Ten*

Throughout the remainder of the night, Daniel woke to Phoenix's nightmares and, by nine in the morning, he lay with Phoenix held tightly in his arms. For some reason, it had a calming affect to sit Phoenix between his legs, resting against his chest, holding Phoenix with as much contact as possible in a soothing cocoon of one body enveloping the other. Spooning into Phoenix's back didn't bring about the same results, nor did holding him front on. Daniel presumed there wasn't the strength in those positions to bring about the feeling of safety Phoenix experienced when held in the body cocoon. The considerable height difference meant Phoenix nestled comfortably with Daniel all around him.

With barely two hours of broken sleep under his belt, Daniel stumbled from the bedroom when a phone call from Paul Somerset demanded immediate attention. Standing outside by the front door, he and Detective O'Grady requested they be let inside. Unintentionally waking Phoenix when he dragged himself from the comfortable warmth of the bed, Daniel answered the door while Phoenix tended to Echo's grumbling stomach.

Less than five minutes after Paul, Steve, and Daniel had seated themselves in the lounge room, their conversation was abruptly interrupted.

"Phoenix wants to know if anyone wants coffee!" Echo screamed from the kitchen table toward the lounge.

Daniel could almost see Phoenix's eyes rolling as they laughed. "I could have done that myself! Go in there and ask them properly before they think I haven't brought you up with any manners."

Echo trotted into the center of the room and asked his question again. They all answered yes and Echo remained where he was without delivering the information back to his brother. "Phoenix is making me pancakes."

Daniel let his gaze wander over Echo before replying wryly, "No wonder your pants are getting tight, buddy!"

"Phoenix got me new pants last week. Eighty hundred thousand and ten pants!"

"I did not buy you eighty hundred thousand and ten pairs of pants." Phoenix retrieved him by the hand. "Tell them how many you really got before they think I've brought up a liar as well."

"Four."

There could be no denying Echo was a happy, confident little boy with a penchant for over exaggeration just like every other child his age. Paul and Steve laughed along with Daniel; they seemed relaxed with the knowledge that their decision to leave him in Phoenix's care appeared to be the right one, so far.

The doorbell sounded and Phoenix stopped in his tracks, turning to Daniel anxiously. "Can you answer that?"

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Having two detectives turn up with no warning hadn't pleased Phoenix in the slightest and when a welfare representative wandered in, he felt smothered inside an apartment filling with strangers.

Introducing herself as Mary Halliday, the welfare worker took a seat at the kitchen table without being invited and set a folder down on the surface. Phoenix set a stack of three pancakes in front of Echo and sat down while Echo tucked in with gusto.

Mary asked one question after another and Echo answered everything honestly. Phoenix knew Echo was unaware she was interviewing him, thinking himself to be the center of everyone's attention lately and loving every second of it.

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Mary watched closely as Phoenix wiped maple syrup off Echo's face with a hand towel and then set it aside to fetch Echo another glass of orange juice. His actions appeared natural. They didn't seem forced, simply to impress a welfare representative and she jotted down notes on a sheet of paper inside the folder.

"Can you show me your bedroom?" she asked Echo with a smile.

"No." Echo replied swiftly.

"Oh! Why not?" she coaxed.

"I'm eating pancakes."

"You won't drag him away from his food," Phoenix interjected.

She extended her smile to Phoenix. "Do you mind if I go and have a quick look?"

"Yes, I do."

Her smile evaporated under his intense, unwavering blue stare.

"He's nearly finished. It's not our fault you turned up when he was having his breakfast, so you can show some courtesy and wait."

Pinned under his icy glare, Mary felt uneasy and threatened. It wasn't so much the tone in Phoenix's voice, or the way he seemed to stare straight through her, it was everything

combined. First impressions of Dylan Firth, a.k.a. Phoenix Love, gave her no feeling of danger whatsoever. When she'd walked in, her immediate thoughts had revolved around his beatific appearance and small stature. Certainly, Phoenix didn't appear in any way dangerous. Yet when his demeanor changed, so too did his angelic façade. The beauty in his face remained, but it altered noticeably into menacing. A dark quality mixed with the mysterious unknown and it gave off a strong sensation that he could be capable of anything. Phoenix had a way of dipping his chin and peering upward through his eyelashes that unnerved Mary at once. Suddenly, he no longer came across as a choir boy, but instead as someone likely to pull a knife on you in a dark alley.

"Okay." Mary shifted awkwardly and cleared her throat. "I understand this is disruptive for both of you."

"I'm glad you do." The edge of Phoenix's mouth tilted in a malevolent half-smile. "I'd hate to think we had a misunderstanding this early on in the game."

Refusing to allow him to intimidate her any further, she turned away and refocused on Echo. "Phoenix is obviously a good cook!" She forced chirpiness into her voice. "Can you tell what you had for dinner last night?"

"Moofucka!"

Taken aback, her jaw dropped and across the table she heard sniggering.

Phoenix spoke up with a correction. "Moussaka not moofucka."

One hand pressed to her chest and Mary sighed with relief. "Moussaka? Goodness me that sounds yummy. That's made with eggplants isn't it?"

"Eggs come from chickens not plants," said Echo through a mouthful of pancakes and syrup.

"Quite right! Eggs do come from chickens. Can you make a clucking sound like a chicken? Or, crow like a rooster?"

"He's not a performing poodle." Phoenix sneered. "I'd appreciate it if you spoke to my brother in a way that doesn't suggest he's mentally retarded."

"I'm just doing my job, Phoenix." Again she experienced a rush of intimidation and stood up from the table refusing to meet his stare. "Echo can finish up his breakfast and you can show me his room. Please."

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Three shelves on the wall housed neat rows of books. Echo's bed had been made up with precision and one large, brown teddy bear sat against the pillows. Educational toys were combined with other toys and filled a green toy box. The carpet, like the rest of the apartment, was vacuumed and clean. The curtains were clean. Inside the wardrobe, clothes hung neatly with each hanger pointing in the same direction and the clothes inside drawers were folded and stacked meticulously. Everything was perfectly ordered and scrupulously hygienic.

Tucking the folder under her arm, Mary stepped toward the door, doing everything in her power to keep the false smile on her lips. Phoenix stood firm, refusing to move aside and allow her to pass.

“I’m done here now.” Even though Mary already knew Phoenix was well aware of the fact, she said it in the hopes he’d move aside.

“I take good care of my brother.”

“Yes, I can see you do, Phoenix. I’ll go and let you get on with your day.”

“I bet you see a lot of unhappy kids in your job.” With his toe, Phoenix closed the door.

“Yes, I do. Part of the territory I’m afraid.” She swallowed nervously. “Can you move aside and open the door, please?”

“Echo isn’t one of them. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him.”

“I can see that.”

“If his mother really was a dirty whore, like I’ve been told she was, then it’s lucky Echo ended up with me.”

“Open the...”

“What is it with women? They find themselves on the streets and they resort to whoring. Then they bring innocent children into the world and make their lives hell as well. It’s like they can’t find, or don’t have the intelligence to find, another way to provide for themselves other than to spread their legs to the highest bidder.”

“This conversation is inappropriate and I won’t ask you again, Phoenix.” Her voice rose in pitch. “Open the door and let me pass.”

Phoenix reached for the handle, opened the door and gestured her through with a sweep of his hand. “Until we meet again, Mary Halliday.”

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Noticing how Mary exited Echo’s bedroom looking flustered and flushed, Paul excused himself and met her at the kitchen door. Together, they left the apartment and stood outside near the stairwell.

“What do you think?”

If he had to guess from her demeanor, he’d say she was glad to be outside, and not looking forward to any return visits. She smoothed down her hair and shuddered. “Echo’s charming, well-adjusted, well-looking-after, well-fed, well-everything. Phoenix? Not quite so charming!”

Paul narrowed his eyes and probed for more information. “What did he say? Did he threaten you?”

“Not in so many words. He’s just extremely intimidating and, quite frankly, plain creepy! However...” She straightened her jacket huffily. “...I can’t base my decision on the fact that he’s unlikable. He takes good care of Echo. I can’t deny that.”

“Okay. Thank you, Mary.”

Hurriedly, she rushed down the stairs and toward her car.

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Bypassing Phoenix clearing plates from the table, Paul gave him a quick nod of acknowledgement and received a wide smile in return.

“I’m sorry, I’ll get to the coffee now. How do you and Detective O’Grady take it?”

“Black for me, no sugar. White for Steve, one sugar. Thanks.”

“Coming right up.” The smile broadened. “I’ve got cake or biscuits if you like.”

“Just the coffee, Phoenix. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Paul watched him turn away, and then mumbled under his breath as walked back toward the lounge, “Don’t trust you as far as I could kick you.”

Reclaiming his spot in the armchair, Paul brought the topic once more to T.C.S. and the murders that had taken place the night before. Phoenix emerged from the kitchen with three mugs on a tray and set it down on the coffee table. Leaving them alone, he then disappeared to clean the bathroom.

“The bottom line is this, Daniel.” Paul sipped his coffee with a thought flashing through his mind of skinned fish and a possible similar chemical added to the liquid in his mug. It wasn’t that the coffee tasted odd, but Paul didn’t put it past Phoenix to lace his drink with poison. “We need to smoke T.C.S. out and the only way we may be able to do that is through Phoenix.”

“You want to use him as bait?”

“Yes,” Paul said as he studied Daniel’s increasingly annoyed glare. “Phoenix will be well-guarded. We need him. We won’t let anything happen to him.”

“That’s all he is to you, isn’t he?” Daniel’s brow furrowed and his words were edged with anger. “I know you think Phoenix is still involved somehow, but I’m telling you he’s not. You haven’t seen the terror in him whenever he tries to sleep. I have! I’ve also seen a stack of paintings he’s done and they all revolve around the same faceless man theme. He was tortured! More so than the ones who’ve actually been murdered.”



“With all due respect, Daniel, you’re not completely unbiased where Phoenix is concerned and you’re emotionally involved.”

“That’s insulting!” Daniel retorted sharply.

“It wasn’t meant to be.” Steve set his coffee mug aside and replied on Paul’s behalf.

“Yesterday you stormed from C.I.B., furious over what Phoenix tried to accuse you of. A few hours later, you’re in his bed and today it seems all’s been forgiven.”

“I came here last night to get answers, not to get laid!”

“You could be getting played, Senior Constable Hart.” Steve shrugged. “We’ve seen Phoenix in action. He’s manipulative enough to show you only what he wants you to see and hide everything else.”

“His fear is real! It’s not acted!”

“We realize Phoenix was a victim,” Paul replied. “What we’re not sure of is for how long. Did he willingly team up with T.C.S. or was he abducted? We don’t know for certain. What we do believe is The Slayer already knew Phoenix. That’s given us a lead, Daniel, and one we have to follow up. Possibly Phoenix did partake in the murders to begin with and then had a change of heart. Possibly The Slayer then turned on him and that’s when he held him captive and tortured him. Without a shadow of doubt, T.C.S. has been permanently imprinted on Phoenix’s psyche. Now, I have actually discussed Phoenix with one of our psychologists and there are two scenarios.”

Daniel was listening out of respect for his superior officers and not a real desire to hear the theories, if the expression on his face was anything to go by.

“The first scenario is this. Dylan was abducted against his will, forced to partake in the murders, held captive and tortured from day one. The result of his ordeal has left him with a serious personality disorder. His manipulative behavior and unpredictability is due to his acting out of what was imprinted on him for a year and not his real self. Acting out what was imprinted *on* him. Brainwashed, for want of a better term. His erratic moods, erratic emotional state, his distrust, all of it adding up the same result. Phoenix is not a stable kid, but none of it is his fault.”

“And scenario two?” Daniel pressed, voice sarcastic.

“Scenario two is the opposite. Phoenix went willingly, he aided and abetted in murder, he wanted out and it all turned pear-shaped for him. *Then* he was tortured until he escaped and went into hiding. For a year, he was in training as The Slayer’s apprentice and maybe T.C.S. found him before we did. Maybe he’s warned Dylan, threatened him, or simply made him an offer he can’t refuse. They’ve teamed up and each one of them is doing what they do best. T.C.S. is a master serial killer, perpetrating the crimes and Phoenix is a master manipulator, stepping up into his role. Messing with C.I.B., *deliberately* bringing the focus onto him, while throwing us off The Slayer’s scent. Fully aware we have no solid proof and all our suspicions are purely circumstantial evidence. In court, all Phoenix would have to do is show those scars to the jury, cry a river of tears, plead mercy, play the innocent child ripped away from his

parents, point the finger solely onto T.C.S., and walk away with his freedom and everyone's sympathy."

Scoffing, Daniel shook his head. "You like scenario number two, right?"

"I am leaning toward scenario two." Paul nodded. "The fact is, Phoenix was a kid who showed *every* sign of a child psychopath. Wreaking havoc at school and then playing the angel around his parents and family. Kids many times behave like that because they're unhappy, they want attention, and they're playing up and pushing boundaries. Occasionally, it's more sinister and what they're showing is psychopathic personality traits. They grow up to be con-artists, criminals and sometimes serial killers."

"You're forgetting the nightmares he suffers. The sleepwalking, the fear, his obsessive compulsive behavior, his security paranoia: all the things I've seen first hand and you haven't."

"Maybe that's residual, Daniel, and more to do with the torture *he* went through and not what *they* went through. The fear and tears you've seen? It could all be an act. The scariest thing about psychopaths is their ability to portray false emotions like a seasoned Academy Award winner."

"No. Psychopaths have no ability to love and Phoenix loves Echo."

"Phoenix could be playing the *role* of loving Echo, Daniel. Psychopaths are very convincing role players. In public, in the privacy of his own home, he could portray the perfect brother and the perfect guardian on a very even keel. Chances are, he doesn't love Echo in the way you or I would love a child. His feelings aren't about love, they're about possession."

Daniel shook his head. "If he's guilty, why risk it all by dating a cop?"

"I know you don't believe Phoenix could be playing you," Paul said bluntly. "Which is why you should be careful, Senior Constable Hart. If Phoenix is psychopathic, he's already reeled you in hook, line, and sinker. Dating a cop could be an adrenaline rush, a power trip, all for the thrill of it."

"In the blink of an eye, he had you back his bed," Steve chimed in.

Rolling his head to the side, Daniel narrowed his eyes and answered curtly. "All you seem to be obsessed with, Detective O'Grady, is whether or not I'm screwing your suspect!"

"It's more about whether or not Phoenix is manipulating you with sex, Daniel," replied Paul matter-of-factly. "Some psychopaths use sex to control. To show their power over others, their superiority, but that's all it is. Others? They'll avoid it because that kind of closeness with another is appalling to them. They make up excuses like, 'I don't believe in sex before marriage,' 'I respect you too much and want to wait a while,' 'I have a medical condition,' they'll use all sorts of excuses."

Paul realized he'd struck a chord with Daniel and, by the expression on his face, knew it was a sexless relationship between Daniel and Phoenix Love. "Perhaps Phoenix was sexually abused and that's why he's obsessed with pedophiles. On the other hand, maybe he wasn't.

Maybe it's an ace to play because sex simply turns him off. They make excuses, Daniel, and they're so easy to believe when they want to be believed.

“Fooling people with the cover of romance, kisses, embraces, chipping at weak spots, doing all the right things at precisely the right time. If Phoenix was a victim from day one, I'll find out and he'll receive the best care we can provide for him. If he wasn't a victim from day one, and in any way aided in those murders willingly, I'll find that out, too, and put him in jail.”

## *Chapter Eleven*

In a suburb thirty-five minutes south of Sydney's central business district, a modest three-bedroom house sat amongst other houses of equal charm in a private cul-de-sac with minimal traffic. Each neighbor knew the other on a friendly, sociable basis. In the garden, the rose bushes had flushed with their last blooms. Always a showstopper, Corrine Firth lovingly tended the flowerbeds and rewarded all who saw them with her efforts. Needing to nurture life in a continual effort to provide a floral tribute to her son's loss, she never felt the joy her garden provided to others.

Clipping away the dying flowers and turning green leafy bushes into thorny sticks more aptly mirrored the vacancy resident in Corrine's heart. The dormancy of a winter garden matched the dormancy of her soul. She blamed herself for losing Dylan. For letting him walk home from school rather than driving to pick him up and making sure he arrived home safely. Not for a second did she believe he'd run away. Constant images assailed her of Dylan screaming for help, begging for her to find him, dying terrified and alone. When she should've protected him, she hadn't. When she should've saved him, she couldn't. These were the thoughts taunting her every breath.

Where many marriages may have buckled under the strain, Corinne's and Evan's did not. Battling depression of fluctuating degrees, from crippling to melancholy, Corrine relied heavily on her husband. Many friends she'd considered to be close drifted away. Evan's love kept her going. Just as Corrine refuted the runaway theory, so too did Evan. Never once had he agreed with Detective Somerset and he refused to let C.I.B. let Dylan's disappearance be filed as a cold case.

Corrine straightened and massaged her neck. At forty-three, she felt ancient. Large, doe blue eyes expressed little other than pain. Shoulder-length blonde hair stayed tied loosely off her face. Five-foot-three, petite and she was the one who had given the beauty gene to her son. Not that she ever felt beautiful anymore. In fact, she could barely stand the sight of her own reflection.

Setting a pair of clippers aside, Corrine watched a silver station wagon approaching. Twenty years of living at the same address and she knew almost every car that turned into the cul-de-sac. Any unknown vehicle sparked distrust. It drove slowly, edging closer, until its yellow indicator flashed and it pulled up at the curb outside her house. Through the window, she saw one familiar face.

Wiping dirt off her hands, Corrine inhaled a deep breath, made a lax attempt to tidy her attire and stepped onto her drive. "Hello, Detective Somerset."

He activated the alarm and walked over. "Hello, Corrine. This is my new partner, Steve O'Grady."

Smiling politely, she greeted him. “I’d say it’s nice to meet you, Steve, but I’m not sure I really mean it.” Her stomach lurched. “It can’t be good news you’re both here.” The Slayer’s reappearance had ripped open wounds yet to heal.

“We need to have a word with you.” Paul rested his hand between her shoulders. “I guess Evan’s at work?”

She shook her head and started for the door. “No, you’re in luck. He’s home. We’ve both been shaken by the...” Her voice drifted into nothingness.

“Yes.” Paul nodded understandingly. “Yes, I’m sure it’s been tough for you.”

Adorning the hall walls, portraits of Dylan fought for space amongst family photographs of happier times. Corrine and Evan kept their son’s bedroom untouched, even leaving Dylan’s discarded clothes where he’d dropped them on the floor.

Paul halted near the lounge entrance and extended his right arm. “Good to see you, Evan. This is my new partner, Steve O’Grady.”

They pressed palms in a round of handshakes.

“Not sure I return those sentiments,” Evan replied swiftly.

“That’s pretty much what Corrine said.” Paul smiled. “How are the ponies?”

A veterinarian, Evan specialized in thoroughbreds and Paul always referred to racehorses as ponies.

“Split hooves, strained tendons, same old, same old.” Evan sat beside Corrine on the sofa and wrapped his hand around her fingers. He didn’t want small talk anymore than she did; he wanted a reason for their visit.

Taking an armchair and a deep breath, Paul made the announcement. “We’ve found Dylan.”

Corrine’s chest heaved and she jammed her eyes closed. Evan’s hand strangled her narrow fingers and his skin paled. Being unable to bury missing loved ones left families without closure, but it also left a sliver of hope. Finding bodies splintered what hope remained.

Paul rushed to clarify. “He’s alive. A police officer recognized him. I’ve spoken with Dylan and he’s most definitely alive.”

Shock overlapped speechlessness. Speechlessness partnered with silent tears. Finally the tears rolled into elation. Five years ago, their son had been lost in a split second. Now they had him back in the same rapid moment.

“Why hasn’t he called us?” Corrine begged for an answer. “Why hasn’t he come home to us?”

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Breaking the good news now had to be followed up by breaking the bad and Paul sighed. "I'm afraid he made a choice not to. He didn't want you to know he'd been found."

Hushed crying was muffled behind a tissue Corrine held to her mouth.

"He *did* run away?" Evan's hazel eyes stared through a layer of watery tears. "This doesn't make any sense! He had problems at school, but he was happy at home."

"He was a shy boy!" Corrine sobbed. "Always timid around strangers. There's no way Dylan would've run away to God knows where!"

"Whether he ran away or not is still a bit of mystery." Reaching for the tissue box, Paul stood and placed it on the arm of the sofa. "Dylan says he didn't. He says he was abducted by The Crucifix Slayer."

"Excuse me?" Evan said in a voice shaking to match his limbs. "He 'says' he was abducted? You think my son's making it up?"

Paul sat down and sighed. "I know you don't want to hear this, either of you, but when we questioned Dylan, he certainly did not come across to us as a shy boy who's timid of strangers. In fact, he was confrontational, verbally aggressive, and told several stories that were blatantly untrue."

"You've had it in for Dylan from the start!" Evan speared a fiery glare of resentment across the room. "If he says he was abducted by that bastard, then he was!"

"There's no doubt in our minds, Evan, The Slayer did have Dylan for close to a year before he escaped. The problem is Dylan can't, or won't, give us any information in regards to The Slayer. He's told us he can't remember, blanked it out. Perhaps that's the case; trauma can do that."

A wail of distress sounded, smothered behind the tissue Corrine held to her mouth.

"What more proof do you need? If he had Dylan, then he took him! Jesus Christ, do you think he took off with a murderer of his own free will?" The pregnant pause appeared to increase Evan's anger. "You do, don't you? I don't fucking believe this!"

Corrine squeezed her husband's hand and found her voice. "You're very mistaken, Paul. Dylan had problems at school, but the other kids never left him alone. He was bullied every day and that's why he misbehaved. He was a sweet, polite, loving child when the other kids didn't pick on him. Outside of school, he never did anything wrong."

"Dylan has a five-year-old boy living with him." Steve crossed his arms over his chest. "A boy that was kidnapped four years ago."

"Although we don't believe Dylan was the one who actually kidnapped him." Paul quickly clarified and sent a rapid warning glance in Steve's direction. "But, nevertheless, he's there. Dylan also goes by another name now. Phoenix Love."

A wide grin smile split Evan's furious expression. "He does? That in itself is proof he wouldn't have left home willingly." Evan nudged Corrine. "Tell them, honey."

"That name means something?" Paul asked with interest.

"Yes!" Corrine laughed through her tears. "Phoenix was Dylan's nickname. I started calling him Phoenix when he was two. Poor little thing took forever to get the hang of walking. Up he'd get up and then down he'd go on his bum! I'd say to him, 'You're like a little phoenix, love! You keep rising from the ashes to have another go!'" The quiver returned to her lips. "Just like he has now. I always called him Phoenix. I'd always say, 'Dinner's ready, Phoenix, love' or 'Goodnight, Phoenix, love.' I always put 'love' on the end."

Deep creases lined Evan's brow when he frowned again. "If The Slayer had him for a year, that would've made him fourteen when he got away? Where's he been? Why hasn't someone recognized him before this, Paul? His photograph was everywhere."

"Living on the streets and squatting in vacant houses," Paul answered. "He's dyed his hair, eyebrows and eyelashes dark brown. He's matured and he wore brown contact lenses. To be honest, had I walked past him in the street, I'd not have recognized him either and I saw him *without* the contact lenses."

Corrine's eyes glistened with tears once more. "Why didn't he come home? I don't understand."

"He said he was too afraid. Said The Slayer knew where he lived and he was too scared to come home. He said he was scared he'd be taken again."

"Too bloody right he was!" Evan snapped. "Wouldn't you be scared of The Slayer? You keep saying 'he said' like Dylan's made the entire thing up, even though you acknowledge he was held against his will for a year!"

Putting himself in Evan and Corrine's shoes, Paul understood parents generally took their children's sides and rarely wanted to entertain the thought they could be guilty.

"What we need to know now..." He allowed Evan's caustic reactions to wash over him. "...is if you can think of anyone who had a relationship with Dylan at that time that you didn't approve of or were wary of. Anyone. Family, friends, teachers, the guy down the local store, anyone. We suspect Dylan knew who took him and, if he didn't go willingly, it seems likely he knew his abductor. He was taken off a suburban street and no one saw or heard any sign of a struggle."

"I can't think of anyone." Corrine met her husband's eyes, searched them, and shrugged. "Except for his art teacher, Ralph Clarkson. But, he was a very nice man. The only teacher at school who did stick up for Dylan and Dylan really liked him. He'd encourage Dylan with his art, make the time to talk to him, he really was a lovely man."

"Does he still work there?"

"I can't tell you that, Paul, I don't know."

“Easy enough to find out. Anyone else who was close to Dylan at the time?”

“Only my brother, William,” replied Evan, tone curt. “He’s a wanker, but he’s not a bloody serial killer!”

“Can you describe his relationship with Dylan for me?”

Evan squeezed the bridge of nose with his thumb and index finger. “My brother’s an arse! He’s got a lot of money, he likes to flaunt it and Dylan was his favorite nephew. He’d take Dylan out in his Porsche and buy him things, that kind of thing. Dylan was a lonely kid. He didn’t have any friends. William, as much as I can’t stand the arrogant prick, at least made the time to spend with him.”

Two names and, at the very least, they were somewhere to restart their investigation. William Firth, and all of Dylan’s teachers, had been interviewed after Dylan went missing. It was time to interview these two once again.

“Anybody else?”

“No.” Evan shook his head. “Not that I can think of.”

“Nor I,” added Corrine. “Do you think Dylan will phone us now? Or... do you think if we invite him to see us he’ll visit?”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t bet on it,” said Steve. “Sorry.”

Devastated tears saturated Corrine’s face and she fell into Evan’s arms. “Tell him we love him. Please. Tell him we love him very much and we miss him.”

“I will.”



## *Chapter Twelve*

“Take a seat, Mr. Clarkson. We’re sorry to pull you away from your class.”

“That’s okay. What can I do for you, Detective... Somersby, was it?”

“Somerset.”

“Sorry, Detective Somerset,” Ralph Clarkson corrected with an apologetic smile.

Choosing the principal’s chair behind an oak desk, Paul sat down while Steve hovered beside a large window overlooking the school grounds.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions about Dylan Firth. From what his mother and father told us, we understand you were his favorite teacher.”

Ralph Clarkson stood six feet tall, neatly dressed in designer-label denim jeans, a white shirt, and a tailored jacket. The principal had said he was popular all around with the students as a teacher with an easy going reputation and one many of the young girls set their sights on.

“I answered questions when he was first abducted. Has there been news about him?” Ralph inquired.

“Since the recent spate of murders, we’ve reopened his case.” Paul didn’t want to reveal too many details until the formal press release. “In your personal opinion, how would you describe Dylan when you taught him?”

“A brilliant art student. The best I’ve ever taught.”

“Corrine, Dylan’s mother, said you took time to try and help him. Advice, mentoring, that kind of thing.”

“I did. He wasn’t the type of boy who opened up easily to anyone, but he talked to me about certain things.”

“Why do you think he talked to you?” Steve moved away from the window and approached the chair Ralph occupied. “Was there a reason do you think?”

“I believe Dylan had a crush on me. He tended to go out of his way to seek me out and spend time alone with me.”

Paul’s pen tapped on the desk surface. “A thirteen-year-old boy with a crush on a male teacher and you willingly spent time alone with him? Risky, Mr. Clarkson.”

“You’re right, it was risky. A poor decision on my part back then and I certainly wouldn’t do it now.” Ralph smiled. “Older and wiser!”

Going by first impressions, Ralph Clarkson came across as his reputation predicted: easy-going, openly conversing, collected and calm.

“What makes so sure he had a crush on you?” asked Paul, keeping it casual.

“He kissed me.”

Paul and Steve’s eyebrows flew up in unison.

“I was helping him with an art project during one lunch hour and when we’d finished, he leaned over and kissed me. I told him it was inappropriate and it was best we didn’t tell anyone else it had happened.”

“And you still continued to spend time alone with him after he kissed you?” Paul asked incredulously.

“Yes. He was lonely. A messed-up kid.”

“Did you lead him on in any way, Mr. Clarkson?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Ever spend time with him outside of school?”

“No.”

“Rather than report it, and cover yourself should Dylan have told anyone, you told him to keep it a secret between the two of you?”

“At the time, I thought it was for the best.”

“What types of things did you talk about with him?” Paul fired the questions at Clarkson one after the other.

“Art, mainly. I’d try and talk to him about his behavior. Try to counsel him, I suppose you could say.”

“Ever get anywhere with that?”

“At times, I thought I got through to him and the next day he’d be in trouble again.”

“Do you think he ran away?”

“I do.” Entwining his fingers together, Ralph stretched his arms out and cracked his knuckles before answering. “He wasn’t happy. Unhappy kids run away sometimes. He hated school. He pretty much hated everything really.”

“Except you,” Steve noted.

“We had a common bond through art. In all honesty, I think that’s the only reason he took to me. I praised him and he responded well to praise.”

