

Extrasensory Elements

Book 3

# Fire's Witness

Franny Armstrong

Red Rose Publishing



*Fire's Witness*

*Extrasensory Elements*

*Book Three*

*By*

*Franny Armstrong*

## *Dedication*

*The mythical Phoenix bird is born in flames, fulfills the cycle  
of its life then crashes to earth once again to be reborn  
in the ashes.*

*Life is like that.*

*This book is to Dr. Z who helped me rise from the ashes of  
illness to soar again, only this time I will not crash but swoop  
through the flames  
and shout to the heavens my joy at living.*

*Never Surrender! Never Give Up!*

*Life is so worth it.*

*Franny Armstrong-ParaNovelGirl 2011*



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## Chapter One

### The Flame Is Banked

“Ohhh, my head!” Ember Colton groaned as she slowly opened her bleary eyes. Her head still swam in a murky swamp of thoughts. She lay on a strange bed in a strange bedroom, a frown of confusion on her face.

*Where am I? How did I get here? What happened?*

Her heart began to pound as a sense of panic set in. A spicy yet sweaty smell, like a man after a hard workout, and the odor of sex assailed her senses, intense and overwhelming. Nausea clawed at her gut as she struggled to still the spinning in her head. Drums pounded through her temples in a heartless beat.

Eyes burning as she looked down at her torn and wrinkled clothing, she gasped when she saw that her pantyhose were missing! With a shaky hand smoothing her rumpled skirt, she found that her panties were gone too.

Gingerly she sat up and grimaced as the room spun. Her shoes lay haphazardly on the floor. Ember sucked in a quick breath as she moved to the edge

of the bed, her lower belly tender and aching. Picking up her shoes, she slipped them on, moaning softly as her head throbbed harder at the movement.

“Where am I?” she murmured, holding her head with both hands.

Voices! Two men talking heatedly though their voices were muffled. She stumbled to her feet and tiptoed over to peer through the crack in the opened door. Holding her hand to her aching head, she listened to what they are saying, trying to get a clue as to who they were and what had happened to her.

*I don't remember anything after going to the bar.* She'd only had two drinks all night long. A gorgeous hunk had bought her the second drink. His equally handsome friend had bought one for her friend, Julie.

The voices rose. Through the thin space, she saw the man from the bar. A masculine hand held a gun pointed at his chest, but the second man remained out of view as he yelled something unintelligible.

The room suddenly wobbled in front of her, her mind so muddled she couldn't understand what they were saying.

Even though she was confused, she felt in her gut the need to hide. Fear crawled through her belly, urging her to run, to get out of the house. As she slipped out the back patio door onto the deck off the bedroom, she heard two strange sounds. Behind her, she left the door slightly ajar and stumbled down the path.

In an unsteady gait, she ran past a car in the driveway she didn't recognize. Unable to go fast enough, Ember searched desperately for a place to hide. She slipped into the yard behind the next house, finding a large, empty doghouse, and crawled through the opening. After scrambling to the back, she fought to catch her breath as her heart beat so fast she felt like it was going to burst from her chest.

Her body shook violently as she remained hidden in the shadows and watched the street, waiting for...she didn't know what. Her terror mounted by the second. She wasn't sure why, but she knew that something bad had happened to her. The pain in her abdomen increased until she had to lean over and clutch her lower belly.

A man ran past the house and she gasped. She could only see his black dress pants and the high quality, black leather shoes on his feet. Covering her mouth to silence a scream when a few minutes later he ran toward the doghouse, she held her breath. He paused, standing just outside, a few feet from her shivering body. A large silver ring glittered on his pinky finger, the strange design made out of small blue sapphires reflecting light into her eyes.

A shout sounded in the distance and he turned away, racing back toward the house she had just left. With a deep, shuddering breath, she looked for her cell phone to call for help. Horror washed over her when she realized that she'd left her



purse in the house. She heard a car move out fast, the wheels squealing on the asphalt. Sirens sounded in the distance, coming closer by the minute.

Afraid to go back to the house, too frightened to leave her hiding place, Ember waited nearly an hour before she finally crawled out of the doghouse. Cautiously walking to the end of the driveway, she peered around a hedge to view the street.

A slow survey of the area showed the police at the house she'd run from. Two men wheeled a gurney carrying what appeared to be a body in a black bag from the home. Ember covered her mouth with her hand to hide her scream as she stared in horror at the scene before her.

Dead! The handsome man was dead! She now knew what the two noises had been. It was the sound of two shots fired from a gun. Terror filled her as she turned and ran down the street in the opposite direction, desperate to get away.

Two blocks down, she found a phone booth and frantically shoved the door open, sobbing when she realized that she didn't have a quarter to make the call. Her fingers shook so hard she couldn't dial the number anyway but pressed the zero key. Tears flowed in hot trails down her cheeks as she fought to still the rising panic.

"Operator," she sobbed, "I don't have any money. I need to talk to my brother, he's a cop. Please, will you help me?"

Without questioning her, the operator said, “I can put it through collect. Please, hang on, okay?”

Since she sounded hysterical to her own ears, she could only imagine the operator’s response to her voice. The phone immediately rang, and was answered by a man.

“Colton!”

“Brett! Help me. Oh, God! Please help me!” Her legs gave out and she slid to the floor of the phone booth, sobbing hysterically.

“Ember? Where are you Ember? Answer me!” he shouted.

She was unable to talk past the sobs as terror took over.



Ember held a hot cup of herbal tea as Brett sat on the edge of the desk before her. She was still shaking, unable to still the tears that continued to pour down her cheeks. The cup was like a lifeline that she kept her eyes focused on, avoiding Brett’s gaze.

Five years older than her, he was married and had adorable twin boys. Lana, his wife, had welcomed Ember with open arms the moment they’d met. Her warm and loving personality had won Ember’s love and devotion immediately.

Living on campus at the university, Ember was close to where they lived. Many an evening she went out with her best friend, Julie, bar hopping. Shy when

it came to men, Ember never left with a guy at the end of the night, and Julie always stuck with her for safety's sake. Except for last night when she'd met the handsome stranger and accepted a drink from him.

"Brett. I...I don't remember what happened. Nothing after a guy bought me a drink and we talked for a bit, and then this morning—" Her voice turned into a squeak.

"Go on, Ember, tell me what happened. Take your time." Brett's tone was soothing as he urged her to continue. He was an undercover detective for the Toronto Police Department and was very good at his job. She felt his anger though he appeared calm and relaxed, yet his shoulder muscles bunched as he waited.

"Well, Julie and I were at the bar. It was early in the night and we'd only had one drink each when these two guys came over and started talking to us. We danced with them then they bought us drinks." Ember had dropped her gaze to focus on the cup but her eyes shot up to meet Brett's. "Julie! I don't know where she is. I don't remember—"

Brett wiped tears from her cheek with his thumb, and said gently, "Hold on, I'll be right back, okay?"

Fear curled through her gut at the thought of Julie's fate. While she waited for her brother, Ember went back to studying her tea and tried to recall what went wrong the night before.

Brett slipped back into the room. “I’ve got Jessie tracking her down. Now, continue with your story, little one.”

With a tremulous smile at his use of the nickname that he’d given her when they were young children, she took a deep breath and kept talking.

“The next thing I remember is waking up this morning in that house. I was dressed, but you can see how messed up my clothes are, and my pantyhose and underwear are missing.” She felt her cheeks heat with humiliation at the confession, her brother being the last person she wanted to talk to about the fact that she was naked beneath her skirt. “I found my shoes scattered on the floor and put them on just before I heard angry voices in the other room.”

A deep shudder wracked her body as she looked up at him again. “I looked into the living room and saw the guy who’d bought me the drink, and another man who was holding a gun on him. I could only see the second man’s hand holding the gun and... well it scared me so much I ran out the patio door. There were two loud bangs that I realized later must have been gunshots with a silencer. I don’t know, I guess I just panicked and ran down the street.”

Another wave of tears hit and Brett handed her another tissue.

When she was able to continue, he urged, “What happened next?”

To stall for time, she took a sip of tea. “I was so groggy I couldn’t run far, so I hid in a doghouse in the backyard next door. Then I watched as a man ran down

the sidewalk. He wasn't wearing sneakers, but patent leather shoes. Only his legs and shoes were visible from where I was hiding. A minute later he came back and stood right next to the doghouse. I knew he was looking for me. I saw a silver ring on his pinky finger. It had a strange design with blue sapphires. His pants were good quality and his shoes were shiny black and expensive, you know?"

"Would you be able to draw the design?" Brett asked.

Her brother knew she was an exceptional artist and had a photographic memory, yet was kind enough to ask if she wanted to draw it for him.

After nodding, Ember said, "Sure. Just get me paper and colored pencils and I'll do it now."

"We can do it now, but I'd rather wait until later. I want you to be examined by a doctor at the hospital."

"But why? I'm not hurt," Ember shook her head at him, confused.

With a gentle finger, he lifted her chin and stared down at her, his voice soft and caring. "We need to find out what kind of drug they used in your drink and to find out if you've...been raped."

Though Brett tried to hide the fury in his eyes, a burning flush rose from his neck up to his face telling her how angry he really was.

"Raped...I—Oh, my God! I never thought—Oh, Brett, no! I couldn't have—No!" she cried, her hands shaking so hard he had to take the cup from her.



Strong arms lifted her and cradled her close. Brett rocked her as she sobbed hysterically.



The doctor came into the hallway to speak to Brett. “I’m sorry, Detective, but she has been raped, repeatedly. However, he, or they, used condoms and there were no skin samples under her fingernails for DNA evidence. The date rape drug, *Rohypnol* is in her system still. It’s virtually undetectable in standard toxicology tests but under the circumstances, we ran a screen and found traces of it. She might or might not remember the rape and would have been a passive victim, so there are no marks on her; no bruises except a few fingertip sized ones on the inside of her thighs. I can provide a few reputable names of psychiatrists for her to get therapy. They specialize in this type of situation.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Is she ready to go?” Brett asked, stiff with fury at what had happened to his little sister.

“Yes. I told her to get some rest and gave her a prescription for a sedative in case she needs it. Goodbye Detective. I urge you to contact the specialist in regards to what she’s going to go through. Rape doesn’t stop once the deed is done. It remains in their minds for a lifetime.”

The doctor left Brett alone in the long hallway. Though he’d give anything to hit something, he struggled to get a hold of himself for Ember’s sake.

A few minutes later, she met him in the hall, silent and avoiding his eyes.

“I’m taking you home with me, Ember. I don’t want you to be left alone. The killer has your identification. Forensics didn’t find it in the house. If you’re up to it, we can get the paper and pencils, and you can draw those pictures for me.” He slipped his arm around her stiff shoulders and led her out to the car.

On the entire trip to Brett’s place, Ember didn’t say a word. Brett watched her even when Lana rushed out to hug her close, but Ember didn’t respond, as though she were in a trance. Helpless to do anything but wait, Brett left Lana to take Ember to the guest room they kept for her. Brett felt the urge to kill for the first time in his life.



“Do you want me to stay with you, honey?” Lana asked in a gentle voice.

A quick shake of her head was her answer as Ember waited until Lana had closed the bathroom door behind her. Mechanically, she locked herself in, stepped into the shower and began washing herself. With the bar of soap she began to lather her body.

Suddenly, she felt so unclean she began scouring harder and harder until her skin was red, her tears mingling with the flow of water down her face. Anxiety built until her heart raced and she began to hyperventilate, her thoughts moving so fast she couldn’t clear her mind.

*Raped! I was raped by those bastards!*

Sobs left her gasping for breath as she continued to scrub, rubbing her skin raw, her mind spinning faster and faster with thoughts until she snapped and began to scream uncontrollably. Over, and over again, she shrieked as rage filled her. The palms of her hands burned with pain as she slapped them on the wall tiles. Finally, exhausted, she slid to the floor of the tub and curled into a ball, shaking and defeated. She couldn't get the sense of filth off her, feeling so dirty, so ashamed.



Lana raced with Brett to the bathroom in Ember's room and tried the handle of the door, but found it locked.

"Lana, open it!" A tick worked in Brett's jaw as he clenched his teeth together.

"I will, Brett, but you have to back off for now. She needs a woman, not a man, and especially not her brother." She had to place her hand on Brett's chest to stop him and shook her head, indicating he should stay out of the bathroom.

Regret filled her at his stricken look, yet she slipped in and closed the door, leaving him standing there.



Brett wanted to hit something, someone. Even if the rapist was dead, he still wanted to punish him. A noise from the hallway caught his attention. His two-year-old twin boys stared up at him from the doorway with identical looks of confusion. After taking a deep breath to try and still his rage, Brett ran his fingers through his thick hair and fought for control so he could care for his kids.

A fake smile on his face, he said, “Hi boys. Let’s go find some milk and cookies. Daddy’s really hungry.” He walked the solemn toddlers to the kitchen, unable to stop shaking.



Lana opened the glass door and turned off the water, then took a large bath towel and helped Ember stand. She wrapped her sister-in-law’s shuddering body in it then led the girl to the bed.

“Ember, darling, you are not to blame for what happened to you. Do you hear me?” Lana said softly.

A cold, quiet cocoon had wrapped its silken threads around Ember, blocking out the world as she locked herself away where no one could hurt her. Depression was setting in and Lana was more worried about the silence than the screaming.

Since Lana had been through depression herself, she understood completely. It was as though your mind went to a place far away where it was protected from

everything and everyone, where nothing could reach it or harm it. The world, the pain, was placed out of sight and your mind floated in a numb void where you didn't have to think, didn't have to worry about anything.

With loving hands, Lana tucked Ember in then bent down and kissed her forehead. Once she'd closed the door behind her, she went to find Brett. They had to do something quickly, before Ember sank any lower.



After tucking the boys in for their naps, Lana and Brett went back into the living room. Brett called Jessie to get an update on the missing woman. When he hung up the phone he turned to Lana, his expression grave.

They can't locate Julie Robbins. No one has seen her since she and Ember were at the bar last night. Jessie's trying to track down information on the two men who did this, but it'll be difficult to do until the bar starts hopping tonight and he can question some of the patrons. Hopefully someone there will remember seeing the girls with the two men."

A deep growl of frustration sounded low in his throat as he dropped down on the sofa.

"Ember is a fantastic artist and could probably draw their likeness, but she's in no shape for that. I should have got her to do it before I took her to the hospital but it was more important to have her checked out before the drug left her



system.” Eyes closed, he ran his fingers through his hair, every muscle in his body taut with tension.

“Brett, she *will* be okay. We’ll make sure of it. Remember how you, Jessie, and Tina pulled me out of my depression? I think we should get the paper and pencils then I’ll have a talk with her. Maybe I can make her angry enough to fight for her rights and draw the images of what she saw, and of the two men they drank with. That should help her find focus again.” Lana brushed a lock of hair from his forehead and kissed him gently.

“She’s my baby sister, Lana. It’s killing me to see her in so much pain and be helpless to do anything about it. I feel so damn useless!” Brett’s teeth were locked together tight and a vein throbbed in his temple.

“You’re doing just fine. Are you going to call your parents, or would you like me to do it?”

“No. I’ll tell them. You’d better make up the two spare rooms. I doubt either of them will stay away when they find out.”

As Brett watched Lana head down the hall to set up the rooms, he dreaded the two phone calls he’d have to make. As a cop when he made a call to relatives of victims to tell them of the tragedies, it was never easy, but calling his own family? It was the worst thing he’d ever had to do.



Since Lana left the room hours ago, Ember hadn't moved a muscle but stared into space. Lost in a cocoon of numbness, she couldn't focus on Lana's soft voice yet felt the mattress dip as Lana sat down beside her on the bed.

"Ember?"

Gentle fingers brushed against her temples. Ember closed her eyes for a moment and sucked in a deep breath.

Lana spoke again. "You can hide away all you want to, but if you don't snap out of it, a killer and a rapist are going to walk free."

Though a sob welled up in her chest as panic began to rise, Ember turned her head away, wanting Lana to stop talking to her. It was safer where her mind resided.

"Julie is still missing, Ember. Are you going to lie there feeling sorry for yourself and let her down, or are you going to help us find her?" Lana's voice hardened.

There was silence for a few moments then Ember shuddered. *Julie needs my help.*

Once again, Lana continued, "Come on, Ember. Julie needs your help. Only you know what the two men looked like. I know you can draw them and the ring. Don't you care about what happened to Julie?"

The rhythmic motion of Lana's fingers on Ember's forehead soothed her frown away.

"Brett brought colored pencils and paper, honey. I'm going to leave them here and go to the living room. Your parent's are here but I'll keep them away from you for a while so you can think about what I said. It's really important to move fast on this. You don't want those men getting away with it, do you?"

Anger stirred in her veins as Ember began to respond. She blinked a number of times to clear the unshed tears that blurred her vision then focused.

Lana kissed her on her forehead. "I'll be back to check on you soon. Drink the water I put on the table here and get drawing. We need to hurry now—I love you, Ember." Lana ran her soft fingers over the still damp tears on Ember's cheek then turned and left the room, pulling the door closed behind her.



As Ember lay there thinking about what Lana had said, she wondered what might have happened to her friend as well. She knew the murderer had her own purse and ID. Fear clawed at her gut as she realized he could track her down and kill her, as he had the man at the house. Anger grew in place of the fear and she sat up on the bed, determined to do something about it.

Ember reached for the bottle on the bedside table and took a deep swallow, then turned to the paper and pencils with purpose and started drawing feverishly.

The images of the two men began to form on the paper. Even though the one man was handsome, she only saw evil. She had to remain impersonal about the drawings or she wouldn't be able to finish them.

Pain knifed through her chest when she stared down at the first image. She fought back the tears that threatened and flipped the page over. Ember did her best to refocus on the art that came naturally and not think about what she drew. Soon the ring with its unusual oriental design as well as the man's hand, pants and shoes emerged on the page. The arched doorway of the doghouse framed the image.

Again she turned over the page but this time drew the scene in the living room, of the hand with the gun wearing the ring, the man who'd raped her looking angry, yelling at the other unseen one. Next she sketched the furniture and details of the entire room until the life-like ink drawing was complete.

Harsh shudders wracked her body when it was done yet Ember stared down at the images in confusion. *How strange! I don't remember drawing them.* Only then did she allow herself to cry soft, cleansing tears.

When they subsided, she closed the pad of paper and left the bed, then struggled to find clothing. Dressed in a tracksuit, she picked up the pad of paper and left the room, numb with shock from seeing her own viewpoint on paper.



From the doorway, Ember stood in a fog and stared at her father, Darren Colton. He stood six feet tall with blond, wavy hair and the same vibrant, electric-blue eyes as Brett. Ember only shared her father's blindingly-beautiful smile. Both children had their mother's straight black hair while Ember had her soft azure-blue eyes.

Memories of her childhood surfaced past her pain as her gaze shifted to her mother. Though she towered over Lucy Colton by a full inch, Ember always felt like she'd been ripped off when she was born since her brother received all the height and she was left at a mere five foot eight.

It almost made her smile when she recalled how Brett would pat the top of her head like she was a little pet to prove he was so much bigger. She used to jump on his back, rubbing her knuckles hard on his scalp. The play fight usually ended with her yelling 'uncle' when Brett wouldn't stop tickling her. Though the fond images flashed through her mind, she couldn't get past the painful thoughts of the rape, and chills wracked her body.

Since the group kept their voices down, the looks on their faces told Ember what they were discussing and she felt dirty and used. About to turn around and go back to the room, she froze when her father looked up. His eyes full of concern and anger, he walked over to Ember and pulled her into his arms.



Ember cringed. She could feel his unspent fury and felt ashamed, thinking she was the cause for being so foolish and allowing the men to rape her. Brett had the same cold rage in his eyes. She couldn't look at anyone, mortified.

When her father stepped back, she turned and handed Brett the pad of paper without speaking. He didn't look at it right away, but asked her gently, "Are you okay, little one?"

In response, she nodded then moved on wooden legs past her silent father toward her mother. As her mother gathered her close, her shoulders shaking with sobs, Ember remained limp and unresponsive, unable to accept the comforting gesture.

"Oh, my baby, I'm so sorry this happened to you. I love you so much. I know there isn't anything I can say or do to make it better, but I want you to know that we all love you and we stand by you." Lucy didn't let go until Lana took her arm and gently pulled her away.

Once again Ember's gaze fell to the art pad Brett now held. She waited for him to open it, dread filling her numb mind. It was like being raped all over again, the thought of her family seeing what she'd seen.



After studying the minute details in the drawings, Brett gasped in amazement. He knew she had exceptional artistic talents, but the work was close

to being a photograph. Ember had always been able to remember details, and her marks in school showed her ability to retain information; the benefits of having a photographic memory.

“Ember, this is fantastic. With such an accurate description, I’m going to have Jessie do a search for the men who ra...who we’re looking for.” Unable to meet her eyes for fear she’d see his blind rage at what had happened to her, Brett avoided mentioning Julie’s disappearance.

“Where’s Julie?” Ember asked, her voice husky and lifeless.

Still, Brett wouldn’t meet her gaze. Ember bit back a sob as though knowing that the news wasn’t good. He couldn’t answer her question until he had confirmation that Julie was alive...or dead.

“I have to scan these then I’ll send them to Jessie. Thanks for doing the drawings, Ember.” Brett left the room in a hurry. He didn’t *want* to tell her what he thought had happened to Julie.



An anguish-filled moan escaped Ember’s throat. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

Lana’s eyes filled with tears. “No one has heard from her yet, but they’re out there looking. The pictures you’ve drawn will help find her, Ember.”

Devastated, Ember stared at the floor. “I need to go lie down now.” She left the room, avoiding everyone’s touch, and quietly closed the bedroom door behind her.



Brett sat at the kitchen table with his hands holding his head. He’d never felt such defeat. His wife returned to join him, her warm hand resting on his shoulder in comfort.

“Brett, what’s going on?” Lana asked, her voice low with dread.

“Julie was found an hour ago by some hitchhikers. Cause of death an overdose. The bastards dumped her body in a gully on the side of the highway. It appears that she’d also been raped multiple times, like Ember was. Damn it, she was only twenty-four years old. I don’t know how to tell Ember. I don’t know what to say.”

He couldn’t look at Lana, unable to draw on her support in the face of such dread.

Hands cradling his head, she pulled him close to her breasts and stroked his hair in a soothing gesture.

Lana said softly. “I’ll tell her, my love. She needs to hear it from me.” Kissing him on the top of his head, she left him there.

For the first time, Brett felt like a coward.

## Chapter Two

### Bringing In the Fire

A woman dressed in ripped jeans and a skimpy tank top crossed the busy Toronto road, taking a quick glance up then down the street. She slipped into the restaurant, the door closing behind her.

From behind a parked van, undercover cop Phoenix McCoy watched and waited, shoulders bunched with tension.

“Get ready to move in,” he said quietly into his radio. After releasing the safety on his gun, he nodded toward another woman who stood in the bakery window next to the restaurant. She returned the gesture and disappeared into the dark.

Traffic on the street cleared out as the road was cordoned off a few blocks away in both directions on his signal. Phoenix waited while civilians were quietly moved out of harm’s way and farther down the street by plain clothed cops. Each

of the storeowners had been ordered to lock up their businesses and evacuate the area. It was time to go in!

With gun held in up position, he slipped across the road like a shadow and moved closer to the door of the restaurant. Three more cops moved in and prepared to enter the building. Phoenix was going in first since it was his takedown operation.

After a quick nod to his teammates, he edged the door open and slipped inside, followed by his backup. They didn't make a sound as Phoenix directed them with hand signals.

Voices came from the rear of the building. Phoenix waited until he heard the woman yelling then gave a hard kick to the large kitchen door.

"Freeze, Police!" At the same time as he and his team entered, the rear door flew inwards with a crash against the counter.

The three men who stood with the lady in the kitchen jumped at the sound. Two of them pulled their guns. In a flash they dropped to the floor as the cops shot back. As the third man pulled his gun, he made a grab for the woman in an attempt to take her as hostage.

Before he could get a good hold on her, in a blur of motion she had him lying faced down on the floor and cuffed. She grinned up at Phoenix. "Hey partner, what took you so long?"

He knew his expression remained serious since he felt no humor in the situation. “Good work, Lindsay.” Phoenix spoke into his radio.

“We need an ambulance. Two perps are down. Give us fifteen minutes then you can let the traffic through. Over and out.” Phoenix shook his head in disgust. “It’s going to take hours to get the paperwork done on this bust.”

He walked over to the table and took note of the bags of dope laid out in neatly packaged parcels.

“Cocaine. There’s enough here to earn them shiny brass nameplates for their jail cells.” His eyes narrowed as one of the prisoners began shouting.

“I want my lawyer. This is police brutality!”

“Knock it off, you idiot. You’ll have plenty of time to call your lawyer.” Flashes of the dead teens Phoenix had watched the coroner bag the week before because of these men went through his mind. Rage nearly blinded him as the man kept yelling.

“You bastards. I’ll sue you all. I’ve got connections. You’ll be sor...”

Phoenix saw red as he moved toward the man, muscles tensed and tight as adrenaline rushed through his veins. His jaw was clenched so tight it hurt.

“I’ll give you some bloody connections. You can join all the people you’ve murdered with your greed!” he growled through his teeth, ready to beat the man to a pulp.

Lindsay put her hand on his arm to stop him. “McCoy, go easy.”

Slowly, Phoenix shook his head as he struggled for control. He continued to stare down at the man, eyes narrowed with hatred. Bitter fury burned like acid in his throat.

“Lindsay, you’d better get him to shut his trap, or my foot’s going to fill it.”

“Why don’t you step out front and see if the ambulance is here yet,” she said, giving him an excuse to get away from the obnoxious dealer.

It took Phoenix a minute to pull himself away as he left the room, slamming his fist into the door before he exited the building. Once out in the fresh air, he bent over and took a few deep breaths. It was always like this. His temper seemed to escalate with every kid the bastards sent to the coroner. Yet, the slime kept coming out of the woodwork bringing more junk onto the streets and he was helpless to stop it, no matter how hard he tried. The cops would take down one group and two others would replace them.

“Arrrgggg,” he shouted, kicking a garbage can. Once the lawyers got involved, the creeps would be on the street in no time setting up their operations to begin the whole process all over again. Burnout hovered over his consciousness as frustration ate at his stomach. He was getting out of control, unable to focus on his job. It was time to go home and see his family, and reclaim the peace he’d grown up with.



Lindsay came out leading the man she'd taken down without a shot fired. The skeletal thin prisoner didn't bother to struggle. From the look of his haggard face and emaciated body, it appeared that the drugs were more important to him than food. Phoenix shook his head. He'd be willing to bet this one would be dead within six months, if not sooner.

The ambulance pulled up as Lindsay placed her hand on the crook's head so he wouldn't bang it getting into the squad car. Eyes narrowed in anger, Phoenix watched her, wishing she would just smash the creep's head on the door a few dozen times, or better yet, turn her head the other way and let him do it.

When the paramedics arrived, he held up two fingers to let them know there would be two for the ride then held the door open for the stretcher, nodding at them as they passed by. He knew them well, seeing them nearly every day on his worst calls.

Lindsay came up to speak with him. "You definitely have some anger issues you need to deal with, partner. Take some time off and pull yourself together. I was watching your face and you were ready to let go on that guy."

Patting his shoulder, she said, "I'm sure the chief will find someone who can put up with me for a month or so." Though her eyes were filled with concern, she smiled then turned and went back to her car to take the perp to the station.

Once the scene was processed, he would speak to his chief about a vacation. His partner was seldom wrong and she knew him like the back of her hand. In stoic silence, he held the door open as the paramedics moved one of the druggies out, he entered the building again, this time with purpose. He wanted to clear the mess up quickly and get the hell out of town!



At his desk in his small office Brett sat across from his partner, Jessie Chan and handed the drawing of the ring over.

“Jessie, you know all Asian written languages, does that look Chinese to you?”

“It’s Japanese. The symbol made from the sapphires means bird. It could be referring to a person’s name or a code name. I’d be willing to bet that it has something to do with a drug dealer or a gang name since a man was murdered and there were drugs involved. I’d go with the drug angle myself.” Jessie handed the pad back to Brett.

“Since the killer has Ember’s ID, we have to put her under protective custody. I have a friend in the Scarborough detachment that’s going on leave for a month or so. I’m waiting for his callback.” Brett studied the design on the ring, wondering where he’d seen it before. He was sure he had.

“How is Ember doing, Brett?” Jessie asked in a quiet tone.

Brett pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Quiet...very quiet. She cringes whenever I go near her. She doesn’t remember what happened, but she’s acting like I blame her for it. I don’t know how to talk to her. Even Bran and Jess can’t snap her out of it, and you know how much she loves the boys.”

Adoring her two nephews, Ember always showered them with love and affection—until the night that she had gone to the bar with Julie.

“Is she going to Julie’s funeral?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’d like to get her out of town. I think the perp would find a funeral a good place to make a move on her if he thinks she can identify him. I doubt he would have taken her purse if he didn’t think she saw him kill the other man.” Brett sat back and took a sip of his coffee.

When the phone rang, Brett jumped slightly, his jangled nerves on edge.

“Colton,” Brett barked into the phone.

“Hi Brett. It’s Phoenix McCoy. You called?”

“Yeah, I did. I need a favor. Can you come to the house tonight?” Brett asked, hoping his friend would help him.

“Sure, what time?” Phoenix asked.

“Come for dinner. I’m sure Lana will spoil you rotten,” Brett tried to joke with him, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“I’ll be there around five o’clock, buddy. Later.”

After hanging up the receiver, Brett shook his head and locked eyes with Jessie. “I hope he says yes, I don’t trust any other man except you to do this for me. Phoenix is a close second.”

“I think he will. He’s a sucker for a damsel in distress,” Jessie smiled slightly. “Let’s get this day wrapped up and head home. Tina’s going to make a dinner and I don’t want to miss teasing her about it. She never cooks and usually burns everything.”

Brett laughed half-heartedly and began to tidy up his desk, putting the files in order and shutting down his computer. He wasn’t looking forward to going home. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. After Jessie left his office, Brett sat in the quiet for a while before he could talk himself into leaving. His frustration with Ember’s case weighed down on him. They didn’t have any leads at all but for the drawings.



After stepping out of his blue, 1974 Mustang convertible, Phoenix locked the doors and headed toward Brett’s house. As was his habit, he scanned his surroundings then looked at the two-year old bungalow. It was made of soft gray fieldstone topped by a dark green, metal roof. Large pine trees stood sentinel around it.

Brett had told Phoenix that he'd inherited the land which had been in the family for generations, and built the home for Lana when they married.

At the door he rang the bell and waited a brief moment before it was opened by Lana Colton. Joy lit in her eyes just before she threw her arms around him.

"Oh, Phoenix, it's so good to see you. It's been too long. Come on in."

"Good to see you too, Lana." He pressed a quick kiss to her cheek then followed her into the living room.

"Brett will be out in a minute. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I wouldn't mind an herbal tea if you have it, thanks," he said, studying her face. Even though she was smiling up at him, he saw the stress in her eyes and around her mouth. It had been months since he had stopped by for a visit. Since the chief practically pushed him out the door on a one month paid leave, Phoenix figured he might have lots of time on his hands to visit the Colton's, after his trip to Bancroft.

Brett entered the room, a wide grin on his face as he extended his hand, he shook Phoenix's. "Thanks for coming. I really need to talk to you in private, but we'll have a short visit with Lana first." The expression in his eyes warmed as he tilted his head. "She's coming back now."

Only a few people knew of Brett's ability to read Lana's mind and Phoenix was one of them. Brett seemed to know where she was at any given time, unless she blocked him from her thoughts.

As if on cue, Lana returned, carrying a tray of drinks and snacks. Phoenix walked over and took it from her.

"You'll have to teach me that trick some day, Brett."

"Thank you, Phoenix," she smiled, giving Brett a loving glance.

It never ceased to amaze him how the couple was always so tuned into each other. Brett had joked that it came in handy when she wanted him for something. Milk, bread, romance—

"So, where are your twin monsters?"

As though affronted, Lana put her hand on her chest. "You cannot be talking about our, *little angels*?" she said, her tone full of innocence.

"Yeah, that's it...angels," Brett said in a dry tone, his eyebrow lifting in mockery though his proud grin belied his words.

Young Bran raced around the corner carrying his toy truck. At two years old, he was tall for his age and looked like a miniature copy of his father. He seemed to know just when his father was looking for him.

His identical brother, Jess, had other talents. Right on his brother's tail, Jess screamed and tackled Bran to the ground. The boys giggled as they wrestled in the

hallway. When the glasses on the tray began to rattle, Lana and Brett had to separate the boys, laughing and tickling them. Jess had inherited his mom's telekinetic abilities while Bran showed signs of his Uncle Brandon's ability to have visions. They were definitely a handful.

With one boy under each arm, Brett brought them over to Phoenix.

Lana's laughter warmed the room. "Which one do you want?"

"Both!" Phoenix became a different man when he held the rowdy boys in his arms. His tension lessened and he relaxed, his intimidating attitude forgotten. Basically, he knew he was was putty in their tiny hands.

"Have you boys been giving your mama a hard time?" He tickled them as he spoke, growling like a bear.

"Unk Pee, stop, Unk Pee." Bran giggled.

Jess squirmed and kicked, laughing with joy. "I good. I good," he yelled.

"Okay, then. I guess I can stop the tickle torture, but be warned that I'll be watching you both." Phoenix gave the boys each an evil stare and they shrieked with laughter, unafraid.

"All right, you three, that's enough roughhousing for now. You have to settle down or we won't get any dinner into you," Lana warned, hiding her smile.

Surprise in his eyes, Phoenix looked at the boys one at a time, exaggerating his expression. “Oh, man, you guys are getting me in trouble! Your mama’s going to send me to my room!”

Jess turned to his mother, his eyes full of worry. “Unk Pee is good, mama. Don’ send him to his woom!”

Lana finally laughed, unable to keep her stern expression. “Okay, I promise I’ll be nice to him. You’d better give him a hug though, he looks sad now.”

Instantly pulling a sad face, Phoenix looked at the boys. “I need big *super-hugs*, boys!”

Scrambling to their feet they climbed up on Phoenix’s lap, throwing their small arms around his neck. Bran kissed his cheek making Phoenix flush, embarrassed and pleased with the boys’ affectionate welcome.

Bran noticed the necklace around Phoenix’s neck and pulled at it until his uncle lifted it out for him to see. It was an Ojibwa pendant depicting a medicine wheel with a phoenix bird preparing to fly in the center.

When Bran’s whole body stiffened, Phoenix froze, the look in the little boy’s eyes spacey and far away.

“What’s wrong with him?” Phoenix panicked, his gut wrenching in fear for the child. When he looked up at Lana then Brett, they didn’t seem worried but just stood still. Phoenix cried out, “Brett...what is—”



“Its okay, Phoenix, Bran has started getting visions like Brandon. Just wait a moment and hold onto him.” Brett picked up a somber Jess and held him close, kissing his forehead. Jess was used to his brother zoning out and wasn’t in the least bit worried. Mischievous, he reached up and yanked at a handful of Brett’s hair then snickered when Brett cringed.

*“She’s fire. Auntie fire,”* Bran whispered then slumped in Phoenix’s arms.

Lana moved forward and took her son. “We’ll be back in a bit,” she said and went to the kitchen with Bran, Jess following in her tracks.

Stunned, Phoenix’s stared up at Brett.

“Let’s go to my office where we can talk. I’ll tell you all about it and also tell you why I asked you here.



In the office, Brett sat back in his cushy black leather chair while Phoenix sat across from him in its mate.

“Bran has been getting the same type of visions that Brandon does. He holds something in his hand and when the visions come to him, his whole body stiffens up. He zones out for a few minutes. It’s called psychometry, though Brandon also gets precognitive dreams or dreams that come true. Sometimes Bran says things and other times he just slumps and falls into a deep sleep. We give him lots of

water and let him rest. The first time it happened I nearly went crazy, but Lana was calm. She'd seen her brother do it all her life."

"What did he mean by '*she's fire, auntie fire*'?"

"I would assume that he meant Ember, my sister. Since 'Ember' means the glowing coals of a fire or a spark, she's obviously connected to you somehow. Funny, your name is associated with fire also, isn't it?" Brett asked, a smirk on his face.

Phoenix nodded and returned the grin. "Phoenix rising. The fabled bird that rises from the ashes, goes through its lifecycle then crashes back into the flames only to be reborn again. Some First Nation tribes call it the thunderbird. My brothers were named for the earth, wind, and water, my sisters are life, or waterfall and living with grace. Mom has always been a traditional woman."

"Hopefully you don't have the same fiery temper as my sister!" Both men laughed.

"Actually I do. That's why I'm taking some time off, as you know."

"Before I tell you what's going on, would you like a drink, Phoenix?"

"Water would be great."

From the small bar fridge behind his desk, Brett leaned over and pulled out two bottles of water, handing one to Phoenix.

“As far as we can tell, my sister and her friend went to a bar on the university campus and two guys slipped them some *Ketamine*. Ember woke up in a house and witnessed the man’s murder. She ran, but the killer has her purse and ID. I need to hide her for a while. The witness protection program is under funded and I’d rather keep the RCMP out of it until absolutely necessary. Since you’re going on leave for a month I wondered if you’d take care of her for me.”

Not surprised, Phoenix kept all emotion from his expression. “What about the other girl?”

A deep breath of frustration left Brett’s mouth before he answered. “Dead. She was found on the side of the highway, overdosed and raped.” Brett’s voice became gruff, his eyes hard blue chips of ice.

Phoenix took a long sip of water from the bottle, giving himself time to think. He placed the bottle back on the desk and studied his hands while he pulled his thoughts together.

“So, let me get this straight; you want me to be her bodyguard for the next month or as long as it takes to catch the perp?” he asked, stunned that Brett wanted him to babysit his sister. Having never met Ember, Phoenix was uncertain he wanted to take the job on.

“We’ll pay you, plus full expenses. I’m...I’m really in a bind, Phoenix. I don’t trust anyone to be with her except Jessie and you, and Jessie can’t do it. I’m asking you to think about it.”

“Brett, do you know why I’m on leave?” Phoenix asked.

His emotions hidden, Brett said, “Yes, I do, but I think you can handle this. Just keep her out of sight for a while so Jessie and I can catch the murderer.” Once again tilting his head, Brett zoned out for a few seconds then grinned.

”Come have dinner and you can think it over. You can meet her and if you choose not to do it, we won’t be upset. No pressure, okay?”

Phoenix nodded then followed Brett to the dining room. “She told you that dinner was on the table right—in your head?”

At Brett’s knowing grin, he shook his head. “Never a dull moment in this house, I’ll bet!”

A deep chuckle shook his chest as Brett entered the dining room. Lana was just tying bibs around the boy’s necks. “Dinner is ready. Have a seat.”

Out of habit, Phoenix made sure his back was to the wall and slipped into the chair beside Jess. He began making faces at the boys, putting his fingers on either side of his mouth he pulled sideways and wagged his tongue at Bran across the table. He froze when he saw a beautiful young woman standing in the

doorway watching him. A deep flush of heat suffused his face and neck at being caught playing.

Immediately, he dropped the playful attitude and jumped to his feet, noting how she cringed at his action. Since he knew what had happened to her, he lowered his gaze and cleared his throat to buy some time so she could adjust to his presence.

Brett came back into the room. “Ember, I’d like you to meet my friend, Phoenix.”

She gave a slight nod but didn’t speak. Hesitant, she moved to the table to sit beside Bran, staring down at her plate.

Anger burned in his gut as he studied her. She had been brutalized emotionally, physically, and psychologically, even though she didn’t remember what had happened. Psychological pain was worse than physical because it seldom healed, no matter how long you lived with it, or dealt with it.

Her long, shiny, blue-black hair was tied at the back, bangs falling over her forehead. Pain filled, electric blue eyes captured his attention, though she tried to avoid his gaze. Her heart-shaped face was unblemished, her lips lush and damp. He watched as her mouth moved when she whispered to Bran and fixed his bib. Her teeth bit down gently, worrying her bottom lip. She stunned him with her delicate looks. He felt her anguish as the pain radiated from her.

Obviously aware that he watched her, she blushed, her breathing quickening. She made to get up to leave the table but Brett chose that moment to come into the room carrying a large pan of lasagna.

“Ember, please sit down. Dinner’s ready and you haven’t eaten today. Please.” Brett placed the pan on top of the hotplates on the table and stood back watching her, his eyes full of pain.

As he swallowed hard, Phoenix wondered how he could possibly deal with guarding her. Watching the pain in her eyes alone would kill him yet seeing his friend suffer was even worse. He looked down at his plate and remained silent.

Lana entered the room with a large basket of toasted garlic bread. Her eyes moved to see her husband’s pain filled expression. Her chin raised a notch as she tried to lighten the mood.

“Ember, would you place the bread on the table beside you? There isn’t any room down here with the boys’ bowls and Sippy cups,” she said in a musical tone. “Isn’t that right, boys?” She looked at them affectionately.



Sliding slowly back into her chair, Ember passed the bread down. Silent, she avoided everyone’s eyes, playing with her food as Brett and Lana conversed with Phoenix. She studied Phoenix from beneath her lashes.

He was gorgeous! She shivered, though she was now wary of handsome men. His features were classical First Nation. High chiseled cheekbones, a strong square jaw, and firm, full lips that framed bright white teeth when he showed his brilliant smile, a smile that seemed foreign to him. Strain showed around his dark chocolate eyes. Soothing and warm, his voice seemed to surround her like the comfort of strong arms. His words were clear and concise, filled with confidence.

From the 'V' of his slightly opened shirt, she could see that his chest was bare. Long straight black hair, similar to her own, was held back with a leather tie, two small feathers hanging from it. Phoenix looked like a man right out of a romance novel, built with just the right amount of muscle and charm, but he also had a haunted look about him, as if he was close to the edge.

"Ember, would you like me to heat up your dinner? You haven't eaten a bite," Lana asked gently.

Startled out of her musings, Ember shook her head and stood up, leaving the table in a rush without a word.



Silence but for the children's chatter filled the room as Brett's eyes flashed his pain and hopelessness. He looked down at his plate.

Phoenix cleared his throat. “Excellent meal, Lana. I love lasagna. The last time I had it was—I can’t remember when!” With a wide smile on his face, he handed her his plate.

“I’ll get the coffee. Or tea if you prefer it?” she asked.

“Do you have herbal tea?”

“I sure do. That’s all Ember will drink. Name your poison,” she grinned.

“Chamomile?” he asked.

“You’ve got it! It will just take a few minutes.” Her gaze slid over to meet Brett’s. “And you, my love, can get your boys tidied up and ready for their bath.”

“Slave driver,” Brett muttered, almost hiding a grin.

“I’ll help if you want to bath them now. We can have our tea later,” Phoenix offered.

Surprise registered on Brett’s face. “Well sure, buddy, if you’re up to it.” Brett turned to the boys. “Who wants Unk Pee to help bath them?”

Both boys yelled, “Meeee!” Amongst laughter, the men helped the twins out of their highchairs.

Lana gave Phoenix a thankful smile then took the dirty plates into the kitchen to clean up. Ember’s plate, still full of food sat in its place. Phoenix frowned. The job wouldn’t be as easy as Brett obviously thought it would be.





“I’ll do it.” Phoenix sat with Brett and Lana, drinking his herbal tea.

Brett’s expression, usually so unreadable, relaxed as relief filled his eyes. Lana blew out a deep breath. They’d told him that the more they tried to help Ember, the further she pulled away from them.

“I can’t tell you what this means to us, Phoenix. I’ll be running the investigation and just knowing she is safely out of the way will go a long way to giving me solid focus. She’s so fragile right now, I don’t...it’s...Oh, damn it! I just don’t know what else to do—Will you be taking her to Bancroft, Phoenix?” Brett asked.

“Yes. I think you’re right that we should get her out of the city. My family is up in Bancroft and I have a hunting cabin deep in the forest near the old marble mines. She should be comfortable enough.”

Lana sat forward in her chair, an uneasy expression on her face, hands shaking in uncertainty. He could tell she had concerns she needed to voice.

“What is it, Lana?”

“Phoenix. I...You know what happened to her. I want you to promise me that you won’t...that she...” Her face flamed with embarrassment as only a redhead’s could.

He reached out a hand to cover hers in a comforting gesture. “I understand that you might fear Ember being abused again, but I swear, Lana, I’ll treat her like

gold. No one will touch her, I promise you. She'll be safe. We'll go fishing and hiking. I'll get her out doing things. You'll see, she'll be fine—Cell phones don't work too well where we'll be."

"Thank you, Phoenix. I believe you will take good care of her."

"Leave messages at the police station if you need to get a hold of us, or I'll give you the number of a friend of ours in town. They can reach us by radio if necessary. We don't have a phone at my mother's house. Once they contact her, she can get someone to four-wheel out to us and we can call back. But I will contact once a week, unless you phone us first."

Phoenix didn't consider himself a threat to Ember physically and hoped to relieve Brett and Lana's concerns. He knew how much Brett trusted him. Ember was a beautiful young woman, but Phoenix planned on keeping his hands to himself.

From the questioning gaze Lana gave her husband, she had questions to ask him. Brett gave her a look that said now was not the time.

Not missing the unspoken query, Phoenix took his leave. "I have to get packed and make some early calls but I should be here by ten o'clock to pick her up, okay?"

"Absolutely. Thanks for everything. We'll see you in the morning." Brett walked Phoenix to the door and clapped a hand on his shoulder. The relief in his

eyes made Phoenix realize he'd done the right thing by accepting the position of Ember's guard.

Once the door closed behind him, Phoenix scanned the dark street, taking note of the cars and any movement. There was nothing out of the ordinary. He unlocked his car and got in, moving out slowly onto the road. He noted a dark blue Buick with tinted windows, but didn't see anything unusual about it and kept driving. He had some packing to do.

## Chapter Three

### Stirring the Embers

“No! You can’t make me! I’m not going anywhere with that man,” Ember cried out, tears filling her eyes. She was terrified of being alone with Phoenix McCoy or any man. She never wanted to have a man touch her again and shuddered at the thought of it.

“Ember, I trust him, and you know I don’t trust many people. I can’t run the investigation and keep you safe at the same time. The killer knows who you are. You have to go away.”

Though Brett tried to reason with Ember, she was inconsolable as panic took over, her heart pounding in her ears.

“No! I don’t want to leave. I can just stay in my room. No one will even know I’m here.” Frantic at the thought of leaving her haven, facing that man, Ember trembled.

Lana gripped Ember’s wrist, surprisingly strong.

“Ember, what if the killer does come here looking for you? Are you willing to place the boys, your brother, and me in danger? How would you feel if we were murdered because you were here?”

A twinge of pain pierced Ember heart, shocked at Lana’s cruel words. Never before had Lana hurt her feelings. Agony washed through Ember as she realized that Lana was right. She gasped in agony at the thought of losing her family. Lana had been the sister Ember never had. The twins and Brett would also be in danger!

Defeat weighed on her shoulders as she fought back tears. She was being selfish, and had to get away from those she loved in order to protect them. Ember took a deep shuddering breath and finally gave in.

“All right. I’ll leave,” she said in a deadened tone. Her shoulders slumped as she turned away and hurried to her bedroom so that Brett and Lana wouldn’t see her cry.



After pulling his distraught wife into his arms, Brett murmured, “You did the right thing, kitten. I think they call that tough love.”

Her cheek resting on his chest, Lana cried openly and whispered, “I hope she can forgive me. I didn’t want to hurt her.”

Brett picked up his wife, carried her down the hall to their bedroom, and placed her gently on the bed. After closing the door quietly, he went to her and

held her close until she finished sobbing a long while later. Then he helped her undress and put her to bed, kissing her gently. Once Brett shed his clothing, he slipped onto the mattress beside her and held her tight. It was a long time before he finally fell asleep, his protective arms keeping her safe.



“We can’t get her tonight. The cop’s house is like a fortress, high tech security system and all. Might as well call it a night and see if we can nab her tomorrow,” the driver of the Buick said.

When the tall, dark visitor left the house earlier and drove away, the two men made plans to slip into the home and capture the girl, but seeing the security system light flashing in the window, they thought better of it.

Caution warred with the need to fulfill his job. He figured since Colton was a cop, the place was probably wired to go direct to the precinct if the alarm sounded.

Frustrated, he pulled out his cell phone and called his boss. “Hey, Birdman, the girl’s under lock-and-key for the night so it looks like we’re out of luck this time. You want us to call it a night and try again tomorrow?”

“You have until six a.m. then you get back there. If she skips, you’ll be the one needing protection.” Disconnecting immediately, the phone went dead.

“Geez, take a freaking chill pill, why don’t ya!” the man griped into the silent phone.

“Let’s go get some sleep,” his passenger yawned.



The two men drove off...unaware of the silent figure watching them. Unable to get an ID on their faces due to the dark, and through the tinted windows, he still took down the license plate. Phoenix picked up his cell, called it in, then drove home, satisfied that the Colton family was safe for the night.



At ten a.m. sharp, Phoenix pulled into the driveway. Brett and Lana each held a child and stood with Ember in the doorway of the home, out of sight from the road, their expressions somber. Brett was taking no chances with her safety.

“Good morning. I’ll take her bags.” Without speaking to Ember, he placed her bags in the trunk then waited by the car, his eyes scanning the road. He noted that there was a brown Oldsmobile in the same parking spot where the Buick had been the day before and wrote down the license plate to give to Brett. The windows were also tinted, so he couldn’t see the men he knew were inside. His gut feelings usually proved to be right.

From his vantage point, he could see and hear the struggle the Colton's were having with their farewells.

"We love you, Ember. Please understand that this is for your safety. We would keep you here with us forever if we could. It's only temporary," Lana said, her eyes awash with pain.

Silent, Ember put her finger in Bran's chubby hand and whispered goodbye, turning to Jess to say the same thing. She didn't offer the same courtesy to either Brett or Lana but walked away in silence, her eyes focused on the ground.

Tears slipped down Lana's cheeks and her lips trembled as though trying to keep it together.

Brett put Jess down and kissed Lana's forehead. "Back in a minute, kitten." He stood by as Phoenix open the door for Ember, his eyes scanning the street and especially the brown car.

"We'll call soon. Enjoy yourself, Ember," Brett offered, but she kept her gaze on the floor and ignored him.

For a moment, Phoenix placed a hand on Brett's shoulder to offer support then nodded as he climbed in behind the wheel. Phoenix pulled out and moved off at a fast pace, watching the brown car in his rear view mirror.



Two kilometers from Brett's home, the car was forced to pull over by two cruisers with flashing lights. Phoenix slowed down to watch as the occupants were apprehended and grinned. His instincts never failed.



An hour into the drive, Ember still hadn't said one word to him and Phoenix began to feel uncomfortable. He was ridiculously relieved when his cell phone rang.

"McCoy!—Perfect! How long can you keep them?" He paused, listening.

"That'll do. Are they talking?—Thanks. Keep me informed. Bye."

He let a wide grin light up his face as he clicked the earpiece to hang up. He refocused on driving, wondering if Ember was the least bit curious about the call. After a few more minutes of silence, he spoke.

"In case you were wondering, my buddies just picked up the car that was parked outside your brother's place and the two criminals who were going to kill you are now in custody."

Ember's eyes shot to his. "What?"

Pleased that she finally acknowledged him, he said, "Your brother ran the plates on the car and found them to be big time crooks."

She sat up straighter, her mouth dropping open. "Then you can take me back now. It's over, right?"

Her hopeful look was the most animation he'd seen in her since they'd been introduced. Though he hated to disappoint her, he had no choice.

"They were just stooges hired to come after you, Little Flame. The real crook is still at large, but we'll catch him, and soon. I promise you that."

A lone tear trailed down her cheek as she watched him then a curious look came over her features. "What did you just call me?" She kept looking straight ahead out the window, waiting for his answer.

"Little Flame. That is what an ember is. When the fire is low and only embers remain, they are called little flames."

Thrilled that he had her talking finally, he waited for a response but didn't receive one so he continued.

"In my culture, fire is a symbol of the heart of the people. We use it in nearly all of our ceremonies. It's believed that fire cleanses the spirit and the smoke from the flames carry the prayers up to the Great Mystery. The one most people call, God."

He could tell that she was hooked on what he was saying by the alert stance of her body, even though she tried to appear she wasn't listening, avoiding his gaze.

"Fire is a messenger; a gift from the Great Mystery." He fell silent, waiting for her to take the bait and process what he'd said.

A few minutes went by then she asked in a quiet voice, “Your name; Phoenix McCoy. Doesn’t Phoenix have to do with fire also?”

“Yes, it represents rebirth, cleansing, new thoughts, new ways of being, and regeneration. As in out with the old and in with the new. Once the phoenix has been through the full cycle of life, it crashes back into the flames, returning to ashes until the next generation is born to start the cycle again. The funny thing is that my surname, McCoy, means fire in Irish! Don’t ask me where the Irish part fits in. I haven’t figured that out yet.”

After she released a deep sigh, she said, “That’s kind of romantic; the Phoenix bird. The renewal of life.” She paused, sucking in a deep quivering breath. “I wonder if my life will ever begin again.”

Phoenix had the strangest urge to pull her close and hold her so she would feel safe. Instead, he gave himself a mental shake. He was her bodyguard, nothing more.

“Perhaps we should pick up some small sticks for you to hold then.” Biting back a grin, he waited in silence.

This time she looked at him in puzzlement. “Pick up sticks? What do you mean by that?”

“Kindling,” he said, biting back mirth.

“Kindling? You aren’t making sense,” she said, looking at him as though he had two heads.

“Yes, kindling, to stir the fire and build the flames; to begin your life again.”

A snort escaped before she could hold herself back. Turning to look out the window again, her shoulders shook as though she hid laughter.

“You’re such an idiot!” she murmured.

A deep chuckle rumbled in his chest as Phoenix concentrated on his driving.

Finally, he cleared his throat. “We’ll be stopping in about half an hour for gas. There’s a restaurant if you’d like to get something to eat.”

Silence crashed against him like waves from the ocean. She had fallen back into her quiet world where he couldn’t travel. He turned the radio on, country music filling the stillness. Soon he was singing quietly to the songs, lost in his own world.



“I suppose I should tell you about my family before I throw you on their mercy.” Phoenix explained, “You may want to take notes, it’s a long story and a large family.”

Grateful for anything to break the tension between them, Ember sat back to listen.

“My grandfather is a very wise and wonderful man. His name is Malimo. I know that sounds like a strange name, but wait until you hear the rest of their names. Malimo is Native American for *Bear Walking Into Shade*. He was named this because the first thing my great-grandfather saw when his son was born was...a bear walking into the shade.”

Caught in the act with a reluctant grin, Ember quickly avoided Phoenix’s amused gaze and bit back a grin.

“Then comes my father,” Phoenix’s voice changed and became cold and hard. “He is called Ezhno. That means *He Walks Alone*. Hopefully you won’t have to meet him. He is an alcoholic and can be violent. He doesn’t live with the family.”

For a moment Phoenix paused then his voice softened along with his expression. “I think you will like my mother, Ayiana. She is our *Eternal Blossom*. I have three brothers and two sisters. Taran is the oldest and his name means *Earth*.”

Though reluctant to admit it, Phoenix had her full attention now. Ember studied him as he turned his eyes back to the road and continued talking to her in his deep, soothing voice. His handsome dark features showed strain, yet his eyes were full of warmth and love for his family.

As she watched him speak, his wide, full lips tempted her to touch them with her fingers until she had to lick her suddenly dry lips. The clean-shaven skin gave her cause to wonder if he had facial hair since there was no dark shadowed

stubble. An urge to brush against his jaw to find out sent a chill of awareness up her spine.

Pulled back into a long ponytail, his blue-black hair was so glossy it reflected the light, so soft looking she wondered what it would feel like between her fingers. Ember pinched her eyes closed to remove the image of him without success and had to swallow a lump in her throat. Thoughts of a man's touch scared her to the bone yet she couldn't help but be drawn back to watch him again.

"Tadi is the second oldest and his name means *Wind* in Omaha Indian language. I am next, Phoenix as in *Fire* and then there is Misu. His name means '*Ripples In The Water*'. My two sisters are Chailyn, meaning *Life* or *Waterfall*, and Keyanna which is American for '*Living With Grace*'."

His eyes caught her gaze, and he chuckled. "You won't be expected to memorize them all in one shot. Our names are traditional and can be a chore to remember.

Ember smiled. "Malimo, Ezhno, Ayiana, Taran, Tadi, Phoenix, Misu, Chailyn, Keyanna. Bear walking into shade, He Walks Alone, Eternal Blossom, Earth, Wind, Fire, Water, Life, or Waterfall, and Living With Grace."

His unguarded expression showed her that he was startled by her recall. Phoenix stared at her for a moment until she grinned.

"I have a photographic memory. It works when I hear things too."

“I am impressed, Little Flame.”

Her face flushing with the heat of pleasure at his praise, Ember turned to look back out the window, unwilling to let him see how his tribute affected her.

It was well past two p.m. when they pulled up to a large log cabin deep in the woods in Bancroft. Ember was in awe of the beautiful home. It was old and rustic, but beautiful. The woods around it and the lake resting behind, had Ember’s heart beating fast at its splendor.

When the car pulled to a stop, she didn’t wait for Phoenix to open the door, stepping out on her own. She took a deep breath of the fresh air. “It’s beautiful up here. I can’t believe you’d choose the city over this.”

At the guarded expression on his face, Ember wondered what secrets he hid away from people. She turned at the sudden noise on the porch.

Two young women ran down the steps, shrieking and grinning as they launched themselves at Phoenix. Ember guessed them to be his sisters.

A brilliant smile on his face, he met their enthusiastic embraces with bear hugs and kisses. When Phoenix finally stepped back from the girls, he introduced them to Ember.

“Chailyn, Keyanna, this is my friend Ember. She’s going to be staying with me for a few weeks. I hope you’ll make her feel welcome.”

“Of course we will, big brother,” Chailyn giggled, smacking him gently on his chest. She gave Ember a gentle hug. “Welcome to our home.”

“Move away, it’s my turn!” Keyanna snickered. She too hugged Ember, who wasn’t sure how to handle the warm greeting. “We’re so glad to have you here. We need another woman to even out the odds against all the men!” Her musical laughter filled the air, fawn brown eyes shining with joy.

The two beautiful native women welcomed her with such warmth and kindness, Ember had a hard time keeping her tears from flowing. An older woman who could only be his mother came out of the house and greeted them.

“My ‘fire boy’. It’s so good that you are here. We missed you.”

Phoenix gave her a hug and held her close for a minute. It was a deeply moving gesture and Ember had to look away as emotions clogged her throat.

“Ember, this is our beautiful Blossom.” Phoenix was formal in his introduction. His mother waved him aside, offered a gentle smile, and took Ember’s hands in hers.

“Ember. That means little flame doesn’t it? Welcome to our home. We are happy to have you here. Call me Ayiana, okay?”

Speechless, Ember nodded.

Two men stepped onto the porch and Ember moved backward, her smile fading as she moved to Phoenix’s side. Her heart skipped a beat when she looked



up at the two large men who stared back at her. Though equally handsome, their eyes filled with kindness, she shivered in apprehension.

“Ember, these are my brothers, Taran, and Misu.” He must have given them a warning because they kept their distance.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Ember.” Taran nodded to her, his deep voice soft and gentle.

Misu wasn’t so subtle. “Hey, you finally caught yourself a gal, eh, big brother?”

His grin was infectious and Ember didn’t have the heart to correct him. She noted that there were still the grandfather, and Tadi left to meet.

Soon she found herself swept into the home and made welcome.

Phoenix looked apologetic when he came over to her. “I’m sorry, Ember, but I have to do a few things and will be busy for the next hour. Will you be okay with my girls?” he smiled, indicating his sisters and his mother.

Though fear fluttered through her belly, she nodded. “Yes, of course. You go ahead and do what you have to, Phoenix. I’ll be fine.”

After he and his brothers left the house, Aiyana and her daughters helped Ember get settled in. They took her to a large bedroom with a queen-sized bed and helped her unpack her things. The thought of spending a few days with the

McCoys didn't seem like such a bad thing after all. Once she was unpacked, the women escorted her to the living room.

"Would you like some herbal tea, Ember?" Aiyana asked.

"How did you know I only drink herbal tea?" she asked out of curiosity.

The girls laughed, but stopped quickly enough when their mother gave them a stern look.

"Little Flame, we only drink herbal, I just took it for granted that you would. I'm sorry." Aiyana smiled in her gentle way.

A snicker escaped as Ember looked over at the girls who were giggling.

"That's not a problem. Thank you, I would love some."

Once the women were seated, Ember was bombarded with questions from the two excited sisters.

"Can you tell us about the big city?"

"We want to hear an update about Brett and his family. Phoenix has told us so much about your brother but we've never met him."

"I hear they have two adorable boys that Phoenix loves. Do you have pictures of them?"

"Girls, give her a chance to answer." Aiyana laughed as she poured scalding water into a teapot.

Though pleased to tell them all about her nephews, showing off the wallet sized images, Ember felt a pang of regret at how she had left Brett and Lana that morning without a word of goodbye or a hug. She figured sadness must have been visible to them since Chailyn changed the subject.

“I noticed you have art supplies. Will you show us some of your work while you’re here?”

Relieved to have her thoughts on something else, Ember said, “Absolutely. As soon as I do some since it’s a new pad and I have plenty of pages to fill. If you’d allow me, I’d love to do your portraits.”

The girls squealed in delight, and Aiyana smiled at them. “We’d love it if you would. We are great fans of artwork.”

A door slammed and Ember jumped to her feet, full of nerves. The women stood with her.

Another man! *This one must be the missing Tadi.* Larger than any of the brothers, his massive shoulders nearly brushed the doorframe. “Hello!” he cried in a deep timber, offered a welcoming grin, and marched right up and lifted her high in a friendly bear hug.

Panic set in as his size dwarfed her and Ember shrieked, kicking and punching to get away. When Tadi let her down in stunned surprise, she raced to the front door, flew past it and down the stairs before anyone could react. She took

off down the driveway at a run, her stomach clenched with fear, terror racing through her veins.



As soon as Phoenix heard the shrieks he went tearing toward the house and saw Ember race down the stairs and off into the forest. Her fear was evident in her face.

“Ember wait!” His shouts were ignored as she ran.

Phoenix soon caught up to her out of sight of the house. When he pulled her up into his arms, she screamed and fought like a wildcat to get away. He had to take her to the ground and pin her down, holding her wrists together above her head.

“Ember! Ember stop!” He held on tight as she fought in wild fury.

“Let me go! Let me go!” she screamed.

She fought him until she had no strength left in her and panted for breath. Her eyes were wide and filled with such terror that he didn’t think she could see him. Sweat beaded her brow, her heart pounding in fright so hard he felt it against his chest.

“It’s okay. You’re safe, Ember. I’ll protect you, I promise.” He murmured soft, comforting words until she finally calmed and fell silent. As she trembled beneath him, tears flowed in rivers down her cheeks and pitiful sobs racked her body.

“It’s all right now, Ember. I’ll keep you safe. Shhhh...It’s okay.” Shifting, he pulled her close to his chest. With his free hand he stroked her hair, trying to calm her.

When she was finally limp in his arms, he moved slowly off her and picked her up. She curled into his chest, numb with shock and trembling as he carried her back to the house. The men stayed back, Tadi staring at the girl with regret in his eyes while Chailyn and Keyanna watched in dismay.

As he carried Ember up the stairs to her room, Aiyana moved ahead of him and pulled down the blankets on the large bed.

Gently, he placed Ember on the bed and moved to take off her shoes but when she gasped and started to fight again, he left them on and covered her up.

To his mother, he whispered, “What happened?”

Aiyana leaned in close to his ear. “Tadi gave her one of his welcoming bear hugs and scared her near to death.”

Phoenix nodded in understanding.

“Mom, can you please stay with her for a bit. I have to talk to the boys and lay out some ground rules for when they’re near her. She’s had a horrifying week and her terror is so new and raw. I want to minimize her stress, and that means telling you all about what she went through.” He feared for Ember’s mental condition and decided there was more he needed to protect than her life.

“Go ahead, son. I’ll talk to you later. You might want to bring her a glass of water when you come back up.” His mother kissed him on his cheek after she nodded for him to go.



Once the door closed behind him, Aiyana sat on the bed beside the quivering girl, soothing her brow with gentle strokes.

“Poor, Little Flame. You have plenty of healing ahead to do. You’re safe here and Phoenix will take good care of you.” As she spoke in her soft, soothing voice, Aiyana rhythmically ran her hand over Ember’s silky black hair.

Phoenix *needed* to be needed. This young broken woman might be just the right person to help him find himself again. She leaned down and placed a tender kiss on Ember’s brow. “Rest, Little Flame. Phoenix will make it all well for you. For now, just sleep.”

Shudders still racked the girl’s body though she slept. Aiyana lay down beside her, pulled her close, and held her like a small child as she hummed a soothing song.