“One more question, Mr. Clarkson, and then we’ll leave you in peace.” Paul smiled and received one in response. “Do you think he killed the fish?”

“Yes, he killed them. I know he did, because I personally caught him in the science lab earlier that day when he had no reason to be there. The science lab is off limits to all students unless they’re in class. That afternoon he had to clean the tank and fifteen minutes after he left, we pretty much had nothing but skeletons floating around in there. He nearly got expelled for that stunt.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“We simply didn’t have positive proof he’d done it. No one actually *saw* him do it. Dylan had a knack for wreaking havoc and being able to cover his tracks. Not sure how he managed it, but there weren’t too many times he was caught red-handed.”

“Sneaky?”

“Very. Trash went up in flames, kids’ lunches went missing, their lunch money went missing, homework went missing. You name it, if it wasn’t tied down, it went missing. When Dylan ran away, all of that stopped. He was devious. Not a kid you’d trust, that’s for sure.”

When Paul stood, so did Ralph.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Clarkson.”

“You’re welcome.”

They watched him leave the office, unruffled and waving to a colleague he passed in the hall as he made his way to the class he’d been interrupted from.

Slipping his pen into his pocket, Paul peered toward his partner, giving him a silent nod to proceed with a deduction he knew Steve was dying to make.

“He was doing so well until he fucked that up at the end, wasn’t he? If he was such an untrustworthy kid, why did Ralph trust him to keep the kissing issue a secret?”

Paul grinned. “I’ll make a detective out of you yet.”

“He fits the profile.”

“He won’t be able to fart without us knowing about it, from now on.”

“William Firth now?”

“Yeah, why not. We’re on a roll.” Paul took his mobile from his pocket. “T.C.S. still hasn’t called me.”

“He’s playing with us.”

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In his side mirror, Paul watched William Firth climb out of a blue convertible and activate the alarm. Parked on the other side of the snaking, tree-lined street, they waited until William approached his front door and then exited the car.

“William Firth?”

Eying Paul, William tilted his head to the side. “You know very well who I am, Detective.”

When Dylan first went missing, all relatives had been interviewed. Paul already knew Evan’s brother to be as arrogant as Even had described him. He’d been able to provide an alibi in his wife and, at the time, hadn’t been a suspect in any way.

“Yes, you’re right, I do know you. Wasn’t sure if you’d remember me. This is my partner, Detective O’Grady. Can we have a word with you?”

“About?”

“Your nephew. Can we come inside?”

“Not without a warrant.”

“I could get one.”

Calmly, William searched for his house key. “Then I suggest you come back when you do.” He opened the door and went inside without another word.

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Stalling his return home, Daniel sat on the carpet playing toy trains with Echo while he silently worked on a way to convince Phoenix to let him stay indefinitely. Either way, he needed a shower, a change of clothes, and to call into the station to request time off for personal reasons. His concern for Phoenix grew with each passing hour. Phoenix cleaned incessantly, going over places he’d already deemed spotless, scrubbed the bathtub and now moved back into his bedroom to change sheets he’d only changed that morning.

Daniel ruffled Echo’s hair and stood. “Back in a moment, short stuff.”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

Pausing at the bedroom door, Daniel peered in and then pushed it open. “Are you okay in here, darlin’?”

Fumbling with his mobile, Phoenix quickly shoved it into his pocket and spun around. “Yeah. Fine. Why?”

“Who were you calling?”

“No one. I was turning it off.”

Daniel frowned and edged nearer. “You had the phone to your ear.”

“Dale left me a message. Prick.”

Everything in Daniel’s heart wanted to believe Phoenix. “What did he say? Can I listen to it?”

“I already deleted it.”

## *Chapter Thirteen*

Prior to Daniel personally requesting time off work, Paul Somerset had spoken to the Senior Sergeant and made the request on Daniel's behalf. Intuition told him Senior Constable Hart would broach the topic of leave sooner rather than later. Whereas career had come first with Daniel in the past, now it came in a poor second to Phoenix Love. Having Daniel remain with Phoenix served Detective Somerset two purposes. It put an extra safety net in place in regards to Echo. It also meant Phoenix would be placed under pressure, providing a greater chance of being caught doing anything that may be deemed suspicious. Paul had no doubt Phoenix would take up an offer of Daniel's continued presence. If he were innocent, he'd surely want Daniel near him to give an extra sense of protection. If he were guilty, he'd likely be thrilled by the challenge of perpetrating crime right under the nose of a law enforcement officer. With this in mind, Paul Somerset contacted Senior Sergeant Santo and stipulated Daniel's leave request be granted with no questions asked.

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From the police station, Daniel drove home as quickly as possible. He wanted to shower, pack enough clothes to see him through a week and return to Phoenix before nightfall. He parked his car in the driveway, got out, and jogged toward the door. Sitting on the doorstep waiting was Rachel Young.

"What are you doing here, Rachel?" Annoyance coated Daniel's surly question. "I'm in a hurry. I don't have time for this."

"Make time!" she replied as she rose to her feet. "We've been partners for over a year and I thought we were friends."

Stepping by her, he placed a key into the lock and opened the front door. "I'm serious, I don't have time for this."

"I'm serious, too! You can spare me five minutes."

Knowing Rachel meant well, he also knew she'd dig her heels in and remain on his doorstep indefinitely and, quite possibly, land on Phoenix's doorstep also until she'd been heard out. Rather than risk that scenario, he growled under his breath, stepped inside, and allowed her to follow.

She placed her handbag on a hallstand and trailed him into the kitchen. "I'm not supposed to discuss this with you and I'm disobeying a direct order."

Concerned curiosity dulled Daniel's anger somewhat. "Discuss what?"

“I know Phoenix tried to set you up. Detective Somerset came in and questioned me after he’d interviewed him. He didn’t just question me about Phoenix, he questioned me about you.” She had his full attention. “Whether he believed Phoenix’s allegations or not, he followed it up.”

“He would’ve had to, it’s his job.”

“He only *had* to because Phoenix tried to frame you! What’s got into you, Dan? It doesn’t seem to matter what he does, you throw yourself at his feet!”

“This isn’t any of your business.” He glared down at her. “Why don’t you take care of shit in your own backyard, huh? Deal with your fiancé screwing around and keep your fucking nose out my relationship!”

“See? Can you see what I mean?” Her fingers ran through her shoulder-length blonde hair in frustration. “It’s not like you to be so obnoxious and talk to me like this. Your mum phoned me this morning because she’s left messages for you and you haven’t returned them. You’ve shut everyone out who doesn’t go by the name of Phoenix Love.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed this or not,” Daniel snapped sarcastically, “there’s been a lot going on lately and Phoenix needs me.”

“No, he doesn’t, Daniel!” she snapped in return. “You *want* him to need you. You want to be his knight in shining armor and, for the life of me, I can’t understand why.”

“I’ve heard enough.” He shrugged off his jacket and tossed his keys onto the bench. “Let yourself out, Rachel, I have to get back to Phoenix.”

“You think this is love, don’t you? It’s not love, Dan, it’s obsession.”

“Let yourself out.”

She trailed him from the kitchen toward his bedroom. “Tell me what you’ve fallen in love with? Is it his impeccable manners? His people skills? His honesty and his sweet, boy-next-door disposition?”

Trying the ignoring her taunting and hoping she’d go away, Daniel began throwing clothes into an overnight bag.

“What did you say to me the first time you saw Phoenix? Hmm? You said, ‘Check out the dark-haired bartender. He’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.’ Right from the start, you were obsessed with him.”

He turned his back on her and went to the wardrobe.

“I absolutely, completely, totally agree with you, Dan, he’s gorgeous to look at. You wouldn’t be the first to pant at his heels.”

From the wardrobe, Daniel went to his bedside table.

“If you were thinking clearly, you’d never have put yourself in this position. You’re twenty-nine years old in three months and he’s eighteen. *Eighteen*, Dan!”

In a deliberate attempt to frustrate her further, he placed a packet of condoms on top of the clothes he’d packed. He knew he wouldn’t need them. It was an antagonistic move.

“You’re going to get your heart splintered. Phoenix doesn’t love you and he never will. He will never be the angel in distress you want him to be. You will never be his savior because he doesn’t want salvation, he wants control. I see it, Paul sees it, Steve sees it, and you’re blind to it. You only see what you want to see and Phoenix is playing you like a harp.”

Daniel zipped up the overnight bag and replied, “You saw how scared he was yesterday when he was sleepwalking. That’s the truth about Phoenix, Rachel; he’s a victim and he’s scared.”

“He’s a victim because he teamed up with a serial killer and it blew up in his face! His fear is for *himself*. He’s having nightmares about what happened to *him*. No one else matters to Phoenix Love except Phoenix Love.”

“And Echo?”

“Belongs to him, Dan. He *belongs* to Phoenix the same way you now do.”

Picking up a set of clothes left out on his bed, Daniel headed toward the bathroom with Rachel still behind him. “I can see you’ve been listening to Paul Somerset.”

“And I can see you’ve been listening to no one but Phoenix.”

“I’m having a shower. Leave. Now.”

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Arriving forty minutes after Daniel’s departure hadn’t been premeditated, but it did allow Somerset and O’Grady the perfect opportunity to speak with Phoenix alone. Only after several attempts to rouse his attention did Phoenix finally answer the door. With an expression carved in stone and an argumentative attitude, he eventually took the only option available to him and let them inside.

There were no offers of coffee and no pleasantries. Echo was sent into his room and Phoenix sat glaring Paul down like a cobra. A black and white rat perched on his shoulder looked to be the perfect fashion accessory for him.

“Do you remember your art teacher, Phoenix?” Paul asked in a conversational manner. “Ralph Clarkson.”

“Yes.”

“We spoke to him today.” The comment brought forth no reaction. “He remembers you clearly.”

“That’s nice. Did you pass on my regards?”



Paul scratched his brow and shook his head. “We spoke to your parents, too. They wanted me to tell you they love you and miss you.”

Phoenix broke the intimidating eye contact and looked to the floor. “I thought I asked you not to.”

“They needed to know before we tell the press you’ve been found.”

“I’m fucked, aren’t I? Not that you’d care. You want T.C.S. to find me and you don’t give a shit what happens to me so long as you can put a notch on your belt as the one who caught him. My blood will be on your hands.”

“You’ll be well-guarded, Phoenix,” Paul answered with a smile. “We have somewhere you can go if things get too out of hand.”

“If? *If* they get out of hand? You’re a fucking idiot, Detective Somerset.”

“As I was saying...” An annoyed huff puffed through Paul’s nostrils. “...Clarkson was under the impression you had a crush on him.”

“He’s lying.”

“He said you kissed him.”

“He kissed me, Detective Somerset. More than once.” While Phoenix spoke he twined the rat’s tail around his finger. “Then he’d tell me not to tell anyone. To keep it a secret between us.”

“I see.” Paul pressed his lips together before replying. “So Clarkson is a pedophile, too?”

“I know you don’t believe me.” Phoenix shrugged. “I can prove it.”

“How?”

Taking the rat off his shoulder, Phoenix placed it on his lap and petted its back in easy strokes. “Unless he’s moved since then, he lives in Rosemont Street, not far from the school. His bedroom’s at the rear of the house. The master bedroom is actually at the front of the house, but he slept in the other one because the streetlights kept him awake. He set up an art studio in the front bedroom.”

Certainly, it wasn’t rock solid confirmation Phoenix had ever been inside Clarkson’s home. However, if Phoenix could provide a firmer testimony, both detectives wanted him do it accurately and damningly.

“All things he may have told you in conversation, Phoenix. It doesn’t prove he’s a pedophile.”

“He’s got a burgundy birthmark the size of a fifty cent piece on his penis.” Phoenix stated bluntly. “Looks like someone tried to shoot it off with a slug gun.”

A blue-eyed gaze pinned Paul's lighter gray eyes. If indeed what Phoenix said could be proven, Ralph Clarkson suddenly had a lot of explaining to do. Then again, Phoenix was a liar and both detectives took his words with a generous pinch of salt.

"Okay, Phoenix, we'll follow that up." Paul flicked his eyebrows upward. "Can you tell us how long this went on for?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I'm asking you."

"You're a detective, figure it out."

"We can't help you unless you help us."

"You don't want to help me!" Phoenix screamed furiously. "You want to set me up and you don't give a flying fuck what happens to me!"

Three sharp raps on the door followed the bell and Phoenix jumped from the sofa. Within moments, he'd thrown himself into Daniel's arms, crying and accusing Paul and Steve of ambushing him.

Refusing to let Phoenix go, Daniel strode into the lounge with his arm tightly around Phoenix's waist. "What the hell is going on?"

Paul met him half way across the floor. "Daniel, we needed to..."

"Have either of you bothered to inform Phoenix of his rights? Have you told him he doesn't need to say anything? Have you told him he's entitled to have a lawyer present?"

"We're leaving now." Paul jerked his head at Steve. "We have a press statement to make." He peered into Phoenix's watery blue eyes. "We'll follow up that other matter and get back to you."

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No amount of prying after Paul and Steve left could convince Phoenix to reveal what exactly that other matter was. He hustled around the kitchen, keeping Daniel at a distance, fixing dinner and cleaning in a frenzy. Echo watched on with concern wallowing in his brown eyes and Daniel was pushed decisively away each time he made an attempt to physically touch Phoenix.

"Get Echo washed up for dinner." Phoenix barked the order at Daniel like he would command a slave to do his bidding.

"Do you want me to take the trash out for you?"

“No! I want you to get Echo ready for dinner like I fucking asked you to!” Phoenix retreated, pressing shaky fingers to his temple. “Please, Daniel. I’m angry and I need some space. Please, can you get Echo ready for dinner?”

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Waiting until Daniel left his company, Phoenix threw the dishtowel aside and opened the cupboard under the sink. He removed a plastic bottle, grabbed the garbage bag, and ran from the apartment. Opting for the stairs at the opposite end of the apartment block, he raced down the first level walkway, dropping the bag of garbage over the banister and sprinting toward dumpsters at the rear of the property. Away from the apartment block lights, his dark clothes blended with the cover of nightfall.

He skidded to a halt in front of a dumpster used for recyclable cardboard and newspapers, fumbling with the bottle’s childproof lid. When it gave way, he tossed it aside and upended to contents into the dumpster, dropping the bottle inside the moment it emptied. He took a packet of matches from his pocket, struck one alight, and threw it inside. The dumpster went up in fireball.

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When Daniel re-entered the kitchen, Phoenix was nowhere to be seen. The front door sat ajar and the kitchen cupboard was open. The matches he’d seen on top of the refrigerator were missing, as was a bottle of methylated spirits from beneath the sink.

“Echo, go to your room and don’t move until I get back!” Daniel shouted in a panic.

By the time Daniel reached the bottom of the stairs, the dumpster was well alight, flaring in a haze of gold and orange. Phoenix stood statue-like in silhouette against the fire, staring with fixation.

Snaring Phoenix from behind, Daniel lifted him off his feet amid screams of protest. His hand clamped over Phoenix’s mouth. “Shut up!”

Struggling, kicking his legs, trying to scream through Daniel’s hand, Phoenix refused to quiet down. Carrying him away from the stairs and into the heavy darkness near the perimeter fence, Daniel lowered Phoenix to his feet and struggled to contain his wildcat fighting. Thinking quickly, he hooked his foot behind Phoenix’s ankle, tripping him up and bringing him to the ground. Sitting on Phoenix’s legs, Daniel forced Phoenix down with a hand pushing his shoulder into the grass and the other hand over Phoenix’s mouth.

In as loud a voice as he dared, Daniel spoke through the struggle. “Any second, those cops waiting out the front are going to be at that dumpster and if you don’t stop screaming, you’re gonna be arrested for arson! Listen to me and do everything I tell you to do.” He felt Phoenix relax beneath him. “You’re going to get up and you’re going to walk with me to the front of this apartment block. We’re going to stick next to the fence and keep away from the lights. Understand?”

Phoenix nodded under his hand.

“Then you’re going to wait until I’ve made sure those cops aren’t in their car. Yes?”

Phoenix nodded again.

“When I come back for you, you’ll walk calmly up the stairs with me and we’ll go inside. You never left the apartment, I never left the apartment, neither us know anything about what happened. Do you understand that?”

Phoenix gave another nod.

“Stand up, shut up, and start praying no one saw us!”

## *Chapter Fourteen*

“Ding dong, warrant calling!” Paul waved the paper in front of William Firth’s face. “May we come inside now, Mr. Firth, or should we kick your door in?”

“Be my guest.” He stepped aside and let them pass through. “I’d prefer we talked in the study, if that’s okay with you.”

“Fine by us,” Steve replied.

At forty-seven years of age, William Firth worked three days a week and the rest of the time he spent in early semi-retirement. A top cosmetic surgeon, he tended to the needs of socialite women spending their dollars on liposuction, implants, lifts, tucks, and nose jobs. The money rolled in and William Firth basked in a multimillion-dollar mansion looking over Sydney Harbour.

Choosing a sumptuous leather armchair, William sat down and reached for a glass of red wine sitting on a side table. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Have you seen the evening news, Mr. Firth?”

“No, I haven’t, Detective Somerset, however I appreciate all the trouble you’ve gone to ask me that question. Is that all?”

“We’ve found Dylan.”

The crystal glass tipped in William’s hand. He swore and swiped at the red stain seeping into the white pinstripe of his trousers. “Jesus Christ, this suit cost me over five thousand dollars!”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, I heard you. I’m not deaf!” He stood, reached for a bottle of soda water, and took a handkerchief from his pocket. “Where’s the little bastard been all this time?”

Steve studied William attempting to remove the stain from his pants and replied, “Dead, Mr. Firth.”

He stopped rubbing at the stain and looked over. “He’s dead?”

“Yes, very much so,” said Paul, going along with Steve’s impromptu lie. “At least, he was when we found him and I’m guessing he still is.”

William reclaimed his seat, turning the corners of his mouth downward. “Right.”

“You don’t seem too upset. He was your nephew and from what we’ve been told he was your favorite nephew.”

“He’s been missing for four years, Detective, I’ve been through the grieving process.”

“Five years, Mr. Firth. He went missing five years ago, not four.”

“Right. Five years. My mistake.”

“It certainly was,” Paul replied with widened eyes.

“Where did you find him?” Now the immediate annoyance of a ruined suit seemed to have passed, William asked the question as though asking for the first time.

“In his apartment.” Steve flipped through a book on William’s desk. “Killed himself. Slit his wrists in the bathtub and was dead for a while before the neighbors reported a foul odor.”

One of Paul’s eyebrows lowered and the other one rose. Steve appeared in control of the myth and Paul let him run with it.

“Left a suicide note, though. As it turns out he wasn’t a runaway after all. He was abducted and...” He sighed dramatically. “...guess the poor kid just couldn’t live with it any longer. Horrible scars around his ankles and wrists. He’d been held captive for quite a while.” Steve shook his head. “A year or thereabouts. Devastating news for his mum and dad. Tragic.”

“I’m sure.” William crossed his legs. “What does this have to do with me and why did it require a warrant?”

“It required a warrant because you wouldn’t let us in without one.” Steve moved away from the desk and feigned interest in his surroundings. “We believe Dylan knew the man who abducted him. All we wanted was to re-question family members and see if anyone could recall anyone in Dylan’s life at the time who had a suspicious relationship with him.”

“What did his suicide note say?” William asked.

Paul replied in case Steve slipped up. “We can’t reveal that at the moment.”

“I see. Evidence?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“When you say he was abducted, you mean by The Crucifix Slayer?” William’s lips twisted and then pressed together. “You lot were so convinced he’d run away. You must feel rather stupid now.”

“It appears you were convinced he’d run away too, Mr. Firth,” noted Paul. “Considering you asked where the ‘little bastard’ had been all this time.”

“I’m not a detective, am I?”

“I find it odd you’re not the slightest bit upset Dylan’s dead. Even if you have, as you said, been through the grieving process. He’s your nephew. *Was* your nephew. For a man who used to take Dylan out and spoil him it seems... well... callous is the word that comes to mind.”

“Bullshit is a word that comes to my mind, Detective Somerset.” William set his wine glass down and casually slipped off his shoes. “You asked me if I’d seen the evening news and I replied no. Which is the truth. However I *heard* it on the radio and Dylan is not dead.” A wispy smile settled on his lips. “Now, let’s cut the crap shall we? Why are you really here and should I call my lawyer?”

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The lie had backfired in an astronomical way and instead of throwing William a curve ball, he’d caught it and thrown it back harder. Unable to question the man any further due to William’s request for a lawyer, they left the house and placed a tail on his movements.

Closing the car door, Steve let his head fall back and squeezed his eyes closed. “I fucked that up, didn’t I?”

Paul put the key in the ignition. “Why, yes, Steven, you did.” He waited until Steve reopened his eyes and sheepishly peered over before he continued. “Do you know what happens now?”

“What?” Steve grumbled.

“You’ve landed yourself the job of searching Clarkson’s penis.”

Breaking into laughter, relieved Paul saw the funny side of it, Steve reached for his seatbelt and buckled in. “Do I get to wear gloves?”

“No gloves for you, not after that stunt!” Paul pulled away from the curb and headed toward Ralph Clarkson’s house.

“I thought if he is T.C.S., then saying Dylan was dead might strike a nerve with him or make him slip up or... I don’t know... something.”

“You did make him slip up. Four years? Dylan *escaped* four years ago. Big, big slip up! Aside from that, what do you make of our Mr. William Firth?”

“Intelligent, manipulative, I can see who Dylan takes after.”

“Hmm. Exactly.”

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Settling Echo at the kitchen table and serving up dinner, Phoenix crouched down next to Echo’s chair and held Echo’s hand in his. “You need to play a game with me and Daniel, okay?”

Less than ten minutes after sneaking back inside the apartment and Phoenix had swiftly regained his composure, while Daniel's hands still shook. Fire engine sirens did nothing to faze Phoenix in the slightest; rather, they only flushed his face and lit his eyes with excitement.

"What sort of game?"

"A pretending game." Phoenix smiled and ran his free hand over Echo's hair. "See, there's two policemen in a car outside and they're friends of Daniel's. When I went out to take the trash to the bins, one of them was on fire."

Echo's eyes rounded into saucers. "One of the policeman's?"

Phoenix threw his hands in the air, laughing hard enough to spring tears into his eyes. "Whoosh!" He gasped, choking on laughter, losing strength in his legs and falling onto his rear with his arms clutching his stomach. "Spontaneously combusting policeman!"

Slamming his hand on the table, Daniel pushed out his chair, grabbed Phoenix under his arms, and picked him up off the floor. "Get up!" Daniel whispered into his ear. "This isn't a fucking laughing matter!" Daniel dropped him into the chair. "Any second, they could be knocking on your front door!"

"All right, all right! Get out the way." Smothering his giggles, Phoenix pushed Daniel aside and scooted his chair closer to Echo. "Not the policemen, silly! One of the bins was on fire." A wide, amused grin plastered across his face. "The policemen outside went to see who set the bin on fire, but Daniel and I want to play a joke on them. We want to pretend that we weren't near the bins, that we were here."

"Why?"

"Cause the policemen outside played a joke on Daniel once and he wants to get them back for it." The lies rolled off Phoenix's tongue. "If the policemen come in here and ask us if we were near the bins, you have to play the pretending game and tell them we were here having dinner."

"Okay." Echo picked up his fork and shoveled food into his mouth.

Phoenix scooted the chair to his spot in front of a plate, picked up a glass of water, tipped it toward Daniel and winked. "Problem solved. Stop looking so worried or you'll give it away yourself."

"When Echo goes to bed, Phoenix, we need to talk." Daniel's voice shook as much as his hands did.

"Fine! We'll talk! Geez, Daniel, it's not like the apartment block burned down!"

"That's not the point."

"I'm sure, whatever the point is, you'll tell me." The doorbell sounded. Phoenix pointed over Daniel's shoulder with his fork. "Can you get that, dear? It'll be for you."



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Just as Phoenix had described, Ralph Clarkson's art studio was situated at the front of his house and, on being escorted through to the living room, Somerset and O'Grady saw the bedroom to be at the rear. Clarkson kept a tidy home, but not pedantically spotless in the way Phoenix or William Firth kept their homes. Laundry folded on the kitchen table hadn't yet been put away and dishes, although stacked neatly, were yet to be washed. Without resisting, Clarkson invited the detectives inside and led them down to an open plan living area.

"I saw the news." Ralph sat down on the sofa. "I'm glad Dylan's been found."

"You may not be so glad in a moment." Steve sat not in an armchair, but on the armrest. "Dylan's made some accusations about you."

Clarkson's light olive complexion paled slightly and his breathing picked up in a noticeable rise and fall of his chest. "What sort of accusations?"

"He said you were sexually molesting him," Paul replied bluntly. "Naturally, we had to follow that up."

"I was not molesting Dylan!" Anger tinged Clarkson's voice and his breathing escalated into sharp inhales and exhales. "Yes, I totally agree with you; I should've said something when he kissed me to cover my arse, but at the time, I thought it was best for him."

"For him? Sure it wasn't what you thought was best for you?"

"No, Detective Somerset, for him!" Clarkson left the sofa and wandered around the room with his arms folded across his chest. "Dylan was a silken thread away from being expelled and all the faculty needed was proof enough to give him his marching orders. He got caught doing minor things, but he never got caught red-handed doing the major stuff. If I'd gone to the principal and told him Dylan made a sexual advance on me, that would've been it for him."

"You yourself described him as devious and not a kid you'd trust." Steve pointed out. "Why did you trust him to keep that secret? Now, five years later, he's decided not to keep his mouth closed about it and you're in deep hot water."

"With all due respect, it's his word against mine."

"True." Paul's gaze followed Ralph's pacing. "However, Dylan was quite graphic and he told us you have a birthmark on your genitals. He also made suggestions implying you molested him over a period time."

"You expect me to drop my pants?"

"We have a warrant." Paul nodded. "If you want to get it over and done with here and now, you can. Otherwise you're entitled to the search being carried out by a health care professional and we'll take you into headquarters. The choice is yours, Mr. Clarkson."

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Five minutes later, they closed the car doors and pulled away from the curb.

Paul slapped the steering wheel hard with his palm. “Fuck me, that kid’s a lying little cunt!”

## *Chapter Fifteen*

An apartment block in a suburb well known for crime kept Phoenix off the list as prime suspect in the torching of the dumpster. The two police officers questioned Daniel about whether he'd seen anything in relation to the fire and believed his words of denial. From what they could tell, by observing the domestic scene of an unhurried dinner, they'd not left the apartment. The officers said their goodbyes and left.

Echo cleaned up every crumb of food on his plate, Phoenix ate in relaxation and chatted nonchalantly to Echo, while Daniel was unable to quell the queasiness in his stomach. He'd withheld evidence to protect Phoenix from being arrested, broken the law twice within a week in relation to Phoenix, and so far had nothing in return.

Sitting in the lounge room, staring vacantly at the television, Daniel listened to Phoenix cleaning the kitchen. Every ounce of common sense told him to stand up, grab his things, and leave. Rather than listen to his nagging inner voice, he remained glued to the sofa. Rachel's words bounced around inside his head, repeating constantly and yet, each time, he found himself making excuses to explain away Phoenix's behavior and his own inability to walk away. Not once, since torching the dumpster, had Phoenix thanked Daniel for his intervention or spoken to him in a manner that wasn't condescending.

At eight-thirty, Phoenix put Echo to bed, stayed with him for half an hour while they read a book together, and then emerged from the bedroom to sit in front of the television without a word or a glance in Daniel's direction.

Picking up the remote control, seething quietly, Daniel turned the television off. "We need to talk."

"I was watching that, Daniel."

"I don't care! Do you want to explain to me what the hell you were doing when you lit that fire?"

"Umm." Phoenix peered up to his left, to his right, pressed his lips together, and shrugged. "No, I don't want to explain what the hell I was doing when I lit that fire."

"Do I mean anything to you?"

"Oh, *God!*" Slapping his right hand to his brow, Phoenix struck the floor with the heel of his shoe. "I light one fire and suddenly you want to turn this into a me, me, me relationship talk!"

"Me, me, me?" Daniel stared at Phoenix in dismay. "I saved your arse tonight! I lied and covered up a crime to keep you from being arrested! Have you even thanked me?"

“See? ‘I did this,’ ‘I did that,’ ‘get over here, Phoenix, and kiss my feet ‘cause I’m such a fucking hero!”

“You twist everything around back onto me every time.”

“There you go again.”

Daniel felt a knife twisting cruelly between his ribs with each syllable Phoenix uttered and each glare of resentment he sent.

“I like fire. I like to watch things burn. It makes me feel better.” Phoenix stood and approached Daniel menacingly. “Did I go out and burn down someone’s house? No, I didn’t. I set fire to a fucking dumpster and you’re carrying on like I’ve committed some huge offence to society. Ever since I’ve met you, all I’ve had is fucking cops turning up every two seconds and welfare on my back. You think you’ve got problems, Daniel? Step inside my world for a day and *then* come back to me and whine!” Bending at the waist he glared furiously into Daniel’s eyes. “My life’s been turned upside down and it’s all happened since I invited you into it. Do you know what I did before I started making dinner for us and before I set the fire?”

Daniel shook his head, already feeling like he’d lost the argument. He was at a loss for any more words to speak.

“I thought you’d feel more at home if I unpacked your things and hung them up in the wardrobe. Guess what I found?” A sneer twisted Phoenix’s mouth.

“Phoenix, it’s not what it looks like, I put them in there because...”

“They’re condoms, Daniel!” Phoenix shouted into Daniel’s face. “I fucking know why you put them in there! What part of ‘no’ haven’t you understood? You think ‘cause I came on to you last night, it means I’m gonna bend over for you? The only reason I did what I did last night was ‘cause I thought I’d lost you! I didn’t want to have sex with you last night, but I was prepared to let you fuck me if it meant you’d forgive me. Then you stopped it and I thought to myself, ‘You know what, Phoenix, maybe he really does care about you. Maybe he does respect you.’” Phoenix leaned in closer. “Now I don’t know if that’s the case. Maybe the only reason you stopped me last night was ‘cause you figure I’m a cheap, trashy whore and you didn’t have the condoms with you. You’ve made sure you packed them now, haven’t you?”

“I can explain why I packed them, if you--”

“I don’t need a bunch of bullshit excuses from you! I know what condoms are used for, Daniel, I’m not a fucking moron! So how about I ask you the same question, huh? Do I mean anything to you other than something you want to fuck?” He gave Daniel no time to reply. “I thought I did, but obviously I don’t. And if you’re wondering where those condoms went, they went up in flames!”

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Gouging and ripping at the page of his sketchbook until the lead of the pencil snapped, Phoenix slammed the book closed and hurled it across the bedroom. For over an hour, he'd needed to use the bathroom and held on rather than leave the room and possibly run into Daniel on the way. Unable to hold on any longer, he crawled off the bed and stalked out the door.

Flushing the toilet, Phoenix caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and noticed the overhead light shimmering a thin line of bright auburn red near his scalp. Every four weeks, he dyed his hair to cover the red he abhorred. As he'd aged, most of the light freckles across the bridge of his nose had faded and a light tan blended the rest into obscurity. He swore under his breath, took a package of hair dye from the cabinet, and left it beside the sink to do first thing in the morning.

He closed the bathroom door quietly, tiptoeing covertly past the lounge room door and then halting when he heard Daniel's voice. Sneaking a look, he saw Daniel with his head resting in his hand and his mobile to his ear. Phoenix hid out of view and listened to the one-way conversation.

"When will they know for sure?"

Phoenix narrowed his eyes and his top lip twitched in a sneer.

"As soon as you find out, call me."

With teeth clenched together, Phoenix balled his hands into fists at his sides.

"How's Dad coping with it all?"

He'd jumped straight to the conclusion the phone conversation was with Paul Somerset, but now that it seemed that it wasn't, Phoenix relaxed his fists, his angry scowl softened, and he leaned nearer to the door to listen more closely. Daniel's voice strained and his head never left the cradle of his hand.

"The results are definitely coming back tomorrow? The doctors said that for certain?"

Phoenix moved into the doorway.

"All right, Mum, well... I'll call you in the morning."

Walking quietly to the back of the sofa, Phoenix stood silently behind Daniel.

"I love you, too. Bye."

When Phoenix touched his fingers to Daniel's shoulder, Daniel started. "Your Dad's sick?" Phoenix asked in a concerned whisper.

"My brother."

Putting both of his palms over his face, Daniel succeeded in hiding the tears, but didn't succeed in covering up the telltale slump and shake of his shoulders. Sitting beside him,

Phoenix slipped an arm around his waist, reached over to place his hand to the side of Daniel's head, and eased Daniel into his arms.

Phoenix's thumb gently stroked at Daniel's temple. "I didn't know you had a brother."

"You never bothered to ask me! You've never bothered to ask me anything." So tall, so physically strong, and yet Daniel had been reduced to tears and lay against Phoenix, as fragile as glass.

"I'll make us some hot chocolate and then, if you want, we can talk." Phoenix kissed Daniel on the brow. "About your brother if you want to. Or, if that's too personal, that's okay, we can just sit and talk."

Making good on his promise, Phoenix returned from the kitchen with two mugs of hot chocolate and set them onto the coffee table. He sat cross legged on the sofa, ready to listen and ready to converse.

"When I got home today, Rachel was on my doorstep." The tears slipped down Daniel's face and he made little effort to wipe them away or stem the flow. Speaking with his head hung low, he kept his gaze off Phoenix, staring instead at the carpet. "She was talking at me about you, saying stuff I didn't want to hear, and I put the condoms in the bag to annoy her. That's the only reason they were in there, Phoenix. I didn't bring them with me to try and force you into sex."

"Okay. I'm sorry for flying at you like I did and I'm sorry for the fire and I'm... I'm sorry." He combed his fingers soothingly through Daniel's hair. "You do mean something to me, Daniel, and I guess that's why I reacted as badly as I did."

"I hate being helpless. I hate being out of control." Taking his gaze off the carpet Daniel dared to establish eye contact. "That's exactly how I am with you, Phoenix! I can't get a lid on my feelings. I can't get a grip. I can't walk away from you; I can't think clearly; I can't control anything! When you smile at me, *honestly* smile at me, I see everything I ever wanted wrapped up in you. When you glare at me like I'm a cockroach, and talk to me like I'm shit under your shoe, I see failure in *me* even if I know I haven't done anything to deserve it."

Beneath the tears, those unusual peridot eyes shimmered greener surrounded by red. Phoenix sat transfixed; he didn't interrupt and he peered at Daniel like an angel hearing a spiritual confession.

"You've invaded every part of me in every way; I can't shake you loose! I'm not in love with you, Phoenix; I'm addicted to you. I don't want to be addicted to you. I want to fall hopelessly in love with you and I want you to fall hopelessly in love with me. I want to be that one guy who sweeps you off your feet so much you won't ever want to look at anyone else. Only I'm not, and I doubt I ever will be. Even if I'm not ever that guy for you, I have a horrible suspicion I'd live with it just so I never have to be without you. It's so incredibly fucked up for me to think that way. I never thought I'd be at someone's beck and call like I am with you, but I can't help it! I want to know everything about you. I want to know what your favorite color is, your favorite movie, your first childhood memories, what you're thinking. I want know it all." His bottom lip trembled and the tears tumbled. "You don't want

to know anything about me, because you're not in the slightest bit interested. I'm not even sure if you've even taken into consideration that I'm real person and have feelings, too."

"I do want to know about you." Phoenix's fingers tracked down the side of Daniel's face and brushed away the tears. "I'm not used to this, baby." By using a softly spoken term of endearment for the first time, Phoenix knew he sounded sincere. Daniel crumbled.

"I want to be close to you, but it scares me. When I'm scared, I do crazy things. I feel as if I have this nuclear bomb of anger inside me and it grabs onto me and it won't let me go. It won't let me go and I'm not sure when it started and I'm not sure if it'll ever go away. I don't want to be a freak. I know I should see a shrink, but that scares me, too, 'cause I don't know if I can cope with remembering what happened to me when he had me. I don't remember his face, his voice, anything, and I think if I do, I'll just lose it totally. I know normal people don't set things on fire. I set fires all the time, Daniel! If I have a box of matches in my pocket, and no one's around to see me, I'll set bins I pass on fire and then hide to watch them burn. It makes me feel better. One day... I'm scared that, one day, I'll set fire to someone's house. Why do I do it? Why do I do crazy shit like that and why am I being such an ass to you? I want the answers, but I don't want them! Since the murders started up again, it's like it triggered me. You're taking the brunt of it all and you're right, Daniel, you *don't* deserve it."

From Daniel's face, Phoenix's hand ran down his arm and closed around his fingers. In response, Daniel moved closer until that sat with barely any space between them.

"I did kill the fish at school."

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Shock dropped Daniel's jaw. Theft, arson, and antisocial behavior, Daniel couldn't deny. Killing any living thing, Daniel hadn't believed for a moment.

"I took sulphuric acid from the science lab and I put it into the tank." Squeezing his eyes closed, Phoenix lowered his face and shook his head in a sharp jerk from left to right. "I thought they'd just die. I thought it'd be over quickly, but they starting darting around and their eyes... their eyes burned first and they were... they were in agony and I ran."

Letting go of Daniel's hand, Phoenix covered his mouth and burst into tears. "I ran home and I locked myself in the bathroom and I threw up and I bawled my eyes out. The principal, he loved those fish, and I killed them because I hated him. I killed them and they died in agony 'cause of me! I still feel sick every time I think of what I did to them, all 'cause I was mad at the fucking principal for telling me to clean their tank! They were so beautiful. Bright colors and they were beautiful and I killed them."

Taking a deep breath in and exhaling slowly through his mouth, Daniel nodded, removed Phoenix's hand from his face and kissed the back of it. "Anything else you want to confess to me?"

"Dale didn't leave a message today."

"Who were you calling?"

“Home,” he gasped between sobs. “I called home.”

Confused, Daniel tilted Phoenix’s chin up with his finger and searched the large blue eyes. “Darlin’, why did you lie to me about that?”

“I didn’t want anyone to pick up the phone. I just wanted to hear the answering machine. Mum always screened calls and I... I can’t remember her voice properly and she always left these silly messages on the machine. I only wanted to listen to it. I was embarrassed to tell you what I was doing.”

“My Mum does the same thing. I bought her the answering machine three years ago and I’ve regretted it ever since!”

They exchanged smiles, holding each other’s hands, searching into each other’s eyes.

Phoenix’s smile faded and his eyebrows knit together. “What’s wrong with your brother?”

The next smile to fade was Daniel’s. “He’s been getting migraines for months. Doctors told him it was stress; now they think it might be something worse. They did a CAT scan today and the results should be in tomorrow morning.”

Placing a soft kiss on Daniel’s lips, Phoenix moved away only enough to regain eye contact. “God, I’m sorry. If someone told me something like that about Echo, I don’t know what I’d do. Are you going to visit him?”

“He doesn’t talk to me, Phoenix.”

“Why?” A small crease took up residence between Phoenix’s brows when he frowned. “Did you have an argument?”

“I came out when I was twenty. Mum and Dad weren’t happy, but they’ve dealt with it. Heath hasn’t spoken to me since.” He swiped a tear from the corner of his eye before it had time to fall. “The last two murders, the twins girls, it hit me harder than the others because Heath and I are identical twins. We were really close and then he cut me off and it’s driven a wedge in the family. Now he could be dying and he still won’t see me or take my call.”

Thoughtfulness in Phoenix’s expression teamed with a hushed reply. “Families suck sometimes.” He rested two fingers on Daniel’s mouth. “Here I was thinking you’re the hottest man in the world and now you’re telling me there’s another one out there who looks just like you?”

“Yeah but...” Daniel spoke through Phoenix’s fingers. “...he’s nowhere near as charming as me.”

“I believe that,” Phoenix replied with a smile. “I have one more confession.”

“Uh-oh! Hit me with it.”

“I don’t want be your addiction, Daniel. I want love, too. Do you wanna go to bed, lie in each others arms and talk until we fall asleep?”



“Yeah. I really do want to do that.”

## *Chapter Sixteen*

By dawn's break the following morning, news telecasts and bold print on newspapers headlined the relationship between Dylan Firth and Senior Constable Daniel Hart. Ready to talk to press for monetary inducement, neighbors in the apartment block revealed the emergency situation they'd witnessed only days before and the comment made by Constable Rachel Young, 'I thought you hadn't slept with him yet.' Rachel's unprofessional remark infuriated her Senior Sergeant and Paul Somerset. It also threw Daniel into the limelight, his photograph displayed beside Dylan's schoolboy missing person picture. For all intents and purposes, Daniel had been set up by the media to look like the pedophile Phoenix had accused him of being. Rachel was suspended until further notice.

The phone call T.C.S. promised to make never eventuated. Something had gone awry, delayed him, distracted him, and possibly even unsettled him. If Phoenix was the one who'd placed the first call, perhaps he'd been told to hang back, told to wait until the media dust settled on his reappearance. Or maybe Phoenix himself had made the decision. Feeling the heat a little too hot on his heels, he was waiting until it began to cool. How Phoenix could have come to be in possession of Paul Somerset's mobile number was a stumbling block, but not a brick wall. There stood a very good chance it had been provided for him by T.C.S. personally. If a person had the knowledge, the right connections, or enough money, phone numbers were not safe from disclosure.

His allegations pertaining to sexual assault at the hands of Ralph Clarkson pointed the needle onto one thing more conclusively. Phoenix was a cunning, compulsive liar focused on getting his own way at the expense of others and showing little to no concern as to how his lies affected their lives.

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Another scene of domestic regularity greeted Paul and Steve when they arrived at Phoenix's apartment early the following morning. Echo sat watching a children's program on the television while Phoenix tidied the kitchen. Daniel, on the other hand, appeared far less relaxed when he opened the door to let the two detectives inside.

Paul dropped a cardboard folder onto the kitchen table and folded his arms across his chest. "We've spoken to Ralph Clarkson."

Breaking in with an unwanted interruption, Daniel took his ringing mobile from his pocket. "I have to take this call."

"Call them back, Senior Constable!" Paul ordered.

Ushering Daniel toward the door, Phoenix undermined his order swiftly. "Go. Answer it."

Daniel left the kitchen and Paul shook his head in irritated disbelief. “You’ve got him on a short leash, haven’t you?”

“Fuck off!” Phoenix snarled. “It’s an important call and you can wait in here until I come back. Don’t touch anything!”

“Excuse me, Phoenix.” Extending his arm out, Paul halted Phoenix mid-stride. “You’ve got some explaining to do and you might want to try a little respect!”

“Pity The Slayer doesn’t kill you and do everyone a favor!” He gave Paul a sharp shove. Paul seized him roughly by his arm. “Get your fucking hands off me!”

“Sit down! Now!”

“Fuck you!”

Losing his temper and his patience, Paul kicked a chair out from under the table, hauled Phoenix toward it and pushed him onto it. He let go of Phoenix’s arm and kept him in a sitting position with a firm hand on his chest. “Have fun torching the dumpster last night?”

“I wasn’t near the fucking dumpster!”

“Like hell you weren’t! Do you have any sense of right and wrong at all?” He leaned over with his face centimeters from Phoenix’s face. “Clarkson has no birthmark! Making false allegations is a criminal offense and you are a whisker away from being arrested!”

“Get your hands off me, you fucking son of a bitch, or I’ll kill you myself!”

“Really?” Paul pushed Phoenix harder into the chair. “Done it before, have you?”

Phoenix hocked and spat in Paul’s face. Shocked and incensed, Paul reacted by snatching Phoenix by the collar and twisting the fabric into a lock hold around his neck. When Steve advanced, Phoenix threw back his head began an ear blasting wail which rose in pitch and force.

Hauling Paul off Phoenix, Daniel shoved him hard against the refrigerator. Steve entered the fray next and Phoenix halted the incessant wailing only to draw breath. Echo hid in the lounge room, crying and terrified.

It was too late. Daniel had walked in and witnessed what looked exactly like a case of police brutality. Paul had lost control, reacted, and damned himself in the process. All Phoenix needed to do now was contact a lawyer, say he’d been questioned without being informed of his rights, and assaulted.

Daniel retreated, crouching at Phoenix’s side and offering comfort. “Get out before I report this!”

Phoenix wrapped his arms around Daniel’s neck and the wailing halted. “He threatened to kill me and spat in my face, Senior Constable!”

“I saw your hand around his throat! In front of a child! Get out!”

Fully aware of how damaging the fiasco would look for C.I.B. and Detective Somerset, Steve picked up the folder and made for the door. “Let’s go, Paul. Now!”

Daniel immersed in his comforting, holding Phoenix tight, whispering calming words into his ear. Paul took a step away. Phoenix lifted his face out of Daniel’s shoulder and smiled.

“Fucker!” Paul mouthed silently.

Phoenix pursed his lips in a kiss and winked.

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“Penny for your thoughts.” Corrine ran her hand down her husband’s back, sitting next to him on the bed while he tied his shoelaces.

“I’m wondering how I’m going to get to the car and get past all those reporter vultures.”

She frowned. “A penny for what’s really on your mind.”

He stopped tying his laces and dropped his face into his hands with exhaustion. “I didn’t sleep at all last night.”

Most of the night prior, until they’d gone to bed, Corrine and Evan had spent taking calls from relatives and friends. After receiving a call from his brother, Evan’s mood changed as though encased in a heavy, dark cloud.

“Honey, did William say something to upset you last night?”

Evan snatched his jacket from the bed and let it hang loose at his side. “When doesn’t he say something to upset me?”

The way he brushed off her inquiry only increased her concern. “What did he say? I know he said something, you’ve been troubled ever since.”

Through a gap in slightly parted curtains Evan stared at a gathering crowd of reporters. His face was drawn and his voice bothered. “He was questioned last night and basically blamed me for it.”

“He’s going to have to deal with it. I’d say a few people are going to be re-questioned. Try not to let him get to you, love. You know what he’s like; if he can niggle at you, he will.”

He stood and shrugged on his jacket. “They suspect him, Corrine.”

“Will’s many things, darling, but he’s...”

“I’m not so sure. Think about it, Corrine. When did Dylan start having problems at school? I’m not talking about the minor stuff. I mean, when did we start getting the school calling us and saying Dylan was lighting fires and stealing?”

“When he started high school.”

“Exactly! When did Will suddenly start showing more interest in Dylan?”

Her mind ticked over and her stomach churned. “When he started high school.”

“A coincidence?”

A hot flush enveloped her entire body. “You seriously think William could be The Slayer?”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about.” With a thud he sat down on the side of the bed. “We thought Dylan was acting up due to the bullying at school. Maybe that wasn’t the only reason. He behaved himself at home, but he wasn’t happy.”

“So what are you saying?”

“What if William was molesting our son?”

The nausea inside Corrine’s stomach reached the point she felt she’d be physically ill.

“It adds up, Corrine. A grown man, who thinks the world is beneath him, suddenly decides to spend time with a young boy. Sure, Dylan was a bit of a brat in primary school, but he never did anything seriously wrong. He turned twelve and he stopped communicating with us. He started painting all those dark pictures of men without faces, do you remember?”

“Yes,” she whispered guiltily.

“Maybe he *was* lighting fires and stealing. It could’ve been his way of trying to tell us something was wrong and we ignored it.”

“Evan... what if he did run away? What if you’re right and that despicable man convinced him to run away with him? We should’ve done something! He probably hates us because we didn’t help him and that’s why he never came home.”

“If William touched our son...” Both hands clamped to the sides of his head. “A great dad I am! What if I waved my son off every Sunday and left him in the hands a deviant?” His hands dropped to his lap with a slap. “Now, all of a sudden, Dylan’s gay? He’s not gay, Corrine, he’s messed up! And Somerset? He’s allowing a twenty-eight year old cop to take even more advantage of our son!”

“I know you’re convinced it was William, but what if it was the teacher? We sent Phoenix over to his house twice a week for private art lessons.”

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“He set me up!” Paul slammed the car door closed.

“You assaulted him.”

“Jesus Christ, that kid’s as guilty as sin and...”

“You assaulted him.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed and he peered to his left. “Thank you, Steven, you don’t need to keep telling me.”

“We don’t know if Dylan’s guilty. We’ve got no evidence whatsoever he’s involved with T.C.S. now, but he’s got all the evidence in the world to prove he was a victim.” Steve turned in his seat. “Is he a sociopath? We don’t know. Is he so totally screwed up in the head that he’s acting out what he was taught? We don’t know that either. Do you wanna know what I think?”

“Not particularly.”

“Too bad I’m going to tell you. You *want* Dylan to be a sociopath because you want him to lead you to T.C.S. You’re clouded, Paul. When we first interviewed Dylan, you were willing to entertain both possibilities equally. Now you’re not. You need to step back and take a look at your own motives. Have you had a shrink talk to him? You haven’t, and I reckon it’s because you don’t want to be told he’s not a sociopath. If he was abducted against his will, held captive, abused, forced to partake in the murders, he deserves some professional help and you’ve made no attempt to see he gets it.”

Saving Steve from a retort, Paul’s mobile demanded attention. He removed it from his jacket pocket. “Detective Somerset speaking.”

Shaking his head, Steve stared out the window and only turned his eyes right when Paul ended the call.

“Fuck it!”

“What?”

“That was Corrine Firth. Seems she and Evan have just realized there *were* signs Dylan may have been molested. They forgot to mention Dylan went to Clarkson’s house twice a week for art tuition.”

“Clarkson lied, did he?”

“Problem is Corrine thinks Clarkson’s the guilty party and Evan thinks it’s his brother.” In frustration Paul banged his head lightly on the steering wheel. “And Phoenix... who the fuck knows what that kid’s thinking!”

“Precisely, Paul. We don’t know what’s going on in Dylan’s mind. We don’t know why and we need to get him seen by a shrink.”

“Don’t tell me the little prick’s conned you, too!”

“Might be time to check William Firth’s penis. This time, it’s *your* job!”

## *Chapter Seventeen*

When Clarkson appeared to have been let off the hook, he'd placed himself right back into the firing line. Somewhere in the web of lies spun, Phoenix had incorporated an element of truth, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Phoenix had indeed been inside the art teacher's house more than once over a period of more than a year. The question had to be asked: why had Clarkson covered facts he knew would come out in the rinse?

William Firth was no longer the prime suspect. He shared the spot equally with Ralph Clarkson. Both men had the opportunity to commit the latest murders. Both were not at work on those days at those times and neither had anything more than hazy alibis. Paul didn't think it to be a coincidence that The Slayer had lain low and reneged on his promise to call. The heat was on and T.C.S. felt the flames licking at his heels. To Paul, there was nothing surer and he grew more convinced that, if one of them had molested Dylan Firth, he also carried The Slayer's title.

In an obscure way, Phoenix had laid out the clues and they revolved around sexual abuse, whether actual or threatened. The Crucifix Slayer thrived on power. He did not sexually assault his victims before or after death. Instead, he forced at least one to cut their wrists in the ultimate show of control. The Slayer wasn't perpetrating a sex crime and he wasn't driven by sexual urges. Paul had suspected long ago T.C.S. dressed his hung victims in underwear purely for show, either for his own twisted amusement or to give the impression there was a sexual undercurrent to what he did.

Paul reasoned Dylan Firth had been abused in some way to gain domination. He did not believe The Slayer was a pedophile. He had not chosen victims with children living with them and, aside from admitting that he had abducted Dylan Firth, had not taken credit for any other crime involving children. Considering The Slayer's ego in reference to his crimes, it didn't make sense for him to cover his tracks if he were also a child predator. T.C.S. took Dylan Firth to train as an apprentice, not to sexually abuse. The fact remained that Phoenix did have an obsession with naming and shaming anyone he thought had crossed him as a pedophile. Paul had to find out why.

There stood a strong chance Dylan had been a hardheaded child from the start. A loner, yes, but a boy who stood his ground and made his own choices. Good or bad, psychopathic or not, Dylan more than likely never took kindly to being told what to do and when to do it. Saying no to his teachers and peers probably came easily to him. Paul figured Dylan couldn't be threatened or coerced by words alone. Probably, he'd have been likely to fight back should a hand have been raised to him and willingly reported any such mistreatment as a sure fire way to see the person responsible duly punished. It was in Dylan's nature to want to see others penalized for crossing him and therefore he'd have seen it through to make sure they were.



These were things T.C.S. would know, also. To execute authority and domination over Dylan Firth, T.C.S. would have needed to instill humiliation, disgrace, and dishonor. He would have needed to ensure that shame kept Dylan quiet and his fear kept him compliant. He would have needed to take all sense of power from Dylan and he would have had to do it in a way that would ensure Dylan was completely subdued.

Whatever T.C.S. had done, real or emotional abuse, he had continued to abuse Dylan before the abduction and right through it, until Dylan had escaped. By that stage, Dylan was held pinned under The Slayer's thumb and the brainwashing had begun. To have known Dylan's character well enough to want him as an apprentice, T.C.S. had to have known Dylan. T.C.S. had considered himself the world's best and most notorious serial killer right from the beginning. To him, his crimes were worthy of worldwide recognition and something he never wanted to end. He didn't want Dylan to be a serial killer in his own right; he wanted Dylan to be an extension of himself. To ensure it, he needed Dylan to think with a mind not his own. He needed Dylan to comply and, to make Dylan comply, he needed to rule absolutely over the boy.

If it were case of one sociopath trying to dominate another, in the end T.C.S. had made his biggest mistake. A psychopathic personality cannot be dominated completely and Dylan Firth had turned the tables. The mind of a sociopath centered around one thing. Themselves. T.C.S.' abuse planted more than the seed of humiliation and disgrace. It may well have planted the seed of hatred and revenge and Dylan had schemed right under The Slayer's nose, no matter how frightened for his safety, and he'd eventually won by executing an escape.

Paul had entertained the idea T.C.S. had found Dylan after four years and somehow reaffirmed his show of status and control. Now he entertained another notion. Perhaps this time, Dylan held the reins, for he was the only one who knew The Slayer's identity. Perhaps Dylan was not by nature a killer, but was a master manipulator of the mind. At eighteen, there stood a strong possibility that Dylan had decided to strike and seek his revenge in full, pairing up once again with The Slayer, only this time calling the shots, all the time reveling in dangling the carrot of exposure should T.C.S. cross him again. If so, he wasn't involved with the murders on a physical level any longer, but on a mental level. T.C.S. had come out of the woodwork to do what he loved doing, unable to resist the opportunity. Dylan had done what he did best by enforcing revenge, using manipulation to exact his control and he would be exhilarated by the thrill. When T.C.S. relaxed enough to presume that Dylan could be trusted as his accomplice, Dylan could draw the sword of vengeance and strike The Slayer down with the fatal wound of exposure.

Steve O'Grady had made a poignant observation, one Paul Somerset couldn't deny, as much as he wished he could. At no time had he called in a psychiatrist to analyze Phoenix and give a professional opinion. At no time had he made it known that Phoenix was entitled to legal assistance and instead it was Daniel who had done so. Five years chasing a shadow and Paul took the killings personally in precisely the way T.C.S. intended him, too, thereby handing control to The Slayer on a psychological level. Unable to solve the crime, unable in the past to even reveal a clue, and Paul had played straight into The Slayer's hands with his frustration and sense of failure.

Phoenix Love had also tapped into Paul's weak spots and knew which buttons to push. Yet Detective O'Grady pointed out the other possibility Paul had all but dismissed. Was Phoenix Love acting out? Was his behavior a direct result of the abuse and brainwashing? By calling

in a psychiatrist, Paul faced being told of another error in judgment. It didn't sit well with Paul's ego and his ego had already taken a battering at the hands of T.C.S.

Acting out or psychopathic, either way Phoenix Love had Senior Constable Hart eating out of the palm of his hand. Daniel knew the law; he knew Phoenix had rights. He'd witnessed a case of police brutality and his allegiance bound him tight to Phoenix. In Daniel's eyes, Paul looked like the villain and Phoenix looked like the angel in distress.

The lying, the mind-messing, and the penchant for arson and theft did not unequivocally denote a sociopath. Things Paul knew but did not want to risk being told for certain when it came to Phoenix. Although now Paul had dug his own grave and, unless he began to provide Phoenix with his rights, he'd metaphorically end up six feet under.

Also at Phoenix's side, in all his childish innocence, stood Echo. Echo not only loved his older pseudo-brother, Echo canonized him. Echo spoke fondly to the child psychologist, portraying Phoenix as the perfect caregiver and provider. Earlier memories showed Echo remembered the tougher times, he recalled living in conditions nowhere near as comfortable as those he lived in now. But he also recalled never going hungry, never being cold or poorly dressed, always having toys, and always having Phoenix's devotion. All this stacked up in Phoenix Love's corner and increasingly irritated Paul. When he'd escaped from T.C.S., Paul had taken Echo with him, a child not yet two years of age. At fourteen, Phoenix had brought up a baby in a situation in which many adults would have buckled under the stress. He'd done it alone, without help, and very successfully. If ever faced with a jury, Phoenix's child-rearing skills and Echo's loving testimony would paint Phoenix in rainbow colors.

One could not doubt Phoenix had a bond with Echo. Not even Paul could deny it. The question was whether that bond was about possession and ownership or whether it revolved around love. Did Phoenix naturally provide for Echo on a parentally-based, internal loving desire or did he play the role of father/mother/brother simply as another form of control? Echo depended on Phoenix for everything and, without him, would suffer deeply. He needed Phoenix, he wanted Phoenix, and he adored Phoenix. In every way, should it all be based on control, Phoenix had at least one human life totally dependent on him and looking upon him with idolization.