*Perhaps Phoenix will heal as he helps Ember heal.* Her knowing smile went unnoticed as Ember rested. *These two were fated to be together.*

## Chapter Four

### The Flame Awakens

The smell of apples and cinnamon tickled her nose as Ember emerged slowly from the welcome arms of slumber. She felt safe and warm, surrounded by heat. Her cheek rested against smooth, warm skin and a heartbeat pounded in a soothing rhythm beneath her ear.

Eyes widening in fear, Ember tensed as she realized that she was securely wrapped in strong arms, *strong masculine* arms, that held her close to a naked chest! Her breathing quickened as she remained frozen in place, unsure of what to do.

The man's calm, even breathing whispered over her hand, the hand that just happened to be resting comfortably on his smooth chest! Panic battled with a feeling of well-being as Ember was torn between the urge to run or stay.



The moment Phoenix sensed the change in her breathing he awoke, knowing she was about to wake up. She lay curled up close to his side, her hand on his chest and her knee...her knee really should be moved off of his...He fought back a groan. Her body suddenly tensed but he remained completely still, keeping his breath even so she could adjust to his presence.

He could almost feel the thoughts in her mind spinning in circles. She was afraid yet felt safe. When he realized she wasn't going to run in fear, he decided it was time to help her with her indecision, "It's okay, Ember, you're safe with me. I won't hurt you."

She froze, tensing as though she were struggling to conquer her fear and face him. Her face flushed with rose as she maintained her silence.

Gently squeezing her shoulder, he talked in a soothing tone to ease her discomfort. "Are you hungry? It smells like my mother has her famous apple-cinnamon buns cooking. She seldom makes them for any but the most honored guests." His chuckle shook his chest and he saw Ember's lips twitch.

Finally she pulled away from him and moved back on the bed, unable to meet his eyes. "Why are you in my...this bed with me?" she whispered, hesitant and uncertain.

"I'm going to be by your side day and night until the man who is trying to kill you is caught. That means at night too." At her look of fear, he added, "I won't



hurt you in any way, Little Flame. My brothers won't come near you physically again unless you want them to. Tadi has always been big on hugging. I'm sorry I didn't warn him not to touch you, but I didn't know you'd react like that."

A deep red suffused her cheeks at the reminder of her reaction to Tadi's enthusiastic hug, and she looked down at her hands as though trying to hide the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes.

"I should warn you..." At his pause, her eyes shot up to his then slid quickly away. "My mother and sisters will be watching over you like hawks. They seem to have adopted you as their own. No man will get near you with them guarding you, I can guarantee it."

She stared at him for a moment and he wondered what she was thinking.



A beautiful smile with perfectly straight white teeth lit up Phoenix's expression. Ember's breath caught at the sight. Uncomfortable since she had slept over sixteen hours based on the time on the alarm clock, Ember squirmed and looked toward the door behind him.

He seemed to be able to read her mind and got up, holding his hand out to her. "Come on. I'll show you where the bathroom is, and if you'd like to shower and change, I'll make sure you have everything you need."

Curious, she stared at his hand, wondering why she didn't feel afraid of him anymore. Though a little uncertain, she reached out and accepted his offering. Once she slipped off the mattress to stand, he kept her hand in his, smiling down at her as he walked her down the hall to the bathroom.

"Would you like a shower now, or later on?" he asked, his deep voice warm and reassuring.

"I...I think I'd like to shower first, please." Still unable to meet his gaze, she kept her eyes on his chest until she realized she was staring at his *bare* chest. Her gaze swung to the Ojibwa pendant hanging from a thick silver chain around his neck. It depicted a medicine wheel with a flame in the center. Another wave of heat washed over her cheeks as she smelled his earthy masculine scent, and liked it...a lot! It was all she could do not to suck in deep breaths of air to savor the aroma.

"Okay. Go ahead, and I'll get you some towels." After giving her a warm smile, Phoenix stepped back and she moved past him, careful not to brush up against his chest.

Once she'd closed the door behind her, she stood with her back to it, shaking with reaction. The man was such a hotty, and here she was acting like a school girl around him! The aching sensations in her lower abdomen weren't all

from her full bladder. She shook her head then set out to relieve at least one of her needs.

Moments later, Phoenix knocked gently on the door. When she opened it, he handed her some towels and left her. She set about having a hot shower as she thought about her personal body guard with reluctant interest.



When Ember left the bathroom, her eyes quickly scanned the hallway. She didn't see anyone lurking and walked swiftly to the bedroom. *I've never been so skittish in my life!*

Anger stirred in her gut as she thought about that. Brett was such a strong, tough cop, and Lana had fought with a killer and won! Ember promised herself she would shake this fear and move on with her life. Even still, she knew that getting comfortable with her enigmatic native was going to be a whole other problem to tackle.

The bedroom appeared to be empty when Ember entered and she let out a sigh of relief.

"That was fast." Ember nearly hit the roof in surprise, her hand clamping over her mouth as she held back a scream. When she spun around, she saw Phoenix standing by the closet door. He was hanging up some of her clothes, his back to her. Relief filled her and she forced herself to calm down.



Phoenix had decided he would ignore her nervousness and act like they had been long time friends, hoping she would feel more comfortable soon.

“Ready for breakfast?” He gave her a warm smile as he turned to face her.

At her uncertain expression, he said, “My brothers have already left for work. Mom and the girls are waiting for you downstairs.”

The relief on her face would have been comical in any other situation, but Phoenix cringed, hating that she was so afraid of men. He held out his hand again and she slipped her smaller one into his without hesitation this time. He smiled. It was a good sign.



When Ember and Phoenix walked into the kitchen the three women looked toward them, welcoming smiles on their faces. Aiyana’s eyes warmed even more as she glanced down at the clasped hands between the couple. Ember tried to pull away, but Phoenix held firm.

“Good morning, girls.” Phoenix kissed his mother’s soft cheek and winked at his sisters.

“Good morning, Phoenix, Little Flame. I am glad to see you had a good sleep. You must be hungry. Come and sit down. How do you like your eggs?” Aiyana asked.

Ember looked uncomfortable as she answered. “Ah...I’m not really—”

“You will eat breakfast, young lady! Now, how do you like your eggs?” Aiyana’s firm but gentle tone had Ember meekly accepting her orders. Phoenix bit back a grin, happy to have his mother in control.

“Over easy, please, ma’am,” she said quietly.

Finally, Phoenix released her hand and pulled out a chair for her. Ember sat, glancing up at him as though amazed at his gentlemanly manner.

“Phoenix, sit down, I have the tea ready and you can pour Ember a cup.”

Without complaint, Phoenix poured the aromatic herbal tea.

“Ember, will you be drawing today?” Keyanna asked.

When Ember looked up, she smiled.

“Would you like yours to be the first portrait I do, Keyanna?”

Excitement filled her eyes, “Oh, would you really do mine first?” A flush of red suddenly blossomed on Keyanna’s cheeks.

As though confused at Keyanna’s expression, Ember frowned. “I’d love to start with you, if you have some time on your hands?”

Even though Phoenix knew that Ember had a photographic memory and didn't require Keyanna to pose for her, he was pleased that she was willing to befriend his sisters.

"I'll be outside with Misu chopping wood. But if you'd like to, Ember, you can sit out on the back porch to work on your portraits," Phoenix said, letting her know that she was not to be out of his sight but giving her a chance to get out of the house.

Though she dropped her gaze, Ember said, "That would be fine, Phoenix."

Aiyana placed a plate of food in front of her and moved back to get her son's meal.

"Thank you, ma'am," Ember said softly.

"You can call me Aiyana, and no thanks are needed. Seeing you eat that food will be thanks enough. Phoenix? Why don't you take Ember up to the Eagle's Nest later this afternoon? It will do her good to get out in the fresh air and see some of the sights."

"That sound's like a good idea. If you'd like to go, Ember, we can drag these two monsters with us," he teased his sisters.

"We aren't monsters, and you know it." Chailyn said in pretended outrage. "You're going to give Ember the wrong impression of us. If anyone is the monster, it's you, big brother."

With a conspiratorial murmur, Chailyn turned to Ember and explained. “Out of all our brothers, Phoenix was always the biggest trickster, playing pranks on us when we were children. The house was never quiet because we were always screaming from his nasty jokes or running away from him when he chased us.” Looking over at her brother with her chin raised, Chailyn grinned with pleasure at her words as though hoping he would get in trouble.

Ember took a quick glance at Phoenix and let out a snicker at the helpless, innocent expression he gave her. She banked her humor almost immediately as if she were surprised at herself for laughing, not ready to come out of her protective shell just yet. Phoenix knew it was difficult for her since this animated family had a healing effect on everyone they took under wing.

“I never picked on you, Waterfall! I have always been the most gentle and kindest of brothers. Isn’t that right, Keyanna?”

“No comment! I don’t want to be the target of your next prank...ah...nice gesture toward your favorite sister.” Though grinning, Keyanna shot a conspiratorial wink at Ember.

Shy all of a sudden, Ember lowered her eyes. Phoenix felt relaxed and happy while he bantered with his sisters. The stress of the city seemed to melt away a little at a time while he teased. As he laughed with Chailyn, he felt Ember’s quick glance but when he looked up, she shied from meeting it. When she picked up her

teacup, she held it like a lifeline with both hands to stare down into the watery green brew.

For a moment she closed her eyes and inhaled the fragrant smell, with a curious frown.

“Sweet grass,” Phoenix said.

Her gaze swung up to meet his. “Pardon, me?”

“The tea; it’s made of sweet grass. That’s the aroma. It’s blended with maple syrup, lemon grass, and red willow bark. It’s a very ‘First Nation’ style tea.” He picked up his own cup and took a deep swallow.

Ember’s mouth dropped slightly open, her eyes glued to his throat as he swallowed. His lips held her focus. She watched them with fascination as his tongue swept over to capture the drops of tea. He could almost feel the moment she gave herself a mental shake as though horrified at where her thoughts were going.

A neutral expression on his face, Phoenix kept his eyes on hers. Her lips were slightly parted and her eyes had that far away look that said she was thinking about him as more than a bodyguard. He knew the signs when a woman was attracted to him, and she was definitely fighting it. Hoping she continued to do so, he nearly groaned, remembering her knee on him when they awoke in bed together that morning.



After drinking the rest of the tea, he picked up his cup and refilled it, pretending he hadn't noticed her reaction to him. They were treading on dangerous ground. He promised to protect her from men—all men—including himself. The thought of letting Brett and Lana down had him squirming in his seat.

Both of them cleared their throats at the same time. *Oh, boy. This might be my toughest assignment yet.*

"Um...I thought that sweet grass was sacred and only used in a smudge stick to purify the air at ceremonies?" Ember kept her focus glued to the teacup in her hands and not on his lips while she waited for his answer.

Glad to have something impersonal to talk about, Phoenix answered, "You're right, that's the main use but it has medicinal properties also. The tea flushes impurities out of the body, and calms and relaxes you. When sweet grass is placed in a shell or bowl and burned like incense, it's used to bless one's self."

"Hmmm. It's strange. I've always been drawn to the First Nation culture. I wonder if I was native in another lifetime," Ember mused aloud as she finished her tea.

The girls giggled and Ember's eyes flew over to stare at them.

"What did I say that was so funny?" she asked, surprise in her eyes.

Chailyn grinned. "You already have the hair for it. Your hair is probably blacker than ours, and it's just as straight. You could dress in native costume and

everyone would believe you were our true sister unless they looked into your blue eyes. They're the color of the lake on a bright, cloudless day, but more vibrant."

After giggling, Keyanna added, "We'll have to wait and see if you have a warrior spirit. With a name that means flame, I'd expect you would have a fiery temper."

Her eyes filled with laughter, Aiyana said, "Girls, help me clean up so Ember can get to her drawing. Phoenix, go find your brother and get started on that wood. Daylight is wasting!"

He offered a mischievous grin then brought his dishes to the sink, kissing his mother on the cheek. "Thanks for breakfast, Mom. When can we have the apple cinnamon buns?"

"Not until you have a good stack of wood ready, now get!" she swatted his butt with a tea towel.

Pretending it hurt he jumped then rubbed it, pouting.



Ember fought back another snicker at Phoenix's antics as he left the kitchen. She began to feel right at home and stood up, about to pick up her dishes, but was gently scolded by Aiyana.

"You are not doing any dishes today. Go gather your art things then we'll find you a comfortable chair on the back porch." After a warm hug, she kissed

Ember on the forehead and turned her around, swatting her butt too, as she shooed her from the kitchen.

A chuckle escaped Ember as she was kicked out of the room. The breakfast was the first full meal she'd eaten in days. Lighthearted, she found herself grinning as she ran up the stairs, but nearly screamed when she arrived at the top landing and came face to face with Misu. She froze, her hand over her mouth, eyes wide with fright.

Misu put his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"Little Flame, please try to accept that we brothers are not beasts like..." Sighing, he changed what he was about to say. "Believe me, we mean you no harm and if Tadi tries to hug you again, we have permission to beat the tar out of him for you."

For a moment, Ember studied the gentle smile on Misu's face then forced herself to relax. She had to quit jumping every time a man walked by.

"I'm sorry, Misu. I...I'm trying. I believe that you wouldn't hurt me." Even so she bit her lip as she slipped past him with her back to the wall, and quickly closed the bedroom door behind her.



Once the door closed safely behind her, Ember leaned on it and held her hand to her racing heart. This new fear of men was driving her crazy! Just because

the brothers were all well over six feet tall and full of muscles and broad shoulders, that didn't mean they were out to hurt her. It angered Ember that one man could have done such a job on her.

Fury stirred in her gut and she vowed to fight the fear tooth-and-nail until it was gone. Satisfied with her decision, she went to get her new art supplies and took a deep breath before cautiously opening the door. Relief filled her when she saw an empty hallway until she turned the corner quickly and slammed into solid muscle. She shrieked, dropping the paper and pens to the floor.

Before she could react, her arms were held in a firm but gentle grip which steadied her.

"Are you all right, Little Flame?" The look of concern in Phoenix's gaze caused her to catch her breath. This was the first time their eyes had met so close and a jolt went through her heart. His deep brown eyes were warm and liquid, filled with some unnamed emotion that sent a quiver of response up her spine.

Ember cursed her pounding heart and pulled away. Her adrenaline kicked into high gear as she knelt down and scrambled to pick up her supplies.

Breathless, she murmured, "I'm fine. This sure is one busy hallway."

His deep chuckle filled her with warmth.

“We do have a lot of traffic here. Many a time I’ve been knocked on my a...my butt. Remember to look both ways when you come out of your room and you’ll be fine.”

As he bent down to pick up her scattered pencils, she shifted to reach for one and they bumped heads. Ember fell back and landed on her bottom while Phoenix crashed into a table and tipped over a vase, catching it with his quick reflexes before it could crash to the ground.

“Ouch! Definitely a dangerous hall,” she said with a wry grin, rubbing her forehead.

Phoenix gave her a measured stare as she snickered.

“You should do that more often, Little Flame.”

Confused by his words, she asked, “Do what? I’m not usually such a klutz.”

“Smile. You have a beautiful smile.”

Uncomfortable with his focus on her, her cheeks warmed. She quickly picked up the rest of the pencils and was about to stand when she found him by her side, taking her arm to help her up.

She was pleased to know that she didn’t fear him anymore. “Thank you for your help. Did you want something from me?”

“I heard you met Misu in the hall and wanted to make sure you were okay—Are you?”

As she nodded, she let out a chuckle. “He’s nice. He promised to beat up Tadi if he hugs me again.”

When Phoenix didn’t laugh at her humorous response, she began to feel the nervous tension and dropped her gaze, suddenly self-conscious.

“Ah, I think I’d better get downstairs and get the portrait started. Keyanna will be waiting.” She moved toward the landing, but was stopped by his hand as he touched her arm. Her eyes shot up to his and she waited, telling herself to be calm, be strong.

“I just want you to know that I’ll be close by if you need me, Ember. Don’t forget that.”

As his dark eyes held hers captive, her throat suddenly became tight. Ember whispered, “I’ll remember, thank you.” She turned and hurried down the stairs.

## Chapter Five

### Hiding The Flame

Ember sat on the back porch with Keyanna for a few hours. Excused from her chores, she talked about the family and their life in Bancroft, a small town that was very busy during tourist season.

“There are a few mines in the area for tourist trips. We have an Annual *Rockhound Gemboree* in August. Maybe we can go if you’re still here.” Keyanna said, offering a hopeful look.

“Shouldn’t that be, Jamboree?” Ember asked, sure she’d be back in Toronto by the end of the week.

“No.” Laughing, Keyanna explained. “There isn’t music involved, it’s all about minerals and gems. They have quartz crystals as big as your arm, and beautiful geodes; rocks that when sliced in half, are filled with amethyst crystals or other beautiful colored rocks. They are absolutely gorgeous!”

With her eyes focused on her drawing, Ember said, “It sounds like a wonderful place to go. I’ve always collected unusual rocks and kept them on top of a mirror on my dresser. I sometimes hold them in my hand for a few minutes and meditate with them. It’s like they each have a different energy.”

“Grandfather says that everything on the Earth has its own energy signature. Some are good, some bad. Just like people.”

“I hope I get to meet your grandfather, he sounds like a fascinating man. Is he very traditional?” The portrait was nearly done. Ember sat back to study it with a critical eye, glancing up at Keyanna for the final details.

“Oh, yes. He wants us to never forget our traditions, our roots. I think he’s the most amazing person I know.”

Satisfied with the drawing, Ember was amazed at how this one had flowed from her fingers so freely. Usually, she hated showing people her work, always doubting her own skills. She supposed it was just a part of being an artist.

Teasing Keyanna, Ember held the drawing close to her chest and did her best to look disappointed. “I...I’m done now. I’m sorry if you don’t like it, I can always rip it up and start all over again.” She bit her lip to hide her grin as she watched Keyanna’s horrified expression.

“Oh, no, Little Flame. You drew me, so I’m keeping it, no matter what.” Her eyes were wide with anticipation.



“Okay, if you insist.” After expelling a dramatic sigh, Ember turned the large pad around, amused when Keyanna’s mouth dropped open in surprise. Suddenly the girl let out a loud shriek and threw herself into Ember’s arms, nearly crushing the artwork.

Shouts came from all directions as Phoenix came running. His expression was lethal and furious. Ember was shocked. A flash of relief went through her that he didn’t have his gun on him for fear that someone could have been shot.

Tadi and Misu rounded the corner next, then Aiyana and Chailyn raced through the back door onto the porch.

“What’s wrong?” Aiyana shouted.

Keyanna was oblivious to all the action around her as she cried on Ember’s shoulder.

Ember stared in stunned amazement at the protective family members as they crowded in close. She continued to pat Keyanna on her shoulder to calm her while also holding the art pad.

“What happened? Are you all right, Ember? Did someone come to the house?” Phoenix shot the questions at her like bullets, in full cop mode. He knelt down beside her chair in a defensive stance with one hand on her shoulder. His whole body was tense, his chest glistening with sweat and arms bulging with

muscles. Alert for trouble, his eyes darted back and forth over the forest around them.

Almost afraid to speak, Ember swallowed hard.

“We’re fine, Phoenix. Keyanna just got a little excited when I gave her the portrait, that’s all.” At his look of disbelief, she handed him the pad.

Keyanna wiped at her tears as she finally released Ember and stood.

“I’ve never seen such beautiful work. It’s like she took my photo, but so much more! It’s so beautiful.”

“Keyanna, it’s the subject I drew who is beautiful. I only draw what I see,” Ember said softly.

Phoenix studied the portrait for a long time, his expression serious.

Ember wondered if he saw his sister in the drawing the same way she’d seen the girl; eyes, full of mischief and longing captured with every pen stroke. Her natural beauty was accented by the images in the background of native spirits that looked like angels, barely visible as they blended with the clouds. Her name meant *Living With Grace* and the background supported that essence. It was a spiritual drawing.

Lifting his head, Phoenix stared into Ember’s eyes as though he saw right through to her soul, making her shudder in response. When he turned it to show

his mother and Chailyn, their mouths dropped open in amazement. Chailyn's hand came up to her mouth to stifle a gasp.

When the brothers finally viewed it, they held equal looks of stunned amazement.

Misu whistled. "You should be famous with a talent like that, Little Flame. That's unbelievable, and you've only been at it a few hours."

Under their praise, Ember flushed with embarrassment. She was shy about her artwork, and didn't take compliments well.

"Ah, excuse me." Unable to look at anyone, she left the pad in Phoenix's hands and slipped past Aiyana into the house. She raced up the stairs and into the bedroom. Once the door was closed behind her, she started shaking and tears flowed down her cheeks. All she wanted to do was pack up her bag and head for the highway. There were way too many emotions flowing around this family. It was difficult to deal with. The only thing Ember wanted was to stay in her safe haven of unfeeling, and avoid dealing with the horror of that night.

Ember lay face down on the bed, shaking with emotion. She couldn't figure out what was happening to her, having never been so sensitive before, yet now she cried at the simple praise of her artwork. When the mattress dipped beside her, she nearly jumped out of her skin, gasping and spinning around, ready to fight.

“Hey, it’s just me! Relax, Ember, its okay.” Phoenix’s soothing voice and the expression of sympathy in his eyes released a wave of anguish in Ember’s heart and she felt her lip begin to quiver as her eyes filled with tears.

Phoenix gently pulled her into his arms, holding her close to his heart. He rubbed soothing circles over her back as she sobbed like her heart was broken, the emotional rollercoaster of the past few days overwhelming her. He kissed her forehead and rocked, murmuring sweet nothings in her ear until she finally calmed down.

It felt so good to be held tight in his strong embrace, safe and cherished. Ember never wanted to leave this moment in time. The sound of his heart pounding in her ear, matched the speed of hers. He’d pulled her onto his lap, continued to offer her comfort. A deep shudder trickled up her spine as Ember tried to catch her breath, afraid to move in case he let go.

When she tipped her head back to meet his gaze, a current flowed between them and his lips came down to brush in a whispered caress across her forehead. Ember ached for him to kiss her, to wipe out the brutal rape from her mind. A tear trailed slowly down her cheek and he caught it with his hot tongue. She held her breath.

He groaned as though fighting what she knew was going to happen. The question in his eyes went unanswered. She knew he waited for her to refuse, to

push him away, yet all she offered was welcome. Still she knew that he fought the urge to kiss her by the frown on his lips. He'd told her he was only supposed to protect her, and that didn't include a kiss.

The strength of the battle against his own will was in his restraint as he held her, so she sought out and found her courage. With tentative fingers, she reached up slowly to tangle them into his silky black hair, pulling his head down to meet her quivering lips.

Electricity flowed between them. He was hesitant at first, brushing his soft mouth gently over hers, tender, cautious. She urged him closer, her fingers gripping his hair tight in her fist. Her other hand caressed his cheek as she poured her heart into the kiss. A sudden wildness came over her and she found that she wanted...more.

Lost in him as his mouth slanted harder over hers, Ember reached for his belt, meeting passion with passion. When Phoenix pulled away abruptly, pushing back from her as if he'd been bitten by a snake, she gasped, struck with horror that he'd rejected her.

His hands raked through his hair as he turned his back on her. "Oh, God! I'm sorry, Ember. I didn't mean for that to happen!"

Phoenix left her staring after him, barely closing the door as he rushed to distance himself from her.

As she watched the silent door, Ember held her fingers to her lips.

*He's repulsed by me because I'm so dirty! I'll never be able to face him again. Oh, God, what have I done?*

Tears filled her eyes as she threw herself across the bed, crying out her anguish, feeling lost and alone.



On silent feet, Aiyana entered the room, studying the young woman on the bed who cried as though her heart had been broken.

*So, the two flames have met. Perhaps I should purchase a few more fire extinguishers.* Though she wanted to grin, the pain Ember suffered forbade it.

Aiyana slid onto the bed beside Ember and placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. Ember shot up like a rocket, horror and fear mingled in her eyes as she shrieked. When she recognized Aiyana, her tear ravaged face crumpled and she continued to sob. Aiyana gathered her close in a comforting hug, happy that Ember placed trust in her as the dam of emotions flowed over.

For a long time, Aiyana rocked her, humming a melody until Ember quieted; sniffing, and hiccupping.

"Oh, Aiyana, I'm so sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me. I never act like this." The girl swiped at her endless tears as a sob shook her body.

“You have a lot of pain bottled up inside you, Ember and every right to cry, scream, rage, or whatever you want. You are allowed to do so, Little Flame.” With one hand she cupped Ember’s chin, looked deep into the girl’s eyes, and smiled. “You will get past all of this, but it will take time. Don’t give up.”

New tears fell down Ember’s cheeks. “You don’t understand Aiyana, its Phoenix, he...” Sobs arose again, rendering her speechless.

“Phoenix is just as confused about this attraction as you are.” Seeing Ember’s shocked expression that she knew about the kiss, Aiyana continued. “He has been gravely hurt before by a woman and it isn’t easy for him to allow himself to feel. Don’t blame him for his fears. He doesn’t even realize that he has them.”

Her gaze dropping to stare at her hands, Ember whispered morosely, “He was repulsed when I kissed him. He couldn’t get away from me fast enough.”

Musical laughter rang throughout the room and Ember’s eyes flew up to meet Aiyana’s in confusion.

“Little Flame, that wasn’t repulsion I saw on my son’s face as he flew by me like he was being chased by a panther. It was fear, because he realized that he is coming to care about you. Your brother asked him to protect you, and for him to begin a relationship with you would make him feel that he’s failed your brother and taken advantage of you. He is definitely not repulsed by you, dear.”

As Aiyana caressed Ember's shiny hair, she watched the numerous emotions flicker and realized that the kiss the woman had shared with Phoenix was anything but repulsive to her. Finally, a rosy flush filled Ember's cheeks.

"Oh! Aiyana, how am I going to face him? I'm so embarrassed. What if I've scared him off or he calls Brett and tells him he can't take care of me?" Eyes wide with concern, Ember swiped at her tears again.

*Little Flame is striving for control and that's a good sign.* With a pleased grin on her face, Aiyana said, "He will do one of two things, Little Flame: either he will pretend that nothing happened and continue to protect you, or he will avoid you for a day or so, unsure of what to do. He definitely will not turn you back over to Brett. That would be losing face to him. Phoenix never quits. He is a persistent man."

"But how should I act around him? I may be twenty-seven years old, but I don't know much about relationships. The only serious one I ever had was a disaster."

"Well, *you* also have two choices: either you can pretend that nothing happened and continue as you were before the kiss, or avoid him for a day or so until you are sure of what to do with him." Aiyana chuckled Ember beneath her chin and gave her a warm smile.



Ember laughed. “Maybe I’ll do the opposite of what he does and force him to face the issue!”

Once again, Aiyana laughed aloud, tears of mirth filling her eyes. “You will be a good match for my fire boy, Little Flame. Fire against Fire. Who do you think will win?”

“That’s easy, the flame that burns the brightest!” Ember giggled, hugging Aiyana. “Thank you. I feel so much better now.”

“Good. Now let’s get you cleaned up. I’ve packed you all a lunch so you can visit the Eagle’s Nest. It’s the main attraction around Bancroft. You should enjoy it.”

Her mood restored, Ember got up and went to the bathroom to clean up. While Aiyana remained on the edge of the bed, grinning with pleasure. *This should be an interesting match.*



Phoenix sat on a large boulder near the top of the driveway staring into space. That kiss! He groaned deep in his throat and shook his head. He’d never reacted to a kiss from any woman like that before. It was magical, powerful, magnetic! *And wrong!*

The horrible feeling in his gut that he'd betrayed Brett had him struggling to decide what to do. Should he call Brett and tell him he can't take care of Ember and let him down?

A deep breath hissed out of his mouth at the thought. No, he couldn't let his friend down. As for Ember, it was his responsibility to take care of her. He took the job and he'd finish it. Only how was he to deal with Ember and this growing attraction to her? It was nearly impossible to be near her and not touch her, especially since that first moment when she placed her hand in his and he'd felt that magnetic pull. Her eyes when they met his, burning with...something, teasing him, making him ache for her.

He growled his frustration and swiped his fingers through his hair, lost as to what to do. His body still shook in reaction from her lips burning into his, her eyes calling to him. Lost in his thoughts, he nearly jumped out of his skin when a voice spoke in the silence of the forest.

"You will never know what to do about it, if you don't face her, Grandson."

Heart pounding, he turned to see his grandfather standing a few feet away with a wide grin on his wrinkled and weathered face. The man was grizzled and old yet other than his arthritic ridden hands, showed no signs of illness. He wore a traditional rawhide tunic and matching pants with the pattern of a bear in shadow woven with colored porcupine quills on the front. Around his neck hung a

medicine bag, no larger than a small wallet, painted with the same design. Brown feathers were entwined in his two long, silver braids that hung down either side of his chest. If anything, he appeared to be an elder of another era right out of the history books.

“In my entire life, I’ve never been able to catch you sneaking up on me. You’re like a spirit; there one minute and gone the next!” After taking a deep breath to steady himself, he climbed off the rock and hugged his grandfather.

The ancient man returned the hug, surprisingly strong for his age. Although Phoenix never asked, he believed him to be in his late eighties, yet he was as spry as a fifty year old.

“So, Big Flame, do you hide, or do you face your lady?”

Another groan escaped him. “Grandfather, I messed up big time. I’ve terrified her, embarrassed her, and shamed myself with her brother. I am not sure what to do from here. My job doesn’t include having a relationship with her, even for a short time. She should be going home in a few days anyway, yet I just can’t fight the strange pull she has on me.”

“It seems that you have two choices: face her and apologize, or act like nothing happened and continue with the day. There isn’t much else to do, unless you wish to hide out here like a turtle in its shell for the rest of the day.” Arms crossed, he waited for Phoenix to think about his words.

After a moment, Phoenix let out a deep breath. “I am attracted to her like I’ve never been attracted to anyone before. I don’t know if I can stop myself from wanting her. I’ve always been proud of my ability to keep my jobs impersonal when it comes to working as a cop and now here I am, not twenty-four hours after meeting the woman, drooling like a schoolboy over her.”

Disgusted with himself, he turned away and picked up a rock, throwing it as far as he could then listening while it made cracking sounds as it bounced off a few tree trunks.

“Well, Grandson, if you were simply consenting adults, then it would be easier to make the decision, wouldn’t it?”

At the slight echo in his grandfather’s voice, Phoenix turned around to find he was alone. He dropped his chin, chuckling. “I hate it when you do that, Grandfather!”

Husky, deep chuckles came from the forest, making Phoenix smile.

“Consenting adults, eh?” he said, feeling better. He decided that it was time to face the flame and headed back to the house.



A large picnic basket was sitting on the front porch when Phoenix returned. He’d not even begun to mount the steps when Chailyn, Keyanna, and Aiyana came out.

“Don’t you have a date for the Eagle’s Nest, my fire boy?” Aiyana asked.

“Ah...yes, I believe we do, but—”

Ember opened the door, carrying her art supplies, and gave him a brave grin, though her eyes held doubt and a little fear.

It was hard to swallow the sudden lump in his throat as Phoenix stared up at her, admiring her courage. She looked like she was ready to flee, yet there she stood, facing him down, a tentative smile on her face.

“Well? Are you taking us on a picnic, or not?” Chailyn teased, which snapped him out of his daze. She grinned at him with mischief in her eyes when her sister nudged her.

The girls had tried to set him up many times before. He hoped that wasn’t their plan this time, but by the look on their faces, he was in for it.

“Ah...yeah, I’ll go get the van.”

Since the road was rough on the way up to the Eagle’s Nest, Phoenix used the family van. The Mustang was too low to the ground and would get damaged during the steep climb. A sense of dread filled his gut at the thought of what the girls had in store for him and Ember.



When Phoenix disappeared around the corner, the sisters let their laughter flow, Aiyana smiling fondly at them.

“What’s so funny?” Ember asked, puzzled at their behavior.

The girls looked at her for a moment but that set off another round of giggles. Though she was getting used to their humor, after looking at Aiyana’s amused expression, Ember was even more confused.

“Little Flame, they have not seen my son so unsure of himself before. He’s always been the one to tease them and they like the fact that the shoe is on the other foot.” A warm smile on her face, Aiyana hooked her arm around Ember’s shoulders, holding her close for a moment.

Before Ember could ask another question, the van pulled up, stopping fast in a cloud of dust.

The girls began laughing again. Aiyana warned, “If you two do not behave, I will keep you here. I am sure I can find some chores for you to do!” That made them quit their antics quickly enough.

An eyebrow rising in question, Ember studied Aiyana but the woman remained silent and nodded toward the van.

Phoenix ran up to the porch and took the basket from Aiyana. “Thank you, Mother.” He gave Ember an uncertain glance. “Ready to go?”

She replied with a slight nod then followed him to the van, glancing over her shoulder at Aiyana, who still grinned. The sisters had already claimed the back seat, leaving Ember to take the front.

After placing the picnic basket on the center seat and giving his sisters a warning glare, Phoenix opened the door for Ember, holding her supplies for her while she climbed. Once he'd slipped behind the wheel, they were off.

Under cover of her thick lashes, Ember studied Phoenix, wondering at this new side of him. He'd been so confident and strong up until now. One kiss and he appeared to be falling apart, as disturbed by the connection between them as she was. She had to bite the inside of her cheek to hide her grin, turning to look out the window at the passing scenery. It was a beautiful day for exploring the countryside...and her protector.

## Chapter Six

### Sparks Atop the Nest

It took twenty minutes to reach the Eagle's Nest cliff top that was located at the edge of town. The steep hill shot straight up. Ember tipped her head slightly to look up at the large rock formation.

"The Eagle's Nest stands over two-hundred feet high and you can see for many miles around from the peak. People say that it guards over the town of Bancroft that lies in its shadow. In the winter when we were kids, we'd come to town to throw rocks at the icicles that hung up to forty feet long from the largest cliff side. It's a popular spot for mountain climbers. They come to practice ice climbing in the winter." Phoenix said in his best tour guide voice.

He shot a quick glance at her, wondering why she was ignoring him. Ember kept silent, her gaze focused on the beautiful forest as they turned onto the cliff road, slowly winding their way up the steep, rutted road.



In a reflexive action, Ember covered her mouth, and muffled a scream when they came across a vehicle descending from the top which narrowly missed them on one of the many curves in the road. Her knuckles were white, they held so tightly to the door handle.

“Thank God for breaks,” she murmured.

Hearing her quiet statement, Phoenix’s eyes darted over to her again, relieved when he realized her sense of humor was still intact.

Without comment, he returned his attention to the treacherous path and soon pulled to a stop, parking near a stand of bushes. He got out and came around to Ember’s door, helping her out before opening the side door for his sisters, and left the picnic basket in the van for later. Once the doors were locked securely, Phoenix followed Ember as she walked to the lookout point and stared at the vista before her.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered with awe.

Keyanna said, “Phoenix, Chailyn and I are going to go see if our friends are up here. We’ll be back in about an hour, okay?”

His sister’s mischievous smile told him that the girls were matchmaking and he raised his eyebrow at her, crossing his arms over his chest. Ember’s eyes were on the panoramic view as Chailyn winked at him and blew him a kiss before the two ran off, giggling in their wake.

Amused, he shook his head and turned back to Ember. She had moved over to stand beside a large boulder and was looking for a place to sit so she could draw. A squawk escaped when he placed his hands around her waist and lifted her high, setting her down on the rock. Breathless and flushed, she settled herself down and averted her gaze when he climbed up beside her.

“Would you rather I find you a better place to sit, Little Flame?”

“No...ah...this is just fine. Thank you. Would you mind if I sketched for a while?”

Though she kept her back to him, she trembled as though she'd felt what he had when he'd touched her. Ember wasn't successful at hiding the tremors in her hands as she opened the pad to a new page. He was pleased to know she was just as affected as he was.

“Go ahead. This is your day.” His eyes caressed her ebony hair as it gleamed in the sun. Curious to see what she was drawing, he moved closer to her, mere inches away, and caught the fresh clean scent of her skin. At the house she'd used the sweet grass soap and shampoo that his mother and sisters made each year. He loved the earthy, natural fragrance.

Ember appeared to be completely focused on her task as she took out her pens, lining them up on the rock beside her. Soon the pen flew over the page,

building the beautiful vista as she lost herself in her art; oblivious to everything but the work, including the man so close behind her.

Watching every movement of her hand as the image took shape, Phoenix was amazed. She quickly switched pen colors, building the scene layer by layer. He moved even closer, drawn by her skill as he watched her. The sweet scent of her hair filled his senses and he stared at her bare neck with an urge to caress it with his lips, nibble it with his teeth, feel with his tongue the tiny pulse beating so quickly on the vein that led down, down toward her—

His face flushing with heat, he turned away and tried to catch his breath, shocked at his reaction to her nearness. When she leaned back in to his warmth, his arms came around her waist automatically and his hard chest supported her back. She seemed unaware that she was touching him, still lost in her own world.

Though stifling a groan, he held her, fighting his needs, his desperate desire to kiss her. He imagined holding her under him naked while he—

“Damn it!” he muttered, uncomfortable in his tight jeans, relieved when she didn’t appear to hear him. To keep his mind occupied, he studied the image again and wondered how much longer she would draw before it was finished. Then he looked even closer and it seemed she’d drawn the image of another time, what it might have looked like hundreds of years ago; as if she’d stood in this very spot, viewing this same scene.

There was nothing to indicate man had been there. The trees were larger, thicker, and greener. The York River that meandered around the trees was smaller too; a deep blue that showed it was clean. There were even birds circling high above the trees, eagles by the look of them. They seemed to float right off the page, they were so real.

Ember sighed and the bottoms of her breasts brushed his fingers, making him grit his teeth and suck in a quick breath. Her pen still flew over the page, the artwork close to finished now. A few minutes later, the drawing was done and Ember jerked as though she'd just realized Phoenix was holding her. He held tighter to make sure she didn't fall.



Ember began pull away when she felt Phoenix's arms around her but it felt so safe she leaned into him, resting her head in the nook of his shoulder. She sighed as if she'd just finished a seven course meal. When her breasts brushed against his hand, she shuddered in reaction, his warm breath quick and harsh against her cheek.

Tingles raced along her spine knowing that his lips were just an inch away. To change the direction of her thoughts, she picked up her drawing pad and stared at it, confused.

“But this isn’t anything like the scene. Funny, I don’t remember drawing it either.”

“Ember, it was like you were in a trance. You just zoned out then leaned back into me when you’d completed it. I thought it would be best that I hold onto you than have you wake up four feet below on the grass.” He nodded, indicating the ground beneath the boulder they were sitting on.

Disappointed that he had to have an excuse to get close, she tried to ignore the feelings in her belly he evoked.

“How strange. That’s happened to me a few times before. The drawings end up looking nothing like what I planned to draw, and in the end I don’t even recall drawing them.” She shifted, gasping softly when her breasts brushed his hand again.

Phoenix tensed, holding completely still. She wondered if he’d done it on purpose but didn’t think so.

“Hi, guys!” Chailyn called out as she raced from the trees followed by Keyanna.

“We’re starving. Let’s eat lunch,” Keyanna said, breathless from the run. “I’ll take your art supplies so you can climb down, Ember.” She took them and stepped back.

After jumping down first, Phoenix reached up to help Ember, grunting when her pelvis slid against his hard member. Her eyes widened and her cheeks flushed with heat as she tried not to look at him. Once he let her go, he took off at an unsteady run to the van while Chailyn grinned after him.

“I think he likes you, Ember.”

Ember shook her head in disappointment. “I’m only a job to your brother.”

Keyanna’s cry of amazement distracted Chailyn. Her sister was staring in wonder at the drawing.

“You should show this to Grandfather, he’s very spiritual and would find this interesting. Ember, you’re amazing!”

After taking a deep breath, Ember muttered, “Thank you.” She walked away to stare out at the vista, seeking the missing eagles from the drawing. Things must have changed a great deal over time if the drawing truly represented the past. The image before her today, though beautiful, was ugly in comparison, signs of humans and technology peeking through the trees.

“Lunch is ready, Ember,” Keyanna called.

Finally, her blush was under control. *It’s getting ridiculous, blushing every two minutes whenever he’s near me.* She didn’t have a lot of experience with men intimately, but they had never caused her so much embarrassment.

When she moved to sit at the edge of the blanket between the two girls, she groaned when Chailyn placed her own plate on the blanket and shifted her legs so that there was no room. Ember bit her lip and reluctantly sat beside Phoenix. Ember hoped that Phoenix was unaware of the conspiratorial looks Chailyn shot her equally sneaky sister.

Phoenix poured the iced herbal tea and handed the cups to his sisters first. When he handed Ember hers and their fingers brushed, she nearly jumped out of her skin, spilling tea on her knee.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I’m such a klutz!” Ember held the cup in one hand, trying to wipe away the tea without luck.

Phoenix took out a cloth napkin and patted at the damp spot sending waves of sensation up her leg and into her pelvis. She fought to hold back a cry and snatched the cloth from him. “I can do that. Thanks.” Breathless, Ember took a sip of her drink then placed it on the grass nearby.

Even though Chailyn and Keyanna hid their grins behind their cups and started babbling about their friends and the courses they planned to take in college in the fall, Ember saw right through their act.

Her cheeks went up in flames again and she looked down, wanting to curse aloud. Though she shifted her butt, she was unable to get comfortable with the tingling swarm of butterflies in her lower abdomen getting in the way.

Phoenix passed her a plate of fried chicken, potato salad, and a homemade biscuit slathered with fresh butter. The girls kept up the conversation through the entire awkward meal while Phoenix and Ember kept silent. She barely tasted the food as it slid like rocks down her throat.

“Did you go to college, Ember?” Keyanna asked unaware of her history. Phoenix had not thought to speak to the girls about Ember’s past since only men bothered her.

Electric-blue eyes shot to his, pain flashing in them, but she answered Keyanna anyway. “I’m enrolled in university, in Law.”

“Oh, that’s so—”

“Keyanna, could you pass the tea, please,” Phoenix asked, shooting her a warning glance to avoid the subject yet Ember caught it and looked away.

“I’m not really sure what I want to take. Chailyn wants to take Business Management, but I’d like to be an actress. All those hunky actors! Grrr...” Giggling, she tucked into her food, oblivious to the tension.

“You have to ask yourself before you choose; where do you want to live? If you’re an actress, you probably need to go to Hollywood, but a business manager can go just about anywhere,” Ember said quietly, her eyes on her food.

“Yes, I suppose going to Hollywood, the land of hunks, would be just *terrible* for me.” She burst out laughing and her sister joined her.



“Sure it would, but you’d miss the family so much, you’d end up crying every day and then the hunks wouldn’t even look at you. Now how would that help you?” They all laughed though Ember felt like her face was frozen in a mask of false humor.

Chailyn nudged Keyanna, nodding toward the path. “Let’s finish eating and go for a walk.”

Phoenix stared at his plate in apparent fascination of the untouched food, and missed the look. The girls finished up quickly, practically throwing the plates back into the hamper. Ember jumped, startled by sudden movement but before she could protest, the girls leapt to their feet and started racing off.

“Our friends wanted to see us after lunch for a while. You two will be okay without us, I’m sure. Phoenix, why don’t you take Ember exploring on the paths?” Chailyn said as Keyanna tugged playfully on her arm.

“Yeah, and don’t get lost or anything,” Keyanna added, giggling as the two girls disappeared into the woods.



Ember stared after the girls with her mouth dropped open in surprise. Phoenix stared at her soft, full, dusty-pink lips, watching with agony as she slowly closed her mouth, sliding the tip of her tongue over the bottom lip before picking up her tea and taking a sip.

He had to suck a few gulps of air as he realized where his thoughts were going. For a moment, he dropped his chin on his chest and tried to steady himself.

*Brett is going to kill me! Brett is going to kill me! Brett is going to kill me!* He repeated the litany in his mind over, and over again, struggling with his hormones. With efficient hands, he began methodically packing up the basket, putting all his focus into the job.

Silent, Ember passed him the dishes and cups. Once the hamper was full, Phoenix picked it up and moved off the blanket. Ember scrambled out of the way and bent to pick up one end of the brightly woven material while he took the other. Together they shook it out and folded it in half, in half again, then brought the ends together where their hands brushed again.

Her eyes flew wide and she jumped back as if she'd been burnt, before turning to walk away from him. A cuss beneath his breath hid his true thoughts. *She hates me touching her. I screwed up when I forced her to kiss me.*

With difficulty, Phoenix stifled a groan as he put the blanket into the hamper and bent to pick up Ember's art supplies, taking everything to the van and locking them inside.

*She's so repelled by men that she can't even look at me.* He knew that she was beginning to trust him, but the sizzling attraction he felt for her was growing, and that terrified him. He'd been gravely hurt before, and he wasn't going to let it

happen again. Besides, Brett...there was always Brett. He took a deep breath then walked back to Ember's side.



Crouched down behind a thick bush, Keyanna giggled, her hand covering her mouth to silence the noise. Together with Chailyn, she watched her brother with Ember. They were such a cute couple. She hoped her brother would finally allow himself to get involved again and forget his past hurt-filled love life.

The family had been concerned about him for years, and now with him having to leave his job due to severe stress, it was even more important for him to move on. They all prayed that there was finally hope for him. Mother had told the girls it was kismet that the two lost souls had met, fate that brought them together. Everything had a purpose, and they obviously needed each other. Their mother was seldom wrong.

When Keyanna had seen Ember's swollen red eyes before their trip, she'd felt so bad for the woman. Phoenix was just the man to make it better.

"Chailyn, I think he's fallen for her. What do you—" Her eyes flew wide open as a hand came over her mouth, an arm of steel banding around her waist, pinning her arms to her side.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Chailyn in the same predicament and began to fight, kicking out as she tried to catch the man's shin. Her muffled screams went unheard as she and her sister were dragged deeper into the bushes.

Desperate, Keyanna reached behind her and pinched the man's stomach, bringing a grunt but his arm tightened, knocking the breath from her as terror rose. She couldn't see Chailyn anymore and she was getting dizzy from lack of air, yet still she struggled, slamming her head back and catching the man's jaw.

"Hold still, bitch," he growled in her ear, keeping his voice down.

His arm tightened again and spots flickered before her eyes as she began to lose consciousness, and darkness reached up to swallow her as she went limp.



Still and waiting, Phoenix stood behind her, knowing that she could feel him, his heat by the way she trembled. Not sure of how to comfort her, he remained silent to give her time to think. Her quivering made him frown.

*Why is she still afraid of me? I tried so hard to be gentle and not make any moves that would frighten her. Well, except for that mind-bending kiss we shared, that might have done it. Damn, I'm such a fool.*

*'Your sisters are in danger Phoenix, hurry!'* Grandfather's voice whispered softly.

Without questioning the inner voice, he snatched the keys from his pocket and grabbed Ember by the shoulders, turning her. All business, he growled, “Ember, take the keys and go to the van. Lock the doors and stay down out of sight, hurry.”

He didn’t wait for her compliance but raced toward the path the girls had taken.

“What’s wrong? Where are you going?” Ember cried.

He spun on his heel. “I’ll explain later, the girls are in trouble. Do as I said, now!” he ordered harshly, then raced off into the woods.



The girl kept screaming behind his hand then bit it hard. In pain, he swore and pulled his hand away but she let a scream rip out, echoing off the trees. He silenced her with a fist across her jaw, shaking his hand as she slumped in his arms.

“Great, now he’ll be after us. Drop them over by the bushes and let’s get out of here. Maybe the other one will be alone back there.” His partner moved closer to the bushes and lowered his captive to the ground.

“Let’s go, you idiot! Hurry up.”

He followed suit then ran after his partner into the woods. Though he moved fast, it was not fast enough as Phoenix McCoy flew after him, tackling him to the ground, fists flying.

As the cop's fist connected with a loud smack across his jaw, a heavy weight slammed into his opponent's chest, knocking him over. Spinning, the cop grappled with the new man, fighting to get on top, in control. *Damn but that bastard's fast!*

With a choice of run or fight, he chose to run. McCoy couldn't take them both down at the same time without a gun. He raced into the woods, hoping to capture the woman his boss wanted.



There were no visible weapons to deal with, but Phoenix felt a holster with a gun pressing against his chest as he dodged punches and landed his own. In a quick move, he slammed his palm up under the man's chin and knocked him over, stunned. Both men were down on the ground, the first one got to his feet and raced off down the path. Phoenix disarmed the one he held down.

"Who the hell are you?" Phoenix asked, panting, his adrenalin pumping fast.

The man didn't answer but prepared to fight again. Phoenix was ready for him until he heard Ember cry of alarm.

“Phoenix, stop! The girls need you. Just let them go for now.” Phoenix looked over his shoulder to see that Ember was kneeling beside the girls. Keyanna was coming around but Chailyn was still unconscious. They were his first priority.

Phoenix swore. Now Ember was in danger too. Since he had no idea if there were any others around, he started backing up toward the women, shielding them with his body.

The other man scrambled to his feet and took off running, disappearing into the woods.

Once Phoenix was sure they were gone, he moved to Chailyn’s side. She was still unconscious, a large bruise swelling on her chin. Keyanna was awake and crying in Ember’s arms.

“Let’s get back to the van and get out of here,” he growled, his eyes scanning the forest. With tender care he gathered his sister in his arms and cradled her close as he followed Ember and Keyanna back down the trail. With the culprit’s gun tucked into his belt, he kept his eyes and ears sharp for attack.

Once they were in the van, Phoenix asked Ember to watch for the men while he climbed in with Chailyn, laying her down carefully on the seat beside her sister, her head in Keyanna’s lap.

Keyanna was still crying in reaction.

“Buckle up and lock your doors.”

He checked beneath the van, looking for evidence of tampering. Satisfied that it was okay, he drove back down the steep, winding road, headed for the police department. His eyes constantly moved over the area watching for anything unusual. Minutes later they pulled up in front of Bancroft's small precinct and Phoenix told the women to stay put. As he climbed out of the van, he saw a cop heading into the building and called out to him.

"Jerry, I need backup!"

Without question, the man rushed over, unlatching the safety on his holster. Within minutes the three women were in the small conference room, Chailyn held safely in her brother's arms as she began to wake up.

A local doctor came to the precinct to examine both women. Although they were bruised and shaken, he pronounced them both fit.

Phoenix filed a report. About to describe the men, he stopped when Ember put her hand on his arm, her gaze telling him what she wanted. He gave her a quick nod then ran outside to the van and brought back her art supplies.

In thirty minutes, she had done sketches of both men and the assigned officer sent out an APB. Phoenix called Brett and updated him, telling him where he was going to take Ember to hide her. She looked away from his questioning gaze and she shook her head, not willing to talk to her brother yet.





By the time he had the distraught girls back home and safe with the family, he noticed that Ember had been silent since the attack. He needed to speak to her alone but the only privacy to be had was either out in the woods or up in the bedroom. He swallowed hard at the thought of being alone with her at all. Taking the choice from him, Ember said she was going to go and lie down, and left the room.

“Phoenix, you should go after her and make sure she’s all right,” Aiyana said, her hand resting on his arm. She was still very upset by what had happened, the stress showing in her eyes.

“I’ll take care of her, Mother. Are the girls all right?” he asked.

“Yes, they’ll be fine. Go.”

He bent to give her a kiss on her smooth cheek then turned and left the room, swiftly climbing the stairs to the bedroom.



After taking off her shoes, Ember was about to climb into bed but stopped short. Seeing her shoes carelessly dropped on the floor triggered a flashback. Images of a faceless man laughing while he removed them then roughly stripped off her pantyhose and underwear had her shaking all over. She shuddered and stared at them as though they were venomous snakes.



As he opened the bedroom door, Phoenix caught Ember's unguarded look. From the horrified expression, he wondered if she was reliving the attack, as stated in Brett's report. Phoenix quickly picked up the shoes and put them away in the closet.

Ember began gasping for breath and started hyperventilating. Her face turned sheet white and he thought she might pass out. He moved to her side.

"Put your head down between your knees, Ember." When she didn't respond, her eyes wide with shock, he pulled her close and had her sit on the bed. He pushed her head gently down toward her knees, but it was too late and she crumpled. He cursed and scooped her up before she could fall then laid her down on the bed. Running to the door, he yelled for his mother to bring up cold water and a cloth.

Aiyana was at the door a minute later, poured water on the face cloth then placed it on Embers forehead.

"What happened?" she asked quietly.

"I think she was remembering something of what happened to her. I didn't get her head down low fast enough and she fainted. I guess we can add not leaving shoes on the floor to the list while she's here."

“Son, the attack on Eagle’s Nest was a shock to her and it probably stirred up her memories. It can take a long time to heal from something like that. I think it would be a good idea to take her up to the hunting cabin to get her away from all of this. She needs some space.”

He lifted Ember’s cold hand in his and nodded, his eyes glued to her face. “I think you’re right, Mom. She has too much going on in that beautiful head of hers. She needs to clear her mind. Perhaps Grandfather will have an idea of how we can help her.”

Phoenix watched Ember while she lay there pale and silent. She looked so much younger without the strain around her eyes and mouth. Her stress had vanished in her unconscious state, leaving her relaxed and peaceful.

Dark brows arched delicately over her closed eyes shadowed by thick black lashes. Her alabaster skin looked satiny soft. A perfectly straight nose rose up a little at the tip, lending an air of mischief as it balanced above her full sensuous lips.

The slight cleft in her chin that deepened when she smiled drew his eyes. Phoenix wanted to kiss that cleft, those tempting lips and the delicate feathery lashes. A shudder of need wracked his body so he stood up, stepping away from the bed as if he’d been scorched.

When Aiyana touched his arm, he jumped. He had been so lost in watching Ember that he'd forgotten his mother was standing there. *How is that for losing it! Some cop.*

"She'll be fine, son. It will take time, but she is a strong woman. Have some patience."

A lump lodged in his throat which caused him to swallow hard. "I'm way out of my element with this little one. She is a flame that might just burn me to the third degree."

"You'll be all right with her. Take her to the cabin for a few days and let her clear her mind. After this incident, perhaps you shouldn't wait and take her there today." Aiyana patted his cheek and left the room, closing the door behind her without a sound.

Deep in thought, Phoenix looked back down at Ember. He would take her today. She obviously needed some peace and quiet. With a wry grin, he thought that the McCoy home was not the place for that!



A feeling of despair filled her as Ember waved goodbye to the family. It was surprisingly difficult regardless of how short the time was that she'd been with them. They had connected on a personal level; at least she had with the women,

feeling a close bond. The men remained at a distance, and thankfully she hadn't had to deal with them at the house.

The trees flew past them as Phoenix drove the all-terrain vehicle through the woodland paths. Ember sat straddled across the seat behind him with her arms tight around his waist. The tingling ache in her lower abdomen she attributed to the bumpy ride, refusing to acknowledge that it could be her reaction to Phoenix's rock hard body.

Ember let out a shriek and then a delighted laugh when they flew over a small hill. Her stomach did a flip as if she'd been on a roller coaster. Happy for the excuse to get even closer, she hugged him.

"Sorry Ember, the road can get pretty bumpy. We still have an hour to go before we reach the cabin," Phoenix called over his shoulder to Ember.

She wondered if he did his best to hit more large bumps so she would cling to him. "This is fun, Phoenix," she yelled, giggling as well. "Do you get to do this very often?" Her heart beat faster as each bump shoved her closer to his back, gasping when her breasts rubbed against him.

He shook his head and turned to shout over his shoulder. "Just when I come home for a visit. My grandfather usually takes me fishing, and we stay at the cabin for a week or more."

They soon hit an extremely large bump and she let out another scream, her laughter echoing in the forest around them. This time she not only held on tighter, but she rested her cheek against him and closed her eyes, breathing in the clean, fresh smell of him. It was earthy with the pleasant smell of sweet grass.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were hitting the bumps on purpose!” she giggled.

His deep chuckle shook his chest against her arms. Phoenix shouted, “Now why would I do that, Ember?”

Feeling him shake with laughter, she grinned again. It felt good to find her humor restored. The more he played and teased, the more relaxed she became. Aiyana had told her that she needed time to heal. Perhaps going away to the cabin was the best medicine. She could take the time to explore the wilderness with him.

Suddenly stopping the vehicle, Phoenix said, “We have a downed tree to move before we can continue. Hang on a minute.” Swinging his leg over the side, Phoenix climbed off and strode over to the tree. It was about six inches around and he’d have to lift it and push it to the side of the path, though the thick canopy would make the chore difficult as it was stuck in between two large trees.

Ember scrambled down and ran over to him. She was panting, adrenalin still rushing through her system from the exciting ride.

Phoenix stood with his hands on his hips staring down at the tree. He shook his head. "This might be difficult and I don't have an axe with me to get rid of some branches."

"If we lift it together, we should be able to walk it over to the side. What do you think?" She looked up to meet his warm brown eyes. His straight black hair had escaped from its tie and fallen forward, giving him a wild and dangerous look.

After he stared back at her for an endless moment, Phoenix gently brushed his fingers over her cheek, his eyes never leaving hers. Her mouth went dry as sensation surged through her belly. Licking her lips, she found it difficult to breathe all of a sudden, hoping that he'd kiss her again.

As though he'd suddenly realized where the moment was going, Phoenix looked down at the tree and cleared his throat. Once again, Ember felt the pain of loss at his rejection.

"Well, I suppose we could try it, Ember, but I want you to be careful. Don't hurt yourself, okay?"

She nodded as speech eluded her then looked over at the vehicle for a moment in thought. After walking back to it, she searched in the knapsack and found a rope Phoenix had packed that afternoon. Once she was back at his side, she handed it over without a word.

His eyes warmed as he gave her a smile. "Good thinking."

Heat flushed into her cheeks as embarrassment set in. She dropped her gaze to look down at the tree.

After tying the rope around the top branches of the tree, Phoenix walked a few feet away and nodded. Ember ran over to him and grabbed hold of it just a few inches above his hands.

“Ready? When I say pull, we give her all we’ve got. One, two, three, pull!”

When both of them tugged hard on the rope, the tree moved faster than they expected, flying toward them. Ember lost her balance. A shriek escaped as she went flying backward, slamming into Phoenix and taking him to the soft ground. He, in turn, threw his arms around her and did his best to cushion her body with his own as they landed.

At the last second, her body twisted and Ember found herself face to face on top of Phoenix. He grunted at the force of the drop.

“Oh, my God, are you all right?” she cried, laughing until she noted his closed eyes and pained expression. She sobered up fast enough as he kept his eyes closed for a few moments and tried to take in some deep breaths. His arms were clenched around her waist which kept her body immobile.

Finally able to talk a little, he hissed, “Wait...hold still...for a minute.” During that endless timeframe, his entire body shuddered beneath her.



Worried about him, Ember leaned her head closer, running her hand over his cheek. “What can I do to help you, Phoenix?” she said softly, her voice husky with concern.

When he suddenly rolled them over so that she was on the bottom, she gasped. His chocolate brown eyes melted into hers, hot with passion.

Surprised, she reached up to cup his cheek, sliding her trembling hand around his neck. With a sigh, she threaded her fingers slowly through his silky black locks.

She gave him an invitation with her eyes, thrilled when Phoenix gently lowered his lips and brushed them over hers.

Ember froze in place, holding her breath until she was able to relax under his hot, wet mouth, feeling safe and cherished. Though hesitant at first, she began to respond, her lips softening and blending into his. Her heart raced as she felt an ache pooling low in her abdomen. Slowly she ran her shaking fingers over his hard muscled back then up into his hair again. Gasping for air, her eyes closed in bliss, she pulled his head closer, her breasts burning against his rock hard chest.

He gasped for air as he broke the achingly sweet kiss to stare down at her, his gaze on her lips. For once, she felt beautiful and cherished, all thoughts of the past forgotten. Her breathing quickened as a wave of searing desire crashed through her womb.

Although nature serenaded them with its melodious symphony, neither of them noticed. Their souls melded and together they froze to relish the moment, afraid to break the fragile hold on it.

Stunned by the energy between them she blinked, feeling his fire, his swollen passion against her belly, and so much more. Her hands anchored in his hair as she slowly pulled his head down to capture his lips again, kissing him with abandon. She moaned into his mouth wanting...wanting...more.

When he captured her moan in his mouth, he suddenly hesitated and pulled back. A look of disgust washed over his face though his body still shook with reaction.

“Ember. I can’t believe I did it again, I—” Scrambling off her, Phoenix ran his fingers through his hair and started to pace in agitation. “What was I thinking? Brett’s going to kill me!” He held out his hand to help her up, avoiding her gaze while he waited for her to take it.

Hurt by his reaction, Ember felt tears fill her eyes. Her lower lip quivered, and she couldn’t hide her pain. He wouldn’t look at her. Shame filled her cheeks with a burning heat.

He didn’t want her because she was tarnished. Aiyana was wrong. She’d come on to him and he was repulsed. Ignoring the hand he held out to help her up,

she scrambled to her feet and walked quickly back to the vehicle. Biting back sobs, she stood with her back to him, shaking head to toe.

With one hand, she shoved her hair out of her face. *Why would he want me? I'm just like the trash in the local dump! Why was I so stupid, kissing him like that? It was the best kiss I've ever had. Damn it!*

Phoenix finished pulling the tree out of the way and removed the rope. Without another word between them, he placed it back in the knapsack and climbed on the four-wheeler.



Once they were underway again, Phoenix did his best to miss every pot hole and hill he could since Ember only held on to him by gripping the cloth of his jacket. He felt the stiffness in her thighs as she leaned away from him. He tried desperately to ignore the searing ache that shot through his groin as they brushed over his.

They hadn't spoken a word to each other during the rest of the trip. When they'd pulled up at the cabin on the lake, Ember appeared emotionally drained and didn't even look around her. Phoenix frowned when she ignored his hand and scrambled off the opposite side by herself.

She avoided his gaze as she undid the ties that held her bag and art pad and lifted them off, and waited for him to lead the way.

Shame filled him as Phoenix wondered how to fix what he'd done. Ember had withdrawn again and he didn't know what to say to bring her out of it. A deep sigh from him was the only sound between them as he picked up his bag and the supplies, and led the way to the cabin. It was just getting dark and he had many things to accomplish before they bedded down for the night. That thought had him cringing at the images which raced through his mind as he unlocked the door and entered the cabin, holding the door open for her.

The sunset splashed crimson, peach, and violet across the sky, mirroring over the still lake, but Ember only gave it the briefest of glances before following him into the cabin. When she stopped on the threshold, he watched her as she studied the large room.

It was a very old log cabin that had been in the family for generations. The walls were made of rustic logs with chinking in between. At the far end of the room there was a fireplace made out of natural rose and gray colored rocks, all about six inches in diameter.

There were no dead animals hung on the wall such as there would be in a hunter's lodge since the McCoys and their grandfather cherished the lives of the forest creatures. An old rust-colored rug rested between the couch and chair in front of the fireplace. The rough textured floor was a dull, natural wood, the same

as the small kitchen cupboards. An old-fashioned cook stove that required firewood was used to heat the cabin in the colder months.

As her eyes fell on the refrigerator, she frowned in puzzlement. He'd already told her there was no power in the cabin to keep it chilled but hadn't mentioned the generator.

Old kerosene lanterns hung on hooks in the ceiling all around the room. There were only two doors on the back wall. Phoenix could almost feel Ember's thoughts when she stared at them and cringed.

*She's probably hoping they are both bedrooms. When she finds out we'll be sharing the single room, she's probably going to freak!*

The front large windows facing the lake gave a panoramic view of the colorful sunset reflected on the still water like a mirror. Sadness filled her eyes as she stared out at the pallet of beauty. Spending the time together in such close quarters was going to be hell on wheels.

Since he couldn't stand near her without wanting to touch her, he held back to let her get adjusted. To keep his hands busy, he squatted down in front of the fireplace to begin building a fire, watching her from beneath his thick lashes as she studied the room's decorations.

Aboriginal in design, there was a dream catcher with feathers, leather straps, and turquoise stones hanging on a pine wall. Brightly colored, patterned

blankets lay haphazardly thrown over the backs of the couch and chair making the atmosphere warm. It was a very comfortable hideaway yet he seldom took note of the things he'd grown up with, taking them for granted as a normal part of his life.



Ember watched Phoenix as he squatted down by the fireplace, feeling a twinge of anguish. He was so handsome and confident. Once he'd taken his jacket off, his T-shirt was snug against his body, hard muscles rippling as he moved his arms to stir the kindling. When it came to buns, his were top of the line, round and firm, the perfect size. She ached to cup them in her palms and run her hands over the enticing cheeks.

She swallowed the drool that had built up in her mouth, and continued her study since he didn't know she was watching him. She loved the way his unbound shiny black hair fell down his back to just below his shoulder blades, teasing as it hid his face from her hungry eyes. When her fingers had grasped it earlier, it had felt like cool satin and smelled like the earthy forest around them.

He shifted his position and added a few larger pieces of wood. Ember noticed his black leather boots and bit back a groan. *Damn! Cowboy boots are so sexy on the man!* The hot moist heat that dampened her panties had her biting back a gasp and tearing her eyes away from him as she fought to catch her breath, her heart racing madly with desire for him.