Psychiatrists could be fooled. It wasn't unheard of. They especially could be fooled by a psychopathic person hell-bent on portraying the ideal victim. Even more so, they could be fooled in an initial therapy session. Over a period time, during regular therapy, cracks started to show and the attending psychiatrist could start to see the inconsistencies. Paul knew this and it worried him. He knew that, time and time again, every day, people befriended sociopaths, trusted them and not for a second suspected them until it was all too late, realizing only when their hearts had been shattered, or their bank accounts stripped, that they'd been taken for a ride. It was what made sociopaths so dangerous. Ninety-nine percent of people with the personality disorder were not serial killers and they blended into society seamlessly if they wanted to. Charming one, turning on the other, and ultimately winning every time unless by some miracle they were thwarted. They rarely sought help, for they rarely acknowledged a problem. Jails were filled with criminals who had broken the law and been captured due to their own stupidity. Jails were not filled with sociopaths for, even more frighteningly, they usually were far too intelligent to be caught.

Phoenix Love had the intelligence and he had the traits. Chances were good that Phoenix had not intentionally pushed for a physical retaliation when verbally abusing Paul, but when presented with the opportunity, he'd thought quickly and milked it for all it was worth. He'd know that if he screamed blue murder, Daniel would rush to his aid and witness everything in incriminating detail. He hadn't reacted on an adrenaline rush to strike back; he'd relied on his smarts to frame Paul within an instant. When he'd lifted his face to seal the deal with a smile, a wink, and a kiss, he'd made sure neither Daniel nor Steve had witnessed the taunting.

Delving into Senior Constable Hart's background only disturbed Paul more in regards to Phoenix's capabilities. Hart's work record was impeccable and his career goals high. Hart wanted to climb the ranks and, for all intents and purposes, was seen by his colleagues as a Senior Sergeant or detective in the making. His sexuality had come as surprise to all his fellow officers except Rachel Young. She'd only learned the truth when she'd overheard a private phone conversation. Speaking to Rachel confirmed Daniel was by no means ashamed of his sexuality, but he believed work and his private life should be separate. Daniel's past police partners hadn't ever crossed the line into friendship; again, Rachel Young was an exception.

Paul pressed her for information and she supplied it, explaining that once she'd learned of Daniel's sexual preference, he'd lowered his defenses in regards to her. It had taken time, but eventually she came to consider herself to be his friend and not just his partner. Not at any time had he given her the impression he could be fooled. Rachel informed Paul that, in her opinion, Daniel had been infatuated with Phoenix from the time he'd first laid eyes on Phoenix. When they'd bumped into Phoenix and Echo at a shopping mall, Echo had revealed that Phoenix had his sights set on Daniel. Unable to resist the infatuation, Daniel had leapt at the opportunity and asked Phoenix out. From then on, it appeared nothing and no one else mattered to Daniel except Phoenix Love.

Armed with this information, Paul continued to weave a profile for Phoenix. He surmised that Phoenix had sunk his claws into a stable, career-oriented, family-oriented man and turned him into putty that Phoenix could mold deftly. Paul reached another conclusion, too. Something told him, a niggling voice in the back of his mind, that if Phoenix were pitched up against T.C.S. in a face off of intelligence, Phoenix would win. He'd already proved he could outsmart The Slayer when nobody else had been able to.

Yet with all his dislike and distrust of Phoenix Love, Paul had no option left now than to back down and allow a psychiatrist to step in. He needed to front Phoenix up to a professional and let him or her do the analyzing. Because, when he let personal feelings fall to the wayside, Paul acknowledged Phoenix indeed had a right to help if he'd been a victim of violent crime that he had in no way abetted.

Paul hated being wrong and he did not believe he was wrong about Phoenix Love. He believed Phoenix could, and would, pull the wool over a professional's eyes. He believed if handed an IQ test, Phoenix would blitz it with a score high enough to blow their minds. His poor school grades were not a reflection of his intelligence but a reflection of his rebellion. Paul could not bully Phoenix into complying. Phoenix had been bullied as a child to the extreme and didn't tolerate it now. If Phoenix was a sociopath, the only way Paul would reach a satisfying conclusion was to pitch T.C.S. and Phoenix against one another. If that were done, he firmly believed Phoenix would rise from the ashes as his pseudonym suggested

and step out as the victor. T.C.S. had indeed chosen a boy worthy of the apprentice title, except he'd also chosen a boy worthy of pushing him off his pedestal.

Perhaps it explained why T.C.S. had suddenly grown nervous. Rather than leave a letter at the latest crime scene, in his usual style, he'd only left a promise to call. A promise he hadn't seen through. If Phoenix was playing him, T.C.S. was vulnerable. If Phoenix was a victim, T.C.S. was vulnerable. No matter the scenario, Phoenix knew T.C.S.' identity and, one day, whether sooner or later, he'd reveal it out of spite or he'd reveal it out of justice. The Slayer was on the fast track to checkmate. All Phoenix needed to do was move the right piece and T.C.S. was doomed. Paul knew one other fact for certain. The only way T.C.S. could ensure his survival was to kill the boy who was once his apprentice and was now his master.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

“Echo’s watching his favorite movie; he won’t move from the TV until it’s over.” Phoenix took a mug of tea out of Daniel’s hands and placed it onto the bedside table. With that done, he chose not to sit on the mattress, but on Daniel’s lap with his arms around Daniel’s neck. “Explain. What’s a subarachnoid hemorrhage?”

“If he touches you again, I’ll kill him.” Daniel buried his nose into Phoenix’s neck.

“What’s done is done. Tell me about your brother.”

Whereas Daniel wasn’t prepared to easily forget what he’d seen, Phoenix appeared to have relegated the incident into a non-event.

“Bleeding between the brain and the tissue that covers the brain.”

“Sounds serious.” Easing away, Phoenix waited until Daniel made eye contact before speaking again. “What caused it?”

“They’re not really sure. Do you mind if we don’t talk about this now?”

“Yes, I do mind.”

“Phoenix...” Trying to disengage Phoenix’s arms from around his neck was like trying to remove a boa constrictor. “I’ll talk about this with you later. Right now, I want to try and figure out getting you a lawyer and what to do about Paul Somerset.”

“Hmm.” Phoenix lifted his eyebrows and widened his eyes. “No. See, right now, what you really want to do is avoid crying in front of me again.”

Giving up trying to loosen Phoenix’s arms, Daniel closed his eyes and dropped his face. Phoenix had hit the nail on the head.

“You’re brother’s sick, Daniel, and it goes way deeper than that anyway.” His hand massaged the nape of Daniel’s neck. “You know what I think? You feel guilty Heath doesn’t talk to you. You blame yourself for the problems *he’s* caused in your family. Now he’s sick and you’re blaming yourself for not being able to visit him like you want to. You’re mum and dad are at his bedside and you know they need support, so now you’re blaming yourself that you can’t give them that.” Phoenix tapped his finger on Daniel’s chin. “Step in and stop me any time, if I happen to be wrong.”

A smile forced its way through Daniel’s stressed frown. “Are you psychic?”

“Extremely intuitive.” Phoenix smiled a knowing smile and sidled in closer. “On top of all that, you’re now blaming yourself for letting your defenses down last night and crying in front of me. You’re thinking, ‘If I do that again, Phoenix is going to presume I’m some kind of spineless, poor excuse for a man and there goes my chances of hanging around for more than a month.’”

“Now you’re freaking me out!” Daniel laughed warily.

“I’m right, though, aren’t I?”

“You’re spot on.”

“Here’s your dilemma, Daniel.” Fingers tracked up and down Daniel’s neck. “Do I find vulnerability in a man attractive or do I find it a turn off?”

“Can you give me a hint?” Daniel asked with grimace.

“I already have. The question is, do you trust the hint I gave you?”

Sighing, Daniel allowed his gaze to wander around the room and his mind to roam with it. Making his decision, he slipped his arm under Phoenix’s knees and lifted him enough to maneuver against the pillows and stretch his legs out on the bed. Altering his position to gain maximum eye contact, Phoenix sat astride Daniel’s lap and returned his arms around Daniel’s neck.

“I’m so fucking angry about it all, Phoenix.” Daniel’s bitterness mixed with his distress. “It’s as though Mum and Dad expect me to accept it without holding any grudges. I don’t want to sound like a boring old fart to you, but I was always the responsible one. Heath’s got financial problems, he’s been married and divorced, he’s got two kids he rarely sees, and he’s never held down a job for longer than a year.”

“He sounds like a complete loser.”

“Pretty much!” Just as Phoenix had predicted, Daniel fell to the mercy of his emotions. “But we were still close. I didn’t approve of the way he treated his wife. I didn’t approve of the affairs he had. I certainly don’t approve of the way he’s dismissed his kids. Even with all that, he’s my brother. He’s my twin brother and I still love him. He doesn’t approve of my sexuality and that’s reason enough to judge me and totally disown me like I never existed.” Daniel wiped at his face and shrugged. “So why do I blame myself, Phoenix? Why don’t I just think, ‘Screw you, Heath, two can play that game’? It’s been eight years, why do I still let it get to me? If I were the one lying in a hospital, I know for sure he’d sooner see me dead than visit. Why should I feel guilty I’m not there?”

As if saying it out loud was a dose of intravenous morphine, Daniel’s entire body relaxed beneath the soft touch of Phoenix’s lips and the sweet taste of his mouth. Fingers combed through Daniel’s hair and his body leaned in close.

Breaking away quickly, Phoenix stared directly into his eyes. “Ahem!”

“Come on, Phoenix.” Daniel winced. “It’s not like I can help it!”

Shifting on Daniel's lap and clearly uncomfortable at the sensation of an erection under him, Phoenix didn't seem sure whether to scoot forward or backward and ended up performing a mix of both.

Daniel grabbed onto Phoenix's hips and shook his head rapidly. "Don't do that, darlin', you're only making matters worse!"

Ending the pelvic wriggling, Phoenix pleasantly surprised Daniel when he broke into a robust round of giggling, laughing even harder when Daniel joined in. Phoenix obviously found the situation amusing rather than threatening.

Able to finally find a wheezing voice, Phoenix spluttered through the giggles. "I'm trying to get off, but my legs are weak from laughing!"

Before common sense told him to censor it, Daniel replied. "That's alright, turtledove, you sit there and I'll try and get off, too, in my fantasies!"

For that, he received a sharp slap to his shoulder. "Stop it! I had such a brilliant reply to what you told me and then you went and did that!"

"Phoenix, it's not like I said to it, 'rise and shine, buddy!'" Daniel chuckled. "What can I say? You do it for me, darlin'. I can't control it." He returned Phoenix's scowl and grinned. "Go on, off you go, give me your brilliant reply. It'll settle down in a second, so long as you don't keep moving around on it."

Phoenix's scowl softened into a smirk. "Right. Well. This is what I think: families suck."

Daniel's grip flexed on Phoenix's hips and, when Phoenix said nothing else, he gave a nod of his head. "That *was* brilliant!"

"There's more to that theory."

"Wow! It gets better?"

"Oh, yes!" Phoenix smiled and winked. "You asked why you still let it get to you, but then you'd already answered your own question. You still love Heath and it's always going to get to you, Daniel, because of that reason. Of course you're angry about it. When you and Heath were kids, I bet your mum and dad stepped in every time you had an argument or fought with each other. I bet they told you both to snap out of it and I bet you both did. Now you're angry because they haven't done that this time, have they?"

The last of Daniel's amused smile dissipated and he watched Phoenix unerringly.

"This time, they've let it fester and now eight years have gone by and they still haven't made it better for you. They still haven't stepped in and told Heath to snap out of it. That's why families suck sometimes, Daniel. They don't step in when they know something's tearing you apart and yet they'll step in at other times when the reason is trivial and not worth shit. So tell me, when was the last time your mum said to you, 'Honey, lie down, let me hold you, and talk to me until you fall asleep'? When was the last time she said to you, 'Cry if you want to,

I'm not going to judge you on it, all I want is to make you feel better'? And that, Daniel, is why you're so angry with them. You will always feel guilty because they haven't ever said to you, 'It's not your fault, sweetheart, don't take all the blame on this one.'"

If Daniel had been an open book with large print and bold text, Phoenix couldn't have read him any more accurately.

Placing both hands on the sides of Daniel's face, Phoenix wiped the tears away with his thumbs. "So, for what it's worth, I'm going to say it to you. Lie down, let me hold you and, just like we did last night, talk until you fall asleep. Cry if you want to, I'm not going to judge you on it, all I want is to make you feel better. It's not your fault, sweetheart, don't take the blame on this one."

On the rare occasions Daniel had cried, he'd done it alone rather than feel ashamed for it. Now he wept openly in Phoenix's arms and made a pact with his heart. He didn't want anyone else. With Phoenix Love was where he wanted to be and where he'd stay for as long as Phoenix kept him there.

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"Ding dong, another warrant calling!" Paul waved another slip of paper in front of William Firth's face.

"For Christ's sake! What now?"

"We need to have a look at your penis," Steve replied.

"You *what*?" From his collar to his hairline, William's face turned beet red with fury. "You two are quickly pissing me off!"

"I'm sure!" said Paul, nodding. "Would you like to invite us in to do it now or would you like us to accompany you to headquarters?"

"I'm calling my lawyer!"

"I'd say that's a very good idea, Mr. Firth."

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At C.I.B. headquarters, Paul and Steve paced outside an interview room while William Firth, his lawyer, and a medical profession were inside. Paul's attention wandered to Clarkson and the plan to execute a search on his house the moment he returned to the school from a field trip.

Steve grabbed Paul's elbow. "They've finished."

Meeting the nurse at the door, Paul lifted his brows in question, already prepared for the answer. "Yes? No?"

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“Can we come in, Senior Constable?”

“You’ve got a nerve!” Daniel snapped. “Phoenix doesn’t have to let you in without a warrant, I’ve already told him that. Come back when you’ve got one.”

Paul certainly expected a less than warm welcome. “I apologize for what happened. I plan to apologize to Phoenix, too. We really need to talk to him. It’s imperative.”

“Let them in.” Phoenix spoke from the kitchen. “I’m eager to hear him apologize to me.”

They filed into the lounge room. Phoenix sat down beside Daniel and immediately placed his hand on his thigh. Steve sat in an armchair and Paul stood beside the coffee table.

“Phoenix, have you informed Daniel of what you told us yesterday?”

“No.” He avoided Daniel’s gaze. “I haven’t.”

“If you’d prefer to speak with us in private...”

His fingers tensed on Daniel’s thigh. “He’ll find out eventually I guess.”

Supportively, Daniel laid his hand over Phoenix’s.

“Okay, if that’s what you want.” Paul sat down on the coffee table. “The birthmark you said was on your art teacher’s genitals was not there. For that reason, we believed your allegations against him for sexually molesting you were false.”

A sick feeling washed inside Daniel’s stomach and Phoenix dropped his head.

“Phoenix, the birthmark you described is on your Uncle William.”

Phoenix laughed in a scoff. “Don’t try and fuck with me.”

“It’s on your Uncle William, Phoenix. Exactly as you described it in every detail.”

## *Chapter Nineteen*

A line of interview rooms rolled along a corridor inside C.I.B. headquarters. In one room sat William Firth and his lawyer. In the next, Evan and Corrine Firth had been brought in to provide any more information they may have had in regard to their son's uncle and the art teacher. The third interview room contained Ralph Clarkson, and in the fourth room sat Phoenix, Paul, and Steve. Daniel watched over Echo inside Detective Somerset's office, angry he'd been separated from Phoenix and riddled with anxiety over Phoenix's refusal to accept the offer of a lawyer.

Coinciding with the questioning of all those occupying the rooms, Ralph Clarkson and William Firth's homes were being turned inside out by police officers searching for anything to link either man to The Slayer. For now, it seemed Clarkson had once again escaped the hangman's noose by the slimmest of margins. The heat was off him while it bubbled and simmered around William Firth.

Paul Somerset could no longer stall the psychological analysis of Phoenix Love and Phoenix was not in a position to refuse it in the same way he'd refused legal representation. An order had been passed and a psychiatrist would take over the moment Paul and Steve stepped from the room.

But for some form of evidence showing up during the property search of William Firth's home, they had nothing to hold him on and no grounds for arrest. Money had bought William the best lawyer in the business and Phoenix's refusal to cooperate bought William breathing space. Unless Phoenix pressed charges against his uncle for sexual abuse, they couldn't pin the offense on the man.

"Do you remember your Uncle picking you up on Sundays?" Paul felt as though he'd have more success communicating with a solid rock wall.

"Vaguely." Phoenix reached for a glass of water with a calm hand free from any sign of nerves. "Like I said, huge chunks of my memory have gone."

"Do you remember where he took you?" Paul watched Phoenix sip from the glass and place it down on the table. "Did he take you out somewhere or did you go back to his house?"

"I've already said I only vaguely remember him picking me up, how would I remember where we went?"

"We're trying to help you, Phoenix. We can't do that unless you cooperate with us."

"Help me?" Phoenix scoffed, dipped his head and peered up through long dark eyelashes. "Attacking me today is your way of helping me?"

“I have apologized, Phoenix.”

“I suppose that makes it okay, then?”

“You did make a verbal threat, Phoenix.” Paul clasped his hands over an open cardboard folder containing paperwork. “Though, if you want to file an official incident report, you can.”

“Like that would ever see the light of day!” Moving the glass in front of him, Phoenix’s finger traced around the rim. “My brother was terrified; it took me ages to calm him down. He’ll probably have nightmares for days.”

“You described a birthmark in detail and we found that birthmark on your uncle.”

“That’s right, change the subject.”

Antagonism was the card laid on the table and Paul gathered all his reserves not to take the bait. Simply being in the same proximity as Phoenix Love raised his hackles and it aggravated him even more to know Phoenix read him clearly.

“Why did you tell us the birthmark was on your art teacher?”

“I made the birthmark up.”

“No, you didn’t. It’s on your uncle.”

“So you say. There is no birthmark on Mr. Clarkson and there is no birthmark on Uncle William because there is no birthmark, full stop. I lied about it ‘cause I’m sick and tired of you and your mute sidekick intruding on my personal space.” He shifted his lowered gaze onto Steve. “Do you have a limit of twenty words a day or something?”

“Steve took your side after the unfortunate incident today, Phoenix.”

“Unfortunate incident?” Ignoring Paul, Phoenix’s eyes remained steadfastly on O’Grady. “Did you hear that, Steve? He called it an unfortunate incident. Going arse up down the stairs and landing in a steaming pile of dog shit is what I’d call an ‘unfortunate incident.’” He quickly raised his right hand. “Don’t comment on that, Steve, I’d hate to think you wasted one of your twenty words.”

The twitch of a smirk on Steve’s lips irritated Paul, but plainly pleased Phoenix.

“The proof is there on your uncle in black and white, Phoenix.”

“Ah, see, when I made the story up, it was burgundy.”

They were getting nowhere. Phoenix continually protested the entire tale was a figment of his imagination, no matter what facts proved otherwise.

“We’ll leave you for a while and let the psychiatrist talk to you.” Paul pushed his chair out and stood.

With a flick of his hand Phoenix upended the glass of water, flooding the folder and paperwork. “Oops! That was an unfortunate incident, wasn’t it?”

Stalking out into the corridor and up to a woman in her early fifties, Paul gestured into the room. “He’s all yours. We’ll be watching.”

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Entering the interview room with a warm smile, Dr. Gwen York moved the chair away from the drenched table and set it approximately six feet to Phoenix’s left. Rearranging his chair to face her, Phoenix returned her smile.

She held out her hand. “I’m Dr. Gwen York. You can call me Gwen.”

Phoenix obliged the handshake. “I’m Phoenix Love. You can call me Phoenix.”

On her lap, she set down a large notepad and then she removed a pen from her jacket pocket.

“That’s a lovely suit you’re wearing.”

“Thank you,” she replied while flipping off the lid of her pen. “Were you aware your parents are in another interview room down the hall?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Is it navy or black? I can’t really tell.”

“I believe it’s called French navy.” Smoothing down her skirt and crossing her legs, Gwen grinned. “That’s what they told me at the store anyway! It’s been five years since you’ve seen your mum and dad; do you miss them?”

“I think about them sometimes.”

“Have you ever thought of calling them?”

“I don’t remember their phone number.”

A picture of innocence was how Dr. York perceived Dylan Firth’s appearance. Making the appropriate facial gestures at the appropriate times, liberally offering smiles, peering through ocean blue eyes, speaking quietly and calmly. He was smaller than she’d expected and finer in build now than he’d appeared in his schoolboy missing person’s photograph. Not that he’d been an overweight child by any means, however maturity had slimmed him down in the face and his limbs were long and elegant despite his tiny stature. The dark hair, eyelashes, and eyebrows framed an exquisite face beautifully and dramatically changed his looks in comparison to the flaming red hair he’d been born with. Rather than horns and a tail, Gwen more aptly could imagine him sprouting wings and a halo, and carrying it off perfectly.

“Speaking of not remembering, you’ve said you’ve lost large segments of your memory. Can you tell me more about that?”

“I don’t think there’s any point.”

She noticed his bottom lip pout ever so slightly and his fingers toy with a button on his shirt. “Why do you think there’s no point?”

“No one believes me.”

“How about you give me a try?”

When she smiled, his posture slumped and one shoulder lifted in a half shrug. “I remember some things. I don’t remember the man who took me. I don’t remember his voice and I can’t remember his face. I’ve told Detective Somerset I can’t remember, but he doesn’t like me. He thinks I’m guilty and he thinks I’m somehow involved with the murders. He attacked me today.

“All I was trying to do was ask them to wait while I gave my boyfriend some emotional support. His twin brother, Heath, is in hospital and Daniel was waiting for an important call on his condition. They thought he might have a brain tumor. He doesn’t, he has a subarachnoid hemorrhage, which is still very, very serious.”

She nodded in agreement. “How is Daniel’s brother now?”

“We don’t know yet whether he’ll have surgery or not. That’s all I was doing, Dr. York. I asked them to wait until I came back and he grabbed me around the throat and attacked me. If it weren’t for Daniel coming in to help, I probably would’ve been seriously injured. In front of my five-year-old brother, too; he was terrified! All because I asked them to wait while I sat with Daniel.”

If Dr. York dismissed what he’d said to return back the prior topic, she knew she’d risk irritating him. If she played the hand he dealt, he’d sense an element of control in the situation, which she also needed to avoid. Instead, she opted for what she hoped would be a happy medium.

“You and Daniel must be extremely worried about Heath. You’re right, Phoenix, it is a very serious condition.”

“Daniel’s been upset and distressed. He’s been crying for two days. It’s a good thing he’s got me there to comfort him. That’s what relationships are all about. When one person is hurting the other one offers support. Give and take. You know?”

“I do know, yes. I’ll certainly keep Heath in my prayers.”

“I don’t give a shit about Heath. He’s an asshole.”

She kept her facial expression neutral and listened.

“The world wouldn’t be a lesser place if he dropped dead. But Daniel would be upset about it.”

“I’ll keep Daniel in my prayers then.” She gave Phoenix another smile. “Tell me about Daniel. What is it you like about him?”

“He’s good-looking. Always smells nice; he wears expensive aftershave.” Pausing, Phoenix twisted his mouth to the side in thought. “He’s good with Echo. He doesn’t snore, that’s a plus. He’s a good kisser.”

“Is that all?”

“He has issues. He needs therapy.” They were blunted, emotionless replies in every sense.

“Can we talk about your mum and dad?”

“Why are they here?”

For the first time since she’d walked in, Phoenix’s face was tinged with annoyance and the mask of innocence began to vaporize. Earlier, when Dr. York had mentioned them, he’d not lost the angelic expression for an instant, nor had he lost it when glibly stating that he basically didn’t care an ounce for Heath’s welfare. Now, it faltered.

“They’re here in regards to your Uncle William and the possibility he sexually molested you.”

“No one sexually molested me, Dr. York. I made it up. I’m not the type of person who’d let anyone molest me.”

“How would you have stopped it, Phoenix? If a grown man, much taller and stronger than you, took advantage of you in the worst possible way, what would a little boy have done to protect himself from that?”

“I’d have cut his dick off!”

“Literally, you couldn’t have done that. In a literal sense, how would you have stopped it?”

“It didn’t happen, Dr. York.” Another angelic smile lit up Phoenix’s face. “I lied. I refuse to discuss it any further.”

“Okay.” Pressing Phoenix would only result in a blow out of temper and Gwen refrained.

“Can I ask you about the reverse crucifix in your ear?”

Leaving off fiddling with the button on his shirt, Phoenix started picking at the scabs on his hands. “I’ve already explained that to Detective Somerset.”

“Can you explain it to me?”

Blood from the opened scabs pooled beneath Phoenix’s fingernails. “I hate Christians.”

“Oh?” Gwen signaled to a crucifix dangling on the end of a gold chain around her neck. “Do you hate me?”

“Let me rephrase that.” Phoenix rolled his eyes and smiled. “I hate Christianity. Obviously, I don’t know you and so I can’t say I hate you.”

“Why do you hate Christianity?”

“I went to a Christian school, Dr. York. The bible is trashy fiction. Jesus didn’t save me, so why should I worship him? Why should I feel anything but hatred for God?” The backs of Phoenix’s hands smeared with blood and yet his composure had eased nicely into relaxed.

“A serial killer abducted you, held you hostage... yes, I can see why you’d hate God for not saving you.” The corners of her mouth dipped downward. “Does the reverse crucifix in your ear remind you of T.C.S. in any way?”

“No.” Flashing a wide smile, Phoenix dug mercilessly into his hands. “It’s purely to display my anti-Christian views.”

“Have a look at your hands, Phoenix.”

Casting his gaze downward and visibly startling at the amount of blood, Phoenix floundered noticeably. Leaving her chair, Dr York removed several tissues from a box on the table, dipped them into the jug of water and then laid them over the wounds.

With that done, she retook her seat. “Prop your hands on the armrests, Phoenix. Don’t move them and don’t touch your hands.”

He did as she asked.

“You told Detective Somerset you’ve worn the earring for years. Do you remember buying it?”

“No.” The fingers of both Phoenix’s hands dug into the armrests. “It’s always been there.”

“Did you wear it at school?”

“I doubt they’d have let me.”

“So it hasn’t *always* been there.” When Phoenix shifted his hands to his lap she pointed with her pen. “Hands on the armrest.” When he complied, she smiled and continued. “Is it possible T.C.S. bought it for you and made you wear it?”

“If he bought it for me, then why would I still wear it now?”

“That’s a very good question.”

Phoenix's demeanor changed considerably. His eyes narrowed, his breathing picked up, his lips sneered, and he leaned forward on the chair aggressively. “You know what I think?”

“Tell me.”

“I think people like you should die. I think people like Detective Somerset should die. You don’t give a shit about me ‘cause you’re on his side. You want to set me up, too. I’m sick of it! Fuck you, fuck him, fuck you all!”

Dr. York tucked the notepad under her arm and rose to her feet. “We’ll leave it there, Phoenix.”

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Wearing a smug smirk, Paul advanced on Dr. York the instant she appeared inside the adjoining room. On a small table, she set the notepad down and laid the pen on top.

“Professional opinion?” Paul prompted.

She approached the window and watched Phoenix dabbing at his wounds with the wet tissues. “You need to get a doctor to look at his hands. They need treatment. Some of those wounds are quite infected.”

“Apart from that?” Paul urged impatiently. “Are we dealing with a sociopath?”

“He tried to charm me when I walked in by commenting on my clothes. Even after I asked him to call me Gwen, he referred to me as Dr. York, thereby trying to give the illusion of respect. He reacted a little edgily to talk of his parents, but that passed quickly. He’s intelligent, that’s plainly obvious. He made a deliberate point of making sure I knew you’d assaulted him and I’m sure he dressed that up in his favor. When I asked him to describe what he liked about Daniel, he was extremely superficial, nothing about his emotions toward Daniel. However, he made sure he pointed out to me in a roundabout way how caring he’s been since Daniel’s brother has been ill.”

Paul finally felt victory in his assumptions.

“Add that to what you’ve already told me about the arson, the theft, and the antisocial behavior and, yes, he does show psychopathic traits.”

“I knew it!” Paul slapped his hands together.

“But...” She turned away from the window. “...there were strong discrepancies.”

Paul deflated like a two-week-old balloon.

“He began to get very agitated when I talked of the crucifix. Outwardly, he kept his cool in both his voice and in his facial expressions. He seemed relaxed enough and clear-headed enough to challenge me with eloquent replies and points of view on the matter. Then he started getting a little edgy again. Did you notice that was when he began ripping at his hands?” None of this was what Paul wanted to hear and he would have bet Dr. York knew it. “It could very well have been a coping mechanism called self-injury. It gave him something else to focus on. By doing it, he caused pain to himself physically and that lowered his emotional pain. He calmed right down. Until I alerted him to what he was doing and made him put his arms on the armrests.” She poured herself a glass of water while she spoke.