Since it seemed a hopeless dream, Ember took her belongings and walked on unsteady legs to check out the back rooms. Behind the first door she found a large bathroom with an old fashioned tub that was large enough for two people. Images of Phoenix surrounded by bubbles, his ebony hair wet and floating in the water filled her mind. After sucking in a deep breath, she shook herself, and looked over at the sink and toilet. Thank God there was a toilet!

When she turned and opened the other door to find a king-sized bed, she began trembling, cursing herself for her overactive imagination. Morose, she dropped her things on the floor, about to go back to the main room but froze when she felt him behind her. The heat of his body warmed her in more ways than one.



“I want to apologize for my behavior earlier. I had no right to kiss you, Ember.” Low and husky, his voice washed over her like the caress of warm chocolate.

When she turned to face him, he saw that she was biting her lip. Her expression was achingly sad causing his heart to flip as she stared into his eyes. Shame flooded her cheeks.

“I’m sorry I came on to you. I know that I’m just...I’m just used goods, and not a woman you would even be interested in, and I—” Unable to continue, she looked away and shuddered.

“Just what do you mean by that?” Phoenix’s voice hardened. He couldn’t believe she thought that of herself. It angered him as he remembered what had happened to her.

“Just what I said,” she choked in a quivery voice. “After...after what happened, I can’t imagine anyone would want anything to do with me. I’m just...disgusting now.” A sob rocked through her body.

Furious with the creep who had made her feel so poorly about herself, he turned her around to face him. When she wouldn’t look at him, he tipped her chin up with his finger so she would look up. The unshed tears made his heart ache for her.

“Don’t! Don’t do this to yourself, Ember. That creep hurt you where scars won’t heal. In your mind! You’re intelligent, beautiful, sexy, and...damn it! I want—” he stopped, unable to tell her how he truly felt about her. “Look, I promised Brett that I would protect you, and that’s what I’m going to do. That doesn’t include taking advantage of you.”

As Phoenix stared down at her, he wondered what he could do to sooth her spirit. He wanted to hold her close, but felt it was safer to keep his distance. This attraction to her was way out of control and he hardened just thinking about her tender lips. The way her body shook with heartrending sobs made him feel helpless.



When her sobs finally subsided to leave her trembling with small shudders, he bent down and lifted her tenderly into his arms. Exhaustion claimed her, as she curled into his neck he carried her to the bed and laid her down carefully on the mattress. In the process of taking off her shoes, he was about to put them on the floor but stopped, placing them on the dresser instead.

With great restraint, he did his best to be impersonal and carefully removed her socks and jeans, covering her with the blankets. Finally, he stood back, studying her sleeping, tear-streaked face, and ached to kiss her tears away. He had to get away from her or he was going to go mad!

After closing the door softly behind him, he tore out of the cabin, stripping his clothes off as he ran. Once he reached the dock, he was completely naked and dove into the cool water. As his head broke the surface of the lake, he started swimming and kept going until he was out of breath and energy.

Phoenix knew she'd been watching him as he built the fire and had done his best to pretend he wasn't aware of her. At that point he'd been hard as a rock and needed a cold dip in the lake with a desperation he'd never known before. No woman had ever affected him as this one did. When she'd finally moved toward the rooms, he'd dropped his head into his hands and taken a few deep breaths. It took him a few moments to get a hold of himself before he could follow her to make sure she was all right.

There were no witnesses to see his exhausted body slowly exit the water. Glistening drops reflected the moonlight, enhancing his rippling muscles as he moved with a graceful stride. He was in no hurry to dress as he finally stood on the cool sand staring at the darkened cabin.

His hands rested on his hips, his chest rapidly rising and falling with the pounding of his heart. He couldn't get the woman out of his mind. She had somehow become a part of him. However, he couldn't allow himself to take advantage of her trust in him, of Brett's trust in him.

Thinking about those soft lips, liquid blue eyes, and curvaceous body, he groaned as his member rose once again. "Traitor!" he swore, glaring at it before turning to race back into the lake. He wondered if it was possible to calm the flames that continued to devour him. It was going to be a very long night.

## Chapter Seven

### Grandfather of Fire

A scream ripped from her throat as she lay on the bed, clutching the blankets to her chest. An old man in full native dress leaned over her, grinning.

Phoenix was there in an instant. “What’s wrong?”

“Hellllloo! Do you not see this man in my room staring at me?” she cried sarcastically, her heart pounding like a jackhammer.

Phoenix snorted. “This is my Grandfather, Malimo. He just came by to welcome you.”

Shaking, Ember clutched the blankets up to her chin. “Do you think maybe we could hold off the introductions until I’m dressed?” Furious and embarrassed to be watched by a stranger, she moved farther back on the bed.

“Little Flame, I have not come to see what you hide beneath the blankets, but I will wait in the other room for a proper introduction.” Malimo offered a

crooked smile, turned and left the room, patting Phoenix on the shoulder as he passed him.

Holding her hand over her pounding heart, she stared at Phoenix in accusation.

“My Grandfather would never hurt you, Little Flame.”

“Tell that to my heart. I think I just had a coronary!” she griped.

His hearty laughter filled the room. “Get dressed and come out and meet him. I have breakfast ready for you.”

“Gee thanks, I’ll hurry as fast as I can. Breakfast, wow!” Her mockery met new levels.

“I see you’re not a morning person.” His big grin told Ember he found that funny.

With a shout of outrage, she threw a pillow at him. “Get out of here before I have you arrested!”

His blindingly bright grin made her stomach flip as he caught the pillow and threw it right back at her before running from the room, his chuckle echoing down the hall after the door closed behind him.

“Now how can you stay angry at that?” she mumbled with a reluctant grin.



Once Ember was dressed and washed up, she entered the main room but it was empty. She sighed in relief noticing that her breakfast lay on the counter. She was in no hurry to meet Phoenix's grandfather since he'd scared ten years off her life, so she tucked into her bacon, eggs, and home fries, which were surprisingly still hot.

As she ate, she mused over the reaction, or lack of, she had with Phoenix when being near any other man freaked her right out; even an old man since she didn't even remember the rape, only flashes, and images. Yet her fear was very real. Men terrified her, no matter what age.

She smiled as an image of Malimo's mischievous grin filled her mind. He wasn't that frightening or threatening at all, and she liked the laughter in his eyes. It appeared he had a good sense of humor, *I could get used to him pretty quick.*

The sudden flash of the danger she was in flickered in her mind, gone as quickly as it came but her appetite disappeared. Since Phoenix had gone to such trouble to make her breakfast, she slipped the rest of the meal into the garbage can and placed a few paper towels on top of it, hoping he wouldn't notice.

After drinking her orange juice, she poured herself a cup of hot herbal tea from the terra cotta teapot. It was more of the sweet grass but held a hint of licorice. A sense of peace filled her heart as she took her cup out onto the porch to look out at the water.

It was so peaceful around her. The loons sang on the lake, and she could hear frogs and other birds adding to nature's symphony. She didn't see either of the men, so she stepped down and walked over to the long dock. When she came to the end, she sat down and put her cup aside. Taking off her shoes and socks, she rolled her pants up to her knees and dipped her feet into the cool water.

Once settled, she picked up her tea and sipped the aromatic brew, sighing in contentment. Her eyes scanned the still lake. It appeared as though there was no one else around for miles. It was a perfect romantic getaway. Frowning, she remembered it would be perfect for anyone else but her.

Lost in thought, she swished her feet back and forth in the water and stared down into the ripples. When her feet stopped, the water slowly settled as still as a mirror and she screamed at the top of her lungs, her cry echoing across the lake as she nearly toppled into the water and sloshed the tea on her jeans.

Sparks of anger turned to flames as she spun around to look over her shoulder and yelled, "Damn it, anyway! Will you please stop sneaking up on me! You're going to kill me here!"

Though she reprimanded Malimo, he didn't seem offended at all. In fact, he seemed completely unrepentant and sat down beside her, crossing his legs in a yoga position.

“You are very jumpy, Little Flame. We must work on that,” he said in his gravelly voice.

“If you stop sneaking up on me, we won’t have to work on anything!” Barely able to smother her smile, she found that she really liked the intriguing man.

They sat in companionable silence for a few moments until Ember couldn’t hold back her curiosity anymore and spoke.

“*Bear Walking Into Shade*. It should have been *Bear Sneaking Up On Woman*.” Unable to hold back her grin, she turned to look over her shoulder at him. He had the same mysterious eyes as Phoenix. Malimo was a lot smaller in stature, at least a foot shorter than his grandson. His skin was like wrinkled old leather and he looked as though he’d fought many of life’s battles in his day. She was surprised to see he wore traditional native clothing, but found that it suited him, loaning him a mystical air.

His tan buckskin shirt had long fringes, his pants matching. Rather than boots, he wore traditional moccasins. A bear claw pendant hung around his neck, and his long gray hair was parted into two braids, tied with leather thongs with brown feathers hanging down on either side of his chest. He was the essence of a wild-west character in an old western movie. Geronimo, come to life!

“You have a good sense of humor when you are not screaming.” He chuckled in a deep, earthy tone.

“Yeah, well I only scream when I’m scared by old men sneaking up on me.” To hide her grin, she sipped the tea. Ember loved the way he teased her, feeling as though she’d just met her best friend.

As if the man could read her mind, he winked at her, releasing a wide smile.

Ember turned her head to look away, trying her best not to laugh aloud.

“Is Grandfather teasing you, Little Flame?” Phoenix asked.

As soon as he began to talk, Ember jumped and bit back a scream.

“I see it runs in the family,” she muttered, sending Grandfather an accusing glare, even though she felt like laughing.

“Phoenix told me about the likeness you drew of my granddaughter. I would be happy to pay you to do the same for all of my grandchildren,” he asked softly. His scratchy voice was soothing.

“I don’t need money. I’ll do it for free.” With a tilt of her head, she added cheekily, “That is, if you promise to stop sneaking up on me!”

Both men laughed. Grandfather nodded. “So be it. I will come crashing into the room like a wild bear if you wish it.”

She held out her hand and giggled as he took it in his. “It’s a deal!”

“Ember, Grandfather is going to sit with you for a few hours while I head to town. I have to check in with Brett and see if there is any news. I’d rather keep you out of sight.” Phoenix looked apologetic and nervous at the same time.



As a flash of pain surged through her heart, she dropped her gaze to hide the sorrow she knew he would see.

“Tell him...tell him I’m sorry about the way we parted and...and that I’m all right. He doesn’t have to worry about me.” Her face flushed with the heat of shame at the way she’d treated Brett and Lana.

For a moment, Phoenix squatted down, placing his hand on her shoulder. “He knows you didn’t mean it, Ember. He understands that it was your hurt talking.”

She looked away, across the lake and said bitterly, “Gee, who needs a psychiatrist with *your* family around?”

His hand brushed gently over her hair in an attempt to sooth her. “It’ll be all right, Ember. We’ll make sure of it.”

His kind words had her eyes tearing up though she fought them back.

“Ember, will you be all right with Grandfather for the day?”

A snort escaped as she quipped, “Well between him and the loons, I think he’ll be the better company.” Unable to look at Phoenix, she kept her eyes on a loon far out in the lake.

He released a deep sigh. “I’ll be back in a few hours.” Patting her head like she was a little kid, he got up and left them, his footsteps silent on the dock.

A quick glance over her shoulder showed him already on shore. “How do you people walk that way? Do you have some kind of floating device in your moccasins?” she joked, trying to hide her pain as she turned back to watch the loon.

A deep, gentle laugh filled the air around her. “It’s a gift,” Grandfather said. “Would you like to go for a canoe ride or sit around drawing?”

“Gosh, now there’s a tough choice. Let me see,” she put her finger to her chin and tapped. “Sit in a chair all day bored out of my mind, or explore the lake! Now the chair does have its merits...but...I think I choose door number one, *oh, wise one*; the canoe ride!”

A delighted chuckle came from behind her. “We are going to get along just fine, Little Flame. Perhaps you could bring your artwork with you and we could pack a lunch. It will be some time before we return. It’s a big lake!”

She looked up to see his cheerful grin. “Guess I’ll pack the lunch then.” Ember stood up and grabbed her shoes, socks, and the teacup then hurried back to the cabin.



Grandfather watched Ember disappear inside the cabin. “My daughter is right. She is perfect for our, Big Flame.” In one fluid move he stood, still agile in his

older years, and followed her to the cabin. He ensured that he made so much noise as he approached the cabin that Little Flame giggled at him.



His fist slammed into the wall as his anger got the best of him. “Why the hell can’t we track the man? Where is he hiding? I want my sister safe!” Brett growled as he paced back and forth in his small office. When he started working at the precinct he’d had a flat punching bag installed on the wall so he could vent his rage without damaging city property.

Brett knew his partner, Jessie, wouldn’t complain about the outbursts. They’d grown up together and Jessie understood Brett’s rage. Ember was his friend. Even when she’d had a crush on him in her teens, they had been close. He’d always treated her like a sister so they’d never developed an intimate relationship.

The investigation was going nowhere and both men were frustrated. Even with the drawing of the ring and her ID on the blue car, they’d been unable to find out a thing. The two men they’d picked up claimed innocence and wouldn’t talk. Since Brett was related to Ember, he wasn’t permitted to question them. With no solid evidence to book them, the men had been released from jail.

Fortunately, Phoenix had been able to get Ember out of town first before anyone could follow them. Yet somehow they had tracked her and Phoenix to

Bancroft. There was obviously a leak at the precinct and as yet they were unable to figure out who it was.

To follow the trail of drugs left by the Birdman was like trying to track a ghost. It appeared then disappeared on them as quick as lightning. Brett had hired a young undercover cop to infiltrate the university where Ember was enrolled. His name was Rory Burns. Even though he was twenty-eight, he looked more like twenty-two. He signed up for the exact same classes as Ember and spent much of his time trying to melt into the crowd and find the drug dealers.

Nothing had shown up so far, but Brett had confidence in the kid's investigative skills. He was good at what he did. Very good!

When the phone rang Brett nearly hit the ceiling as he flew to answer it.

"Colton!"

"McCoy here. Is everything all right down there?" Phoenix asked.

A sigh of relief escaped Brett, deflating his anger temporarily. "We have nothing so far. How is my sister?" The brief silence that followed the question had Brett reading more than he wanted to into it.

"She's fine. I have her up at our fishing cabin and Grandfather is with her. Ember was a little overwhelmed by my brothers at the house, so my mother suggested the cabin. After the attack on my sister's yesterday, Ember was really shook up, but she's doing much better now."

Though Phoenix's voice seemed impersonal, Brett was too sharp and alarm bells rang in his brain. A slight hesitation indicated to Brett that Phoenix was uncomfortable about something. *Maybe he and Ember are getting close, a little too close.* Suspicions raced through his mind.

"What's really going on, Phoenix?" Brett asked in a growl.

"She's fine." Phoenix jumped in quickly, trying to dispel Brett's suspicious nature. "She's been as skittish as a cat, Brett. It's going to take time for her to adjust. She did an awesome drawing of Keyanna yesterday, and when everyone went to admire it, she panicked a bit and ended up having flashbacks, but she's fine. I'm treating her with kid gloves—has there been any word about the Birdman?"

Brett allowed the quick change of subject. "Not a word, but we put Burns on the case at the university. He's very good at mingling and gathering info. When will you call in again?" Brett asked, doing his best to hide his simmering anger.

"I'll call in two days, but I don't like leaving her alone and bringing her into town might be a bad idea. My Grandfather said he'd stay with her while I'm gone. I'd like to keep her out of sight, just in case."

There was something in Phoenix's tone that concerned Brett. *Something is up.*

“Two days then. Tell her...Tell her we love her.” Brett said hesitantly, glancing over at Jessie. Instead of the teasing look he expected, Jessie looked serious and nodded at him.

“Oh, she asked me to tell you that she’s sorry...about the way she treated you and Lana. She’s better now, Brett. Honestly, she is.”

It was hard to swallow the sudden lump in his throat as Brett said gruffly, “Thanks. Talk to you in two days.”

Once he’d hung up the phone, Brett turned his back on Jessie. After clearing his throat, he said, “She’s fine and sent an apology for her behavior to Lana and me.”

Tense with nerves, Brett held his shoulders stiff.

“Talk to me, Brett. What’s going on?” Jessie asked.

With a loud grunt, Brett slammed his fist into the punching bag on the wall. “I think things are getting a little too close between them—think about it,” he said, turning to Jessie, “they’re up at his cabin, all alone. Things are bound to happen and I don’t want her hurt any more than she already is. What was I thinking, putting the two together like that? I expected them to stay with his family, not alone at his cabin.”

Jessie added a dash of cold reality into the mix. “Brett, Ember is a grown woman. Yes, she’s been hurt and she’s lost her best friend, but don’t you think that at twenty-seven, she’s earned the right to make her own choices?”

“Arrrrggg!” Brett cried. “She’s my kid sister, no matter what has happened. I thought that Phoenix, of all people, would be able to control himself around her.”

With a calm demeanor, Jessie sat back in his chair, hands folded over his abdomen. “Maybe it’s her pulling the strings. If I recall correctly, when Ember was interested in something, or someone, she went full tilt until she got them. She knows what she wants, Brett. No one is going to force her into a decision she doesn’t want to make. Have a little faith in her.”

After a moment Brett released a sigh of frustration, realizing that Jessie was right. Phoenix would never force Ember into anything. She was a strong woman, no matter what kicks life threw at her, and he trusted Phoenix, or he would never have asked him to take care of her.

“Let’s get out of here. I need to see my wife,” Brett said. Lana would know what to do about it. She always seemed to know. The men left the office for the day, no further along on the case than when they’d started on it that morning.



“Ember Colton must be found and eliminated. I don’t know how much she saw, but she saw something, or she wouldn’t have run.” The man picked up

Ember's ID and stared at her likeness. "She knows me and I can't have her running off screaming to the cops. I want more men out there looking for her. She's been taken from her brother's place and hidden somewhere up in Bancroft. Find her!"

Blue sapphires glittered when the man's hand moved as he picked up her driver's license. Ember would know him in an instant. The drug might have dulled her memory, but she could remember that night at any time. He wondered why the cops didn't know about him already.

Angered at the thought, he frowned. *She must die!* Impatient, he threw her ID on the table and picked up the phone receiver. It was time to bring in reinforcements, and he knew just who to call to help him.



## Chapter Eight

### Cinders of the Past Awakened

The stillness around her was a soothing balm for her chaotic thoughts. As she dipped the paddle smoothly into the water, sending circular ripples away from the birch bark canoe, the only sounds around her were the water droplets, the birds, frogs, and insects. A Great Blue Heron took flight from the reeds, looking like a graceful pterodactyl as it passed overhead.

Fresh air filled her lungs as she breathed, bringing new life and a cleansing to her mind. Ember took a deep, calming breath. Her quiet companion was motionless as he paddled so she barely felt the canoe vibrate. Tears burned behind her eyes as she thought about what had happened to her over the past week. In one evening, her whole life had been turned upside down.

She'd gone from being a fun loving young woman to a terrified shell of a woman in a heartbeat. Shuddering, she thought of the hand with the ring. Though having a photographic mind was one thing, remembering where she had seen it

before was another. She jerked suddenly, as she realized that she *had* seen the ring before; but where?

In the stillness, Malimo spoke in his gentle, gravelly voice. “Little Flame, do you wish to talk about it?”

Startled at his sudden words, she turned her head to look over her shoulder at him, resting her paddle across her lap. “Talk about it?”

“You were still for so long and then, when the chaos in your mind cleared, you thought of something that shocked you. Do you wish to talk about it?” he repeated, keeping the rhythm going with the paddle.

Amazed at his perception, she faced forward again. “I...I think I just remembered something important about the ring I saw on the man’s hand. I’m sure I’ve seen it before, but I can’t remember where.” Ember shuddered again, the memory elusive.

“It will come to you when the time is right, Little Flame. Let’s pull over to that island ahead. There is a place where we can rest and eat.” Malimo fell silent again, leaving her to her thoughts as he steered the canoe. They didn’t speak again until they were sitting on the ground, eating their picnic lunch.

Soon, Ember found that her mind was clearing again and let her thoughts wander. There was no point in worrying about something she couldn’t remember.

Malimo was right, it would come to her when it was supposed to. She picked up her pad and pens, turning to look at him.

“Mr...ah, I’m not sure what to call you.” She looked at him, shy all of a sudden.

“I am called by many names, but I would be honored if you wished to call me Grandfather. Unless you would prefer Malimo?” he asked, smiling at her.

She liked the thought of calling him that. “Since one of my grandfathers died before I was born, and the other when I was very young, I don’t remember having one. If you don’t mind, I think I would like to call you Grandfather.” A slow flush of heat burned her cheeks.

“I would like that, Little Flame. One can never have too many grandchildren.” His warm chuckle had her grinning.

“Would you mind if I did your portrait, Grandfather?” she asked, her face still hot. It was strange to call him by that name and yet it felt right.

“My grandchildren can wait for their portraits. I will play some music for you while you draw, if you would like?”

“I’d love that. Thank you.”

He pulled what looked like a flute out of his sack. Made of cedar the length of his forearm, it was long and narrow with holes carved in a straight line. The tip

of one end was the shape of a bird's beak. Aboriginal artwork, painted in turquoise, amber, red, and white patterns, ran along its length.

"It's beautiful." Ember nodded at the flute and smiled.

"There is a Lakota legend that tells of how the flute came to the people. Would you like me to tell you the story?"

"Are you kidding me? I'd love that."

His wide grin soon faded as he began the tale. Ember began to sketch him, her eyes focused on the drawing.

"This flute is called a *siyotanka*. Before such a thing existed, the only way a warrior could claim a maiden he loved for himself was to wait by the river for the women to pass by him on the forest path. He would then jump out to make himself known to her, but never speak directly to the maiden. He might grin or just stare at the ground, but he would wait for her to notice him. If she favored him, she might blush, like you do, Little Flame, or giggle, or throw something toward him like a wild turnip or an apple. This was the only way they could become acquainted, yet still they could not speak to each other."

After a shake of her head at the strange behavior, Ember fought to hold back her chuckle. "Why didn't he just talk to her or ask her out?"

Amusement in his dark gaze, Malimo continued, "It was not permitted for a warrior to approach a maiden. That was the way of the Lakota people. The

*siyotanka* would come to the people through a vision quest. One warrior resting by a tree in the forest could suddenly hear the beautiful music. He sought the answer to its creation and saw a red headed bird pecking on the branch of a cedar tree. The thin branch was filled with a line of holes, and strange, beautiful sounds came from it as the wind blew.”

Malimo played a few notes on the flute and smiled at Ember’s pleased reaction. Her hand moved the pen over the paper as he talked.

“The warrior took the branch and tried to make sounds with it but was unable to do so. Finally, he went up into the mountains and fasted for four days on a vision quest. On the fourth day, he saw the red headed bird. When he asked it how to create the beautiful sounds, the bird showed him the secret. Once the warrior came down from the mountain, back to the village, he spent time creating the *siyotanka*. He hallowed out the center of a cedar branch and whittled the fine wood at the tip into the shape of the bird’s head. It had a long neck and opened beak, which he painted using red sacred paint. He bore holes in a line and finally, when it was finished, he placed his fingers on the holes and blew into the flute like the bird had shown him.”

Playing a short melody, Malimo focused on the song. Ember felt the mystical sounds flow through her body, echoing off the trees and floating out over the lake. It was a haunting tune, and she was so moved by it she felt tears come to her eyes.

When Malimo stopped playing, the echoing sounds faded into silence.

Ember said, “That was beautiful, Grandfather.” Her voice was choked, relieved when he continued.

“In the old days, warriors used the *siyotanka* to woo the maidens. If a maiden favored the warrior, she would sneak off with him and tell him she would accept his courting, and soon after they would be united. A dowry would be offered to the girl’s family and if it was accepted, he would take her for his bride.”

“That is so romantic. I can picture it so clearly in my mind. You’re a wonderful story teller, Grandfather,” she said softly, still looking down at her pad. Her hand still moved swiftly, almost of its own accord.

Malimo went back to playing the *siyotanka*. She continued to draw his portrait as the sounds encircled her, giving her a sense of peace and serenity. He played for a long time as she sketched and only stopped when she lowered her pen.

“You are done, Little Flame?” he asked in the quiet.

Absently staring down at the pad, Ember nodded slowly, confused by her work.

“May I see it?”

Baffled, she slowly turned the pad to face him, watching as he became still. His eyes glittered with emotion as he stared at the artwork as though unable to speak.

“I...don’t understand this. I was drawing you and—who is she?” Ember said in awe, confused as to how she had drawn the woman without even knowing it.

“It is my Luyu...my Wild Dove. She was my wife.”

The sadness in his eyes made Ember’s heart ache and her eyes misted. She looked down at the image. It was of a much younger Malimo and a stunning native woman. The love that shone from their eyes made Ember’s breath hitch.

They were in their early thirties and dressed in full native attire. Luyu’s dress was of white deerskin with long fringes and beautiful colored beading. She had two thin braids, one on either side of her heart-shaped face, tied with leather thongs, feathers, and beads. The rest of her hair fell loose about her shoulders. She was incredibly beautiful and her eyes looked just like Phoenix’s.

The young Malimo gazed at her with pride and love. He carried the *siyotanka*. His arm encircled her shoulders, and it looked like he was about to kiss her.

For a moment, Ember stared at Malimo. “I don’t understand this. I’ve been zoning out and drawing things like I’ve never done before, lately. It’s as though someone else drew it for me. How could I have sketched your wife if I’ve never seen her? It happened first on Eagle’s Nest, and now this.” Ember felt bewildered.

“You have a great gift, Little Flame; greater than I had thought possible. The spirits have spoken through you and given you true insight. Seldom have I been

surprised to such a degree.” His throat moved as he swallowed hard and ran his fingers gently down her cheek. “There are great things in store for you. In time you will see them.” Malimo put his flute away. “It’s time to get back to the cabin.”

Carefully putting her supplies away, she packed up the lunch and put everything in the canoe. Both of them were quiet on the way back to the cabin.

Mystified by the drawing, Ember wondered how she could possibly have drawn someone she’d never even seen before. Something made her look up toward the cabin ahead. Phoenix stood on the dock waiting, his chest bare and glistening. He didn’t move a muscle, his ebony hair blowing gently around his face in the breeze. Even though they were far enough away that she couldn’t see his eyes, she knew he was looking right into hers. She felt it.



Phoenix had returned to the cabin more than an hour before and found himself pacing as he waited for Ember and his Grandfather to return. He wasn’t worried about her safety, but felt a burning need to see her. Finally, ready to pull his own hair out, he stripped off his shirt and began chopping wood like a man on a mission. The more he thought about her, the faster he chopped until a large pile of firewood lay at his feet.

Sweat dripped into his eyes, his body glistening as the drops trailed down his chest, past his stomach, finding refuge behind his belt. His heavy breathing and



pounding heart finally forced him to stop. When he looked around him, he was surprised to see how much work he had done and laid the axe down to go for a swim to cool off, his mind still focused on Ember.



As the canoe kissed the side of the dock, Phoenix stared down into Ember's eyes until she looked away. His grandfather had a strange expression on his face and Phoenix frowned. Had something gone wrong during their outing?

Phoenix held out his hand, gripped Ember's, and pulled her safely onto the dock. She took hers back quickly, bringing another frown from him at her action. Grandfather handed her belongings up to him and Ember took them, keeping her eyes down. Reaching forward, Phoenix assisted his grandfather too.

Once Malimo was on the dock and the rest of the gear was removed from the boat, Ember turned to him and kissed his weathered cheek. Her voice husky and quiet, she said, "Thank you, Grandfather." With that, she turned to flee to the cabin, leaving the men staring after her.

"What was that all about, Grandfather?"

Malimo suddenly grinned. "I think you will find out soon enough, Grandson...soon enough!" He walked away into the woods toward his home, leaving a very confused man standing on the dock.



“I know where she is, but it’s going to cost you more than we originally agreed on. There’s a lot of attention focused on her because she’s a cop’s sister.”

Alone in his cubicle, Jeff Langdon spoke quietly into his cell, his eyes darting around to make sure he was alone.

“I don’t care what it costs, just give me the information,” Birdman said, anger in his voice.

“When do I get the money?”

“When you deliver! Meet my men behind Brandy’s Bar and Grill at seven o’clock tonight.” The phone went dead as Birdman abruptly ended the call.

Thrilled at the results of the call, Jeff sat back in his chair and grinned. This one was going to make him a rich man. He checked the clock. Four hours left on his shift then he was going to book a ticket to anywhere he wanted and get the hell out of Dodge!

A hand on his shoulder had him jumping out of his seat, ready to fight.



“Hey, go easy, Langdon. I just came to ask you a question.” Jessie Chan had heard one side of the conversation but had to pretend otherwise. Jeff was under suspicion of using drugs, but he was unaware that anyone knew about it. The

Chief had ordered surveillance on him and had kept a tight lid on it, hoping to take down his suppliers as well. A good look into the man's dilated pupils proved to Jessie that he was coming down from a high.

It was a shame Jeff had become an addict. Sometimes it happened with undercover officers who worked in the narcotics enforcement section. There were programs for rehabilitation, but so far Jeff had been left alone, monitored by his fellow cops.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police were in charge of drug enforcement on a federal level, but Brett's sister-in-law, Erin Anderson, was in the undercover narcotics enforcement section at the precinct.

Erin had passed the information about Jeff's addiction and possible connection to certain drug dealers to the Chief. Although unwilling to hand him in, she did so to protect the kids; having seen too many taken away in body bags because of drugs. She'd even lost her high school sweetheart to a drug overdose, and fought tooth and nail to keep it off the streets.

Quick on his feet, Jeff put on his best poker face. "Sorry, Chan, you shouldn't sneak up on me that way."

"I apologize. There's a drawing I'd like you to look at. Have you seen any of your contacts with this ring or using this symbol?" Jessie asked, gauging Jeff's reaction carefully.

When Jeff took the drawing of the ring from Jessie, his nostrils flared slightly as he studied it for a moment then shook his head.

“Nope. Sorry buddy, haven’t seen that one.” When he looked up at Jessie, Jeff avoided his eyes by staring at Jessie’s nose and smiled. “If I do find out though, I’ll get right back to you. It’s a good drawing. Did one of our people draw it?”

“No, this was drawn by a witness to a murder. We need to find out who owns this ring. It’s linked to a drug crime. Let me know if you find out anything.” Jessie pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to Jeff. “Here’s a copy of the drawing for you to show your contacts on the street.

“Sure, Chan, I’ll head out and see if I can pick anything up.”

Jessie nodded, staring into Jeff’s pale blue eyes for a few heartbeats then walked away.



Brett looked up as Jessie entered the small office.

“Well, did he bite?” he asked.

With an expression of disgust on his face, Jessie nodded then sat down before answering. “Langdon’s definitely on something, and when I asked him if he’d seen anyone with a ring like that, he lied.

“Damn! Is the tail in place?”

“Yeah, we borrowed an undercover cop from the Scarborough division since Langdon’s never met her before. She’s waiting for his move.”

Finally, feeling as though things were moving in the right direction, Brett sat back with a sigh. “My gut says that Langdon’s in pretty deep. I hope Phoenix is prepared, just in case Langdon was able to dig up any info on their whereabouts.” Worry gnawing at his stomach, Brett ran his fingers through his hair. “I wish he’d call so we can give him the heads up.”

“He isn’t supposed to call until tomorrow afternoon. Knowing Phoenix, he’ll be prepared for anything.”

“I hope so, Jessie. I truly hope so,” Brett said quietly.



Maylin Mitchell was a petite, five-foot nothing thirty year old, who worked undercover in Scarborough. She was good at her job because she was tiny and knew how to blend. Her short, curly brown hair framed an oval face giving her the appearance of a pixie. At ninety pounds sopping wet, she was able to pass as a young teen.

Seeing her mark, she got on her skateboard and began to follow him. Langdon was nervous, which made him difficult to follow since he checked behind him often for a tail. Maylin had a few changes of clothing with her for cover since, as a cop, he knew how to spot a tail.

It was close to five o'clock now; rush hour in downtown Toronto. Dodging people and obstacles on the street, Maylin was able to remain undetected as she followed him to an apartment building. When he went inside, she studied the place noting entrance and exit points. Once she had the info she needed, she called Jessie on her cell and had him run a check on the place to see if anyone familiar popped up.

As soon as she shut off the phone, she dug through her bag and drew out a change of clothing. She slipped on a nondescript sweatshirt and baggy jeans over her clothes then pulled out a baseball cap that had a long blond wig attached. In minutes she discarded the skating board and became a punk. She was ready when he came out of the apartment twenty minutes later, looking higher than a kite as he staggered along the street.

Langdon wasn't as nervous now and seldom looked over his shoulder. She was able to follow at a distance without him spotting her. From her pocket, she took out a small pad of paper and took notes in her own coded language as they moved around town.

Anyone reading her notepad would find only sports data. Her codes were the scores from hockey, baseball, soccer, and other games. She had come up with this coding system after taking a shorthand class and other detectives had begun

making similar codes. It was a system that only the person writing it would be able to decipher.

Leaning against a wall, behind a large newspaper box, she watched him meet up with two men. They spoke for a few minutes, laughing with each other. Langdon was killing time, it seemed.

When her subject went on the move, she darted across the road as soon as his back was turned, and hid behind a tall businessman as he walked briskly along the street. Only taking quick peeks, she followed the man until he turned away then she switched to shadow two women walking along, chatting about their boyfriends. Doing her best not to roll her eyes at their giggles, Maylin watched as Langdon entered a restaurant.

This one she knew had a back entrance so she called Jessie again.

“Mitchell here. I’m at the Golden Wok. Do you have any backup in the area? I can’t watch both exits at the same time.”

“Hang on. I’ll look into it for you.”

While she waited for him to check, she slipped behind a large red mailbox and tried to see into the restaurant. The windows were too dark, so she had to wait it out. Jessie came back on the phone.

“Sorry, Mitchell, you’re on your own unless you run into trouble.”

“That figures. I’m on it. Gotta go, Chan.” She hung up her cell, hoping her instincts were right and her mark would come out the front door.

She did another quick change, this time stripping her jeans and baggy track pants off, leaving a short black leather skirt. Used to the rude looks from people when she worked undercover, she ignored them and stayed behind the mailbox. Once she’d stripped off two shirts she was left wearing a black tank top with a skeleton design on the front. A long black wig with streaks of purple and pink over one ear and beaded braids down the opposite side now replaced the ball cap.

Seconds later she was wearing short, punk-style black boots and was ready to go again. Now she was a cross between a punk and a hooker. She stuffed the other bag into the knapsack and pulled it over her shoulders. Writing in her notepad, she put Score 6:1 Argos, meaning at six-ten p.m., he entered a restaurant. He emerged at six-forty and continued westbound down Alexander Street where he entered Brandy’s Bar and Grill at seven o’clock sharp.

Since he’d already spent time in a restaurant, Maylin decided to slip around behind to the alley in case he was meeting someone there. It was a tough call, but she had to go with her gut instincts, and something told her he was meeting his contact there.

With a quick call to the precinct, she left a message on Jessie’s machine, updating him while she waited behind a Dumpster. The rat that ran across her



foot didn't even faze her as she remained completely still. It wasn't long before a four door black sedan arrived. Two large Japanese men stepped out of the vehicle and waited.

The rear door of the restaurant opened and Langdon strutted outdoors after scanning the area to make sure they were alone. Greeting the two men, Langdon spoke in a quiet voice that Maylin had a hard time hearing. She got small bits and pieces of the conversation but didn't dare move in closer as she waited to see what would happen. All she could do was code the description of the perps and the license plates of the car.



“Hey, boys, did you bring my money?” Langdon said, swaggering toward the men.

One of them nodded. “What information do you have, Langdon?”

Jeff laughed, rubbing his hands together with glee. “I know where the woman is hidden. But look at this.” He pulled the sketch out of his pocket and showed the man.

The other one raised an eyebrow, but didn't change his expression. “What is this for?”

“This, my friend is my ticket to more money. The witness drew this herself and she knows more than your boss thought. Since only I know where she is, I

want more money. Call him now and tell him, or I walk. He wouldn't be too happy to find the cops on his doorstep and I would get a big promotion if I talked." Jeff Langdon was sure he had all of the cards in his hands and stood with his arms crossed, waiting while the man called 'the boss' to give him Langdon's ultimatum.

After nodding a few times, the large man ended the call. "Birdman has agreed to give you the money, but you must provide the information first and he will have it checked out. In the mean time, you can have the money we brought with us."

Suddenly Langdon felt uncertain, alarm bells going off in his head as he studied the two goons. He realized they wouldn't have had the extra money with them so he decided to take the money and run.

"Okay, buddy, *show me the money* and I'll tell you," Langdon did a very poor imitation of Tom Cruise and waited while the second man brought a bag from the car.

Silent, he opened the cloth bag and showed Langdon the money.

Greed dulling his caution, Langdon nodded. "Okay. She's staying up north in a place called Bancroft. There is a cop by the name of Phoenix McCoy guarding her." Langdon went on to provide what details he knew regarding Ember's whereabouts.

"Anything else?" the first man asked.

“Nope, that’s about it, so hand it over and we’re done here.”

The man nodded at his friend. Just as Langdon reached for the bag, his body jerked four times and he slowly dropped to the ground in disbelief.

The men didn’t wait for Langdon to die but climbed into the car and took off.

“Shit!” Maylin pulled out her phone, dialing 911 as she ran to Langdon’s side. She knew before she reached him that he wasn’t going to make it.

“Langdon! Langdon, what did you tell them? Come on buddy, we’ll get them for you but you have to tell me what you said!” Maylin held Langdon’s hand.

Gasping for air as blood gurgled in his throat and dripped out the side of his mouth, his eyes began to glaze over, yet he whispered, “Bancroft.”

Langdon was dead. Maylin put in a call to Brett right away. He was at home and picked up immediately.

“Colton.”

“Brett, he’s dead. He sold her to some guy called Birdman. I couldn’t hear much of the conversation, but I got that. He told them where she’s staying in Bancroft, Brett.” Maylin’s voice was calm and matter of fact, although her heart was racing with adrenaline.

“Shit! Thanks, Maylin. I appreciate your help. If there’s anything else, call here and tell Lana.” Brett hung up, not giving her a chance to say another word.

Sirens rang through the air, echoing off the ally walls as a cruiser pulled up. Maylin held up her ID and explained the situation, getting the cop to run a make on the plates. She thought about Ember and the danger she was in. Brett sure had his hands full.

## Chapter Nine

### Two Flames Become One

“You are not leaving here without me, Brett, and that’s final. Ember needs me. You can go do your bloody he-man stuff, but Ember needs a woman. You saw how terrified she was before she left. Let me go with you, or I’ll just follow anyway!” Lana raged at her husband.

“Lana, please, I don’t have time for this. The kids—” he started.

“The kids will be fine with Tina watching them. I won’t take no for an answer!” Lana put her hands on her hips and two plates crashed to the floor behind him.

Brett cringed, wondering if she was right about Ember needing her. Besides, if he didn’t agree, he’d have to buy another set of dishes. Her telekinetic ability went crazy when she was angry.

“Okay.”

“I’m not going to—” Lana stopped, shocked. “Okay?”

“Make it quick before I change my mind. You need to pack for a few days just in case; only jeans, T-shirts, and hiking boots. Nothing fancy Lana, we don’t have time.” Brett hadn’t even finished his sentence before she was rushing down the hall, the cordless phone to her ear as she called Tina.

Within twenty minutes, Tina and Jessie were at the door and Lana had everything ready. Since the boys were asleep, Lana and Brett slipped in quietly and kissed them both on their soft, downy black curls.

Brett knew how much Lana hated to be away from the boys. He gently took her hand and led her from the room. Lana stared over her shoulder at them until Brett closed the door softly then swiped at her tears. Before Brett could say a word to dissuade her, Lana put her hands up. “I’m going!”



Ember had been quiet all afternoon and didn’t seem inclined to talk to Phoenix about her day with his grandfather. She’d been out on the porch drawing for hours.

Fed up, he decided that enough was enough and went out to join her.

She didn’t look up when he approached but he knew she sensed his presence by the way she tensed. He leaned against the railing and crossed his arms, waiting for her to look at him. It took ten minutes of silence, staring at her, before she finally sighed and put her pen down.

“What do you want from me, Phoenix?”

He studied her eyes, noting the dark circles left by the stress she'd been under. Ember was comfortable with him now and he could touch her arm without her shrinking away, but he had concerns about her wounded mind, hoping he could help her find some peace. His curiosity about her day with his grandfather had been eating at him since she'd disappeared into the cabin.

“A little conversation would be nice,” he said softly.

Her eyes dropped.

“Ember, are you going to tell me about what happened today with my grandfather?”

She bit her lower lip and looked at the pad for a moment in indecision. Then she turned the page and held up the drawing of Malimo and Luyu.

He studied the drawing carefully, curious as to why it bothered her.

“It's exceptional, just like your drawing of Keyanna. What's that got to do with your day with Grandfather?”

“Look at it Phoenix, really look at it! We went to a small island and Grandfather told me the legend about the *siyotanka*, then he played for me while I drew his portrait.” She raised her gaze to meet his. “I was drawing *Grandfather's* portrait, and when I was finished and the music stopped, I looked down and this

is what I saw. I don't remember drawing it, Phoenix. It was the strangest thing I've ever done, more so than at the Eagle's Nest. It scared me."

Now he understood better why she had been so withdrawn. Phoenix stared down at the drawing.

"These are my grandparents when they were young. You have an exceptional gift, Ember. You connected with the spirit. Not many people can do that."

"That's what Grandfather said," she said in a small voice, dropping her gaze to her hands.

Phoenix smiled. "You call him Grandfather which means he's accepted you as one of his grandchildren, Ember. That is a great honor in our family. Did he tell you that he is a healer?"

Her vibrant eyes flew to meet his. "You mean like a spiritual leader?"

"Yes. Some people call them Shaman, but we refer to them as healers. They can speak to the spirits, have visions, and also many other mystical abilities. They are revered in our culture."

Admiration shone in her eyes. "I feel so...connected to him. It's like we've known each other before, like in another lifetime. I love him already. He's a wonderful man, Phoenix."



“I think he knows you too, or he wouldn’t have asked you to call him Grandfather. Don’t be concerned about your gift, Little Flame. Be happy about it. Very few people can do what you did today.” Lost in her eyes, he cleared his throat and changed the subject, “Are you hungry? I’ve made dinner.”

A genuine smile lit up her face. “I’m actually so hungry that I thought there was a bear in the woods before I realized it was my stomach.” Relief in her expression, she laughed aloud. “Or maybe, if it was a bear it could have been Grandfather trying to sneak up on me again.”

Phoenix couldn’t help but chuckle as he held out his hand. This time she didn’t even hesitate before she took it.

Close to her chest, she carried her art supplies inside, about to put them away, but Phoenix stopped her, placing his hand on her arm.

“Will you show me what you have worked on all afternoon, Little Flame?” he asked.

A deep blush rose in her cheeks as she handed him the pad and moved to look out the window over the lake. The sun was beginning its decent and a palette of colors began to gather for another display of dazzling beauty.

Phoenix flipped the pages in silence, studying each one before moving to the next. His mother, Chailyn, and Misu stared back at him, each of their expressions

held the spirit of their character. The backgrounds held faint images of the spiritual sides of their natures.

When he came to a blank page, he thought there were no more drawings, but something made him turn the page. He looked into his own mysterious eyes. She had captured the essence of his spirit, his emotions. She saw something in his eyes that he hadn't realized was there until that moment. She saw love.

On another sheet, he saw himself as he imagined he would have looked through her eyes earlier in the afternoon when he'd stood on the dock, eager and yet wistful as he waited for them to approach.

She'd even drawn his pendant to the tiniest detail. Swallowing hard, he turned to another page. This one was of him lying on the bed, the sheet down to his waist, his chest naked and one knee revealed. His eyes were sleepy, sexy, and alluring. He sucked in a deep breath and put the pad down, walking on silent feet to stand behind her. She had her back to him but he knew she was aware of his presence.

"You've captured my soul, Ember," he said softly.

He wondered what she was thinking as he turned her to face him and saw that she'd caught her lip between her teeth, her eyes full of uncertainty. Gently, he placed his finger beneath her chin and lifted it so her eyes met his. For a long moment he searched for answers then smiled.

There it was in her eyes; she felt the same way. Slowly, he lowered his lips to brush gently across her trembling mouth, his fingers caressing the column of her throat.

As he pulled her body up against his, he felt her shuddering. Her heart beat like a hummingbird's wings in her throat as she held her breath. He wanted this, had wanted this since the day he'd first laid eyes on her. There was a strong connection between them that had been forged before they'd even met.

Hesitant, she slowly slid trembling hands up his chest until they circled behind his neck and deepened the kiss, sighing into his mouth.

Phoenix was filled with energy as their souls merged. For a moment he wondered if he would burst into flames. Her lips were magnetic, pulling him closer, holding his own captive in their welcome embrace.

He shivered with need when she gasped and slipped her hands into his hair, imprisoning him.

Suddenly he grasped her wrists and pulled away from her. When tears filled her eyes at his rejection and she drew in a ragged breath, he felt guilt wash over him.

"Ember wait, I promised Brett I would protect you and here I am—" Unable to continue, he shook his head.

"You don't want me?" Her eyes glittered with tears.

“You have no idea how much I want you, but I swore that I would take care of you, not take advantage. I can’t stand being in the same room as you and not touching you, kissing you, holding you close. But Brett—”

Ember stared at him in stunned surprise. A half-laugh, half-sob shook her body.

“Hang on, Phoenix. Are you saying that you *do* want me, but because of my brother, you won’t—”

The furious glitter in her eyes confused him. “That’s pretty much it. I owe Brett a lot, and he deserves my loyalty.”

“To hell with Brett! I’m a grown woman and I make my own decisions. No one tells me how to live my life. Please, Phoenix...kiss me again!”

The way her eyes beseeched him ensured he was losing the battle against his attraction to her.

Ember reached up and slowly wrapped her index fingers around locks of his hair, and gently reeled his head in closer and closer. When her lips touched his, she took the initiative and began to kiss him gently, exploring, seeking, determined. As soon as he relaxed into her mouth, she attacked him with a voracious passion that startled him.

Groin throbbing with want, Phoenix groaned, encircled her waist to hold her tight against him and gave in, unable to resist her offer.

Before he knew it, they were in the bedroom and she was beneath him on the bed. They pulled at each other's clothing in a frenzied rush, ripping their shirts, popping buttons and carelessly tossing their clothing aside until finally they lay naked together, their hot skin burning where they touched.



A wild cry of desire filled the air as Ember gasped, her hands roving over his strong back, following the rippling hard muscles. She moaned with need. Drunk with yearning she pulled her lips away, panting as she tried to calm the spinning sensations he evoked in her. He was hers!

His lips and tongue burned a trail down her neck, following the pulsing vein in her throat while his rock hard body skimmed over hers. Slow and steady, he moved downward, following the path to her breasts. Wild sensations rolled through her belly as he sucked a nipple into his mouth.

The sounds of his groans turned her on even more. She lifted her hips, her fingers lodged tight in his hair as she tugged him close. A scream of passion left her breathless as he switched to her other nipple. At her tug, he moved back up to claim her mouth, nipping her bottom lip just before he lifted his head.

His voice a husky growl, he said, "Are you absolutely sure that you want this, Little Flame? Much more and I won't be able to stop."

“Don’t stop. Please, don’t stop!” Lips capturing his once again, she kissed him with every ounce of ardor in her heart. She felt lightning bolts shoot through her at his touch and heard the rumble of thunder. “Please, I want—”

Shocked when he sat back, gasping for breath, she stared at him, unable to fathom why he’d stopped.

“I’ll be right back.”

Though his voice was hoarse with desire, she wondered if he wanted to quit what they’d started. He left the room and tears filled her eyes. Fear clawed through her as she began to think he really didn’t want her, and she’d done something to turn him off again.

When Phoenix returned, he stood at the door, chest heaving, his eyes hot with the flames of passion.

“If you don’t want to continue, say it now, Ember. I can’t take much more.”

He held condoms in his hand. The fear receded, replaced by relief and joy as she reached her hand out to him. She whimpered, “Please. Oh, please hurry.”

He blew out a sigh of relief, opening the packet, and slipped the condom on, leaving the others on the bedside stand. Once again his arms surrounded her, his lips taking command while her fingers dug into his back to hold him tight against her.

Desperate for him, her hips shifting beneath his powerful body, she sobbed, “Now, Phoenix, now!”

His breath ragged, Phoenix moved over her and slid his finger into her, bringing an ache to be filled like she’d never known before. She mewled as her hips gyrated, needing more. Her sheath clamped around his finger and he groaned. She was more than ready.

Ember wrapped her legs around his hips, to give him access. When he thrust deep into her, moaning, she screamed her delight and pulled his hair again.

Lost in the feelings he evoked, Ember held onto his shoulders, her lips willing captives to his. The rhythm of his pounding hips against her pelvis made her wild as flames burning out of control. He swallowed her screams of passion while he moved faster, surging into her over and over, building their fervor as they climbed toward blissful release.

Close...they were both so close to untamed ecstasy as his lips trailed sweet kisses along her neck, suckling her earlobe, brushing over the corner of her mouth. Then he recaptured her mouth, his tongue seeking hers, plunging deep to mate with hers. He muffled their cries as the dance continued, both of them gasping as their pleasure mounted.

Unable to stop herself, Ember pulled away from his mouth and cried out, “Phoenix! Please...I...oh...please—” She shrieked, unable to say what she wanted, needed...desired.

“I’m with you, *flame of my heart*. We’ll be there soon,” he whispered into her ear, kissing her neck. He moved his hips even faster, cupping her buttocks with his powerful hands. Reaching between them he found her mound, using his thumb to rub over her sensitive nub.

Out of control, she panted, digging her fingers into his shoulders.

Suddenly he released her lips to sucked in a quick breath, the muscles in his neck standing out as the moment of ecstasy neared.

“Phoenix! Now...please, now!” she cried, her hips jerking as she found her release.

With a shout of joy, he let go, joining her as they climbed the mountain of rapture, his hips pumping hard as he followed her. Then, the world of wonder began to recede, reality coming back in a wash of waves. Collapsing on her, he stayed propped on his elbows and kissed her gently, his lips brushing softly over hers.

“Oh, my, Little Flame. You certainly light my fire. You were aptly named.” Kissing her again, he looked into her eyes. “Are you okay?”



Never had she found such heaven in a man's arms. She nodded, whispering, "Better than I've been in a very long time, my Big Flame." When she ran her fingers through his hair, he winced.

"What's wrong?"

Amusement filled his expression as he chuckled. "You were a little overenthusiastic with my hair as your anchor. But I'd rather go bald than miss out on your passion. You are amazing."

Chagrined, she bit her lip. "I'm sorry, Phoenix. I didn't realize—"

Warm, earthy eyes smiled down into hers as he chuckled. "Don't be. I have plenty of hair left."

Unable to hold back, Ember laughed. She'd never felt so loved before and wondered at the magic of him. He was the most wonderful man she'd ever met. As he leaned down to kiss her once again, she wondered about his concerns toward Brett. Her brother was definitely protective toward her. She could only hope that Phoenix could stand up to him and not head for the hills like so many others that Brett had scared off.

Satisfied physically, she slipped her arms around Phoenix's neck and snuggled up close.

## Chapter Ten

### Seeking The Kindled Fire

The sounds of early morning birds welcoming the day and a deep chuckle pulled Ember from the comforting arms of sleep. Something tickled her nose and she brushed it aside in annoyance. She fought to stay asleep after an exhausting night of lovemaking, wanting to revel in the blissful feeling.

Her nose itched once again and she brushed at it, slipping open one eye to catch a masculine hand holding a feather in the act. With narrowed eyes, she turned to look into the sheepish face of her lover, her dream come true.

“You like to live dangerously, Detective?” she growled, her voice husky from sleep.

“That I do, Little Flame. That I do.” When he tickled her under her chin with the feather, he was rewarded with a giggle from her.

“Now stop that. I need a drink of water. Somebody forgot to feed and water me last night.” As if on cue, her stomach growled. “Now see what you’ve done? You woke up the bear!” She snickered.

Chuckling, Phoenix leaned over and kissed her. “Good morning. Let’s hit the shower then we can have breakfast. I have a big day planned for you. Did you bring a bathing suit?”

Shaking her head, she grinned, “Guess we’ll just have to skinny dip.”

Phoenix pretended to be shocked. “Wow, you just never know a girl until you get her into bed and then lookout, she shows her true colors!” He leaned over and kissed her again. “I think I like the new you.”

Playful, she shoved at his chest. “Get out of this bed, my fiery warrior. I have to get my things together and you are way too distracting.”

A wicked grin on his face, Phoenix practically vaulted over her to get out of bed. When the sheet came away from his sculpted body, she gave him a good hard smack on his butt.

He jumped then cried out, “Owww,” and rubbed his bum. “Turn about is fair play, my love.”

Both of them stopped their play at his words. Shock registered on his face and she stared at him in stunned surprise.

After a pause, Phoenix sat on the side of the bed and took her hand in his. “I meant that Ember. I think I’m falling in love with you. This has never happened to me so quickly before but...it just feels...right.”

“I...I don’t know what to say. I need some time to think about it, okay?” Though her stomach clenched in fear at his words, she also felt pleasure and wondered what he’d meant by ‘before’, but didn’t ask.

“Okay, I’ll hit the shower and we’ll discuss it another time when you’re ready. No pressure.”

“Thank you, Phoenix,” she said, relief filling her.

He kissed the tip of her nose and left the room.

When he was out of sight, she flopped back on the bed and thought about what he’d said. She knew that she loved him too, but couldn’t understand how he could love her so easily. It just seemed strange. After all that had happened, she still couldn’t believe that he wanted her.

She heard the shower start up and grinned, jumping out of bed. With wicked intent, she snatched a condom from the table and snuck into the bathroom, slipping into the shower behind him.

Phoenix washed the soap out of his eyes then turned to face her with an evil leer. “What have we here, a maiden to wash my back?”

A cocky smile on her face, Ember said, “I’ll wash your back if you wash mine. And I’ll even throw in some extras for good measure.”

“Now there’s a deal a guy just can’t refuse.”

When he reached for her, she squealed. “Wait! I get to play first!”

“Wow, aren’t you demanding?” Though he snickered, he let her have her way.

Ember made sure that she covered every inch of his body as she massaged soap into his skin. Finally she looked down and purred like a kitten.

“Well, well, look who’s awake. I guess I’ll have to give him special attention, won’t I?” her sultry eyes burned into his as she lowered herself to her knees. With her tongue poking out the corner of her mouth, she began to wash him with the bar of soap in excruciatingly small circles, taking such a long time that Phoenix groaned and his hot gaze threatened payback.

Ember snickered and moved the soap lower, teasing his sac over, and over again until his legs began to tremble. When he growled and picked her up in his arms, she shrieked with laughter, trying to avoid his persistent lips from claiming hers.

When he put her down, he spun her around. “Assume the position, lady. You need a cavity search. Oh, wait, I have to go and get—”

Ember reached outside the curtain and picked up the condom she had sitting on the back of the toilet, holding it up with a leer. "Here you go, Detective, please continue." Wiggling her saucy bottom at him, she giggled again.

Phoenix gave her a swat on her butt. "That's just a little payback."

"Oh, gee that hurt tons," she said sarcastically. "Guess you aren't much good at spanking people, eh?"

"You don't think so?"

She wiggled her bottom again and stuck her tongue out over her shoulder, daring him to continue.

He gently swatted her again, her bottom stinging slightly.

"Oh, please! My mom's cat could do better! Come on...put some muscle into it, big boy."

She wiggled her butt again and he swatted her a bit harder. The sensation stirred her desire.

With a gasp, she cried, "More!"

"Tell me when to stop," he croaked, his voice husky with desire at her game.

"Oh, I will. Now, please," she begged, knowing he wouldn't harm her.

With the water on her skin, the stinging slaps excited her and she didn't let him stop until her bottom was burning.

Though he'd been gentle, she knew he was concerned, amazed when he knelt down and began to kiss her heated skin, licking and sucking over the tender area.

Ember trembled, her body worked up into a fevered pitch.

"Come to me!" she demanded. Her hands still rested on the wall with her back to him. She met his heated gaze over her shoulder.

Phoenix slipped the condom on, the water still pouring over his body.

In his husky voice, he spoke softly, "Prepare to be searched, my Little Flame." He slipped into her from behind, bringing cries from both of them. Holding her hips close to his, he plunged slowly in and out of her.

Desperate for release, she gave a wild cry, yelling, "Faster, faster, please."

In an instant he obeyed her, slipping his arm around her waist to hold her hips even closer. Her feet left the ground. Now he was fully embedded in her and pumped harder still. Ember shuddered and her groan of pleasure was met with his own. She felt that he too was coming closer to the edge. When her hand reached under and cupped his balls, rubbing and caressing in a speedy rhythm, he cried out.

When Ember felt him convulsing within her, she screamed again and was lost. Phoenix thrusting as fast as he could go, reaching that final peak as he slipped

his other arm around her to hold her tight and they crashed over the precipice together.



“Come on woman, keep up,” Phoenix teased.

They’d started out on a daylong hike right after breakfast, taking lunch and a dozen water bottles with them. Ember was having a great time. Phoenix was very entertaining when he relaxed. They talked about their families, finding that they had a lot in common. They had been walking for two hours when Phoenix finally called a halt.

“How’s your bum?” he asked, grinning.

“Waiting for a second round,” she teased. Looking at a large log lying on the ground in appraisal, she mused, “You know, that log looks about the right size for you to lean over and then I can spank you!” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“I don’t think so, you wild woman. We’ll save that for behind closed doors. I’m thinking we could add a little honey so I could lick it off of your sweet cheeks nice and slow.”

Ember groaned theatrically and rolled her eyes. “Oh, stop it. Now I won’t be able to walk any further until you give me some attention.” Ember gave him an exaggerated pout, sad eyes and all.



“In another twenty minutes, I have a surprise for you that ought to wipe the pout off of your face.” Mischief danced in his eyes.

Ember jumped up from the log she’d sat on, eager to continue. “Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s go!” She began marching down the path and screamed with laughter when he grabbed her around the waist, pulling her to the ground.

Phoenix lay on top of her. “You goose! We are taking a ten-minute break before we continue. The surprise can wait. Now get me a bottle of water, woman! I’m thirsty.”

“Hmmm, maybe I should get you some *little blue pills* to go with that water.”

“Ha! Malign my manhood, will you?” When he started tickling her, she shrieked, begging him to stop. When he didn’t, she grabbed his necklace and pulled his head down for a kiss, wrapping her legs around him, successfully escaping his fingers.

Before things got out of control, again, Phoenix pulled away, smiling down at her. “You know, I don’t remember when I’ve laughed so much. I had no life before you came along, Little Flame. You have definitely kindled my fire.” His sexy voice was low and earthy, the light of happiness in his eyes.

“I don’t ever remember feeling whole before. It’s like a big part of me was missing, I just didn’t know it.” Her fingers caressed his cheek, tracing along his jaw and over his tender lips.

After clearing his throat, Phoenix let her go and stood. Holding out his hand, he helped her up and slipped his arms around her to hold her close.

“Let’s get a drink of water and then we can move on. We have a lot of trail to cover.” After one more passionate kiss, he stepped back and moved to the packs, pulling out two bottles of water.

Mischievous, Ember met his gaze and laughed low in her throat. Phoenix looked like a puppy waiting for a treat. Once they’d had their water, they packed the bottles back into the bags and prepared to head out. He took her hand in his and led her down the path.



“Wow, it’s so beautiful. And yet, there’s a certain melancholy about it. Is it natural or man made?” Ember asked.

They stood at the edge of a fifty foot drop, looking down into a circular hole in the ground, about two hundred feet across. Dark black water covered the bottom. The steep walls were of a light gray marbled stone. No plant life grew in the hole and the stillness of the water was eerie.

“Bancroft is a part of the Canadian Shield and is famous for its variety of minerals. This is one of the abandoned mines. They used to mine marble from this one. Local teens come here to swim even though there are warnings against it. No one knows just how deep the hole goes and people have drowned here.”

“It’s kind of creepy, even though it’s so mysterious. Did you ever swim in it?” Ember found it hard to believe anyone would want to venture into the dark water.

“My brothers and sisters and I all did while we were growing up. Would you like to?” he asked, a daring look in his eyes.

“I...ah...don’t have a swimsuit.” She shrugged her shoulders with a wide grin. “Oh, well!”

“You are not getting out of it that easy. Let’s strip. We’re skinny dipping,” Phoenix grinned, pulling at her shirt.

“Oh, no you don’t. I’m not going in that black pit!” she cried, giggling as she pulled away from him.

“Okay, but you know we’re not supposed to swim alone, I guess I’ll have to take my chances.” Phoenix shrugged and began taking his clothes off, dropping each item on the ground by the knapsacks. Before Ember could say a word, he ran and dove off the side, disappearing into the murky depths.

A horrified scream echoed all around her as she stared at the rippling water, waiting for him to come back up. She started to panic and nearly ripped her clothing off, leaving her lacy red bra and panties on. He still hadn’t come up so she ran and jumped, fear pounding in her chest as she plunged feet first into the water. She went deep, but couldn’t see anything in the dark water.

Breaking the surface, she screamed for him, tears coming to her eyes. Cold fear shook her body. “Phoenix!” she cried desperately, her voice vibrating off the walls.

“Looking for me?” His amused voice repeated in the air.

Spinning around, she tried to find him but couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Phoenix?” she asked, her voice quivering.

He peeked around the corner of a large split in the wall, grinning, until he saw the look on her face. Sobering fast, he swam over to her, pulling her into his arms.

Sobs wracked her body and she shook violently, crying into his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Ember. I didn’t think you’d react like that. I was only fooling around with you.”

He supported her, holding her close under one arm as he swam toward the ledge. Once he’d lifted her out, he climbed up beside her and pulled her close to him as she trembled. All the while he kissed her face he spoke to her in whispers. “It’s all right, Ember. Please don’t cry.”

She cried for a long time until his lips claimed hers, seeking to give her comfort.

Suddenly she found her fire and shoved away from him. Scrambling to her feet, she screamed, “How could you do that to me? I thought you’d died. I thought you’d died!”

He began to move toward her, hands up in surrender.

“Ember, please don’t be angry with me. My siblings and I always played tricks like that on each other. I never meant to scare you. Please, forgive me. I’m really sorry.”

Furious to the point of not thinking clearly, she shook her head, backing up until she came up against a cold wall of rock. Her eyes darted around as she sought a way out. Seeing a path behind him, she shrieked and ran forward, shoving him back into the water.

With a shout, he fell back and she heard the splash as she scrambled up the path. Her feet were slashed and cut on the rough rocks, yet she kept going. By the time she made it to the top, he was half way up chasing after her.

Sobs shook her body as she ran off into the brush, scratching her face on the branches and hurting her feet on stones. Her adrenaline was pumping fast and she couldn’t think straight as she ran blindly through the woods. Soon she was lost and barely aware of it.

When a hand clamped over her mouth and strong arms imprisoned her, she was too stunned to fight and went limp.

A stranger's voice whispered in her ear, "Thanks for making it easy, Ember. You've saved us a lot of trouble. We were supposed to just kill you, but since you're already undressed, we might as well have some fun before we do." His hand grasped her breast and pinched her nipple.

Ember went wild, her muffled screams matching his grunts as she kicked and punched him, fighting to get away. She was not going to allow him to rape her. Never again would she be a victim.

When she bit his hand, she heard him swear then slammed her fist backwards into his groin. He dropped her, gasping for breath. Without looking back, she took off at a run. Terror lent her wings as she flew through the forest, seeking a place to hide. She kept running, turning, and twisting through the forest. She barely felt her torn and bloodied feet until long after she ran out of steam. By then, she had no idea where she was.

The only place she could think to hide was up in a large oak tree. With great effort, she climbed up into it, pulling herself up and scraping her stomach and thighs as she moved higher and higher. She stopped only when she found a branch wide enough to rest on. Once she'd stopped moving, she tried desperately to control her breathing and heartbeat in case she'd been followed.

Hot tears flowed in rivers down her cheeks as she began to shiver. It was getting cold since it was mid afternoon and the heat of the day had begun to cool.

Alone, hurt, and afraid, Ember felt a new terror clawing through her belly as hopelessness set in. She shuddered at the thought of Phoenix out there somewhere searching for her, praying he'd find her yet that man was out there too! A new fear filled her mind, one of losing her true love.

## Chapter Eleven

### Out From the Ashes

Grandfather sat up in his chair and tilted his head as though listening for something. Tadi sat next to him, waiting for him to share his message. Able to speak to the spirits, Malimo heard things in the silence. Although most people didn't believe in psychic ability, the McCoy family did. They had seen too many unusual things happen that supported his gift to doubt him, and each of the family members had their own.

Tadi watched his grandfather's face as he listened to an unseen force. He sat perfectly still, his eyes staring blindly into the forest. Occasionally he would nod and a frown would mar his face. His hands suddenly twitched then he gasped as they clenched into fists. As soon as his eyes came back into focus, they flew up to meet Tadi's.