“When I took that coping mechanism away from him, denied him the chance to do it, he lost control of his temper and attacked verbally.”

“He’s unstable. Unpredictable. You saw how easily he lied in there about the birthmark.”

“That’s another thing, Paul.”

He deflated further.

“There is the chance that he *thinks* he made it up. It may have been said as a lie without him subconsciously realizing it was the truth. This is especially possible if indeed he has lost large segments of his memory due to trauma.” After several sips of water, Gwen set her glass down and watched Paul closely. “Just because Phoenix remembers a birthmark doesn’t mean he was molested. Maybe there’s a perfectly logical reason why he knows about it.”

Collapsing into the chair, Paul dropped his face into his hands and groaned. “I knew he’d do this! He’s manipulative and everything he did in there could’ve been an act to fool you.”

“Correct. It could have been. You asked me for my professional opinion and I’m giving it to you. Is he a sociopath? I can’t say for certain yes and I can’t say for certain no. I haven’t spent enough time with him. What I can tell you is he showed me enough in there to provide me with doubt. Then there’s Echo’s chat to the child psychologist clearly stating Phoenix has never lost his temper with him, never struck him, and never hurt him in any way.”

“Which a sociopath is also capable of, if they set their minds to it! He *showed* you what he wanted you to see, Gwen.”

“Yes. That’s all I can go by at the moment.” She picked up her notepad. “I’ll provide you with a full written report by the morning. Please make sure he gets medical attention for his hands. I’m more than happy to continue seeing Dylan for therapy and only then, after a few sessions or more, can I give you an accurate diagnosis. Until then, I can’t.” When she reached the door she added a final comment. “What caused Phoenix the most unease were questions about the reverse crucifix. I’d keep that in mind, if I were you, Paul. If you *are* dealing with a psychopathic personality, you’re going about it the wrong way. If you push Dylan, if you challenge him, if you’re aggressive with him, it’ll backfire on you. Try a different approach and be consistent. If you’re not dealing with a psychopathic personality, and instead you’re dealing with a teenager who’s emotionally shattered and suffering a severe personality disorder as a result, a little bit of compassion might not go astray either.”

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Feeling claustrophobic, overwhelmed, devastated, and emotionally spent, Corrine Firth left the bare interview room and stood hugging herself tightly in the corridor. Furious his brother wouldn’t be charged, Evan remained inside with Somerset and O’Grady.

She watched a well-dressed woman in her fifties step from another room and started to look away when the next figure stepped out. Her heart leapt into her throat and, before she was able to stop herself, she called out and ran forward. “Phoenix, love!”

The older woman stepped to the side, but didn’t leave.

Phoenix reacted promptly. His feet carried him toward her for several paces before he turned sharply back into the room and slammed the door.

## *Chapter Twenty*

Each homicide at the hands of The Crucifix Slayer had taken place within a narrow time margin. Death for the victims hadn't ever been estimated before four o'clock in the afternoon or after nine-thirty in the evening. The Slayer stalked his victims until he knew their routine religiously. He then specifically targeted them after they'd arrived home from work. Never had T.C.S. struck in the morning or in the height of afternoon. During the summer of his first year of terror, T.C.S. committed crimes later than he had during the winter. Daylight savings adjusted his timeline and The Slayer preferred at least some covering of dusk or darkness.

Paul Somerset believed it went further than providing a shawl of discretion after sundown. T.C.S. was a pedantic killer with a pedantic routine. The Slayer could have been obligated during the day and more than likely held down a respectable job. Blending into society was an absolute necessity, but T.C.S.' narcissistic qualities would not allow him stoop to menial labor.

Until going into semi-retirement one year ago, William Firth performed surgery from Mondays through to Wednesdays. Thursdays and Fridays, he saw patients for consultations in his private practice. Every day, he finished work at three unless unavoidably detained. Rosalie Firth, William's ex-wife, had long since stopped questioning her then-husband in regards to his whereabouts when he returned home long after he'd clocked off for the day. William Firth had a reputation for affairs and Rosalie was more a doormat than a wife. When eventually they'd divorced, she had packed her suitcases and moved across the other side of the country to live near her sister in Western Australia.

Ralph Clarkson didn't fit The Slayer's criminal profile as perfectly as William Firth did. Profiles were guidelines and, although generally accurate, they didn't always precisely match those eventually convicted. Clarkson didn't keep a spotless home, but he was a perfectionist with regard to his art. He too worked on a schedule, from eight in the morning until three in the afternoon, five days a week. He too had the opportunity to commit the murders at sundown. Clarkson hadn't ever married and had a poor record for maintaining relationships. He preferred to remain single, live alone, and spend his time on artistic pursuits rather than on romantic ones.

Both men could not provide solid alibis for the last two double murders. Both men reported being home alone with no one to back up their stories. Four years had gone by since the initial year of T.C.S.' reign of fear. After four years, people's memories started to wash into a haze and accuracy in recalling details became foggy. Unless recalling an incident involving a memorable date, a birthday or something similar, people remembered incidents rather than specific times and days. As William Firth and Ralph Clarkson had not been in any way suspects back then, it was all the more difficult to provide alibis now.

Dylan Firth's case had been all but closed, the belief being he'd run away. Relatives had been questioned, teachers had been questioned, students had been questioned, neighbors had been questioned, and nothing had stood out as suspicious except for Dylan's own behavior and T.C.S.' sketchy reference to abducting him. Certainly, William Firth had not then appeared to be connected with Dylan's disappearance and neither had Ralph Clarkson. All arrows had pointed to Dylan absconding of his own accord.

One piece of solid evidence did place The Slayer at a certain place on a certain day. The letter sent to Detective Somerset had been posted from the outskirts of Sydney's western suburbs, a short trip in relation to the importance of anonymity and an easy drive out of the central business district along the Great Western Highway. It had been a premeditated move, Paul firmly believed, to post the letter in an area he'd be less likely seen and far from where he resided. For Ralph Clarkson, the trip was closer, but only by ten minutes, certainly not enough to make a case out of. Had either man driven from work that afternoon on a mission to post the letter, they may have been pushed for time in making the evening postal pick up. Therefore, Paul reasoned, it was more likely T.C.S. had made the trip early morning.

Either way, there was little chance people nearby had taken notice of a well-dressed man posting a letter, yet it was one place they could have begun their search had lawyers not stepped in. With no evidence, other than wispy circumstantial, C.I.B. could not provide reason enough for a respected surgeon's and teacher's photographs to hit the streets. They could not make an arrest and they could not hold William Firth or Ralph Clarkson in custody indefinitely. Police searches of their homes turned up nothing. Both men walked free from C.I.B.

As a search of their homes had turned up zero, Paul wanted their workplaces combed next and two more warrants were requested.

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Exiting the kitchen with two mugs of hot coffee, Phoenix spied Echo quickly hide his right hand behind his back and stare guiltily at the television.

"What are you hiding?"

Round eyes widened innocently in response. "Nothing!"

"Show me your hand."

Echo held out his left hand.

"The *other* hand!"

Taking his hand from behind his back, Echo opened his fingers to reveal a melting square of chocolate and a pink wrapper.

Phoenix dipped his chin. "That's a pretty messy nothing you have there."

"It's Daniel's! He told me to mind it for him!"

His chin dipped further, his eyebrows rose and Phoenix didn't need to say another word for Echo to own up.

"I took it from the cupboard. I was eating it."

"Thank you for telling me the truth. Hurry up and eat it and then go wash your hands before you filth up the furniture."

Phoenix continued on to the bedroom. Giving the half-finished walls a quick once over, Phoenix put the coffee mugs on the bedside table and sat on the end of the mattress. "Looking good."

Daniel continued rolling the walls with paint. "Thanks, cherub. I work out."

Although he'd meant the walls looked good, Phoenix couldn't deny Daniel looked equally as good. Wearing denim jeans and sleeveless T-shirt, Daniel showed off his body in the best possible way.

"It's a pity we couldn't paint it another color. I'm sick of white."

This time, Daniel turned and took the roller off the wall. "We? I've seen a paintbrush in your hand once and that was only to wave me toward a spot I'd missed!"

"Yeah... well... you should be wearing sleeves and then I wouldn't be distracted."

One of Daniel's eyebrows flickered up. "Phoenix Love, are you flirting with me?"

"I saw Mum yesterday."

Setting the roller aside, looking surprised at the revelation, Daniel wandered over and sat down. "I thought you refused to see your parents."

"I did. When I walked out, Mum was in the corridor and she saw me. She called out to me and she ran over."

"Did you talk to her?"

Shaking his head, Phoenix picked at the white bandage squares covering the wounds on his hands. "I went back into the room." Lying down on the bed, Phoenix covered his eyes with his forearm and stifled a frustrated groan. "I swear, Daniel, for a split second I almost ran over to her. I didn't believe they were really there and then I saw her, and I..."

Daniel lay down beside Phoenix, his head propped up in his hand. "Your first instincts were to go to her, darlin'. That's got to say something to you."

He rolled over and met Daniel's eyes. "She looked so happy to see me. Upset but happy, you know? She got close enough to me I could see her crying. I can't get her face out of my head. I keep hearing her voice yelling my name."

“Sounds to me like you’re not so sure anymore.” Daniel said, placing his hand on Phoenix’s hip. “Like you’re reconsidering your decision not to see them.”

“I was sure! Now I can’t stop all these other things going through my mind.”

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To Daniel, it felt like a major breakthrough in trust and communication. Phoenix did not offer up personal feelings easily and he certainly never did it voluntarily.

“Last night when we went to bed, after you fell asleep, I laid there for ages listening to you breathing and thinking over the things you’ve told me about Heath. Then I started thinking about how scared I am someone will take Echo away from me. All the time I could see Mum’s face and hear her voice, I kept rerunning the scene over and over again.” Phoenix’s fingers toyed with the collar of Daniel’s T-shirt. “You’ve missed Heath for eight years and it still hurts you. If I lost Echo and didn’t see him for a day, I think I’d go crazy with worry and grief. That’s what I saw in Mum, that crazy look of worry and grief. What was the look on her face when I turned away and slammed the door on her? How would I feel if I hadn’t seen Echo for five years and he did that to me?”

Times like these, Daniel wished Paul Somerset were a fly on the wall. Nothing could coerce Daniel into the belief Phoenix mimicked his displays of empathy and understanding. If Somerset saw these intimate moments, if he heard the kindness in Phoenix’s voice and saw the expression on his face, Daniel knew Somerset would change his mind and trust Phoenix.

“Why don’t you give them a call?” He placed a finger against Phoenix’s lips. “Hear me out before you argue.” When he smiled, Phoenix smiled in return. “A phone call allows you to keep a little bit of distance and if it gets to be too much for you, you can always say you’ll call them back and hang up. You don’t have to talk for long and, who knows, once you’ve spoken to them, you might think about seeing them.”

“Do you believe me?” Phoenix whispered through Daniel’s finger. “Do you believe I can’t remember what happened?”

“Of course I do.”

“I didn’t run away with him, Daniel. I know I ran away *from* him, but I didn’t run away *with* him. I wouldn’t have! Why doesn’t Detective Somerset believe me? Why did he attack me like he did? I don’t want innocent people murdered either and if I could help, I would. I can’t tell Somerset things I can’t remember.”

“Is the sexual abuse something you can’t remember or is it something you’re deliberately saying didn’t happen because you’re ashamed?”

“Everyone’s so hung up on that! It *didn’t* happen!” Phoenix sat upright and stepped away from the bed. “And you have missed a spot over there, Daniel, I can see it clearly.”

“I haven’t missed anything!” Daniel remained on the bed and spoke sharply enough to snap Phoenix’s mouth closed. “I didn’t want to talk to you yesterday about my brother. Not at the time you asked me about it. It didn’t stop you pushing and I’m glad you did because talking

to you helped. What I've told you is highly personal and I've never told anyone before. I don't regret telling you. I don't regret it at all." Although Phoenix said nothing, Daniel knew he had Phoenix's full attention. "If I didn't care about you as much as I do, I'd be thinking, 'keep it to yourself, I don't want to get involved.' Not too long ago, someone said to me, 'It's not your fault, sweetheart, don't take the blame on this one.'"

"That's easier to say to someone else. Not so easy to say to yourself."

Daniel patted the mattress and Phoenix slowly walked over. When he sat down he let Daniel put an arm around him.

"Can you remember anything at all?"

"I feel like someone's told me parts of a horror story." The acidity washed from Phoenix's voice and manner. "Like I was little kid and someone scared the fuck out of me with this story and I've never been able to forget it. I have nightmares about it, I think about all the time, I paint it, I draw it, and I'm living it even though I don't feel as though it actually happened to me. Then I look at my scars and..." From his pocket, he took out a tissue and dabbed at his eyes. "I don't want to remember it happening to me in reality when I already feel terrified. I don't remember being sexually abused, Daniel, I honestly can't. I really, *truly*, don't think it happened."

"Do you acknowledge it might have and you've repressed it? The signs are there, darlin', you must be able to see that."

"Why must I?" The question was asked without animosity. "Because I made up a couple of stories about pedophiles? Because I'm nervous about sex? I can't be the only person on the planet nervous about sex! How eager would you be to jump between the sheets with me if you couldn't get it up? I'm telling you there's something wrong with me and it's not psychological. Fine, you say it doesn't matter and we could do it anyway, but it matters to me! It's humiliating."

"Phoenix..." Pausing, Daniel kissed him on the cheek. "Darlin', it *is* psychological."

"It's not!"

"I know for a fact it is."

Exuding irritation and frustration, Phoenix glared. "Now you're fucking Senior Constable Professor of Erectile Dysfunction Hart?"

Laughing at Phoenix when his mood tipped into anger wasn't the best move, but Daniel couldn't keep it within. "Sugar, I don't want to embarrass you more than you already are about this, but I'm going to tell you in the hope it eases your mind a bit. I woke up about four o'clock this morning, went to the bathroom and when I got back you were sound asleep. You weren't having nightmares; you were peacefully asleep for a change. I got into bed, I put my arms around you, I pressed in next to you and, darlin', you had an erection."

"I did not!" Clearly scandalized, Phoenix moved away.

“You definitely did! Guys get erections in their sleep all the time, it’s perfectly natural. It doesn’t mean you’re kinky, but it does mean there’s nothing medically wrong with you.”

“You’re lying!”

Rather than ease Phoenix’s mind, it seemed only to add to his tension and Daniel frowned heavily. “It disgusts you, doesn’t it? The thought you actually can get it up disgusts you. Is there a chance you avoid sex because you you’re afraid it will turn you on?”

“Did you touch me?” Leaving the bed, Phoenix edged further and further away. “You did, didn’t you? You touched me!”

“Phoenix, I would never take advantage of you and I sure as hell wouldn’t feel you up when you’re asleep!” Natural instincts told Daniel to approach with arms out, to attempt to settle a situation fast heading out of control. “I didn’t tell you to upset you, I thought...”

It happened too quickly for Daniel to react. Phoenix drew back his right arm and backhanded Daniel with all the force he could muster. Even stretched as tall as possible on tiptoes didn’t take strength from the blow. Stunned, Daniel stood hunched over with his hand to his mouth. A trickle of bright red pushed between Daniel’s fingers.



## *Chapter Twenty One*

All through the night, Evan lay beside Corrine on Dylan's bed, holding her while she cried and speaking words of soothing comfort. If only for the distance of a few meters, she'd have been able to reach out and hold her son for the first time in five long years. Those childhood photographs kept Dylan in suspended animation; he'd been forever thirteen, unable to age another year. Now inside her mind she saw a new image and it haunted her with grief on a profoundly different level.

Words couldn't convey to Evan the change in their son's physical appearance or the way her heart had caught in her throat when she saw him step from the room. No matter how different he looked, no matter the time-warped jump in age, Corrine had recognized her son immediately. He'd morphed from an attractive boy into a stunning beauty and it took her breath away. In his eyes, she swore she'd seen a flash of longing, the same in those first quick steps he took toward her. Then he'd shattered her heart once more when that look had altered into contempt and the door had slammed her out of his life.

When the sun rose the next morning, neither Corrine nor Evan had felt the release of sleep.

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Detective Somerset pressed for every detail they could scrape together to provide unequivocal evidence Dylan had been sexually molested. William's lawyer stepped in and the particulars of the birthmark were to be kept quiet unless C.I.B. could actually make the charges stick. Due to this, Evan and Corrine were kept in the dark on the details and William Firth walked away with his head held high in smug arrogance.

In dealing with William Firth, Paul Somerset saw more and more similarities between the man and Phoenix Love. There was not a single murmur from T.C.S. and, to Paul, it only threw the mercury in the suspect thermometer soaring to its limits. The heat was now on Phoenix and, if he were responsible for the call during the press conference, he'd taken a step away to preserve his own skin in true psychopathic style. Rather than show any curiosity, morbid or otherwise, Phoenix subtly argued in favor of his uncle's innocence. If indeed Phoenix did want to be the one who drew the sword of vengeance on T.C.S., he wouldn't be prepared to allow anyone else the pleasure.

Somerset leaned in the same direction as Evan. His finger pointed to William Firth in the same way Evan's did. O'Grady, on the other hand, wasn't as keen to place all his eggs in the one basket. The creative element to The Slayer's arrangement of bodies played continually on Steve's mind. Evan's long-standing feud with his brother may have tainted his ability to think with an open mind and this Paul acknowledged. However, William Firth made little effort to prove his egotistically superior self-image an over-exaggeration on Evan's behalf. A phone call to Rosalie, William's ex-wife, told the same tale. In fact, it seemed to Paul, Rosalie held

onto extremely bitter feelings when it came to her ex-husband and showed she was more than willing to shovel any amount of dirt she could find on him, including his penchant for affairs and the fact that many times she didn't know where he went after he'd finished work.

Ralph Clarkson, when questioned on why he'd lied with regards to Dylan Firth being inside his home, pleaded the fear of losing his job as the reason for his cover-up. He was either extremely stupid or extremely paranoid. Further digging into his background showed a similar incident occurring in his first year out of college as a fresh-faced teacher. This time, Clarkson's attentions centered on another troubled young male student he freely offered to spend time with. When the student told his parents Clarkson had invited him to his home, Clarkson resigned on the recommendation of the principal. The school hadn't wanted to face negative repercussions and the student's parents had agreed to drop their complaints so long as the art teacher was no longer on the premises. Clarkson wasn't without skeletons he wanted to keep hidden in a closet. Steve O'Grady had a valid point. The bizarre arrangement of bodies did portray a macabre, twisted sense of creative flair and Ralph Clarkson was an artist. Then again, so was Phoenix Love.

A box of paintings and drawings, provided by Dylan's parents, proved the obsession with a faceless man did exist. At the ages of ten and eleven, Dylan had already shown talent beyond his years and most times his art revolved around portraiture. He painted self-portraits on a regular basis, further igniting Paul's conviction that Dylan showed narcissistic traits, but Dylan always replaced the bright red hair with tones ranging from light blonde to raven black. Other portraits were of his mother and father, relatives and celebrities. Occasionally, he dabbled in landscape scenes and cityscapes. At age twelve, the paintings became darker in nature. The portraits he focused on were no longer of himself, but of a faceless man and his style altered from realism into impressionism. Hair color on the subject matter, as he'd done with the self-portraits, ranged in tone. By the age of thirteen, the impressionist style combined with purely abstract art in heavy, sinister colors.

Something had happened to Dylan Firth and it had occurred when he'd reached the age of twelve, coinciding with a marked decline in his behavior. His primary school report cards stated Dylan was a smart boy with an aptitude and attention problem. The only 'A' he'd received was for art and the rest of his marks rarely climbed above a 'C.' High school report cards showed a plummet in Dylan's grades. Still, he consistently received the highest marks for his art classes, but other subjects, he failed on a regular basis. Each of his teachers, aside from Ralph Clarkson, described him as lazy, unmotivated, disrespectful, anti-social, and a needling troublemaker.

Corrine confessed to being soft on Dylan and she'd left the discipline in the hands of Evan. Both stated they preferred the discussion approach and never enforced any type of corporal punishment. Dylan was sent to his room, he was grounded, he lost rights to watch television and listen to his CDs, but raising a hand to their son wasn't in their child-rearing manual. Rather than place the blame on Dylan, Paul noticed they held the bullying and a strong-willed, artistic nature responsible. Paul also noted Corrine pressed the view of Dylan's apparent shyness more strongly than Evan. Whereas Corrine said her son exhibited introverted behavior around strangers, Evan suggested it wasn't so much introverted as much as it was boredom. Dylan simply didn't enjoy being around people for the most part and made little attempt to pretend otherwise. To Paul, Evan's depiction held more weight.

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“Daniel!” Phoenix screamed from the kitchen.

After being belted in the face, Daniel had kept his distance from Phoenix for more reasons than one and sat out on the narrow balcony. His bottom lip sported a split near the corner, but it felt worse than it actually looked. The hysterical screaming and the sound of Echo wailing startled him out of his broody thoughts and he sprinted into the kitchen.

“What happened?” Daniel demanded, his voice sharp with alarm and worry, as he found Phoenix crouching over Echo, who lay howling on the floor with his arms over his head.

Phoenix cradled Echo in his arms, rocking him back forth, crying and panicked. “He was standing on the chair! I only turned my back for a second! I think he hit his head on the floor!”

“Is he bleeding?” Searching through the blonde hair, Daniel tried to move Echo’s face away from Phoenix’s chest to no avail. “Echo? Talk to me, buddy, and tell me where it hurts.”

“My head hurts!” Echo wailed, curling tighter into his brother’s arms. “I fell off the chair!”

“Oh, God, Daniel! What do I do? Call an ambulance!”

Echo wailed at the top of his lungs and hung onto Phoenix for dear life. Flailing his legs about, he appeared more frightened over his accident than injured. Daniel quickly assumed Phoenix’s panicked state was only succeeding in working Echo up more.

“Calm down, darlin’, I don’t think he needs an ambulance.”

“He might have concussion!” Struggling to his feet under Echo’s weight in his arms, Phoenix held tight to his brother, petting Echo’s back in soothing circles. “Is he bleeding?”

“He’s not bleeding.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure!” Certain Phoenix would soon succumb to a full-blown anxiety attack, Daniel circled both Phoenix and Echo in his arms.

“What about a doctor?” Phoenix spluttered. “We should call a doctor!”

“I think he’s scared, not seriously hurt. Take him to his room, lay him down, and I’ll fix him chocolate milk. I’ll bet anything he forgets about it all in favor of his belly.”

“If he’s got concussion, he shouldn’t drink anything!”

“He hasn’t got a concussion. If he did, he would’ve slurred when he answered me and he didn’t. You take care of Echo and I’ll take care of fixing the drink.”

“I only turned my back for a second!”

“Phoenix, accidents happen!” Daniel ushered Phoenix toward the kitchen door. “Check him over and I’ll be there in a minute.”

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Dashing toward Echo’s bedroom, Phoenix flung the door open with his hip, entered the room hastily, kicked the door closed and laid Echo down on his bed. Sitting on the side of the mattress, he enveloped Echo in his arms, placed his brow on top of Echo’s head and promptly broke into laughter.

Echo kept one eye squeezed shut and opened his other eye. “Did I do good?”

Stamping his right foot on the carpet, Phoenix lifted his head and held his hand out. “High five! You’re a star!”

Giggling, Echo slapped his brother’s hand. “Will Daniel stop being mad at you now?”

“Hell, yes!” He smothered Echo’s face into his chest. “All you need to do is pretend to be a bit sore for while, okay?”

“Okay!”

Phoenix battled to control his laughter. “Just for that, you get to have two bowls of ice cream for dessert!”

“Yay!”

Frowning, Phoenix twisted his mouth to the side, still giggling. “Rub your eyes really hard, it’ll look like you’ve been crying.”

Echo rubbed furiously at his eyes, chatting while he did. “Can I have strawberry ice cream?”

“You can have strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate after a performance like that!” Fanning at his face, he swallowed the chuckles. “Stop laughing, Phoenix!”

“Stop laughing, Phoenix!” Echo repeated, parrot-fashion. “Can I stop rubbing my eyes now?”

“Let me look.”

Taking his chubby fists from his eyes, Echo peered expectantly.

“Perfect!”

Opening the bedroom door, Daniel presented Echo with a tall glass of chocolate milk and two cookies on a plate. Pouting in the ideal portrayal of sulking child, Echo drank his milk and munched on his cookies.

Phoenix looped his arm through Daniel’s arm, sidling in close. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you weren’t here. I thought he’d cracked his head open!”

He tentatively touched his fingertip to Daniel's lip. "I'm so sorry. Before I knew what happened I... what you were saying scared me. It scared me and I..." His hand wrapped around Daniel's wrist. "I don't want you to leave me. I don't want to be alone anymore. I want to be with you and I'm so sorry."

Folding like a house of cards in the wind, Daniel placed his hand on the side of Phoenix's face. "I pushed too hard, I should've backed off and I didn't."

"Does it hurt?"

"I'll live." Daniel replied with a smile. "Don't do it again!"

"I won't. I didn't mean to do it then. It just happened before I could stop myself." Carefully, Phoenix kissed Daniel on the mouth. "When Echo goes to bed tonight, I'll make it up to you. I don't know how, but I will."

## *Chapter Twenty Two*

“Salutations, Detective Somerset.”

Swerving his car to the side of a busy main road, Paul strained to hear over the traffic and the loud background noise of a television. “Speak up, I can hardly hear you.” Paul manufactured a tone suggesting he was unaware of the caller’s identity.

“You’ll have to listen more closely.”

Evidently, the television was being used to mask a clear phone reception and the noise of peak-hour morning traffic only added to Paul’s inability to hear easily. What couldn’t be disguised was the obviously young male voice.

“Overdue with this call, aren’t you? Feeling a bit of pressure maybe?”

“Not half as much pressure as you’re feeling, Detective Somerset. As much as I’d love to chat indefinitely with you, I have called for a reason. I’ve chosen my next victims. Would you like a hint or shall I hang up?”

“I’ll drag you in for questioning again and this time you won’t be leaving!”

“If you weren’t so pathetic I could actually find you amusing. I do believe there’s a little something called ‘evidence’ you’re lacking.”

The corner of Paul’s mouth twitched upward in a smirk. “I do believe you’ve just put your foot in it!”

“No. No, I haven’t. I know exactly what I’m saying. I prefer it this way. I’m exhilarated by the thrill of the chase.”

“How did you know the twins were natural brunettes?”

“I stalk my prey, Detective Somerset. The grocery store, work, friends... their hairdresser. It’s amazing what you can learn about people simply by walking past a window and peering inside.” He laughed quietly. “Now, let’s return to the reason I called. One male, one female, they’ll be dead within the week. May I suggest you keep your eyes open close to home?”

Paul’s stomach lurched, twisting inside him and causing physical pain in the process.

“Close to where I live or are you threatening my family?”

“I don’t make threats. What I mean by close to home is up to you to figure out. Sadly, I don’t like their chances seeing as you’re... well... pathetic.”

“Fucker!”

“Language! Please! Until we meet again, Detective Somerset. Literally!”

## *Chapter Twenty Three*

Close to home. When warning of the prior murder, T.C.S. had given a cryptic hint and the twin girls were chemical blondes, not natural ones. With this in the forefront of his mind, Paul knew T.C.S. could very well have given another clue equally as misleading. Close to home could pan out to describe the targeted victims lived physically close to Paul's address. It could mean the targeted victims were related or friends. Paul set about alerting everyone he knew to alter their routines and to be especially vigilant.

In one week or less, Paul needed find the evidence and charge one of his two prime suspects. T.C.S. had all but admitted he'd been taken in for questioning and walked away unscathed, unworried by the heat and instead thriving on it. Filled with conceited bravado, basking in his ability to sit right under the law's nose and still relish in being uncatchable. Unless, of course, the caller was not T.C.S. and was instead his sword-wielding apprentice. Given that possibility, if Phoenix were the caller, perhaps he'd started the countdown to T.C.S.' demise. Deliberately stating, in an enigmatic way, C.I.B. had their man in either Ralph Clarkson or William Firth. Therefore, if that were the case, Phoenix Love once more held the cards and held the control as to when to reveal them on the table. He possibly knew who the targeted victims were, probably knew when T.C.S. would carry out the murders and taunted Paul with his knowledge and power.

The phone call had been hazy, the reception poor and background noise enveloping. As much as Paul desired to indisputably state Phoenix was on the other end of the line, he couldn't. The voice was young, it was well-spoken, but it simply was not clear enough to provide proof.

Being unable to find any clues or leads during the searches of William Firth's or Ralph Clarkson's homes, requests for a warrant to search their work premises had been delayed in red tape. Armed with the threat of another double murder, Somerset barreled headlong into getting the warrant request cleared and executed. The DPP, Director of Public Prosecutions, had begun to bend and Paul could smell the warrants being issued getting closer.

William Firth and Ralph Clarkson would be swooped on at the precisely the same time the moment the warrants were cleared, Detective Somerset in control of searching Firth's consulting practice and Detective O'Grady in control of the search carried out at the high school. Paul had his sights set on William and nothing would stop him arresting T.C.S. in person. Once T.C.S. was cuffed and taken into custody, the next person Paul wanted taken down was Phoenix Love.

By twelve noon, the DPP agreed to grant the warrants and handed over paperwork. Giving Steve O'Grady one final rundown, they went their separate ways. The hunt was on and Paul didn't want to return without T.C.S.' head mounted on a plaque.



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Phoenix spun Daniel around his little finger like wool around a spindle, fooling Daniel completely with Echo's fabricated accident and succeeding beautifully. Daniel accepted that he had pushed too fervently, had tried to force Phoenix into discussing something causing him great emotional distress, resulting in Phoenix lashing out reflexively. All things, when analyzed, could very well have been truth. The enigma remained not so much in Phoenix's reaction to the talk of sexual abuse but more in his handling of the situation afterward. Rather than approach Daniel, explain his side of why he physically struck out, Phoenix had set up an elaborate scheme to infuse enough guilt in Daniel to ensure he took most of the blame.

After putting Echo to bed for the night, Phoenix doted around Daniel and tended to his every need, making sure he lay comfortably on the sofa with plenty of pillows propped up behind him and being the perfect partner in every sense. They talked late into the night on topics ranging from Daniel's family through to nonsensical discussions purely for amusement value.

When welfare representative Mary Halliday arrived later that afternoon for her daily visit, Phoenix turned on the charm in stark contrast to how he'd intimidated her every other time. Daniel didn't mention Echo's accident and neither did Echo or Phoenix. She left none the wiser to Phoenix's coercion of a five-year-old to assist in a staged farce for his own benefit.

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Corrine Firth wallowed in the familiar grips of depression. Nothing Evan said to her could lift the dark cloud or make her believe they would ever see their son again. Evan tried to plant optimism in her mind and failed in his attempts. Locking herself in the bedroom with a notepad and a pen, she wrote a letter to her son and revealed everything in her heart. She couldn't deliver it personally and Evan suggested she fax it to Paul Somerset and ask him to pass it on.

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"When you and Daniel get married, you'll be love hearts."

The sandwich in Phoenix's hand ceased moving mid-air and he stared, mouth gaping, at Echo across the table. Daniel lowered his face and laughed.

"Cause your last name is Love and Daniel's last name is Hart, so you'll be love hearts."

Picking up a knife from beside a freshly made chocolate cake, Phoenix waved it in Echo's direction. "Want me to cut your tongue out and feed it to Shakespeare?"

"Phoenix!"

"What?" He asked, chuckling at Daniel's horrified expression. "He knows I'm kidding." The knife moved off Echo and pointed at Daniel. "I wouldn't really cut his tongue out or feed it to Shakespeare."

Daniel eyed the knife waving in front of his face from side to side.

“I’d cut his tongue out and eat it myself.”

Rollicking laughter followed the twisted comment and Daniel stared straight-faced. “That’s not funny, Phoenix.”

“Yes, it is! You should see the look on your face!” Tears of laughter pooled in his eyes.

“Put the knife down.”

“Am I making you nervous?”

“Put it down!”

The more Daniel pressed, the harder Phoenix laughed. Echo joined in with giggles and that only unnerved Daniel further.

“It’s a fucking cake knife, Daniel! You’re scared of a fucking cake knife?”

“Don’t wave knives around in front of a child!”

“Ooh!” Phoenix replied tauntingly. “You gonna call in the welfare bitch-whore and tell her I’m being unduly reckless with a cake knife?”

Over the short time Daniel had known Phoenix, his behavior had become more and more erratic. Initially, he’d kept his language in check around Echo, yet now he cursed and swore seemingly with no concern to young ears listening in. Inappropriate laughter at out-of-place times tipped into hysterics and it ended as abruptly as it started. His moods dipped and peaked unpredictably and at times were highly inconsistent with what was going on around him. Instead of showering quickly in the morning, Phoenix remained in the bathroom for extended periods of time and bars of soap diminished at a rapid rate.

His nightmares occurred regularly every night and Daniel had stopped him from wandering around the apartment during his sleepwalking. He cleaned obsessively during the day, the compulsion only easing off in the evening. At random intervals, Phoenix appeared to go out of his way to mock, or pick an argument, only to turn around afterward and implore Daniel not to leave him. All of it added together sent Daniel’s mind into a tailspin. Each day forced him closer to admitting the damning fact that Phoenix was not mentally stable by any stretch of the imagination.

Daniel snatched Phoenix’s wrist and pried the knife from his grip. “Give it to me!”

“All right, all right!” Shoving his chair out and standing, Phoenix stumbled giggling to a kitchen drawer, opened it and took out a carving knife. “What are you gonna do now?”

“Put it down.”

“Make me!”

“Echo, go to your room for a while, buddy.” Standing up, Daniel shuffled Echo toward his room, and waited until he disappeared before walking to where Phoenix stood brandishing the carving knife. “What is it you’re trying to prove here, Phoenix?”

“You’re scared of me, aren’t you? You think I am a psychopath and you’re scared I’m gonna wedge this thing between your ribs.”

“Why are you laughing?” Daniel refused to retreat when Phoenix stepped closer. “If Echo walks back in here now, he’s going to see you with a thirty-centimeter carving knife aimed at my throat. What is it about that you find so hilarious?”

Phoenix quit laughing immediately, lowered the knife and placed it in the drawer. “You can tell Echo to come back and finish his lunch.”

“What would you have done if it had been the other way around? If I’d picked a knife, in front of Echo, and waved it around in your face? If I took the carving knife out of the drawer and held it to your throat? Would it have been hilarious then?”

“I’ll get Echo, seeing as you won’t.”

As Phoenix tried to shove by and head for Echo’s room, Daniel took hold of his elbow and bent to stare directly into blue eyes. “Answer me: would it have been hilarious then?”

“I guess not!” Wriggling free, Phoenix hesitantly edged away. “I wasn’t going to hurt you with it.”

“I know you weren’t. Phoenix, shit like that type of stunt have consequences. Torching the dumpster had consequences. Do you understand that?”

“A bin full of paper burnt, Daniel! No one caught me and all’s well that ends well.”

“The dumpster was destroyed. The consequence meant someone was out of pocket a lot of money to replace it. I put my neck out for you and the consequence is I lied to fellow police officers and to my superiors. The consequence of that, Phoenix, if anyone finds out, is that I’ll lose my job. If anyone finds out you were the one who lit the fire, the consequence will be arrest for you and welfare for Echo. Am I getting through to you?”

“I don’t see what that’s got to do with the knife,” Phoenix grumbled.

“You *are* unduly reckless, Phoenix. One day it’s going to turn around and bite you on the arse if you don’t acknowledge it.”

Walking away Phoenix waved a hand in the air. “Finish your lunch.”

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Every square inch of William Firth’s practice had been turned over and inside out without a smidge of evidence found. His car received the same treatment and again they came up with nothing. Arrogantly reclining in a leather chair the entire time, William Firth casually read a magazine while his lawyer hovered nearby. Paul Somerset steamed with rage and

exasperation. If forensics could find nothing conclusive at the scene of any of the murders, Paul logically reasoned he'd leave zilch hanging around his home or his workplace. Nothing made sense and it hadn't made sense from the beginning. How could a man carry out twenty killings and leave no evidence he'd been there except death? The only plausible explanation to consider was T.C.S. covered himself from head to toe with some form of protective clothing.

The type of clothing surgeons wore to ensure an operating room remained sterile.

"You haven't seen the end of this, Mr. Firth." Paul ominously jabbed his finger at William relaxing in his chair. "One way or another I'm taking you down."

Stalking away from uniformed officers and toward his car, Paul snatched his mobile from his pocket and saw Steve's name on the screen. "I found fuck all!" he shouted into the phone.

"You'd better get over here, Paul."

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Breaking every speed limit in his haste to reach the high school, Paul sprinted through the corridors and into the art room where Clarkson sat with his head lowered. Lined up one by one, in plastic evidence bags, on a rectangular table were seventeen small clay sculptures of people in every day poses. Sitting in chairs, sleeping, reading books and others equally as telltale. In another evidence bag was nylon cord identical to that used by The Slayer.

"Jesus Christ!" Paul muttered.

"We found the cord under the front passenger seat in his car." Steve took one of the clay sculptures off the table and handed it to his partner. "Look underneath."

Turning the sculpture over, Paul straightened out the plastic and read the artist's name clearly scratched into the clay. Dylan Firth. Beside the name was a reverse crucifix.

## *Chapter Twenty Four*

Ralph Clarkson fervently denied any knowledge of the nylon cord found in his car. The small clay statues Dylan had sculpted for an art project only weeks before he'd gone missing. Clarkson admitted to keeping the statues as a memento to remember Dylan by, but pleaded to making no connection between them and the bizarre positions the murder victims had been found in.

They had the evidence and it appeared they had their man. Something wasn't sitting right with Paul. Why did a pedantically careful killer carelessly leave nylon cord beneath the seat of his car when he knew himself to be a prime suspect? Ralph Clarkson had been framed and Somerset had Phoenix in his sights as the one who'd orchestrated the set up.

If conversations were taking place between Phoenix and William Firth, Clarkson's identity had been revealed. At no time had William Firth been told of another suspect, but Phoenix had known from the start. He didn't ever have to leave his apartment for the framing of Ralph Clarkson to take place. William Firth, from what Paul knew of his intelligence and cunning, could have taken the reins into his own hands and Clarkson was a sitting duck.

Paul needed to admit to a major error of judgment. The reverse crucifix did indeed have great significance, however it seemed that significance lay with Phoenix Love, not T.C.S. personally. The arrangement of bodies now also pointed the arrow damningly in Phoenix's direction.

Paul Somerset had to think like Phoenix Love. He had to play Phoenix at his own manipulative game and hope he could outsmart both Phoenix and his uncle before the next two murders took place. Inside the faxed letter Corrine had written, a paragraph stood out as one Paul was certain Phoenix couldn't refuse. It remained to be seen whether Phoenix would jump at the chance to spin his parents into his scheming web of deceit. If he did, it would prove to Paul, without a shadow of a doubt, Phoenix Love cared for only Phoenix Love. It would prove The Slayer's apprentice would cast aside bitterness for the chance to take advantage, prove he would bleed dry God Himself if given the opportunity to do it, prove once and for all, to anyone who argued against Paul's gut feeling, Phoenix Love *was* a sociopath capable of anything at the price of anyone. Corrine Firth had unwittingly laid tempting bait and unknowingly provided her son the chance to cut and run the moment he'd sought his revenge on The Slayer. Paul needed to plan ahead and amass as much dirt on Phoenix as possible. Enough to tear down the plea of victim should Phoenix ever face a jury.

To Corrine and Evan, to the media and to Phoenix, the C.I.B. would announce they had their prime suspect in custody. Then, giving Phoenix and William ample time to contact one another, they'd swoop in and confiscate everything from computers to mobile phones. Firth's home and business phone lines would be tapped. Willing to do anything to avoid jail,

Clarkson had agreed to remain under mock house arrest in a location known only to C.I.B. It wasn't over yet.

First, Paul placed a call and broke the false news to Corrine and Evan. Evan's certainty over his brother's guilt resulted in the predicted shock and questions. At the onset, Corrine had walked a line between suspecting William Firth and Ralph Clarkson, leaning further toward the art teacher as the one who may have molested her son. She had changed her mind when brought into C.I.B. for questioning and her shock matched her husband's.

Prior to alerting media, Phoenix and Daniel were the next port of call. Receiving a lukewarm welcome from Daniel, and an even colder reception from Phoenix, Paul and Steve took their spots in armchairs and donned their best acting faces.

"Before the media finds out, it's only fair we tell you first, Phoenix."

Phoenix glared resentfully. "Tell me what?"

"We've made an arrest. We believe we have the man who abducted you. T.C.S. is in custody."

Daniel surged forward on the sofa, clamping his hand to Phoenix's knee and displaying all the emotion Phoenix lacked. "What? How? When did this happen?"

"A couple of hours ago." Paul sighed dramatically. "I was positive it was your uncle, Phoenix; turns out, it was your art teacher." Feigning empathy, Paul knitted his brows together. "Knowing that... does it jolt your memory in any way?"

Dipping his chin in the intimidating way he always did, Phoenix replied slowly and forthrightly. "Is this another mythical revelation like the fantasy birthmark?"

"You're sure it's Clarkson?" Daniel interrupted. "You found proof?"

"Found the nylon cord in his car, Daniel. Pretty hefty proof." He shifted his gaze to Phoenix. "We also found seventeen sculptures you did when you were thirteen. Clarkson admitted he kept them to remember you by."

"Sick fuck!" Clearly reeling from the information, Daniel shifted his hand off Phoenix's knee and replaced it around his waist.

"Hmm." Paul agreed with a nod. "Majorly sick fuck." He made sure his eyes turned to Phoenix as he said the words.

"Has Clarkson admitted to it?"

"It's only a matter of time, Daniel. The cord we found in his car is exactly the type the victims were killed with." He addressed Phoenix next. "Do you remember sculpting the statuettes? Clarkson said they were an art project. Clay figurines of people doing normal, everyday things. Each one is around fifteen centimeters tall and you received an 'A' triple plus as your mark."

“I don’t remember.”

“This doesn’t make sense.” Refusing to let it go, Daniel blurted another interruption. “The birthmark was on William, not Clarkson.”

“The birthmark doesn’t exist.” Phoenix mumbled irritably.

“That’s exactly what I thought, Daniel,” replied Paul, ignoring Phoenix’s comment. “However, the cord was in Clarkson’s car. He plainly had, and still does have, an obsession with Phoenix that began back when Phoenix started high school. He lied to us about giving private lessons in his home, told us he’d never seen Phoenix out of school, and he kept the sculptures for reasons he openly admitted to.”

Phoenix showed no emotion at all, and seemed more interested in picking at the square white bandages on his hands than discussion.

“We’ll definitely keep you posted, Daniel.” Paul smiled stiffly. “I want to apologize to you, Phoenix. I haven’t treated you fairly and, because of that, I’m sure I’ve only made things more distressing for you. You were abducted, you were tortured, and we’ll do everything we can to provide you with the help we can.”

“Gee, thank you, Detective Somerset.” Stopping the picking at his bandages, Phoenix placed his hand over his heart and fluttered his lashes. “I feel warm and fuzzy inside now.”

From his pocket, Paul removed an envelope. “This is for you. It’s a letter from your mum. Your dad faxed it to me earlier today and asked me to give it to you.”

Taking the letter from Paul’s hand on Phoenix’s behalf, Daniel tried to pass it onto Phoenix, but his attempts were snubbed.

Paul stood. “We have to get back to headquarters. Got a long night ahead of us!”

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As soon as Daniel walked Somerset and O’Grady to the door, Phoenix took the letter off the sofa, walked calmly to his bedroom and closed the door behind him. He removed the folded sheet of paper, opened it, and started reading.

*My darling Phoenix, love,*

*I failed you, sweetheart. In every way, I failed you. I let you walk home from school when I should have been there to pick you up. My heart is broken in many pieces. When I think about what you’ve been through, I never want my heart to mend because I know, darling, I know yours never truly will. If I could take all of your pain and bear it myself, I would. I don’t blame you for being angry with me; you have every right to be.*

*Phoenix, love, when I tried to describe you to your dad, I couldn’t find the words to tell him how lovely you are. You took my breath away. I want to believe, even if it was only for an instant, you wanted to run to me, too.*

*We've kept your bedroom exactly as you left it. I'm sitting on your bed now as I write this, surrounded by your things. I have your picture next to me. When I look at it, I can see you as you are now, with your dark hair and your beautiful, beautiful face.*

*Your dad and I are very proud of you, darling. You fought, you survived, and you saved a little baby with you. I hope you realize how brave that was and what a self-sacrificing act of compassion it was. Without you, that precious little baby boy would have died and you gave him the chance to live. If you ever decide to visit us, Phoenix, please know we will take Echo into our hearts as you've taken him into yours.*

*To be able to hold you in my arms would be the answer to all my dreams. Losing a child is a deep, deep never-healing agony. Not a moment has gone by when I haven't regretted my failure as a mother to protect you. My failure to protect you even before you were stolen from us and my failure to read the signs I'm sure, in your soul, you prayed I would read, prayed I would stop the pain for you. I didn't. I didn't and I'm so sorry, sweetheart. For that alone, I don't deserve your forgiveness.*

Anything you need, Phoenix, your dad and I will give to you. Raising a child with a husband is tough enough and you're eighteen years old and doing it alone. I know you have Daniel now. I'm sure he's looking after you. We want to help you, too. I want to shower you with hugs and kisses, but I know you're not ready for that yet. Maybe you never will be. Can we at least help you financially? We're not trying to bribe you or buy your affection. You're our son, we love you, and we don't want to think you're struggling to buy the necessities and to pay the bills. We know you've been in hiding and you don't have a bank account. We could write you a check and ask Detective Somerset to deliver it to you. Or, if you change your mind and choose to visit us, we can go to the bank first and have the money here ready for you. Oh, that does sound like I'm trying to bribe you, doesn't it? If I'm honest with myself, I'm desperate for any way to be with you.

*If seeing you in the hall is the last time I'll ever see you, I'll treasure the memory until the day I die. I'll remember that split second where you came to me, too, and cherish the moment in my heart.*

*We love you. We miss you. We will always be here for you. We'll keep your bedroom untouched and this is still your home, darling.*

*Love forever and always,  
Mum*

Phoenix refolded the letter and slipped it inside the envelope. He raised his eyes and saw Daniel standing in the bedroom doorway. "How long have you been there?"

"Not long. Are you okay?"

"They didn't seem very excited, did they?" The letter he slipped into the bedside drawer. "Especially Detective Somerset. He's been after T.C.S. for five years and he acted as though the only thing he'd caught was a cold."

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Phoenix's apt summation of Paul Somerset's mood accurately mirrored Daniel's stance on it. Something wasn't settling well. Putting T.C.S. behind bars had become personal for Daniel and he wanted the full force of the law brought down hard on him for what Phoenix had suffered at his hands. An indisputable question mark hovered over the art teacher's head. His relationship with a student had pushed the line. A larger question mark hung suspended over William Firth's head, complete with condemning proof that Phoenix inappropriately knew more about his uncle than any child should.

Phoenix patted the mattress and Daniel advanced to accept the offer. "If I ask you something, do you promise to tell me the truth? Even if Detective Somerset has asked you not to?"

"Sure." Daniel nodded. "Though Paul hasn't really told me anything, blossom. He's kept me in the dark, too."

"Is he trying to set me up?"

"I don't know if he's trying to set you up or not. What I do know is he doesn't think you were abducted against your will." He tucked Phoenix's long dark fringe behind his ear. "Which is why, snookums, you need to be careful. Don't lie to him. Don't do anything rash and don't give him any more reason not to trust you."

"Blossom? Snookums?" Phoenix narrowed his eyes. "Do you have a thesaurus of corny names or something?"

"I don't *have* a thesaurus of corny names, bunnykins, I *wrote* it!"

A wide smile lit up Phoenix's face. "You're weird."

"*I'm* weird? You're a little on the eccentric side yourself!"

"I'm not eccentric, Daniel, I'm fucked up." Sliding open the drawer, Phoenix removed the letter and rescanned the words. "If you got a letter from Heath, and he apologized and said he wanted to see you, would you agree to it?"

Curious to read the letter, Daniel nevertheless respected Phoenix's privacy and kept his gaze off the paper. "I would."

"Why?"

"For a chance to say what's been on my mind for eight years. It wouldn't be cheery reunion, that's for sure. I'm angry and I'd like to let him know about it. Rebuilding a relationship with Heath would take time. A lot of time. If his motives were good, I'd give him the opportunity to prove it to me."

"If I said I was considering seeing them, would you think my motives were good?"

Daniel cradled Phoenix's chin in his palm. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

“Nope.” Refolding the letter, Phoenix placed it into his pocket instead of the drawer. “How do I go about this? Do we need to involve Detective Fuckerset?”

“Don’t let him hear you call him that!” Daniel replied inside laughter. “Probably, yeah. I’ll call him and find out.”

“Tell him to contact them and arrange a time for as soon as possible. Tomorrow would be good.”

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Entwining his fingers together and settling his hands behind his head, Paul leaned into his leather chair, placed his feet up on his desk and grinned at his partner watching on. “Like a moth to the proverbial flame, young O’Grady!”

Breaking into a wide grin of his own, Steve replied. “You’re not wrong! Ten minutes after leaving his apartment, wham! How much did he ask poor mummy and daddy for?”

“He’s too smart for that, Steve. He’ll put the hard word on them when he gets there. He’ll ask for a check made out for cash, he’ll get Daniel to take it to a bank, and then he’ll use the money to abscond as soon as he’s got his revenge on dear Uncle William.” Paul sniffed deeply. “I can smell victory!”

“Doubt he’ll look too innocent in court trying to explain that away.”

“Exactly! We’ll let Daniel cash the check and when Phoenix takes off with the money and a child that isn’t his, bingo, we’ve got the shithead by the balls.”

## *Chapter Twenty Five*

An unexpected phone call sent Corrine and Evan into a tailspin. Determined to make the best impression possible, she hastened around the oven, baking Phoenix's favorite chocolate cake, and assigned her husband to tidy an already immaculate house.

Evan took one final look around the house and approached his bustling wife. "Can't say I'm looking forward to meeting that cop."

She placed the baked cake on a cooling tray, spun around and grasped his hands. "Senior Constable Daniel Hart is his name and you'd better not forget it!"

He puckered his lips. She obliged him with a quick kiss, and he rolled his eyes. "He's twenty-eight."

"I know, dear." She returned to her baking.

Evan sat down at the breakfast bar and watched on. It had been a long time since he'd seen his wife this happy. "He'll be turning twenty-nine soon."

"I know that, too, dear." She giggled and peered over her shoulder. "If you promise to be nice to Daniel, you can like the mixing bowl."

"Bribery, hey? All right, all right, I'll be nice to him." He smirked and wandered toward her. "I still don't agree with it though. He's too old for Dylan."

In the pantry, she took out all she needed to frost the cake, determined to make it a masterpiece of culinary delight. "I don't agree with it either, but for now we'll have to let it slide and not rock the boat."

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At the top of the street, Paul pulled the car toward the curb and idled while he peered over his shoulder into the backseat. "Are you ready, Phoenix, or do you need to take a few minutes?"

Phoenix had spent the entire drive saying nothing while Echo chatted non-stop. "I want it over with as quickly as possible."

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Spying the car turn into the drive, Corrine instantly broke into tears and rushed for the door. Evan followed behind, keeping his emotions in check, taking deep calming breaths through

his nose and exhaling through his mouth. She threw the front door open and ran out onto the patio.

Paul stepped out first, Steve second, Daniel third, and through the lightly tinted windows, they saw Phoenix unbuckling Echo, keeping his head held low.

Evan choked on a gasp. As a child, Dylan had spent his days wearing tattered jeans and well-worn sweat tops. A fashion plate he'd never been, but now definitely was. He was clothed in casually dressy black pants, a slim-fitting mulberry-colored shirt, a tailored black jacket and polished raven leather shoes. Phoenix was so slender, Evan concluded both his hands could circle Phoenix's waist and meet. The shock of dark brown hair only one shade off ebony changed his appearance as dramatically as the years had done.

Echo stood clutching tight to their son's hand, face split in a smile contrasting starkly with the somber expression over Phoenix's face, the boy as chubby as Phoenix was lithe. Echo wore blue denim jeans, a sweater with a car knitted into the front, and brand name runners on his tiny feet.

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Stepping back, Phoenix grabbed a handful of Daniel shirt. "I've changed my mind."

Expecting an eleventh hour retreat and prepared for it, Daniel bent down to speak quietly in Phoenix's ear. "I know you're nervous, darlin', it's perfectly understandable. You're doing good." Daniel took Phoenix's hands in his. "I'm right here with you."

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Paul covertly rolled his eyes toward his partner whispered. "Bet his nerves will vanish when he sees the check come out!"

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Unable to remain on the patio, Corrine apprehensively approached the car with her hands over her mouth and tears in her eyes. Evan followed her lead and walked behind, eying Daniel with his mouth twisted irritably to the side.

"Hello, baby!" Before she checked herself, one hand reached out toward her son's face. He immediately drew back and she dropped her hand to her side. "Oh, Phoenix, love, aren't you gorgeous! Look at you!"

He ignored her compliment, choosing to stare over her head at his father and promptly denying him a return smile also.

Placing her hands on her thighs, Corrine bent down to look Echo in the eyes. "Hello! Goodness me, what a handsome little soul you are!"

Echo grinned happily in response and boomed a reply loud enough for the entire street to hear. "Hello! I'm five and a half!"

“Are you? I would’ve guessed five and three quarters!”

“I want to be a policeman when I grow up!”

“Do you? Thank you for telling me!”

Phoenix finally spoke, in a voice deeper than she remembered it. “He tells everyone the same thing. Don’t feel special.”

It was an acidic comment and it cut her to the quick. Phoenix didn’t really want to be there and it screamed from every pore of his being. Forgiveness would take a while, if it ever came at all.

Inside the lounge, cozy with a roaring fireplace, Phoenix sat tentatively on the sofa with Echo on his lap and Daniel on left. Evan took a seat in another sofa and the two detectives in the remaining armchairs.

Corrine stayed on her feet, desperate to break the ice somehow. “I’ve made coffee. I made your favorite chocolate cake, Phoenix.”

“I’m not hungry.”

She deflated a little more each time he dismissed her. “All right, well...” With her index finger she tickled the front of Echo’s sweater. “What about you, love? Would you like some cake?”

“Yes, please!”

“And a glass of milk?”

“Yes, please!”

Corrine served up coffee and cake, a glass of milk for Echo, and observed with pride at how Dylan settled his baby pseudo-brother at the coffee table and tucked a serviette in the collar of his sweater to avoid spills. He doted like any loving parent would.

She cut an extra slice and peered to her left. “Are you sure don’t want any, love? I made it for you.” She pleaded without saying anything more.

Shooting a glance in Paul’s direction, Phoenix smiled sarcastically before looking again to his mother. “Okay. Thank you. That would be lovely, Mum.”

Paul rolled his eyes, but to Corrine, it felt like he’d agreed to the world.

With everyone settled and eating cake, Echo decided to fill the room with conversation, stabbing at the cake with his fork and shoveling it in his mouth as spoke. “I have a rat called Shakespeare. I have a fish called Fin-Fin.”

Evan laughed softly and replied, “What a great name for a fish!”

“Phoenix helped me name him.” Another forkful of cake vanished. “He’s a goldfish. He lives in a big bowl. Phoenix buys me a new plants to put in his bowl.” A huge slurp of milk followed the cake and Echo wasn’t going to let anyone else get a word in edgewise. “I have a green toy box and last week Phoenix got me eighty hundred thousand and ten pants.”

Nudging his brother gently in the side with the top of his shoe, Phoenix widened his eyes and said nothing while the room filled with chuckles.

Echo shook his head. “Four pants.”

“Daniel.” Evan piped up the moment Echo fell silent for second. “Do you own your own home?”

Corrine’s glare in her husband’s direction went unnoticed.

“I’m paying off a mortgage on a three bedroom townhouse.”

“Oops!” Echo’s face fell to join a chunk of cake that landed on the floor and splattered the carpet with cream and frosting.

“Echo!” Phoenix left the sofa, taking a handful of serviettes and promptly trying to clean up the mess. “Look what you’ve done!”

Corrine bustled over. “It’s okay, love, it was an accident. I’ll get a sponge and we’ll clean it up in a jiffy.”

Rather than stay behind as she expected, Phoenix followed her into the kitchen. “Thank you for the letter.”

Tears she’d kept stoically under control flooded her blue eyes. “Thank you, darling, for visiting. I love you so much, Phoenix.” She made another attempt to touch him and this time he didn’t move away. Her hand settled on the side of his face. “You’re wonderful with Echo. I’m so proud of you I want to burst!”

“I’m sorry for the other day. For slamming the door on you.”

She saw the high walls of his guard start to waver. “You don’t have to apologize to me, love. I completely understand.” Hesitating, she ran her hand over his face and down his arm. “I don’t want to push, you but have you thought about letting us help you?”

Taking her totally by surprise, Phoenix stepped into her arms and allowed her to hold him. Corrine crumbled into tears, hanging on for dear life and lost in the moment.

Quietly, he whispered in her ear. “There is one thing you can do to help me.”

“Anything, darling! Do you need money?”

His arms tightened around her and he lowered his voice even more. “I need to go to the toilet and I’ve forgotten where it is!”

When he laughed in his now adult timbre, it laced with breathy huskiness and danced around her ears like music. She dared to kiss his cheek. “Down the hall, toward the back of the house, last door on your left.”