"Little Flame and your brother are in grave danger. We need to go tracking. Take me to your cabin and we will gather your brothers."



He and his grandfather climbed into the pickup truck yet Tadi didn't say a word, driving at breakneck speed toward home. If grandfather said they were in danger, then they were in danger.



"How much longer, Brett?" asked Lana, biting her lip.

"We should be there in twenty minutes," he said and increased his speed.

When an unmarked car came screaming up behind them, flashing its lights, Brett swore, pulling out his badge. He stopped at the shoulder of the road and jumped out of the car, racing to the cruiser before the officer could get out. Lana watched as he spoke quickly to the cop, gesturing with his hands. Seconds later he nodded and raced back to the car, slipping his seatbelt on with a grim smile on his face.

"What's going on?" Lana asked.

"We have an escort. Hold on tight, we're going to fly." Once the unmarked car passed them with the lights flashing and siren blaring, Brett floored the gas pedal and followed him.

"Guess this will get us there in less than twenty minutes," Lana murmured.

"Ten, if I have my way," he said, all his focus on the road.



Aiyana sat on the front porch, her stomach in knots. Her father had telepathically informed her and the family that something was wrong. His intuition was always right and she had a bad feeling that Phoenix and Ember were definitely in danger.

When Tadi's truck roared up the driveway, Aiyana ran down the steps with her children to greet Tadi and Malimo.

"Phoenix and Ember need help. We will also have company in a few minutes so let's prepare for them." Grandfather barked out orders, the household was in chaos.

"Girls, pack some food and water, a warm blanket and the elixir," Aiyana said. Her commands were never ignored.

In fifteen minutes, there were four all-terrain vehicles lined up, their gas tanks full and the backs packed with supplies.

Grandfather turned to watch the road. A siren was blaring as two cars approached and came screaming into the driveway, stirring up dirt and debris.

Brett and Lana jumped out of the car and stared at the group in surprise.

Gesturing with his hand, Grandfather said, "My boys are ready to go with you, Brett. No arguments. They know the countryside and are excellent trackers. Besides, we have everything you'll need ready to go."

Brett stopped in his tracks, his expression unreadable. He turned to Lana.

“Please, Lana. You have to stay here. We’ll bring her back. You can take over then, okay?” Though he appeared to be bracing himself for an argument, he looked surprised when she only nodded and kissed him.

“Bring her home, Brett. I’ll be waiting. Be careful.” Tears filled Lana’s eyes.

The officer spoke with the men briefly and ran back to his car, turning around and tearing off down the road. He’d bring help but he had to head back to an area where he could get a radio signal.

Brett, Taran, Tadi, and Misu all mounted the vehicles and prepared to move out.

Meeting his wife’s eyes, Brett nodded grimly in silent communication. Seconds later they were gone in a cloud of dust.

Aiyana put her arm around Lana’s shoulder and led her into the cabin. They had a long wait ahead of them. As the screen door closed, she heard her father as he began an old native chant for the successful return of the warriors. Tradition stood firm, even in the millennium.



“Ember!” Phoenix shouted. He swore under his breath as he scrambled up the narrow path on the rock wall, calling himself any number of names for scaring her. Ember was nowhere in sight when he reached the top. She hadn’t taken her belongings either. He picked up his bag and pulled out his holster, buckling it into

place then slipped his gun into it. He threw his shirt on over top and slipped on his pants over his dripping wet body. Once he had his shoes on, he grabbed his knapsack and began searching for her trail, leaving her things behind.

He was a good tracker and Ember didn't know the area. Her emotional state was his greatest concern. When she ran out of energy, she would realize that she was lost and be terrified. There were hundreds of acres of forest to search.

At once he found the signs and bent down to study the ground. Blood! She must have cut her feet on the rocks. Silent, Phoenix listened for her movements as he slipped through the bush. She was going in a fairly straight line, running fast, based on the distance between the spots of blood.

Phoenix stopped short. He thought he'd heard a muffled scream. At a run, he raced through the woods, listening as his feet moved without a sound over the soft ground. When he noticed the birds and insects had fallen silent he stopped, his body tense and ready for trouble.

Something wasn't right. He waited patiently as he studied the area ahead. On the ground at his feet he saw more blood and edged ahead slowly. Phoenix sensed danger, the hairs on the back of his neck rising as he stepped into the clearing, unable to locate the reason for the disruption in the balance of nature around him.

Twenty feet ahead of him, a man stepped out from behind a tree. He was Asian, large, his face flushed and sweating. He radiated malevolence.

“Looking for someone?” The man grinned.

“You could say that. Have you seen anyone?” Phoenix asked, keeping his voice controlled and even. He was attentive to the sounds around him while holding the man’s gaze.

He could feel the presence of another one somewhere close by. Phoenix watched the man before him, alert for any noise or change in the glade. The man was dressed for the city, a casual business suit, a tie, polished dress shoes covered in mud.

“Maybe I have. Who are you looking for?”

In the man’s eyes, Phoenix caught the slight twitch as if he was trying not to look to Phoenix’s left.

A whooshing sound had Phoenix diving into a roll and coming back up on his feet, ready to fight. The second man, also Asian and dressed in similar form to his partner, stood with a branch the size of a baseball bat, ready to swing again.

He kept both men in view and cursed the fact that his gun was inaccessible under his shirt. When the second man swung again, Phoenix jumped back, almost tripping on a log behind him. Another attempted strike came too close. Bringing

his arm up to block it, pain crashed through him radiating up his arm to his shoulder. He decided to use the trees for protection.

Once out of reach of the attacker, Phoenix tried to grab his gun from the holster but grunted in pain, unable to grip it. The other man had circled behind him. In a dance to stay out of range, Phoenix shifted, moving back toward the mine. His arm on fire, he held it close to him as he carefully retraced his steps, edging down the trail. The next swing had him ducking, the branch making a loud crack as it slammed into a large pine, showering them with brown needles.

The first man kept trying to get behind him. He had pulled out a knife and moved in closer, trying to cut Phoenix off. In retreat to lure them into the open glade so he'd have room to fight, Phoenix raced down the path. The mine was another hundred feet or so further down. Fear for Ember was held at bay as he focused on leading the men on a chase. Phoenix heard them crashing through the woods behind him but didn't look over his shoulder.

Once he had reached the clearing, he turned around to face them. He was a lot faster than they were and had time to catch his breath before they exploded from the bush. Still unable to access his gun, he held his throbbing arm close to his chest and prepared himself.

The first man came through the brush ahead of the other one, coming to a halt when he saw Phoenix; his knife held out and a leering grin on his face. When

the other man emerged, he moved to the left of his partner and they widened the distance between them, leaving Phoenix no choice but to attack.

He chose the man with the branch and charged at him, not giving him time to lift his arm to use the branch. After slamming into the man's gut, Phoenix didn't wait to see him go down but spun on his heel to kick his partner in the stomach, doing his best to avoid the knife.

With both men down, he moved back to the open area, ready for any move they might make. The man with the knife recovered first and came at him in a rush, swinging the blade. He tried to catch Phoenix across his stomach, but fleet of foot, he moved back again, closer to the edge of the mine.

The second man was up now, and closing in, the branch discarded. In his hand was a gun aimed at Phoenix's chest.

"No! The boss said not to use the gun. He doesn't want them found and we don't have a silencer. Put it away, now!"

A scowl on his face, the man reluctantly placed it back in its harness and picked up the branch again.

Although Phoenix had turned to watch the man with the branch, he was ready for any movement from the other man. As soon as the knife wielder came at him, Phoenix dropped to the ground on his back and used his good arm and his

legs to toss the man over his head. The scream as the man fell into the mine was abruptly silenced as his body took a nosedive deep down into the murky water.

In seconds, Phoenix was up on his feet, spinning out of the way when the branch swung at his head. Immediately, he backed up again as the branch glanced off his shoulder, sending shooting pains up his wounded arm. Though gasping in agony, Phoenix kicked out at the man's leg, knocking him off balance.

His partner's yells for help distracted his opponent, allowing Phoenix to move in close and grab the arm holding the branch. They struggled for control, dancing back and forth until the man punched Phoenix's aching arm and broke his hold.

Just as he bit back a groan, Phoenix stepped back, sucking in deep breaths to control his pain. He faltered as the branch came down, catching him on the temple to send him crashing to the ground. Darkness closed around him.



Brett followed the three brothers as they raced through the woods on the all-terrain vehicles. He couldn't figure out how they had known Phoenix and Ember were in danger and were prepared when he'd driven up. They'd moved along in a fairly straight path for twenty minutes with no sign that anyone had passed by.



Suddenly, Taran held up his hand as he pulled the vehicle to a stop and the others followed suit.

“We go on foot from here,” he said in a quiet voice.

They each gathered their gear then took off at a steady jog into the bush ahead.

Misu turned his head slightly murmured to Brett.

“We know that Phoenix was taking Little Flame to the old mine. It’s a swimming hole used by many of the locals. It isn’t far ahead, but we need to be as quiet as possible as noise travels far in the forest.” Without waiting for an answer, he turned and continued running.

Another fifteen minutes went by and there was still no sign of the men stopping. Brett followed along, silent, his anger simmering as fear for his sister built. He wondered what Misu had meant by Little Flame.

Tadi stopped cold and hissed, his hand held up to indicate they must stop. Though they’d heard a scream, it wasn’t a woman’s. Close to the mine now, they slowed their pace. A fine layer of sweat beaded on each of them, their breathing becoming more even as they moved in silence through the trees as a unit.

Taran motioned to his brothers with his hands in what appeared to be a sign language of sorts. Soon Misu and Tadi spread out, slipping quietly into the forest.

As he motioned Brett forward, Taran whispered, “Just follow me. You don’t know the woods, so we’ll stay together. But keep it quiet.”

Taran moved forward, silent on his feet. Brett followed as close as possible, pulling out his gun and removing the safety lock. Soon he heard sounds of a struggle, water splashing and shouts.

When Taran placed a hand on Brett’s arm to stop him, they both studied the scene before them.

Phoenix lay face down on the ground, his attackers out of sight. Taran made a couple of bird sounds and Misu emerged from the woods, throwing his brother over his shoulder and disappearing once again into the brush without a sound.

Two birdcalls came from the other side of the clearing and Taran nodded.

He whispered, “Two men are down in the water hole, one is helping the other to climb out. They’re climbing back up now. You’ll be able to hear them long before you see them,” he grinned with a wry smile.

Brett nodded and turned to watch the gaping hole of the mine. It took the two men a long time to climb to the top. He could hear their feet sliding on the rocks. When they finally crawled over the edge and stood up, it took them a moment to notice that Phoenix was missing.

“Shit, McCoy is gone! Do you think he went after the girl? I clocked him pretty good. He should have been out for a while.”

“You idiot! Why didn’t you just dust him before you came to get me?” The larger man was furious and sopping wet from his swim.

“You had the knife, and you told me not to use the gun. Why are you yelling at me? He ordered *you* to kill the bastard and bring the girl in,” griped the smaller man.

“Let’s get moving. We have to find the girl. It’s going to get dark soon.”

The two men moved across the clearing but stopped short when a lethal looking Tadi stepped out in front of them. They backed up a few steps and turned to their left but once again halted when Misu appeared from the trees with the same deadly expression. They reached for their guns but Taran and Brett came forward, Brett’s gun held on them.

“Keep your hands where I can see them, boys. You’re under arrest. Drop your weapons, and put your hands on your heads, nice and slow.”

The cold fury in Brett’s voice didn’t deter the larger man who spun with his weapon, lifting it to aim at Brett. Before he could pull the trigger, Brett shot him in the shoulder, high enough to miss any vital organs. The man screamed, his weapon falling uselessly to the ground from his nerveless fingers. His partner dropped his gun and put his hands on his head immediately.

Tadi and Misu moved in and tied the men’s hands behind their backs with leather thongs, securing them seated together back to back on the ground.

Taran returned from the woods with Phoenix who was clutching his head and groaning, his arm held close to his chest. Taran helped his brother to sit on the ground. His stone-cold gaze swept over the two men. “Do you know which way she went, Phoenix?”

Eyes narrowed in pain, Phoenix looked over at the two men. Fury rose in his eyes. “Ask them if they killed her. I know they had her, I heard her scream.”

His expression lethal, Misu squatted down in front of the small man and stared at him for a long moment. “Where is the girl?” he growled.

Smart mouthing Misu, the man sneered, “What girl? I never saw anyone.”

In one quick move, Misu took out his hunting knife, plucked a piece of crabgrass from the ground, and held it over the sharp blade. “You know, that water hole is bottomless. I wonder how long it would take for you to sink all the way down into the darkness if you had no tendons in the back of your legs to let you kick your feet.” At that, he dropped the blade of grass onto the edge of the knife and it split in two without Misu adding any pressure.

The man’s eyes widened and he swallowed hard.

“You can’t do that. It would be murder, and that guy is a cop,” he cried, uncertain.

Misu’s amused grin didn’t match his deadly serious eyes as he looked over at his brothers and Brett. “I don’t see a cop. Do any of you see a cop?”

The three men looked at each other then scanned the forest. After shrugging, Tadi answered, “I haven’t seen one. Let’s hurry up and get it done, I’m hungry and Mom’s got dinner on the table.”

With no help from that quarter, the small man jumped when Misu slowly slipped the knife behind one of the buttons on the man’s shirt and it popped away, falling without a sound on the grass. The next button followed the same path. As the knife climbed higher, the man’s breathing became more rapid and his eyes widened.

It took him until the final button at the base of his throat before he cracked, “She ran off. She attacked him and took off.” He jerked his head back at his partner.

“Shut up, you bloody fool! He can’t do anything to us,” the larger man snarled, pulling at the bindings.

Taran walked over, circling the men on the ground with a calculating expression.

“Time is wasting. Which direction did she go?” he asked, his eyes glittering ebony.

“Go to hell!” said the large man.

In one swift move, Taran was nose to nose with him like a cougar with its prey. “My little brother may be deadly with his little knife, but I use only my

hands. I can kill with a flick of my wrist. The cops will only think that you fell, landing on your neck by accident. Unfortunately, it does take some time to die and it's *extremely* painful."

His hand moved so fast the man didn't have time to gasp as Taran's fingers pressed against his neck, pushing on a pressure point. The man immediately began choking, his face turning red. His feet kicked out ineffectually, trying to get away.

When he released his hold, Taran spoke softly. "I am going to leave my little brother here to baby sit you while the rest of us go look for the woman. You'd better be nice and answer his questions. He doesn't have as much *restraint* as I do." For an endless moment, Taran stared into the man's terror filled eyes then stood in one quick motion causing the man to jump and gasp in surprise.

Dark laughter filled the glad as Misu fingered his knife, licking his lips as if he'd just eaten dessert.

"Go ahead my brothers. I'll take *good* care of these men." Amusement laced his deadly voice, his eyes hardening as he sat down cross-legged beside the men. "Now, I have some questions for you both, and I am sure that I will like your answers. Won't I?" Misu stabbed the knife into the ground, a hairsbreadth away from the big man.

As the three other men moved off into the woods the two criminals cried out in protest.

“Don’t leave us here with him!”

“Hey, come back here, you can’t do this to us!”

Brett grinned, amazed that Misu’s expression was so eerie in the forest light. Normally, Misu was a pussycat yet he played the part of a terrifying warrior well. Brett turned to follow the others in search of Ember, his gut in knots.



Ember shivered uncontrollably. Her tears had stopped hours ago after she’d huddled high up in the tree, afraid to move in case the men came after her. Though her body had dried off leaving her bra and panties only slightly damp, that was all she wore and it was colder as the sun set.

She looked down at her feet. The blood still oozed slowly out of the sharp gashes in her tender skin. Her body and face were covered in scratches and bloody welts from her escape into the forest. The stinging scrapes on her abdomen hurt the worst. She had received those when she’d pulled her body up over the branches of the tree to get high enough from the ground to hide. Losing consciousness and falling was her greatest fear. She was exhausted and weak. Since she’d left her pack behind, she had no water or food.

Shudders wracked her body as she leaned her head back on the tree and closed her eyes, her arm rested on a thick branch beside her waist for balance. As soon as she felt herself falling asleep, she jerked awake in fear then shifted her

body in an attempt to wake up. A few minutes went by and the sound of the forest creatures soon lulled her into a state of semi-consciousness.

Her mind floated along in a safe, quiet place where she felt warm. Phoenix stared down into her eyes with a gentle, loving expression. She wanted him to hold her close, to tell her that everything was going to be okay. Grandfather was before her now, his kind face filling her heart with love.

*Little Flame, help is coming. Just hold on tight. It won't be long now.*

"Grandfather," she murmured aloud, her voice sluggish with sleep.

*Yes, Little Flame. I am with you. Your brother and my grandson's will be there soon.*

"Phoenix. I'm afraid those men might have killed him." Her eyes were still closed as her head lolled back against the tree.

*My grandson is fine. He is worried about you.* The deep gravelly voice swept over her like a warm blanket of security.

"I shouldn't have run from him. I've made such a mess of things." Tears gathered in her eyes, escaping from the corners and falling down her cheeks.

*All will be well, Little Flame. Sleep now, I will stay with you.* Grandfather wrapped his gentle arms around her and held her close like a small child and she slept, feeling safe again.





“It’s getting dark. Bring out the flashlights. Here, more blood. She must have cut her feet badly,” Tadi said as he tracked with Taran, Phoenix, and Brett.

Phoenix was unsteady on his feet and in a great deal of pain, but he wouldn’t stop searching. He had never felt so helpless, cursing himself for teasing her. She wouldn’t be lost and alone if he hadn’t scared her at the mine. They’d been searching for an hour and he wondered how much farther she could have gone with her feet so badly damaged.

Taran stopped. “The trail ends here, below this tree.”

Though Phoenix looked up, he couldn’t see much in the gathering darkness.

“Brett, flash that light up into the branches. I think she’s hiding up there.”

Taran waited and watched while Brett searched the tree and focused on a spot where there was a flash of red.

“Em...”

Tadi cut him off, a hand on his arm.

“Brett, don’t call to her. If she fell asleep or is unconscious and we startle her, she could fall. I’ll climb up and bring her down.”

“I’ll go,” Brett said, trying to hand the light to Tadi.

“No, Brett. I can climb faster and I’m sure on my feet in the trees. You’ll need to take her when I hand her down. Hold the light for me.”

Phoenix was filled with guilt and frustration. With his arm, he wouldn't be able to help at all. He stood there silent, feeling useless while his brother nimbly climbed up the tree.



It took less than a minute for Tadi to reach her. He stood quietly studying her injuries, noting how she held the branch beside her in a death grip.

He called softly to the men. "She seems to be asleep. I have to wake her or she'll fight me when I carry her down." His greatest concern was the last time he went near her how she had freaked out, screaming, kicking, and then running away. It was important to wake her with great caution.

With tender care, he brushed his fingers over her scratched and bloody cheek and spoke in a low murmur. "Little Flame, wake up now. We're here to rescue you."

Ember stirred but didn't open her eyes, she whispered, "Grandfather, they're here."

Tadi brushed his fingers over her cheek again, "Wake up now, Little Flame. Phoenix and Brett are waiting for you."

"Phoenix?"

"Yes, he is here with your brother. Open your eyes now." Bracing himself to catch her in case she panicked, he watched while her eyes opened.

“Oh, hello, Tadi. You didn’t come for another bear hug did you?” she said in a sleepy tone, not quite awake yet.

His chest shook with a deep chuckle. “No, I won’t hug you, but I will help you down from this tree. Are you awake now?”

Suddenly her eyes went wide, and she gasped. For fear she would panic, Tadi moved in closer to prevent her from falling, but she only put her shaking hand on his cheek. “You’re real? This isn’t a dream?” she asked.

Tadi nodded and smiled at her. “Would you like to get down so that my brother will stop worrying about you?”

She sat up fast, cringing.

“Ouch, I hurt all over. I...I don’t think I can climb down, Tadi.”

“If you let me, I’ll carry you down.” He was worried that she wouldn’t let him help her but she gave him a smile and held out her arms.

Noting the rough gashes on her stomach, he said, “It will hurt a bit until we get to the ground, but we’ll take care of your wounds then. I have to put you over my shoulder. Are you ready?”

Trust in her eyes, she nodded and allowed him to put her over his shoulder. Though she hissed in pain, she didn’t complain once as he slowly climbed down the tree, careful not to bump her legs against the tree limbs. When he was on the

last branch, he sat and gently pulled her back in front of him. She was pale from her ordeal. He could tell she'd held back groans of agony as he'd carried her.

"I'm going to pass you to your brother now. Just hold my wrists and I will lower you."

Tadi was amazed at the trust she gave him when she did what he asked and allowed him to lower her down into Brett's waiting arms. He jumped the last few feet and stood watching the siblings reunite.



Fresh tears flowed down her cheeks as Ember hugged Brett close, sobbing gently.

Relief flowed freely as her brother kissed the top of her head, his arms tight around her. He was shaking in reaction and that surprised Ember. He frowned as his eyes took in her state of undress.

"Are you all right, Ember? Did those men hurt you?"

Her whole body stiffened as she pulled back and looked at Brett. "No, Brett. I smashed my fist into his groin and ran like you taught me when I was a kid, and that's the last I saw of them—but Phoenix—" Her eyes widened in fear, "Phoenix!" she cried out. "Is he—"

"I'm here, Little Flame. I'm right beside you."

Phoenix's comforting voice broke through her pain. When lost and alone, thinking she'd never want to speak to him again, now the feeling of his arms holding her close was all she craved.

Twisting in Brett's arms, Ember was frantic to hold Phoenix. She grabbed his necklace and pulled him closer, trying to climb into his arms but stopped in horror at his grimace of pain.

"Oh, my God, are you all right, Phoenix? Did they hurt you?" she cried, tears sliding down her cheeks.

"I'm fine, Ember. My arm is hurt a little, but I'm okay."

Desperate, she pulled him close again and kissed him, while her brother held her close, his body stiff with anger.

The kiss was tender and sweet and all too brief as Brett moved away with her.

"Let's get you out of here," he growled, his voice gruff with anger. He turned his back on Phoenix and began walking down the trail but stopped a few feet away.

The sound of a motor disturbed the darkening forest and lights blazed through the trees as Misu drove up on the four-wheeler. He had brought the blanket and medical kit.

“Thought you might need these,” Misu said. Once he’d climbed off the vehicle, he pulled the blanket out of the bag and walked over to cover Ember, tucking it in snugly. Then he took out a bottle of brown liquid, and opened it. “Drink a large swallow of this, Little Flame. It will help with the pain.”

Ember looked into his caring eyes and nodded, taking a large drink of the brew. Wrinkling her nose, she said, “Yuck! It doesn’t taste very good.”

He chuckled then handed her a bottle of water. “This will help.”

This time, she drank half of the bottle, gasping when she was done. “I was thirsty from all that running. Thank you, Misu,” she said with a shy smile, wiping her lips with the back of her hand.

Immediately her eyes sought out Phoenix. He too drank some of the elixir and a bottle of water. When he climbed on a vehicle behind Taran, she protested.

“I want to ride with Phoenix.” She tried to get Brett to put her down but he held firm.

“His arm is hurt as well as his head. He won’t be able to hold you,” Brett said, holding her still.

The tone of her brother’s voice told her just how angry he was with her, though she couldn’t figure out why. Ember stared after Phoenix but remained quiet.

“Her wounds have stopped bleeding. Let’s get her back to the cabin before we clean her up,” Taran said as though noting the tension between Brett and Phoenix.

Misu helped Brett climb on the seat, with Ember wrapped securely in his arms, and then climbed on in front of them. There wasn’t much room, but he started it up and began to drive slowly back to the other vehicles, the men following behind at a steady pace. All questions would wait until they were safely home.

## Chapter Twelve

### The Flame Revealed

Ember was asleep within minutes, the steady rocking of the all-terrain lulling her with the help of the elixir. Brett looked down at her face, scratched and torn by the sharp branches during her flight. Simmering fury rose in his veins. Not only had she been in danger again, but the trusted cop and friend who he'd hired to protect her had obviously become involved with her.



His gaze focused on Ember, Brett didn't see Phoenix watching them both. A mixture of longing and regret that she would go back to the city with Brett and never see him again nearly broke his heart. He believed that Brett would never forgive him for falling in love with his sister.

Surprise at his thoughts made him jerk suddenly. He realized he really did love her and that scared him. His past relationship experiences were abysmally



poor. Maybe it was just as well that Brett would take her away from him. A twinge of pain shot through him at the thought.

It was full dark now and they'd finally come to the place where the other vehicles waited in the dark. Since Misu drove with both Brett and Ember aboard, Taran, Tadi, and Phoenix each had an all-terrain to themselves. Phoenix had to drive with one hand and did his best to hide his dizziness from his brothers. He was having a hard time focusing his eyes. They hadn't gone far when Misu stopped, the headlight silhouetting Malimo who stood beside a large pine tree.



“Hello, Grandchildren. I have come to share the ride home.” First, he walked up to Ember and gently caressed her scratched cheek, careful not to disturb her sleep. “She is strong, our Little Flame. She will be all right, Brett.”

The anger Brett held close was like a beacon of red light around him. Looking into Brett's eyes, Malimo said, “Do not be angry at them, son. What they have is meant to be.”

Before Brett could reply, Malimo walked over to Phoenix. “I will drive,” was all he said and Phoenix didn't argue, he just moved farther back. Malimo pulled out a long scarf and tied it around Phoenix's chest, then climbed on the vehicle and tied it tight around his own, binding them together.

Malimo nodded at Taran and Tadi. “Let's go. We need to get them home.”



Close to the main house, Brett saw Malimo, Taran and Tadi turn off the path, disappearing into the trees. Phoenix had passed out shortly after Malimo had secured him with the scarf. Brett shook his head, wondering how the old man had known that Phoenix needed his help.

A few minutes later, they pulled up at the large cabin. Lana, Aiyana, Chailyn, and Keyanna were standing on the porch waiting and rushed down the steps to meet them.

Once Misu had shut down the machine and climbed off, he took Ember from Brett's arms. Lana threw herself at her husband.

"I was so worried. Are you okay? Is Ember? Where's Phoenix?" she asked in a rush.

With a grim smile, he said, "Yes. Yes. She needs medical attention for abrasions, I don't know." He answered her rapid questions in sequence.

She stood back and blinked as though the anger emanating from him hit her full force. Lana always knew what he felt, but she wouldn't know that it was directed at Phoenix.

"Brett, tell me what's going on."

“Not now. We need to get her in a bath and clean out those cuts. She might need a few stitches in her feet.” Avoiding Lana’s eyes, he turned and took Ember gently from Misu’s arms and walked toward the house.

Aiyana was already ahead of him, “Bring her this way, Brett.” She led him up the stairs to the second floor and into a large bathroom. The water had already been drawn and steam rose from it.

“How did you know when we’d be back? And that she’d need a bath as soon as we arrived?” he asked, surprised.

A secretive smile came to her face. “There are many things that we are told if we listen closely enough. Now, put her down on the seat and get out. My daughters will help me.”

Though her voice was gentle, there was a ring of steel to her tone. Reluctant to leave his sister, when he looked into Aiyana’s eyes, he realized that if there were a fight, she would win. He placed Ember on the closed toilet seat and gently woke her up, cupping her cheeks with his hands.

“Ember, we’re back at the McCoy’s house. Wake up. We need to bathe those wounds.” Brett held her chin as her eyes fluttered open.

“Phoenix?” she murmured.

If she’d smacked him across the face, he’d not have been hurt more. He stood up, fury racing through him. Aiyana had her arms around Ember, holding her close.

His body shaking with rage, Brett turned and left the room without another word, heading straight back outside.

He gulped in deep breaths of air as he walked to the trees and bent over, trying to contain his anger. Suddenly he stood up and slammed his fist into a tree, ripping his knuckles.

A hand on his shoulder stopped him. He knew it was his wife, but kept his back to her.

“Brett, what’s wrong?” she asked softly.

Shuddering with his anger, it took him a minute to answer.

“I was holding her in my arms, so glad that she was all right and all she could think about was *him*. She pulled him over and kissed him and then the first thing out of her mouth when she wakes up in the bathroom is *his* name.”

Fists clenched, he shouted, “What have I done? I *trusted* him.”

Lana placed a hand on his arm and gently turned him to face her. “It sounds to me like Ember has fallen for him. You of all people should know what it’s like to fall in love in a blink. They’re drawn to each other. Phoenix didn’t take the job from you so he could score with Ember. He admires you, Brett. He’d do anything to help you. From what I hear, he’s hurt badly from trying to protect her. I think that you’d better take a second look at them and put your brotherly protective instincts aside.”

As he looked down into his wife's eyes, he felt some of the anger leaving him. His fingers raked through his hair again and his gaze dropped to the ground. "I guess you're right Lana, but it's hard to let go. She's my little sister and I've always watched over her. Handing the reins over to someone else is—"

"Difficult, I know. But for tonight, can we just let it be? Come inside and have something to eat. Tomorrow can take care of itself." Brushing her lips over his with a feather light touch, Lana took his hand and led him into the cabin.



Lana sat beside Ember on the bed watching her little sister-in-law sleep. She brushed a strand of hair from Ember's forehead and kissed her brow. The young woman had been through a lot in just a few short days.

It hadn't surprised her that Ember had fallen for Phoenix. He was a very handsome man, but he also had a kind and gentle spirit. Lana had watched Phoenix at the dinner table the first night he'd come to the house and seen that spark in his eyes as he'd watched Ember.

Ember too had watched him, keeping her eyes down and peeking through her lashes when he wasn't looking. There was definitely strong chemistry going on between them.

As Ember's eyes opened, Lana smiled. "Hey there, sleeping beauty. How are you feeling?"

Heavy-lidded eyes stared at Lana for a minute and then widened as she sat up quickly. “Phoenix? Is he okay? Where is he?” she cried frantically, trying to pull the covers down so she could go and find him. She didn’t even give Lana a chance to talk so Lana grabbed her shoulders gently and pushed her back down.

“Stop it, Ember! You just lie there and listen to me for a minute. Phoenix is fine. His arm was hurt and he has a bump on his head, but his grandfather is taking care of him.” In a soothing gesture, Lana brushed aside Ember’s hair again. “It’s you we need to worry about. How are you feeling?”

After taking a deep breath, Ember said, “I’m okay. My feet are throbbing, but I’m fine. Can I go see him?”

“You’ve got it bad, my friend.” Lana chuckled.

Confused eyes stared back at her. “I’ve got what bad?”

“How do you feel about him, Ember? Honestly.”

“I...I can’t stand being away from him. When he is out of my sight, I panic. I love watching him, listening to him, I...Oh, God! I think I’m in love with him!” Wonder and fear filled her eyes. Then she laughed. “Holy cow! Lana, I’m in love with Phoenix! How is that possible in such a short time?”

“You’re asking me? I was in love with your brother the minute he kissed me. It took me weeks to realize it though.” Lana and Brett did have a whirlwind

romance when they'd met, but it had been forged with steel and grew stronger every day, especially since the twins had come along.

A blissful smile turned into a frown. "What if he doesn't feel the same way? I know I'm not beautiful like you, and Tina, and Erin. What if he doesn't really want me for more than just—" A deep blush suffused her face and Lana was able to fill in the blanks.

"Sex?" Lana asked. Ember's eyes fell, her face flushing darker. "Ember, have a little faith in yourself. You *are* beautiful. You should be able to see it in the way he looks at you. Watch his eyes. They tell the truth."

A knock on the door interrupted the women and Lana opened it to admit Aiyana, Chailyn, and Keyanna. Chailyn carried a tray and placed it on the bed for Ember.



"We've come to see how you are and to feed you, Little Flame," Aiyana said, running her fingers lightly over Ember's scratched cheek. "Perhaps a bit of home remedy would help also."

"Aiyana, have you heard word of how Phoenix is?" Ember's hopeful expression brought a grin from Aiyana.

"That's all she can think about. We'd better get an update soon or she'll end up running out into the forest to see him," Lana joked warmly.

The women laughed and Ember lay back on the pillow with a thump, crossing her arms over her chest. “What’s wrong with that? Wouldn’t you do the same with Brett?”

Lana nodded. “You know it girl! I keep close tabs on that boy.”

More laughter followed then Chailyn asked, “Ember, would you still be willing to do my portrait?”

Ember smiled at the girl’s enthusiasm. Chailyn was five years younger than Ember but the gap in age seemed very wide. Ember had grown up a lot in the past few weeks.

“If you will pick up my pad over on the dresser, you can see for yourself what I’ve done.”