He moved away and took hold of her hands. “I don’t want money, Mum. I came here ‘cause of what you said in the letter. About me being compassionate and brave. I don’t ever feel brave. I’m always scared. I’m still scared. I can’t remember anything. Most of the time, I think I’m going crazy.”

Disengaging one hand, she wiped the tears from his cheeks. “You’ve been through hell, Phoenix, love. You have easy reason to feel scared of everything. Forgetting it all has kept you sane, honey. You’re not going crazy. We’ll get you the best help we can. The best help. This is your home and you’ll always be loved here.”

He nodded, smiled, swiped at his face with his sleeve and clearly needed to leave her company to compose himself. “I have to go to the toilet!”

“Off you go. I’ll clean up Echo’s mishap.”

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In the bathroom, Phoenix splashed his face with cold water and straightened his clothes. Cursing the reddened whites of his eyes, he mumbled cuss words under his breath and left to rejoin the others in the lounge room.

Slamming his hand over Phoenix’s mouth the second he stepped out, Evan smothered his son’s small body in his grip and growled in his ear. “Remember me now, you little bastard?”

Floodgates of horror opened inside Phoenix’s mind and everything crashed into his memory in sickening detail. Too terrified to move, too terrified to struggle, he went limp in Evan’s control.

“Walk out the back door to the silver car. If you make a sound, I’ll snap your neck like a twig.”

Right under Paul Somerset’s nose, The Crucifix Slayer abducted Dylan Firth a second time.

## *Chapter Twenty Six*

Three streets away from the house, parked in a narrow alley, Evan dumped his car for one pre-stolen and left at the ready. He changed his jacket, donned dark sunglasses, locked Phoenix in the trunk, and confidently drove away protected behind tinted windows.

Prewritten, and left nonchalantly attached to the front of refrigerator, there was a letter.

*Salutations, Detective Somerset,*

*Am I being presumptuous in suggesting you're feeling rather ill at the moment? I almost wish I were there to see the expressions on your faces. Two detectives, one police officer and, like an innocent lamb to the slaughter, the three of you delivered Dylan back to me where he belongs. My sincerest thanks and appreciation.*

*Feel free to saturate the media with my photograph. After all, I feel it's only fair my sheer brilliance is matched with my... dare I say it... aristocratic good looks. I've grown somewhat bored with being the silhouette on your murder wall, but rest assured, I will always be an untouchable shadow.*

*Time is ticking. Have you warned those close to home?*

*Until we meet again,  
T.C.S.*

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Rotting timber mixed with an overpowering stench of mold clinging to the stone walls. A battery operated light hung suspended from a rickety staircase leading from the cellar into a derelict house above. Terrifyingly vivid memories crashed through from Phoenix's subconscious into his conscious mind. He remembered the cellar, the odor, the biting cold, the horror, and he remembered his father's face as the man who had inflicted it all.

Stripped to his boxer shorts, Phoenix's wrists and ankles burned beneath the excruciatingly tight nylon cord. His lips stuck cruelly to silver duct tape. By denying Phoenix clothes, Evan initiated the dominating ritual focused on degradation and humiliation. He denied his son speech, denied him an opportunity to fight, and denied his basic human right to dignity.

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Until the age of eleven, Dylan had been a strong-willed child, willing to test his metal against the rules. He'd pushed limits as a show of discovering independence and flexed his intellectual muscle to challenge teachers and fellow students. Corrine had left Evan in charge



of disciplining their son, never knowing that, behind closed doors, Evan had encouraged the behavior, not discouraged it.

At age twelve, Dylan had started high school. Within a few short weeks, other students had him singled out for bullying and the few friends carried over from primary school drifted away. Angry, and suffering low self-esteem, Phoenix's behavior began to get a little more unpredictable. Heading into the first stages of puberty and adolescence added to his change in temper. He became argumentative, moodily sulked for days at a time, lashed out verbally and aggressively.

Evan had plans. Plans to implement the ever-increasing desire to take human life in the ultimate show of power. Plans to reign as the country's, if not the world's, most infamous serial killer who could never truly die. Petty theft in his childhood had escalated into honed skills as a flawless pickpocket. In his late teens, Evan graduated to extortion, all the while attending university to gain a degree in veterinary science and leaving his hapless victims unaware he'd fleeced them financially. He stole credit cards and bank details, and charmed money from the more easily manipulated. At the age of twenty-four, Evan met Corrine and he married her six months later. The ideal façade of happy family man with a loving, doting wife concealed perfectly the sick, contorted knots inside Evan's mind. Stealing money, twisting and playing other people's emotions, no longer satisfied the urge to kill.

To never truly die, Evan needed an apprentice. His ego saw in his son a clone of himself. To get back at his peers for the bullying, Evan taught Dylan pickpocketing skills and encouraged him to implement what he'd learned as often as he could without ever disclosing the secret to anyone, including his mother. Dylan proved to be an excellent student until the seams showed signs of fraying. Evan began to see in his son the traits he loathed. Guilt, remorse, and a desire to have friends rather than repel them all cracked at Dylan's veneer. Secrets he had agreed to keep from his mother he then threatened to reveal whenever an argument with his father took place. During once such argument on a Sunday, while Corrine spent the afternoon with a friend, Evan snapped. He raised a hand to his son in a physical attack. It reduced Dylan to tears, but it only further ignited his desire to make Evan pay for striking him. Evan needed Dylan silenced or he risked all his future plans disintegrating. He needed Dylan to toe the line, not cross it. He needed to be positive that Dylan feared him enough to never dare challenge him again. He needed to break Dylan in order to make the boy his apprentice. That Sunday, while Corrine shared lunch and coffee with her friend, Evan broke into a neighboring backyard, stole their dog, and forced Phoenix to watch on while he tortured it and slit its throat in the bathtub. He then forced Phoenix to scrub the tub with bleach, dismember the dog, put it into a garbage bag, and dispose of it.

By the age of thirteen, Dylan was at Evan's mercy. He was continually terrorized by Evan's threats to kill him in the same manner as the hapless animals, should he dare speak out about any of it. Though Dylan was never sexually molested by his father, or by anyone else, Evan threatened that it would be next on the agenda should his son disobey. In silent fear, Dylan's art started to depict a never-ending stream of dark paintings representing his father without a face. Repressed, hidden anger manifested itself in ways ranging from increased behavioral problems to arson. When Evan felt confident in his belief that Dylan bowed down to him as the master, he kidnapped his son.

At fourteen, Dylan had existed in a world of sadism and brutal murders. Forced to coerce victims into taking him into their homes, forced to witness his father kill people, he was then

forced to replicate the killings on the victim's family pets. He was made to scrub clean blood from bathtubs with chlorine bleach that ate through his hands, ordered to arrange the bodies in macabre positions of death imitating his art. Then he was taken back to the cold, dark cellar where he was stripped of his clothes, bound by wrists and feet, gagged, and ritualistically brainwashed. Dylan had no sense of self; it was torn away from him as surely as his clothes had been. He had no sense of personal power and his will to live vanished with the first shocking murder. Dylan saw nothing in his future except pain and horror. Until the day his twisted father handed over a baby for Dylan to raise as *his* apprentice.

Suddenly, Dylan saw a purpose: to save not his life but that of a baby he'd christened Echo, so named because of the way his cries bounced off the cellar walls. Two weeks after delivering the abducted baby to his son, Evan dragged Dylan to what would be the final murders of that year, instructing Dylan to use the child to his added advantage as he coerced victims to open their front doors and let him inside. Evan left Dylan alone only to clean the bathroom while he redressed and hung the body. Gathering up Echo, and all the will he had left, Dylan absconded from the victim's house and ran.

At eighteen, Phoenix wasn't the clone Evan intended him to be. He was a splintered young adult who still possessed no real sense of self and no true memories of what he'd suffered through other than torment. He exhibited acting out through rash, reckless behavior, compulsive lying to preserve his skin, and manipulation to gain a false sense of control. He was unable to sustain relationships, except in Echo where he didn't feel his personal security threatened, yet he was desperately in need of someone to show him love and offer safety. He pushed Daniel away time and time again until Daniel reached breaking point and then Phoenix would fly into panic-mode at the thought that Daniel might walk away and abandon him. Phoenix was not a sociopath, but he was the shattered casualty of one.

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Evan hugged his jacket around him and sat down on a plastic chair. "Is it just me or are we having a particularly chilly winter this season? You must be cold, Dylan. You should put some clothes on."

Shivering uncontrollably, Phoenix huddled further into the wall.

"You'll be a damn sight colder in a few days, when you're lying on a slab in the morgue!" Evan's shoulders moved up and down in time with taunting laughter. "If you think I'm going to keep you around for as long as I did last time, you can think again." He sighed and stretched his legs out casually. "You're a liability to me. The smartest thing for me to do would be to kill you now and be done with it. As much as I'm tempted, I won't. Do you know why?"

Behind closed eyelids, Phoenix interchanged Echo's face with Daniel's, trying to block out his father's voice and the all too familiar surroundings of the dungeon-like cellar.

Leaving the chair, Evan gripped onto his son's chin and jerked his head up. "I'd appreciate it if you looked at me when I'm speaking to you."

Tears saturated Phoenix's face and mixed with the cold sweat of unadulterated fear.

“Do you know why I won’t kill you now and be done with it?”

Phoenix shook his head and cringed away.

“Because that would be too easy on you and you need to be punished for what you did to me. You need to be punished for the last four years I’ve spent in limbo due to your disobedience. I killed three people during those four years. Only three. Homeless dregs of the earth no one missed anyway.” In his fingers, he twined a strand of Phoenix’s long fringe. “Lo and behold, when I could stand limbo no longer, guess who came out of the woodwork?” His sinister smile widened into an exaggerated grin. “You! The prodigal son returned. Lacking his memory and managing to turn everyone he met against him. Everyone except for that cop you were screwing.”

Unable to breathe properly with his mouth taped shut and his sinuses constricted due to the crying, Phoenix struggled to inhale air into his lungs. The cold from the concrete floor and stone walls bit through his skin and cramped his muscles. Humiliation at being stripped to his boxers combined with formidable dread. In every possible way, Phoenix was vulnerable to Evan’s perverse mind.

“I knew I’d get you, Dylan. The moment that idiot Somerset told me you’d been found, I knew I’d get you. Now it’s time you paid the price. There’s two ways we can go about this. The first is I’ll keep you here for a few days, and you and I can get reacquainted in the way you apparently now remember. Then I’ll kill you. Then, when everyone realizes I am a shadow that cannot be trapped and cannot be found, when they’ve resigned themselves to failure, I’ll kill Echo. Hell, what do you say I kill Daniel, too? Hmm? Why not!”

Losing what strength he had left, Phoenix curled into a tight ball on the concrete floor and cried so hard his body convulsed.

“The second choice you have is this: I’ll keep you here for a few days and you and I can get reacquainted in the way you apparently now remember. You’ll then accompany me, like the good old days, to a house I’ve pre-selected. A male and a female reside there. Alas, I have resigned myself to the fact you’re not a natural killer, Dylan. Therefore, as part of your punishment, you’ll kill them. I’ll then kill you and I’ll let Echo and Daniel live.”

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"Like an innocent lamb to the slaughter." The Slayer’s own words. Detective Somerset knew all too late Phoenix *was* an innocent and he’d done precisely that. Led him to the slaughter. In those first horrifying moments when they realized Evan had stolen Phoenix out from under them, everything fell into place. Corrine flew into hysterics. She’d lost her son again and now faced the shocking knowledge she was married to a serial killer, a man who had deceived her on so many levels and then dared to falsely comfort her when it was he who’d abducted and tortured their child. Paul left Corrine heavily sedated, and in the care of her parents and twenty-four hour police protection.

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Daniel’s shock, guilt, rage, and grief resulted in an unrestrained attack on Somerset. Pulled away by Steve, Daniel only backed off when he heard Echo’s cries of distress. No matter how

many times he'd tried to plead Phoenix's case, it had fallen on deaf ears. Daniel was the only one who had seen firsthand Phoenix swinging wildly between moods. He had known that Phoenix was not collected enough, not calm enough, and not mentally stable enough to be labeled a sociopath. A sociopathic personality was not an insane one. That was what made them so dangerous. Phoenix teetered precariously on the sanity line.

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Phoenix did not remember the birthmark in the truest sense. That was another thing Somerset needed to admit to. Dr York had been correct in her assumptions. Phoenix had mentioned it without knowing why, purely to be rid of intrusion and unaware of its significance. During the bitter months of her divorce from William Firth, Rosalie mentioned the mark to Corrine. Corrine then mentioned it to Evan when she thought her son was in bed. In fact, Dylan had stood in the lounge room doorway, something Corrine remembered clearly because she'd been mortified her son had overheard. Phoenix had stored the information inside his subconscious and, later, had twisted the reality. Phoenix did fear and abhor pedophiles. Not because he'd been a direct victim of one, but because he lived in terror that he may one day have been a victim.

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Phoenix's keys were left behind on the Firth's coffee table and Daniel demanded to be taken to his apartment. He needed Phoenix's things surrounding him and Echo needed the familiarity of his own home. On the single bed, Daniel leaned against the pillows and held the distraught child until Echo finally cried himself to sleep. Daniel stared through the wash of tears and let them fall unhindered down his face. Admittance days ago to being addicted to Phoenix changed into an admittance of much more. He'd seen enough of Phoenix's gentle moments, experienced enough time in his embraces, heard enough kind words to know beneath the emotional roller coaster was a compassionate heart and a benevolent soul. Now Phoenix was gone and Daniel no longer had the chance to change a declaration of "I'm not in love with you" into a declaration of "I love you."

## *Chapter Twenty Seven*

A media uproar ensued over the following two days. C.I.B. had knowingly misled reporters into believing they held The Slayer in custody, thereby knowingly misleading the public. Had William Firth turned out to be T.C.S., Paul Somerset would have had his back covered with ends justifying the means. Instead, he only felt the bitter pressure of outrage throwing C.I.B. entirely to the wolves. Dylan Firth had been abducted again, in the presence of three law enforcement officers, by his father. A father all now knew as The Crucifix Slayer.

Evan's picture was emblazoned in every newspaper across the country and the story hit international headlines. With no current photograph of Phoenix available, an identikit image had been made. News reports warned of another imminent double murder and the people bayed for The Slayer's blood even more fervently. Keeping secrets could not assist C.I.B. or Phoenix in any way. Everybody knew The Slayer murdered indiscriminately. Now they also knew of the years of terror Dylan Firth had encountered at the hands of a psychopathic parent. Paul could only pray the media saturation rendered Evan unable to step out of hiding. Two innocent victims could possibly survive due to the story coverage. That didn't help Phoenix. If he were still alive, he made escape for Evan harder to orchestrate. Cutting his losses and running would mean killing his son, if he hadn't already done so.

Another mystery unraveled and it concerned the reverse crucifix. Corrine clearly recalled Phoenix sculpting the small clay statuettes. Phoenix primarily painted and by that stage, he mostly depicted the dark, faceless man. Uncertain of what to depict in sculpture, Phoenix had eventually settled on people in relaxed poses. Corrine also clearly remembered the statuettes had not originally been signed with anything other than "Dylan Firth" on the base of each. The reverse crucifix had been added prior to firing, once they'd been taken to school.

Paul relayed the information to Dr. Gwen York, seeking a professional opinion and a possible answer to the enigma. In her view, the answer was not as enigmatic as it was transparent. The statuettes signified the serenity and innocence Phoenix lost. They were his attempt to find normalcy. Less obvious was the number symbolism hiding quietly in the background with no one considering the implication. Phoenix had indeed attended a Christian high school and it appeared bible study lessons might not have gone in one ear and out the other. Seventeen statuettes. Christ rose from the dead on the seventeenth day of the month. The biblical flood occurred on the seventeenth day of the month. The overall meaning of the number meant "victory." Yet victory and Christ were something Phoenix felt had abandoned him. Hence the reverse crucifix placed beside his name as symbol of lost faith and anger in God. It made sense to Paul, but didn't quite answer why The Slayer drew the symbol on the foreheads of the murder victims if the reverse crucifix meant more to Phoenix. There had to be a connection between it and Evan Firth.

Believing the dark childhood paintings might have contained more cryptic messages, Paul went over each one with a magnifying glass. From the apartment, he took all of the paintings

Phoenix had done recently and gave them the same treatment. Like puzzle pictures made to fool the eyes, once the hidden clue had been exposed in one painting, they screamed from every other, perfectly concealed in a truly artistic manner. Phoenix's realism paintings did not show up the same thing; it only occurred in the abstract, faceless men. In these paintings, Phoenix built up shade by cross-hatching. Piled on top of one another, they appeared as nothing more than fine lines forming depth. Under a magnifying glass, these small cross-hatchings separated into masses of reverse crucifixes on top of one another.

From there, Paul knew at some time, before Evan started his murder spree as T.C.S., he'd realized his son literally painted him as a faceless man in the symbol of the anti-Christ. By placing the symbol on the murder victims, Evan successfully tormented Phoenix on a whole other level. Therefore, along with satisfying his bloodthirsty urge to kill, Evan always had another motive. To punish his son for not being the clone he wanted him to be and to force him into becoming that clone, breaking Phoenix not only physically and mentally, but also spiritually, taunting his son's cryptic efforts to plea for aid inside his artwork as the only one who actually knew it *was* a cry for help.

Phoenix did not wear the earring as a testament to The Slayer in the way Paul had presumed he did. He wore it as a testament to his lost faith and his hatred toward God for never saving or protecting him, just as he'd revealed to Dr. York. During the nightmare-riddled sleepwalking, and the sign scrawled over Phoenix's bedroom walls, the symbol only then became a testament to The Slayer, portraying not dedication but dread. Another obscure hint plastered from one wall to the other from a damaged subconscious mind. His father's name in symbolic graffiti.

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Grieving mournfully, Echo refused to eat, cried dolefully, and called out Phoenix's name repeatedly. One of his brother's jackets became his security blanket. Refusing to give it up, Echo clutched onto it and Daniel. Nothing could separate him from them. If Daniel could only do one thing more for Phoenix, if it were too late to save him, he would fight for custody and raise Echo on his behalf, though Daniel forbade himself to give up hope. Phoenix couldn't be relegated to a memory when all Daniel wanted was Phoenix as his future. Helplessness combined with furious frustration. He wanted to actively search for Phoenix, but knew not where to start. No one knew where to start.

"Try and drink it, buddy."

Echo shook his head and pushed Daniel's hand away. "Where's Phoenix?"

Large brown eyes stared pleadingly, puffy and reddened. Each time Echo asked for his brother, it twisted Daniel's heart inside his chest. Echo knew his brother hadn't left him intentionally. What Echo couldn't understand was why no one could tell him where Phoenix had gone and why they couldn't go and bring him home. Daniel was a policeman. Policemen took bad men to jail and they saved people. This was what Echo understood.

Phoenix had left him in the past to go to work, but he had always come home again. Phoenix made his dinner. Phoenix put him to bed. Phoenix gave him hugs and kisses. Phoenix made him feel safe. Phoenix made him laugh. Phoenix held him when he cried. Phoenix did

everything for him. Echo loved and worshipped Phoenix in every sense and now he was gone. Gone and Daniel couldn't bring him home.

"We're looking for him. Everyone's looking for him." The banana smoothie in Daniel's hand tilted and the emotions he battled to keep in check, for Echo's sake, bubbled to the surface.

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Corrine removed the glass from Daniel's hand before it spilled to the floor. He'd had minimal sleep and, although he tried hopelessly to tempt Echo to eat, hadn't touched food himself either. Daniel's grief and Echo's grief compounded hers. Sitting around the apartment felt as if they made no attempt to locate Phoenix, waiting for the phone to ring and freezing in panic each time it did. By the grace of childhood naiveté, Echo didn't face the nightmarish knowledge Corrine and Daniel did. Echo knew his brother had been taken and that was where his understanding of it ended. Corrine and Daniel knew the horrifying truth of the abduction and it tore strips off their souls.

When Corrine first learned of Senior Constable Hart's involvement with her son, she'd been skeptical and wary of his intentions. Her wariness increased the instant she saw Phoenix in the hall, worried Daniel, a much older man, had his sights set on her son for purely physical reasons. Seeing him falling apart over Phoenix's disappearance swiftly changed her mind. He cared for Phoenix deeply and he hurt as profoundly as she did.

"Go lie down, Daniel." Her hand pressed against his face. "I'll stay with Echo."

"I should've listened to him." Daniel's voice whispered and strained over the knot in his throat. "When he got out the car, he said he didn't want to go inside. He told me he'd changed his mind. I said it was just nerves, but it wasn't. Part of him knew he was in danger there and I encouraged him to go in."

"You weren't to know, love. I lived with Evan for over twenty years and..." She dropped her face in her hand and broke down. "Never once did I think..."

\*\*\*

From a suitcase leaning against the stone walls, Evan took a pair of socks and a pair of shoes. On a campfire stove, he boiled water to bathe in and went about his business behind a privacy screen. Everything, including food, had been pre-planned and stowed away in the cellar in preparation for several days of hiding away. Evan slept on an air mattress with plenty of blankets while Phoenix remained bound, mostly naked and shivering on the concrete floor.

"I'm not cut out for roughing it." Evan said conversationally, pulling a sock over his foot. "My back's killing me and my clothes are creased." Finishing with that foot, he pulled a sock over the other. "Speaking of clothes, you must be missing yours right about now." He laughed and reached for a shoe. "I'm going to untie your hands in a moment so you can clean up this place. It stinks in here."

Finishing up tying his laces and checking his appearance in a square mirror he'd attached to the wall, Evan wandered toward Phoenix and crouched down. He cut through the nylon cord

with scissors, nicking cruelly at Phoenix's skin without flinching. In ready, to his right, sat a bottle of bleach with several sponges and rags.

He stepped away and moved the bleach closer with the toe of his shoe. "Clean."

Weak, bruised, suffering from shock and hypothermia, Phoenix clearly forced his body to move in agonizingly slow stages to obey the order given. Evan sat down and watched. Phoenix conformed without any sign of argument and Evan mentally congratulated himself. It had been far easier than he'd imagined it would be. Not the escape or the abduction -- at no time had Evan doubted success in taking his son again or his ability to vanish afterward. From what Paul Somerset described, Evan considered Phoenix might have shown a rebellious streak. In actual fact, he'd showed none, cowering every time Evan approached him. Not quite the sporting attitude Evan had expected. Still, it worked in his favor. Or so he thought.

Evan saw before him a boy too frightened to disobey anything. Too emotionally attached to the child of a streetwalker to risk Echo's life rather than take a life to save him. Of that, Evan was certain. Forcing Phoenix to murder gratified Evan's twisted mind more than the idea of killing Echo and Daniel did. Although, once he'd done away with his son, he planned to renege on the deal and kill them anyway simply for the sheer pleasure of it.

Domination through shaming and humiliation picked up from where Evan had left off. At times, Evan untied Phoenix's wrists and ankles, ungagged his mouth, purely to see whether or not Phoenix would put up any type of resistance. Phoenix cried and he whimpered but he didn't fight back. All this added up to the positive proof Evan needed to ensure Phoenix would kill if told to. Evan basked in the knowledge of being his son's master. He knew, in the forefront of Phoenix's mind, Phoenix feared Echo might one day endure the same. He knew Phoenix would have entertained the idea that after Evan killed him, he'd cast him aside, and he would take on another apprentice in Echo.

There was one thing Evan hadn't considered, too wrapped up in his ego to acknowledge the obvious signs of his son's frailty. Phoenix was five-foot-six and built like whippet. There wasn't an ounce of excess weight on him. Two days lying naked on a freezing cold concrete floor combined with physical injuries. He'd had no food, only given minimal water to drink and next to no sleep. Phoenix was ill and his strength clearly drained. Evan hadn't taken into account the fact Phoenix, in this condition, would be a hindrance to his plans of murdering more victims.

Evan kicked away the bleach bottle, rags, and sponges the instant he deemed the area clean enough. Taking a reel of nylon cord from the suitcase, he retied Phoenix hands and ripped the tape away from his mouth. "Time for a chat, son."

Blood gathered over Phoenix's lips.

"D-day tomorrow, Dylan." He looked at his watch. "On rough estimate, I'd say you have around twenty hours left before you die. Give or take an hour. Now..." He grasped Phoenix's chin. "...as you are my son, and because I'm prepared to make allowances for that reason, you have a few choices. I've done a little research and I'm going to pass on my knowledge to you. No point making a choice if it's not an educated one, is there?"



Phoenix's tears streamed down his face and pooled inside Evan's palm. He could barely muster the strength to lift his eyes.

"I could strangle you. That's your first option. Can take a good few minutes to die. During that time you'll struggle to breathe, your eyes will bulge, your brain will slowly starve of oxygen, etcetera, etcetera. I hear it's a cruel way go. But, you know, it's up to you." Letting go of Phoenix's chin, Evan wiped the tears off his hand and took hold again. "In the suitcase over there, I have a gun. The one I use at work to shoot horses. It'd be quick. I know exactly where to aim. If you want to leave behind a relatively nice looking corpse, there is the chance that gun could rip the top of your skull off. After all, the bullets are meant to kill horses, not people. That's your second option."

Evan could see the effect his words were having on Phoenix.

"The last option is to slit your throat. Straight through your jugular and, naturally, you'd bleed to death. I hear it's one of the better ways to go. Fairly quick, you'd rapidly lose consciousness first and then die." He shrugged and smiled. "Almost peaceful, I guess. With the added bonus that you'll look great in a coffin for the viewing! So..." He petted the Phoenix's cheek. "...one, two, or three?"

"I don't wanna die." The words bubbled over tears and gasps.

"Obviously, son!" Evan laughed heartily. "If I had a dollar for every time I've heard that!" He sighed, still chuckling to himself. "Whether you want to or not, you're going to. The only question is how."

## *Chapter Twenty Eight*

Outside, beyond the walls, the beautiful Blue Mountains hid a house long ago abandoned. For extended periods at a time, Evan left Phoenix to walk around outside like a country gentleman taking a serene, late afternoon stroll. Evan had stumbled on the house six years prior, more by accident than by intention. Often, he tended to thoroughbreds on properties nearby and Evan knew the Blue Mountains well. Old, disused houses were not a rarity, dotted here and there amid the landscape, left and forgotten by their owners, some not occupied for nigh on a century.

Charming to tourists who looked upon them as a tribute to a bygone era, they were ominous to Phoenix, who'd spent a year of his life captive inside one and now revisited that pain and terror all over again.

Footsteps creaked from the top of the staircase to the concrete cellar floor. Evan set down a bucket of cold water, soap, a sponge, a towel, a toothbrush, and toothpaste. With the scissors, he cut away the binding cord and then tore the tape off his son's mouth. "Wash yourself. Your hair, too."

Phoenix barely had the strength to cry anymore, let alone bathe. Evan left him to it and fetched the folded clothes he'd taken from his son three days before. He laid out the black pants, the jacket, shoes, and socks.

Keeping hold of the mulberry shirt, Evan held it out and tilted his head to the side in admiration. "I like this. Pity it's too small for me." He refolded it and placed it on top of the black jacket.

Sponging listlessly at his skin with water as icy as the cellar temperature, Phoenix tried to preserve his modesty as best he could. Preceding daybreak, he'd given up hope and resigned himself to his fate. When Evan left to breathe in the fresh country air, Phoenix's survival impulses had sparked. Fogginess inside his mind started to clear and he forced images of Echo and Daniel into his brain as fuel to add to the primal adrenalin fire. If he were to maintain any hope of surviving, he had to outsmart The Slayer. How, he didn't know. Phoenix always referred to Echo as his brother, but his primordial instinct was parental. He would not leave Echo orphaned without a fight. Physically, Phoenix could not challenge his father. If he were to stand any chance at all, he needed to rely on his intelligence.

Phoenix toweled himself dry, brushed his teeth, and waited obediently for an order to dress. Every instant Evan took his attention off his son, Phoenix watched him unerringly. Standing nearly rendered Phoenix physically sick. His muscles seized with cramps and cold. No matter how excruciating, he couldn't give in to it. He'd coped before. He had to do it again.

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Over three days, Evan remained unshaven. Early that morning he took a pair of clippers and sheared his brown, neatly styled hair down to within a centimeter of his scalp. He bleached it, the newly grown stubble, his brows and eyelashes mid-blond. Light blue-gray contact lenses covered the natural hazel of his eyes. A pair of non-prescription, heavy frame glasses sat in ready. Behind the privacy screen, Evan changed out of expensive designer attire and redressed in nondescript denim jeans, a checked flannelette shirt, a puffed parka, and worn runners. Minor alterations made a dramatic difference to Evan's looks.

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"Evan used a voice changer device. We found it hidden in his veterinary kit."

It was a meaningless discovery to Daniel and he listened half-heartedly. It didn't matter what solid proof Somerset had found; it was too late. They already had a name and a face for The Slayer and a voice changer only confirmed what Daniel already knew. Phoenix had not placed any calls to Detective Somerset. Evan chose to disguise his voice as that of a young male and had hit an unintentional jackpot by doing so.

At the time of the first call, Evan hadn't known his son had been located. Premeditatedly, Evan had set the wheels in motion to frame William Firth by planting the seed of doubt into Corrine's mind after they learned their son had been found. He had supplied the necessary distraction to point Somerset in the wrong direction and playing the concerned, wrathful father perfectly. By mentioning the birthmark, all Phoenix had done was throw gasoline onto the false lead and bring Ralph Clarkson further into the fray. Clarkson himself added to suspicion by keeping information from Somerset in an attempt to save a job and a reputation he firmly believed could be on the line. Back and forth it went, from William to Ralph, and Evan had fed off it all. Playing different games, altering his plans as the need arose, always with the same outcome in mind. To provide diversion until the chance arose to retake his son.

Evan had planted the nylon cord inside Ralph's car to add to the confusion, something now obvious to Detective Somerset and to Detective O'Grady. Corrine had already written a heartfelt letter to her son. Evan suggested she mention money in the hopes it could be the clincher in coaxing Phoenix out of the shadows. In the end, it hadn't been. Phoenix's reasons for going home were about his mother, not financial gain. Everything slotted nicely into Evan's scheme whether he'd coordinated it or not. Phoenix's trauma-related amnesia was a platinum opportunity for Evan to manipulate everything to his advantage, as was Phoenix's mental instability and his uncanny knack to form enemies quicker than he formed allies.

"It's been three days, Paul. Three days and all you've come up with is a voice changer." Daniel gazed at Echo, curled up around Phoenix's jacket and sleeping out of pure exhaustion and bereavement.

"We've confiscated Evan's computer, phone records, paperwork. Everything we could take, we've taken. We're going over everything, looking for any clue as to where he's taken Phoenix."

"Right." From Echo's sleeping face, Daniel looked up and met Paul's anxious gaze. "So basically what you're saying to me is you have no hope of finding Phoenix. Let's face it,

Evan wouldn't have left anything on a computer and he's too smart to make calls from a home phone or his own mobile."

"We're doing everything we can, Daniel."

"It's not enough!" He stifled a yell into a snarled hiss. "You're scared Evan's going to kill two people you love. The mere *thought* of it is making you sick. For three days, I've been living the nightmare you're afraid could happen to you! Echo's living the nightmare! Corrine's *reliving* the nightmare! And Phoenix? God only knows what he's been through, what he's going through, if he's even still alive!"

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Paul dropped his face. They'd found one other thing regarding the veterinary kit. It was missing a gun, something Paul kept from Daniel and had no plans to reveal.

"When you lose someone you love like this? When you don't know where they are but you know they're in agony, terrified and begging for you to save them? When you're not sure if it's already too late, but you hang onto that slim hope it's not? There is only one greater hell than this feeling, Paul, and that's the hell Phoenix is in!"

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At sundown, Evan retied Phoenix and left to drive to a nearby property ten minutes west of the abandoned, ramshackle house. He dumped the car in a thicket of bushland to the side of the country road and walked three minutes to the property's main gates. The owner was a regular client, a widower in his early seventies who woke at four every morning to oversee the training schedule of two mediocre racehorses and retired to bed at six every evening without his hearing aid. Predictable routines of predictable people ensured Evan had all bases covered.

The driveway forked in two directions. To Evan's left stood the main house and, to his right, the shed where the owner kept an old model Pajero four-wheel drive without a car alarm. Approximately fifty meters separated the house from the targeted vehicle. By the time the owner woke the next morning, realized his car had been stolen and reported it to the police, Evan and Phoenix would be long gone.

By six-forty-five, Evan returned with the four-wheel drive. A two-hour drive from the Blue Mountains to Sydney's inner west suburbs meant Evan needed to stick to a tight time schedule. The intended victims spent Monday nights at the female's parents' house and arrived home between nine-thirty and ten in the evening. Evan was cutting it fine and the thrill added to his adrenaline rush.

Picking Phoenix up off the concrete floor, Evan draped him over his shoulder and climbed the stairs. In the rear of the Pajero, he ordered Phoenix huddle as small as possible and remain beneath a blanket. Evan loaded up enough of the camping gear to hide Phoenix behind it. Slamming the rear of the four-wheel drive closed, Evan climbed behind the wheel and headed toward his destination.

Once off the Great Western Highway, Evan used his knowledge of back streets to keep away from main roads. He parked the car in a poorly lit avenue close to the victim's house. Showing now outward signs of tension, he lowered the rear seats and dragged Phoenix through from the back. He cut through the cord, released his son's hands and feet, and ripped gag off his mouth. Inside the puffed parka jacket, he hid the gun fitted with a silencer, a small hammer, a surgical scalpel, a tightly wound bundle of nylon cord, a torch, and a roll of duct tape.

"Get out, keep quiet, and walk beside me. Understand?" He slipped the scissors inside his parka.

Phoenix could barely stand, let alone walk. However, he nodded obediently. Evan grasped a handful of his son's jacket and pushed him forward. They followed the street to the end, detoured to the right, and walked a short distance to a modest house situated on a corner block perfectly concealed in the night darkness and from prying neighbors behind closed curtains and blinds.

The house stood in complete darkness. Evan snatched Phoenix around the waist, deposited him into the front yard over a small picket fence, and leapt over to join him. On the side of the house facing out toward the road, the fence line rose to seven feet. A narrow path led toward a locked gate. Repeating what he'd done earlier, Evan lifted Phoenix over the gate and then deftly climbed over to follow.

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Evan forced Phoenix into a crouching position under a small square window next to the back door and took the duct tape out of his pocket. As his father fixed tape over the glass, Phoenix's nausea peaked. Everything Evan did was methodical and detached. Thoughts flooded Phoenix's mind in a deluge of confusion. To outwit his father, he needed to think sharply.

Pain, sickening fear and exhaustion clouded together into a confused, murky smog. He couldn't place one single thought to the forefront of his brain and nothing made sense except imminent death for him and the intended victims. Phoenix tried to recall Daniel's voice and couldn't. He tried to picture Daniel's face and realized it too had vanished within terror and distress. Phoenix could see Echo as a baby, but could not see him as a five-year-old. He could hear Echo's baby cries, but not hear his words. Phoenix shook uncontrollably, shivering and sweating profusely, a breath away from emotional and physical collapse.

Evan took the hammer from inside his parka and smashed the window. The tape held the splintered glass together, smothered the sound, and allowed Evan to peel away the remnants. Reaching inside, he felt for the lock and opened the door. They were inside far too easily.

Flicking on the torch, Evan kept the beam away from the windows and aimed toward the floor. "The problem with these old houses, Dylan, is the lack of security." He snatched Phoenix's jacket and shoved him forward. "People buy them with dreams to renovate them into something not resembling a heap of shit and live in a death trap while they pick out a new kitchen."

The torch beam traveled down one end of the hall to the other, finding the master bedroom, a smaller bedroom, and a room set aside to store paint and renovation tools. Circling Phoenix's waist with his arm, Evan lifted him off his feet and walked toward the main bedroom.

Once inside, he shone the light around the room and settled it on his watch. "They should be home in around ten minutes."

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Evan quickly cased the house, dragging Phoenix with him, and located one telephone handset in the bedroom and the main handset and base inside the lounge room. He removed the batteries from both handsets and placed them back where he'd found them. Protective plastic surgical clothing he'd meticulously worn during prior murders was discarded this time. Everyone knew the true identity of The Slayer and covering his tracks was no longer a priority. Before anyone knew two more victims lay dead, three counting his son, Evan would vacate the premises the same way he'd entered it, return to the four-wheel drive and be gone before anyone called the police hours from now.

Headlights broke through a narrow gap in the lounge room window. Evan's adrenaline and exhilaration hit overdrive. Quick steps took him and Phoenix to the storeroom.

The front door slammed, lights went on, and the oblivious couple continued a furious argument carried over from the car. Back and forth, they shouted at one another, exchanging insults and yelling obscenities until the male slammed the bathroom door and the female stormed crying into the master bedroom.

Evan whispered into Phoenix's ear, "Change of plans."

He left Phoenix and walked calmly down the hall. The woman lay face down on the bed, her face buried in a pillow, howling. He swiftly took her mobile from an open handbag left discarded on a dressing table, tucked it into his back jeans pocket, and wandered over to the bed.

Seizing a cruel handful of her long blonde hair, Evan ripped her head back and smothered her mouth with his hand. "Hello, Rachel."

## *Chapter Twenty Nine*

Overpowering her with his height and strength, Evan kept his hand hard over Rachel's mouth and nose to constrict her breathing. Her fighting, struggling, and sheer terror only served to quickly use up her oxygen supply and Evan hauled her from the bedroom. He took his hand off her mouth, she gasped in a sharp breath and he wrapped his arm around her neck in a crushing headlock. From his jacket, he removed the gun, then opened the bathroom door and fired two shots, the first into the lower right side of Ian's abdomen, the next into the upper right side of his chest near his shoulder. Ian slumped forward onto the floor.

"Well, now, little lady." Evan spun Rachel around, grasped her by the throat and pushed her against the wall. "That's one way to deal with a cheating fiancé, isn't it?"

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Rachel's legs buckled beneath her. She was held upright by the grip on her throat until Evan let her go and she fell onto her knees. When she tried to scream, her voice refused and her limbs were converted to jelly. She felt The Slayer's foot on the center of her back, pressing down harder until he had her pinned, belly down, in the hall.

"Dylan?" The Slayer called out coolly. "Come to papa!"

\*\*\*

Phoenix robotically forced one foot to move in front of the other. Bracing against the wall, he was lost in the horror and a ceaseless bombardment of The Slayer's murders assailing his brain. He hadn't been able to stop the slaughters as a child and he was resigned to not being able to stop it now. Phoenix wasn't in the present, he wasn't in the past, and there was no future. From inside the bathroom, he heard guttural groans and saw the male writhing in pooled scarlet.

Evan twisted Rachel's hair inside his fingers and yanked her face off the floor. "I believe you two have met?"

His eyes locked with Rachel's terror-stricken blue; he knew his own looked just as scared. Rachel's fingernails dug claw-like into the floor, scratching narrow channels into the yet-to-be-polished boards, breaking off and splintering into the wooden surface. Evan kept her head wrenched and her pallid, gray complexion bathed beneath a wash of fretful tears.

A familiar face speared into Phoenix's conscious mind and connected her image with Daniel's. Daniel's image connected with Phoenix's emotions. Phoenix's emotions connected with Echo. Thrown out of the murky smog of confusion, he slammed full throttle into reality.

This wasn't another nightmare trapped inside parasomnia; this was real and it was happening now.

"Take the tape and gag her," Evan ordered.

Phoenix jolted his gaze off Rachel and reached inside his father's jacket for the roll of duct tape and the scissors. His hands shook as he cut a section of tape long enough to cover her mouth completely.

"Phoenix, please!" Begging words bubbled out over sobs and gasps for air.

Phoenix crouched down to seal the tape across her mouth. With that done, Evan dragged Rachel by her hair toward the bathroom. Painstaking step by painstaking step, Phoenix followed. Picking her up, Evan dumped her into the bathtub as if she were nothing more than a trash bag of refuse.

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Blind fear kept Rachel from kicking out and struggling, unable to use her arms or legs to strike at her assailant or defend herself. Whether Ian was alive or dead, she didn't know.

"Take your clothes off. Underwear, too." Evan leaned in over the tub. "There's only one way I like women to look, Rachel, and that's dressed in underwear. I'd rather look at a beautiful girl semi-naked than fuck one totally naked. And there's only one thing I like better than looking at a beautiful woman dressed in underwear and that's a dead woman dressed in underwear."

She stared pleadingly at Phoenix and he lowered his face away from her. The Slayer had never used a gun during any other murder. Rachel knew his Modus Operandi religiously. Photographs of those who had died by The Slayer's hand wore the death mask she knew she would soon wear.

"Because dead women can't talk back." Evan continued calmly with his speech. "Dead women don't bore me with needless conversation and a smothering want for comfort and reassurance. Don't get me wrong, Rachel, I'm not into necrophilia. The simple truth is men are superior to women on every level except one. Women look better dressed in underwear than men do." Rolling his eyes, Evan jerked his head toward Phoenix. "He doesn't think so. He's been a disappointment to me in so many ways and then I find out he's a fag to top it all off!"

Evan brandished the weapon in Rachel's face and, within her body, she experienced a horrid sensation of all her insides turning to icy liquid while her skin burned as if on fire.

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Phoenix stumbled forward, swaying back and forth with one hand on his brow and the other reaching sightlessly for the towel rail. In his peripheral vision, he saw Rachel shakily removing her clothes, trembling convulsively inside the tub, sickened by The Slayer's hands ripping away her shirt. Rachel wasn't what Phoenix focused on and he couldn't allow her fear to distract him.



Evan pierced his son with a shrewd glance. “If you’re going to throw up, Dylan, do it in the basin.”

From the towel rail, Phoenix reached for the porcelain basin, hesitating until he was certain Evan’s concentration was fixed entirely on Rachel. Adjusting his standing position, Phoenix staggered, fell forward, knocked Evan off balance, grappled at his father to stay standing, and then fell to the floor with a thud.

Spinning around, Evan kept the gun aimed at Rachel’s head and snarled. “Get up!” Using the basin as support, Phoenix wobbled to his feet. Rachel sat quaking in the tub, deathly pale and naked from the waist up.

Evan had a routine. He taunted before killing in the same way he taunted his son, using humiliation, control, exacting his power every step of the way until strangling the dying breath from their lungs. He usually killed the males swiftly, though Ian was still alive. Phoenix heard his intermittent groans from down the hall. Evan hadn’t shot to kill; he’d shot to maim.

As soon as Rachel stripped down to nothing, Evan would tape her hands and feet and then leave her to choose underwear from her dressing table drawer. Coming back with a selection of several items, he would then force Rachel to decide which she wanted her corpse dressed in. Only then, when he’d tormented her to his satisfaction, would he release her hands and pass over the scalpel with an order for her to cut her wrists. When blood loss brought near death, Phoenix knew he’d make good on his threat to punish Phoenix and force him to strangle her.

Tossing the silver duct tape into the basin, Evan admired his handiwork and sat down on the edge of the tub. “I’ve never killed a cop before and I’m not going to kill one now.” He settled the barrel of the gun beneath her chin and tilted her face up. “Dylan’s going to kill you. He’s not quite as good at it as I am, so I predict it’ll be fairly slow.” He smiled, stood and walked from the bathroom toward the bedroom.

In the following frenzied moments, Phoenix fumbled inside his jacket. Evan had taught his son the art of becoming a seamless pickpocket and now had possibly lynched himself by doing so. When Evan had leaned over the tub, Phoenix saw salvation in the form of a mobile phone inside his pocket. Taken from Evan’s jeans during the staged fainting spell, it was now in Phoenix’s possession.

Phoenix lurched toward Rachel, falling to his knees beside the tub, forgetting his own pain temporarily, placing his hand firmly behind her head, pulling her forward until their faces almost touched. “Whatever you do, you need to trust me! I’ll stall him as long as I can, I promise!”

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Trusting Phoenix Love with her life wasn’t something Rachel had ever believed she could or would do. Now she had no choice. Her heart thumped in her chest, tears blinded her eyes and she nodded helplessly. She couldn’t deny how ill Phoenix appeared, nor could she fail to see

bruises on his face and around his wrists. A faint glimmer of hope arose in the shape of phone clasped inside his right hand.

Phoenix floundered over the mobile. In his panic, it seemed he couldn't remember the simple triple zero for an emergency and desperately searched for stored numbers. Finally, the name he searched for lit up the screen and he pressed the dial key.

With one hand, he held the phone to his ear; with the other hand, he stroked Rachel's face. "Come on, Daniel!" After several rings, the call connected and Phoenix whispered frantically. "Rachel's house! Hurry!"

Disconnecting the call, Phoenix hid the mobile inside his jacket and prayed his father wouldn't notice it missing before help arrived. A groan reverberated off the bathroom walls when Phoenix pushed himself off his knees and onto his feet, staggering away from Rachel, lumbering doubled over toward the door. Over the inside of his shoe, Rachel watched a trickle of blood trail over the tiles. Phoenix was injured, in severe pain, and bleeding. The Slayer no longer watched his son and it was then Rachel realized Phoenix could have taken the opportunity to attempt an escape and leave her behind. Instead, he battled through his pain and remained at her side, even showing her comfort in the best way he could while fighting to save them both.

Evan's footsteps trod down the hall and Phoenix lurched toward the door. Phoenix was deliberately blocking Evan's entrance and Rachel knew even these few seconds could be the difference between life and death.

"Move!" Evan demanded, taking hold of Phoenix by his jacket lapel and shoving him inside the bathroom.

Phoenix corrected his fall enough to redirect it. Landing inside the tub and on top of Rachel, stalling another few moments while Evan swore a string of abuse and fished him out again. Phoenix then managed to collapse at his father's feet and send him stumbling into the wall. Every move Phoenix made increased the amount of blood running from his ankles onto the floor. Rachel's gag smothered her scream when Evan snatched his son by the hair, pulled him to his feet, and slapped him brutally across the face. The underwear Evan had been holding scattered across the bathroom. To gain extra time, Phoenix threw himself into the line of fire, obviously knowing the only way he could distract Evan from Rachel was to take the brunt of his attack for as long as he possibly could.

The mobile flew from Phoenix's pocket and skidded across the tiles. Evan's hand, already raised for another strike, froze in mid-air. Rachel cowered in the tub and whimpered, watching stricken as Evan's macabre coolness shifted into panic. His face twisted into rage and, swiping the gun from inside his jacket, he held it point blank in the center of his son's brow.

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Wailing police sirens tore apart the sleepy, silent suburb. Self-preservation meant taking Phoenix alive and using him as a barrier and a hostage. Soon the house would be surrounded and Evan knew he'd be trapped. If he attempted escape via the way they'd entered, he'd be cornered between the side of the house and a seven-foot fence. Rachel became an

afterthought. Bound by the hands and feet with tape, she'd be more a burden than an aide in his bid for freedom. Evan needed to get out of the house and he needed to do it quickly. He needed to take his son with him.

Evan snared Phoenix around the waist, lifted him off his feet, and ran for the rear of the house. He sandwiched his son between himself and the backdoor, frantically trying the lock and discovering that, unlike the side door, it refused to give without a key. For the first time in existence, Evan tasted fear and felt the bitter reality of lost control.

He ran from the rear of the house to the front door, clutching his son as his only lifeline. He needed to get outside before the police swarmed inside, needed to keep Phoenix between him and them.

The flaming argument between Rachel and Ian had left a lapse in their concentration. They'd closed the front door but hadn't locked it. Blue and red flashing lights taunted through every crack in the curtains and through every window. Evan dropped Phoenix to his feet, put the gun to his temple, and stepped outside onto the front porch.

Keeping his back to a brick wall, and holding Phoenix lifted off his feet to guard his head and chest, Evan shouted into a night lit up by blue and red. "Put the guns down or I kill the kid!"

It wasn't an idle threat. This was The Slayer and they knew he'd shoot his son dead without flinching. The porch kept Evan guarded from behind and to the sides. They could only take Evan out from straight on, but had no clear aim without risking a slightly stray bullet killing Phoenix instead. They were at a standoff.

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Within ten minutes of Evan stepping from the house with his son as his hostage, Paul Somerset arrived with the SWAT team. Approaching from all angles, the house was swarmed over with police and the street blazed beneath floodlights. Evan edgily shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Phoenix hung motionless in his grasp and blood on the porch confirmed he'd already sustained injuries. Paul couldn't ascertain if The Slayer was using an already dead son as his shield.

Amid the crowd of police, Paul spied Daniel Hart and strode toward him. "Behind the barrier, Daniel."

Already supplied with a weapon, Daniel stood his ground. "Like hell!"

Too emotionally involved, Daniel posed more of a risk to Paul than an asset. "Hand over the gun and get behind the barrier; that's a direct order!"

Again, Daniel refused to budge, keeping his eyes locked onto Evan and the one he loved dangling lifelessly in Evan's arms with a gun aimed at his temple. Paul couldn't waste time arguing. He swore under his breath and took a megaphone that was handed to him. First and foremost, he needed to find out if Phoenix was still alive. Spearheading Daniel with a burning glare, Paul left him standing amid other officers with the gun held at his side.

A medium-sized front yard separated police from Phoenix and Evan. One false move from any of the officers and Evan would pull the trigger. From where Daniel and Paul stood, Evan held Phoenix slightly to their left. Phoenix lifted his arm and grasped onto his father's wrist, confirming he was indeed a live hostage.

"I want a car and I want a clear run out of here!" Evan shouted.

"It's over, Evan." Paul kept his voice as calm as possible. "Let Dylan go. Killing him is not going to save you."

Evan pushed the barrel harder against Phoenix's head. "The girl's still alive. The guy? Maybe. Give me what I want and Dylan lives, too. You might be in time to save the guy as well."

"Your only hope, Evan, is to let Dylan go."

"Then I'll take him down with me!"

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Daniel's stomach swirled in a sickening whirlpool. His eyes flicked from Evan to Phoenix. The more Paul spoke, the edgier Evan grew. Evan's sole attention now focused on Paul Somerset, off the surrounding police. Slowly, Phoenix had slipped lower in his father's grip until his head barely reached Evan's chin.

Phoenix jerked his face upward and his head lolled slightly. Daniel saw the terrified flight of his eyes and the hopeless expression of doom carved into his ivory white complexion. Daniel's hand flexed around the gun and his arm inched up from his side when he saw Phoenix's wandering, directionless gaze magnetize onto him. He watched Phoenix gather all the strength he had left, part his lips and mouth the words "I love you." Daniel's hand flew from his side and a clear aim over Phoenix's head lodged a bullet into Evan's head. The Slayer was dead before he hit the ground.

## Chapter Thirty

*The Crucifix Slayer's reign of terror was over. Evil had been ultimately conquered by love. For Phoenix, the horror lived on and his recovery promised to be a slow, trying ordeal. This time, he wasn't alone, surrounded by those who loved him and provided him with a soft place to fall as he struggled to find himself and an identity lost in childhood.*

*Phoenix wasn't a sociopath in mirror of his psychopathic father. Dr. Gwen York vowed to assist him in rediscovering the person he'd once been. Time remained the essence and support from those who loved him the key. Severe borderline personality disorder drove harshly into the core of those afflicted. Phoenix needed understanding in a non-judgmental manner and a guiding hand to change traits deeply ingrained.*

*In the past, Phoenix's survival had depended on those traits. Now he needed to be taught to alter his behavior and consciously choose against what his subconscious told him. He needed to learn how to combine his love for Daniel into faith, to believe in himself enough to trust that he didn't require the use of lying and manipulation to test a relationship or to hold onto one, to discover how to feel his pain constructively, to grieve through the trauma and to let go of the rash actions he used to use to express his anger and hurt.*

*Corrine dealt with her own roller coaster of emotions. A seemingly perfect marriage was nothing but a sham of deception and hidden atrocities. She mourned the death of an ideal, but did not mourn Evan. The man she'd loved for over twenty years had never existed and her life with him was built around a cruel, illusory farce. Anger mixed with sorrow, sorrow mixed with confusion, and confusion mixed with hatred. Not at any time had Evan let his façade of loving husband slip and Corrine blamed herself for not seeing through his veil of deceit. He'd held her while she lamented the abduction of their son, played the flawless grieving father, tricked her and fooled all others.*

*She'd spent nights sleeping beside a serial killer and a sadistic child abuser, made love to him and, above all else, she had trusted him. That trust turned now to repulsion. She found herself watching Daniel as he dotingly tended to Phoenix and many times searched for a clue he wasn't what he seemed. Then she shook the thought from her mind. She couldn't tar Daniel with same brush as Evan. She couldn't mistrust him or his intentions. If it weren't for Daniel, her son would be dead. Phoenix needed her to be strong and strength was what she'd give him.*

*From despising the air Phoenix breathed, Rachel placed him on a pedestal. He'd saved her life and almost lost his own in the process. Suffering severe shock, Rachel spent a week under medical supervision before discharge. Counseling began to ease her mind and her distressed sense of failure. No amount of police or self-defense training had kicked in to contest The Slayer that night. Rachel criticized herself and her lack of action. Therapy told a different story to the one circling inside a mind of self-blame. No one, police officer or not, could*

*predict how they'd react when faced with a fear as blinding as the one Rachel had been faced with. Every day, she visited Phoenix with yet another bunch of flowers to add the many already adorning his room.*

*Paramedics accessed the house in time to save Ian. Massive blood loss listed him as critical for almost three weeks. When Evan shot Ian, he'd deliberately aimed to miss major organs, never believing he'd be the one to die that night instead. Ian's recovery didn't include a mending of his relationship with Rachel. She'd been spared her life and decisively chose not to waste it on cheating fiancé.*

*Paul Somerset worked behind the scenes to ensure Phoenix's healing occurred with as little stress as possible, ensuring Echo remained in Phoenix's care and putting the wheels in motion to guarantee separation didn't happen. Over the days after Phoenix's abduction, Echo pined mournfully. Phoenix was more than a sibling to him; he was his mother and father rolled into one. With Daniel close by to provide support, and welfare keeping a close eye until Phoenix's emotional stability evened out, Paul rested comfortably with his decision. The two would stay together until such time as Phoenix could apply for a permanent care order to raise Echo under very similar conditions as adoption.*

*Ralph Clarkson was guilty of nothing except poor choices. His tendency to gravitate toward certain students evolved from an honest desire to lend an ear and not a malicious intent to harm. Wiser for his experience, Ralph quit his job as an art teacher for children and chose to hedge a safer bet and tutor adults instead.*

*William Firth threatened legal action whilst dismissing his nephew and sister-in-law. William lacked the psychopathic personality of his younger brother, but shared the arrogance and ego. Once, he'd had a close relationship with Dylan, a relationship that had ground to a halt when he'd caught his nephew stealing from him only weeks before Phoenix had first been abducted. Learning Dylan had only acted on Evan's orders didn't change William's opinion. He wanted nothing to do with his nephew. His sights were set on financial gain and a lawsuit for compensation due to his so-called emotional distress of being a suspect.*

*Ten weeks after his ordeal, Phoenix was discharged from the hospital.*

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*The last of several sealed cartons made their way out of the apartment and into a moving truck. Furniture belonging to the landlord remained, but shelves stood bare and cupboards were empty. In a state of hyperactive excitement, Echo kept Corrine on her toes as she made sure his fascination with the moving men didn't lead to him disappearing from the apartment to climb amongst items already inside the truck.*

*On the end of a bed stripped free of linen, Phoenix sat beside Daniel. "Are you sure about this?"*

*From the center of Phoenix's back, Daniel's hand slid to wrap over Phoenix's hand. "Never been surer about anything, darlin'. I didn't put that ring on your finger for nothing."*

*Daniel had given Phoenix the plain platinum promise ring the day before Phoenix's release from hospital. Worn on Phoenix's left hand, it signified an oath of commitment, engraved on*

*the top with 'LoveHart' in homage to Echo's astute pairing of names weeks before. On the other side of the band, Daniel had Echo's name engraved. Phoenix wasn't ready for engagement or marriage before he'd rediscovered himself. Daniel knew that and the promise ring signified security and assurance without adding pressure to the long road of Phoenix's recovery.*

*"Guess I'll have to meet my future parents-in-law now and your brother. It's gonna be flat out freaky, meeting someone who looks exactly like you."*

*After facing his own brush with death, and watching Daniel launch into public superhero status, Heath had made contact with his estranged twin and the mending of bridges had begun.*

*"I'm better-looking than Heath." Daniel winked. "Whatever you do, don't get us mixed up and kiss him instead."*

*"Guess it can't go as badly as when you met my parents. You shot one of mine in the head!" Phoenix doubled over into hysterical laughter. "You know..." He gasped in between laughter. "...for a split second, when you pointed the gun, I thought you were gonna shoot me for telling you I loved you!"*

*An awkward moment of silence on Daniel's part broke when he enclosed Phoenix in his arms and kissed his cheek. The laughter subsided in stages of smothered giggles until it stopped entirely. Inappropriate displays of the wrong emotions at the wrong times were another reminder of the battle Phoenix had ahead of him.*

*"I know you're nervous, darlin'." Daniel tightened his arms around Phoenix. "I swear I'll take care of you and you'll never regret moving in with me."*

*Racing into the bedroom, with Corrine in hot pursuit, Echo leapt onto the bed and pushed the two apart. "The truck's gone! Can we go, too?"*

*Gently nudging Echo off, Phoenix nodded and stood. "Yeah. Let's get out of here."*

*Squeezing between them again, Echo grasped Daniel's hand and Phoenix's hand, placing himself in the center. Together, they walked out of the apartment and locked the door behind them.*