As she waited for the women’s reactions, Ember bit her lip, the ever present uncertainty hovering over her. Chailyn held up the pad and flipped to the first page. Keyanna stared back, her expression excited, animated. The next page flipped and there was a younger version of Grandfather and Grandmother.

Aiyana’s eyebrow rose as she looked at Ember. “Little Flame, tell me how you knew what my mother and father looked like so long ago?”

“Grandfather and Phoenix said it was the spirits talking through me. When Grandfather played the *siyotanka*, it was like I went into a trance, and when I snapped out of it, that was what I’d drawn.”



“That is very powerful, Little Flame. Grandfather only gives those close to his heart permission to call him Grandfather. You never cease to amaze me.” Keyanna’s warm smile made Ember grin.

“Turn the next page, Keyanna.” Aiyana said, eager to see more.

Chailyn cried out in delight, “Oh, Little Flame, its perfect.”

Her portrait had an extra element to it. Ember had drawn a very faint waterfall flowing through her fingers into a pond. It represented Chailyn’s name, Waterfall. Her serene expression and starry-eyed look made the image ethereal, mystical even.

After admiring the portrait for a few silent moments, Keyanna turned the next page. Aiyana’s mysterious eyes shone with knowledge and secrets. Her knowing smile spoke volumes. In the background was the faint image of a flower in bloom that filled the entire background, an eternal bloom.

There were tears in Aiyana’s eyes as she turned to Ember and leaned over to hold her close. Ember closed her eyes and fought tears. Somehow, these women had become her family and she loved them.

Wiping at her tears, Aiyana sniffed. “You honor me, Little Flame. Thank you.”

She had to swallow a lump in her throat before nodding at Keyanna to continue.

Taran's gentle countenance was next. His background showed the element of earth, his shoulders and head framed by a faint planet Earth.

Next Tadi's handsome face smiled out at them, his element was wind and Ember had used a stormy scene depicting trees swaying in the wind.

Finally, Misu grinned at them, his mischievous eyes held laughter and joy. His element was water. Drops of rain fell into a faded waterfall, pouring into a lake that framed his head.

When Keyanna turned to the next page and found it blank, the women all looked at Ember.

"What about Phoenix?" Lana asked softly.

A deep blush filled Ember's cheeks as she mumbled, "At the back."

She was embarrassed because she knew that they would see more than just an image in the drawings.

A stunned silence fell in the room like a bank of fog as the women stared at the pages, showing Phoenix in different views.

"He's in love with you." Chailyn whispered.

Looking up at Ember, Keyanna said in wonder, "You love him too, Little Flame. It's there in your drawing and it shows in your face. You're in love."

Tears filled Ember's eyes and she covered them quickly with her hands and wept. Aiyana quickly shooed the girls from the room. Keyanna still held the pad of artwork.

Pulling Ember close, Lana held her while she cried, rocking her back and forth and running her fingers down Ember hair to sooth her.

"Hush, sweetheart. Everything's going to be just fine." She kept talking softly, the sound of her words a soothing balm until Ember fell asleep.



Malimo watched Phoenix as he paced back and forth in the living room. His grandson was unable to sleep, unable to sit still, his concern for Ember was so strong he barely sat for a minute before he jumped up to begin again.

The moment he'd awakened at Grandfather's cabin, his arm and head wound tended to, he was up and getting dressed, ready to go home to see her. His Grandfather had stopped him.

"She is fine for tonight. Give Brett time to cool down before you go rushing over there," he'd said.

"I need to see her. I need to see for myself that she's okay. I have to hold her, I—" Phoenix cursed and began pacing the floor.

"Have some tea, Phoenix, it will help to calm you," Grandfather said.

“I don’t want—” As though realizing he’d been about to argue with his Grandfather, Phoenix drank the hot liquid in one gulp and went back to his restless walk.

“I thought...I was afraid she’d been hurt by them or even killed. I—” he stopped, suddenly swaying on his feet. Eyes wide with surprise, he turned to look at his grandfather. “You...put something in...the tea...why?” he cried.

Before he slid slowly to the floor, Taran and Tadi caught him and carried him down into the bedroom.

Malimo sat there shaking his head at the impetuous boy. He would be angry in the morning, but it was necessary to keep him away from Brett for the night. The two tempers would get out of hand. Tomorrow would come soon enough.



Since Aiyana had given Ember a natural sedative and she would sleep through the night, Brett and Lana sat at the large kitchen table with Misu, talking.

“Tell me what happened after we left you with the men, Misu,” Brett asked in a tired voice.

A wide grin spread on his face as Misu answered. “Well, we had a little...talk. I think they might have watched one too many cowboy and Indian movies because they seemed very nervous around me.”

Lana giggled.

“I was just entertaining them with the skills of my knife on a branch and suddenly they were talking up a storm. It seems that their boss is some man they call the Birdman. He sent them to bring her to him or kill her if they couldn’t catch her, but to do it quietly since he didn’t want her body found. That’s why they didn’t use their guns. They knew that Phoenix was guarding Ember, and were told that if he got in the way they were to kill him too.”

“Did they say who the man was? Where we can find him?” Brett asked, his tone analytical, in cop mode.

The grin faded to a frown. “I should have pushed harder I guess, but what I did get was that he had something to do with an eagle’s eyes on campus. I’m not sure what they meant by that.” Misu smirked. “For some reason, when your cop friends arrived, the two men were anxious to leave. And here I thought we were getting along just fine!”

Brett was soon off in another world, thinking, mulling things over, the humor lost to him. He needed to talk to Jessie. Unfortunately, the McCoy’s didn’t have a phone and it was a long way to town. Impatient, he realized it would be morning before he could call him.

“You did a good job, Misu. That’s more than we had to go on already.” With a sigh of defeat, he made ready to stand, but Misu stopped him.

His expression serious, he said, “Brett, about Phoenix...”

Though he kept a guarded expression on his face, Brett let him continue, regardless of the anger he still nurtured.

“He’s a good and honorable man. He would never do anything to harm your sister. What they have together came on fast, but it’s not just a one night stand for my brother. He had a bad marriage a long time ago and he learned a lot about relationships. At least he learned the things that you shouldn’t do. Give him a chance to prove himself.” Since he’d had his say, Misu nodded and left the room.

“He’s right you know, Brett. I have something to show you.” Lana got up and went to the counter, picking up Ember’s art pad. She placed it in front of her husband, kissed him on his forehead, and left the room.

Brett stared down at the pad for a long time before opening it. Flipping the pages slowly, he studied each image. He could feel each person’s personality and energy in the pictures. Coming to the last one, he stared at the blank page then turned to the last page. Ember always hid her most prized drawings in the back.

When he saw her interpretation of Phoenix’s face, Brett’s hands clenched. He had to take a deep breath before looking again to see something in the man’s eyes that he didn’t want to see. When he flipped to the page before it, he groaned, putting his head in his hands. There before him was the truth. She did love him and by the look in his eyes, he loved her too.

After he closed the pad, Brett sat back in the chair. For the first time in his adult life, he didn't know what to think or what to do. His little sister had grown up. Even though she was in grave danger, he knew that Phoenix would protect her with his dying breath, but you just couldn't fight love. Lana was proof of that.

Brett placed the pad back on the counter, turned off the kitchen light, and sought out his wife. Lana and the twins were his only reality. She had brought love into his empty heart. It was hard to let his little sister go, but he saw what Lana and Misu meant. Ember was a woman now, it was time he let her be one.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Drawn To the Fire

“What do you mean they were arrested? I sent them after one simple girl and a cop. How hard could that be?” the Birdman growled, pacing in his office, livid. “Did they say anything to the cops?” he snarled into the phone.

After a short silence in the room, he lowered his voice to a lethal tone, “Dust them both, and do it now!” Birdman slammed down the receiver and swept his arm across his desk, sending his papers flying to the floor.

“Incompetence!” He placed his hands on the edge of the desk as he shook with fury.

A calm, amused voice filled the silence as Birdman fought to recover his temper.

“I’ve picked out a real beauty for you for tonight, boss. She’s got long red hair and a body that won’t quit!” A cocky young man grinned from the corner



where he stood leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, distracting Birdman from his rampage.

“What time?” he growled.

“How about nine o’clock? There is a campus party in one of the fraternity houses. She’s innocent, so she should be easy pickings,” he grinned.

A cold smile curved his lips as he pushed his anger aside and took a deep breath. “Bring her to the usual place and make sure you leave her for me first. What you do with her later is your business—And Andrew? Don’t make another mistake! I want this one left alive afterwards.”

Nodding, the young man grinned and left the room.

Birdman adjusted his pants. He was looking forward to having a red head this time. Their skin was usually so white and soft. Leaving the mess behind him, he picked up his lesson book and left his office, locking the door behind him. It was time to teach a class of lazy young adults.



“I think I’m on to something, Chan. I can’t go into it right now but by tonight I’ll know if I’m on the right track,” Rory Burns spoke in a quiet voice on the phone.

“What do you have, Burns? Don’t keep things from me. It’s imperative we keep communication open between us.”

Jessie was concerned. The kid was young for an undercover cop and he was often reckless. He didn't have the discipline to stay out of trouble.

"Look, Chan, I have a lineup of people waiting for this phone. I'll have something for you tonight," Rory said and ended the call.

Jessie swore. Since he knew the kid wasn't at a pay phone but on a cell, it sounded like he was up to something and wanted glory not justice. He wondered why Brett hadn't called in yet. It was nine o'clock in the morning and it wasn't like him to disappear like that and not check in.

When the phone rang a few minutes later, Jessie picked up quick, "Chan."

"Don't you ever change the way you answer the phone, Jessie? It's getting kind of dull."

Brett's welcome voice had Jessie grinning.

"What's up, partner?"

"We caught the two perps who were trying to kill Ember and Phoenix. It was a long night," Brett said. Jessie could tell by Brett's voice that there was more.

"Talk to me, buddy," he urged.

By the deep sigh Brett released, Jessie knew he was frustrated.

"Remember how I was worried about Phoenix and Ember getting too close?"

"Yup! So they *are* an item, right?"

“Apparently. I’m ready to kill him,” Brett growled.

“Why? Ember’s a grown woman and it seems to me that you wouldn’t have put Phoenix in the picture if you didn’t trust him. I’d pick a guy like him to date my sister. He’d be good to her and keep her safe.” As always, Jessie offered a rational viewpoint which he knew went a long way toward easing Brett’s mind.

“You don’t have a sister, pal, and if you did you’d be just as angry. They weren’t together more than two days before they *got* together. That’s rushing it a little don’t you think?”

The irony of Brett’s situation made Jessie laugh, “Right! Like you and I didn’t fall like a couple of logs the minute we met Lana and Tina. Give me a break. Who are you trying to convince?”

“All right, know-it-all. Change the subject. I want to stay mad for a while. How are my boys?”

“Oh, sorry about that,” Jessie teased, doing his best to sound apologetic.

“Sorry about what, Jessie?” Brett asked, concern in his tone.

“Well, you see...their Auntie Tina decided that they needed makeovers and she did their hair just like hers: pink with a black stripe down the center. But they look really cute and...”

“What?” Brett yelled.

“You are such a sucker!” Jessie’s laughter had Brett snickering.

“Just you wait, buster. When you have a kid or two, Uncle Brett’s going to come over with a new set of drums and a bucketful of candy and food coloring!”

Both men laughed then returned to business.

“What’s our update?”

“Burn’s is playing it solo and I’m worried about him.”

“He’s always doing that. Someday he’s going to get in too deep and we won’t be able to pull him out of trouble. Maybe we should send Mitchell down to check on him?” Brett asked.

“Now there’s an idea. I’ll call her and see if it’s feasible. Say hi to the girls for me, okay?” Jessie added, “Oh, and Brett?”

“Yeah...go ahead and say it.”

“Take it easy on Phoenix. He’s top quality cop material and an excellent candidate for a brother-in-law.” Jessie chortled when Brett swore at him and hung up.

He was still grinning when he dialed Maylin Mitchell’s number.



The porch seat rocked back and forth in a soothing rhythm as Ember continued to draw. Tadi had carried her down from her room. She could tell by the look on his face that he was concerned she would freak out again if he touched her. When she didn’t, his expression of pride was so comical that Ember laughed. She’d

conquered her fear of the brothers. They were good men, and she felt safe with them.

Beside her, Lana appeared to be nervous and edgy. She kept looking at her watch and Ember did a quick sketch of her.

“Lana, what’s wrong?” she asked softly, keeping her eyes on the pad.

“Nothing. I...I’m just wondering if the boys are okay. Brett should be back by now, shouldn’t he?” she asked, looking at her watch again.

“Thirty seconds.” Ember snickered and glanced over at Lana.

“Thirty seconds?” Lana asked, staring at her with a confused expression.

“That’s how long it’s been since the last time you looked at your watch. Why are you so worried, Lana? The truth!” Ember demanded.

“Oh...damn.” After flopping back against the cushions in defeat, Lana groaned, her fingers fumbling with her watch absentmindedly. “I was trying to avoid this conversation, but I guess it’s inevitable. Ember, Brett is furious about you and Phoenix. He thinks Phoenix not only broke his confidence as a friend, but that he took advantage of you.”

Pure fire filled Ember’s veins, her hand clenching the pencil. “Oh, he does, does he? He thinks that I’m too stupid and unattractive to get a man on my own, and so he’s going to hand pick one for me? Well have I got news for him! Why that—Ohhhh! That man infuriates me!”

“Ember, please don’t be angry at your brother. Brett loves you. He’s only looking out for your best interests. It’s natural for guys to be protective of their little sisters. You should have seen Brandon when he heard I’d...ah, fallen for Brett. They have to have their stupid ‘pissing’ contests and circle each other to test the guy’s merits. It’s a man thing!”

Ember giggled, the anger dissolving as she stared at the finished drawing.

“What’s so funny?” Lana asked.

When Ember held up the sketch, Lana’s mouth dropped.

“Oh, my God! Put it away before someone sees it, Ember. Why on Earth would you draw me like that?”

The image was one of Lana looking anxious, biting her lip, her eyes full of raw nerves. An enlarged watch circled her wrist that seemed to be calling out for Lana to look at it.

“Sorry, *Ma Sista*, but that’s exactly how you look right now. So cut it out or I’m getting it framed,” Ember teased.

Lana cried out, laughing. “That’s blackmail, you brat! Just for that I’m not going to tell you that your sweetheart is standing right behind you.”

For once, Ember didn’t believe her. “Sure he is, Lana, like he doesn’t have better things to do with his time than hang around me—I really screwed up

yesterday. If I hadn't lost my temper, we wouldn't have gotten into such a mess. Lana, I think I ruined any chance I had with him." Tears filled her eyes.

At Lana silence, Ember closed her eyes tight. "Tell me you were kidding, and he's not standing right behind me. Please tell me that." Embarrassment brought on a wave of heat to her cheeks when Lana didn't answer her. Ember put her hands over her eyes. "Oh, God!"

Though she kept her face covered, Ember heard Lana get up and move away. She didn't hear Phoenix approach and kneel in front of her chair but she sure felt him. Tears squeezed from her eyes as she trembled in reaction to his nearness.

One of his hands brushed softly over her hair while strong fingers circled her wrists, pulling her hands gently away from her face.

"Little Flame, look at me," he murmured, lifting her chin with his finger. He brushed a whisper of a kiss over her lips.

Slowly she opened her eyes to meet his gaze. Warm brown eyes filled with tenderness reminded her of melted chocolate. She saw the truth, that he wasn't angry with her. Ember cried out and threw her arms around his neck, holding onto him as though he were an anchor in a storm. Her body shivered as his arms closed around her while he held her tight to his chest.

Through her tears, she said, "I thought...when you didn't come here last night...I thought that—"

Phoenix kissed her hair, her cheek, her lips and explained as he continued to worship her.

“Grandfather gave me his *home remedy* with a little something extra in it without telling me, or I would have been here with you. I slept for ten hours. I’m not very pleased about it, but he did it for a reason, and whatever that is, it must be a good one.”

As her arms tightened, drawing him back again, he kept kissing her, he murmured reassuring words and seized her lips. A desperate need she’d never felt before filled her heart.

When he lifted his mouth, Ember cried out. “Phoenix. I’m so sorry about the way I reacted yesterday, I—”

He stopped her words with another fiery kiss, and showed her that all was forgiven. They both shook as passion built between them, lost in each other until a harsh voice cut through the air.

“Get your hands off her, McCoy!” Brett growled with deadly calm, fury in his eyes.



Phoenix immediately let Ember go and stood to face her brother. He would not fight Brett. He couldn’t, for Ember’s sake.

“Brett, back off. You are not my keeper!” Ember’s fury rose up to match his.



Brett's eyes never left Phoenix's.

Lana came back out onto the porch. "Brett, please don't—"

"Stay out of this, Lana. This doesn't concern you."

"I will not fight you, Brett. You're my friend, not my enemy." Phoenix tried to reason with him but could tell by his eyes that Brett wasn't going to back down.

"Your friend? I hired you to protect my sister and you slept with her? How is that protecting her? How is that being my *friend*?" Brett's whole body tensed, the muscles and veins in his arms and throat standing out.

With a calm he didn't feel, Phoenix walked down the steps to meet Brett face to face. When Ember grabbed his arm, he hid a wince of pain as she watched her brother.

"Don't do this, Brett. I will never forgive you if you do!" Ember shouted.

With gentle care, Phoenix removed her fingers from his arm, gave her a reassuring smile, and stepped onto the grass.

The whole family stood back to let the men resolve their issue. Only Ember and Lana refused to stay out of it.

The windows began to shake and the teacups flew up in the air as Lana's temper rose.

"I'm warning you, Brett. Stop this now!" Ember yelled, her eyes darkening with anger.

Aiyana, Chailyn, and Keyanna grabbed the cups out of the air, their faces filled with wonder and fear. Phoenix looked back at Brett.

For an endless moment, Brett stared at him, his anger simmering in his eyes.

Resigned, Phoenix stood and waited. He wouldn't defend himself against his friend.

"I trusted you. You betrayed that trust, McCoy," Brett growled.

Unable to defend himself against the truth, Phoenix remained silent.

"Say something!" Brett yelled.

"I can't change the truth, Brett, so there is nothing to say," he said quietly.

Not giving Phoenix a chance to react, Brett took a swing at Phoenix. Though he stumbled, Phoenix remained on his feet and shook his head to clear it. Once again, he moved back to stand in front of Brett, waiting for his next move. It wasn't long in coming, this time Brett's fist sent him to the ground on his back. He leaned on his elbow and wiped blood from his lip.

Lana and Ember both screamed.

"Stop it, Brett stop this!" Ember shrieked.

Debris from the yard began to fly up and hit Brett, dirt flying into his eyes. He put up his hands to deflect it. Phoenix lay there and watched through squinted his eyes and waited.

"Damn it, Lana. Stop it, now!" Brett yelled at his wife.

“I will if you will,” Lana shouted back, her voice filled with fury.

After blocking a planter from hitting him, Brett grabbed Phoenix by his collar, took another swing, knocking him back down to the ground. Still, Phoenix didn’t fight back.

Ember tore down the steps, limping on her bandaged feet then scrambled to Phoenix’s side. Her arms slipped around Phoenix’s shoulders as she cried out, “Leave him alone. I love him, Brett! Leave him alone or I’ll never speak to you again. I love him!” She held Phoenix on her lap when he tried to get up.

“He’s just using you, Ember. He doesn’t care about you. You’re just another notch on his belt!” Brett’s words were cruel and bitter, torn from his throat in a hoarse cry.

Phoenix sat up, pushing Ember’s hands away as he staggered to his feet. Pine needles, bark, pebbles, dirt, all flew in the air around them, yet there was no wind.

Anger stirred as Phoenix rose to defend Ember, his fists clenched. “You’re wrong, Brett. I love Ember with all my heart. I would never hurt her or use her. I love her!” Phoenix yelled, finally releasing his fury toward Brett.

Suddenly, the rage left Brett’s eyes and body, his shoulders sagged and he looked down at his sister and smiled.

“Now that we have that out of the way, what’s for lunch?” Brett asked, as though nothing happened.

The debris fell to the ground in the blink of an eye as Lana, Ember, and Phoenix stared at Brett in shock.

“Are you out of your bloody mind, Brett? One minute you’re ready to kill the man and the next you’re hungry and smiling? What the hell is the matter with you?” Ember cried.

For a moment, Brett looked down at his sister, his demeanor serious.

“I needed to make sure he had good intentions and was worthy of you, Ember. I was testing his mettle, and he passed with flying colors.”

Chuckles came from Phoenix first, then his brothers, followed by Brett. When the two men embraced, Ember and Lana threw up their hands.

“You are all out of your freaking minds!” Ember cried, trying to get to her feet.

When Brett and Phoenix rushed to her side to help her, she swatted their hands away and got up on her own, hobbling to the stairs. Phoenix tried to help her again but she turned on him.

“Get the hell away from me! You bloody men are insane! I want nothing to do with any of you.” Her face crumpled, and she began to cry in pitiful sobs.

Lana and Keyanna rushed to her side and helped her into the house, throwing dirty looks at the men before they disappeared inside.

Rubbing his jaw, Phoenix said, “Your punch is as hard as a rock.”

An unrepentant grin on his face, Brett replied, “You don’t punch at all, wussy.”

As Phoenix grinned, he moved, and Brett suddenly lay flat out on the ground wiping blood from his lips; Phoenix knew he hadn’t seen the punch coming.

“Well, wussy, at least you’re quick.” Brett’s laughter was contagious as he rubbed his chin.

Their friendship restored, Phoenix held out his hand and helped Brett to his feet.



The party was noisy as usual in the frat house. Guys and girls disappeared behind closed doors and drugs were offered freely. Booze flowed like a river, and Rory Burns fit in like a glove. He pretended he was drinking. He’d take a mouthful of his drink then turn away, spit the booze back into the glass as he moved on to the next group of people. For effect, he stumbled around, laughing, and making passes at the girls.

He’d always been a good actor. Undetected so far, he watched his quarry. Andrew Jensen slipped a pill into a drink with expert precision and handed it to a

gorgeous redhead. Rory wondered if it was Ketamine, the rape drug. Instead of calling him on it, Rory stood back and kept up his act.

Out of all of the students and teachers he'd studied, Jensen stood out the most. He schmoozed with some of the instructors and somehow his marks were excellent, even though he never seemed to study. Rory had watched him sell a few illegal drugs to some of the students and even two instructors. The entire campus was a virtual playground for drugs.

Rory noticed when the red head showed signs of being drugged, her head lolling, her eyes blinking as though to try and gain focus. Jensen laughingly helped her up and supported her as they walked to the front door. After they left the building, Rory tripped and staggered his way after them, pretending he was going to be sick to his stomach. People got out of his way fast enough.

Outside, his act disappeared and he became the cop, tailing his quarry. Jensen was in the process of putting the girl into a car and Rory ran to get his own.

From a distance with no car lights on, Rory followed and watched as the car pulled into a private residence of one of the instructors who lived on campus. A grim smile lit his face when he realized who that professor was. After parking down the street, he jumped out of the car and slipped in close to the building, peeking in the window just as the blind dropped down, shutting off his view.

He'd caught a brief glimpse of a hand with the ring from the drawing Chan had shown him as well as the redhead sprawled out on a large bed. Excited that he'd found the Birdman and the information he needed to bring down the drug ring, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Chan's number.

He got the answering machine. "Shit! Listen, Chan, I've got him, he's a—"

Pain crashed through his head as Rory dropped to the ground like a rock. Dazed as the two men picked him up and dragged him into the building, Rory was unable to fight back.

Jensen himself opened the door and waved them in.

"Who the hell is this?"

"A snoop. We caught him peeking in the bedroom window. What should we do with him?" one man asked.

"Take him into the living room. I'll be back in a minute."

Everything faded to black...



Jensen left them to knock on the bedroom door.

"What the hell do you want?" an angry man shouted.

"We have a problem." Jensen was no fool, he knew he should be afraid of the man, yet he wasn't and played the lapdog well.

“Shit!” There was some shuffling and a moment later the door opened. The woman on the bed had already been undressed. Her naked body was sprawled out on her back, semiconscious and moaning.

“The boys caught a snoop. What do you want us to do with him?”

The Birdman tugged at his silk robe, trying to hide his erection. “What did he see?”

“He saw her on your bed in the window, but I don’t know what else.”

“Then give him a little extra fun and dust him. Dump his body somewhere far from here when you’re done. Make sure he isn’t found.” At that Birdman slammed the door in his face.

Not deterred by the rude gesture, Jensen walked into the front room. The kid was coming around.

He nodded at one of the men, indicating what he wanted, then walked over to the spy and grabbed him by his scruffy hair.

“Looking for a thrill, buddy? Well I’m going to give you a real nice ride with a one way ticket.” Jensen chuckled as he took the syringe from his cohort.

Rory’s eyes opened and he started to struggle. He put up a good fight, knocking over a table and kicking out at Jensen, but the two men holding him were too strong; they held him down while Jensen sat on his chest, jabbing the



needle into his arm. Soon Rory didn't fight at all as he fell into a wonderful dream world from which he would never awake.



Maylin had checked every fraternity on the campus. Three of them were having parties. No one had seen Rory in the first two, but at the third one a young woman remembered him bumping into her on his way to the front door.

"I thought he was going to hurl on me. He was so wasted. That guy sure likes to party." She looked around the room. "I can't find my girlfriend either. People seem to disappear all the time around here." The little blond giggled. "Bet she got lucky. She was hanging with that hunky guy, Andrew Jensen. He's gorgeous." After gulping her drink, she wandered off.

Just as she left the building, Maylin saw Rory's car take off down the road. "Shit! I'll never catch up with him." She was about to run for her car when she saw two men get into another car and drive off without headlights, following him.

Suspicious, she ran to her car, determined to follow them. Unfortunately, some idiot had blocked her in and she couldn't get out. A sense of urgency in her gut had her seeking another way. When she saw a bike standing alone, she ran over to it and tried to pull it out of the rack, but it was chained securely.

“Damn it!” Frantic to follow them, Maylin considered a couple who’d just pulled up in a car and climbed out, drunk already. Maylin ran up to them and grabbed the keys from the guy.

“Don’t you know drinking and driving is illegal, buddy? I’m going to park your car for you. Now get out of the way. I hear they have a huge keg at that party.”

The guy grinned, taking his girlfriend’s hand. “Thanks kid. Make sure you put it close by so we can find it later.” The drunk walked unsteadily over to the frat house.

“Idiot,” Maylin murmured, and shook her head at his stupidity. Maylin took off down the road, headlights out. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed Jessie’s number.

He answered on the first ring, “Chan!”

“Mitchell. We have big trouble. I confiscated a car and I’m following two perps who are on Burns’ tail. He’s following someone else. There’s a girl missing from the frat party. Red head. Beautiful. Looks like she might be another vic for the Birdman.”

“Do you want backup?” Jessie asked.

“Not just yet. Let me see where this goes. I can’t get the plates of the perp in front of me because I’m driving without beams. He’s turning into the residential

area.” Maylin watched as the car pulled into a driveway and the men got out. They didn’t go inside, but took off into the night.

“I’m getting out of the car to pursue. They moved out of sight. I’ll call back when I have more.” She didn’t wait for Jessie to speak, but closed the phone and took off after the men.

Cautious, Maylin followed them into the dark. Something didn’t smell right in her book, and she always worked on pure gut instinct. She stood still, listening, but heard nothing and saw no one. Slow and methodical, she moved through the residential area looking for clues as to their whereabouts. Rory’s car was not visible either.

Maylin figured they hadn’t gone far and watched for lights on at residence buildings. Most of them were dark. Fifteen minutes later, there was still no sign of the men. A car sped down the road, its lights on. Maylin had to duck behind a bush to avoid being spotted. The car was unfamiliar so she kept moving. After two hours, she called Jessie.

“Chan!”

“I lost them. It’s like they disappeared into thin air. No sign of Burns either. I rechecked the frat parties, and no one has seen him. Where should I go from here?”

“Call it a night, Mitchell. It looks like we’re out of luck. Bring me your report in the morning.”

“Sorry.” Maylin seldom lost her quarry. She was really ticked but gave it up and went home.

## Chapter Fourteen

### Making Up Flames

Ember and Lana completely ignored Brett and Phoenix for the entire evening, even though it didn't seem to bother the men at all. They acted as though they were best friends again and had never even had a fight. Men! Ember couldn't figure them out.

Over dinner, the two women were very quiet but the rest of the group laughed and teased each other, eating as though it was their first meal in a month. Ember only picked at her food, her appetite gone. She didn't know how to get over her anger.

The meal went just fine until Brett said something to Lana and dishes started lifting off the table, her temper kicking into gear. When a dish smashed, splashing sauce all over the table, Lana burst into tears and tore out of the room, running out the back door into the night.

Brett was right on her tail and everyone else fell silent.

“Tadi,” Ember asked, “Would you please take me up to my room?”

Tadi looked at Phoenix, as did the rest of his family and lingered in his spot. Throwing down his napkin, Phoenix came to her side and tried to lift her.

“No! Don’t you touch me! Don’t you even...I’ll walk by myself then,” she yelled, giving poor Tadi a dirty look. But Phoenix wouldn’t let her. Scooping her up into his immovable arms he carried her kicking and screaming up the stairs. She howled when her foot hit the railing and tears filled her eyes.

“Stop it, Ember! Just stop it!” he snarled at her, giving her a shake. “You’re going to hurt yourself even more.”

“What do you care you...you bastard! Why don’t you go and let my brother beat the shit out of you again? It’ll save me the trouble!” she screamed at him, pummeling his chest with her free hand as she struggled to get down.

With care, he slipped them through the bedroom door and placed her on the bed, kicking the door closed then locking it behind him.

“Get out of here! You are not sleeping in here with me!”

When Phoenix stood there staring at her in silence, his hands on his hips. She cried out, “Get out, I said!” Tears flowed down her cheeks.

“Yes, I am sleeping in here, with you,” he growled.

Ember moved to get out of bed but he pushed her back. When she tried hitting him, he grasped her wrists and held them over her head, covering her body

with his to keep her still. As soon as she opened her mouth to yell at him again, he captured her lips with his, swallowing her scream of rage.

She struggled to break free at first but gradually relaxed into the kiss, her heart pounding, not out of anger, but desire. His tongue dipped and swirled inside her mouth, his hand roving over her breast as he kneaded it and gently pinched her nipple through material. Back arching in response, she whimpered.

His questing lips swallowed her moan of desire as they burned a trail across hers. He increased his gentle assault, moving his hand down lower to undo her jeans, sliding inside her panties until he found her nub. A gasp of desire left her in a whoosh as she shifted her hips to the rhythm he created.

When he stopped the sweet torture, she groaned in protest but he only let her wrists go to remove her shirt, undoing the buttons and sliding it off her shoulders. Hot, moist lips brushed over her skin like feathers as he nibbled on her earlobe and caressed her temple, eyelids, and cheeks. Ember panted, breathless as his tongue trailed behind her ear where the skin was so utterly sensitive.

Unable to resist him, Ember began pulling at his shirt too. She was on fire, demanding he fill her as desperation set in. Her whole body trembled, wild with need. Tears escaped from the corners of her eyes as her fingers ripped at his shirt, frantic to remove it.

His lips continued to ravage her, kissing down her neck, pausing to tenderly brush over the scratches. At her growl of frustration, he quickly took his shirt off, chuckling as he tried to evade her hands when he left her for that moment.

Phoenix slid her jeans down over her hips and carefully removed them, cautious of hurting her bandaged feet. Once naked, he laid on top of her, worshipping her breasts through the lavender lace bra and sucking until she was bucking, writhing under him. He undid the clasp at the front of her bra and pushed the material aside to access her tender nipples, sucking and licking, kissing and nibbling, until she nearly came off the bed.

After turning to her other breast and giving it equal attention, he moved down farther, gently kissing the jagged scratches on her belly, laving them with his tongue until she was mindless with need, tugging his hair.

At his chuckle she lifted her head, her eyes full of question. “What is so funny?” she moaned.

“I was just thinking that I’d better get a brush cut before I go completely bald.” The wide grin on his face disappeared quick enough as he continued down to her navel.

Instantly contrite, she cried out and released his hair, “Sorry, I’m sorry...Oh, I’m so sorr...ohhh.”



His lips found her nub and suckled through the material, making her hips jerk as she shrieked. Suddenly, her eyes flew wide open and she stopped him.

“Oh, my God. Your family...they’re going to think—”

“Who gives a damn?” he growled, slipping her panties off and returning to continue his sweet attack.

Ember grabbed a pillow, holding it over her face to cover her mouth, muffling her screams as his tongue slipped into her, licking upwards to her clitoris and circling it, over and over again. He held her hips still as she bucked, an orgasm shaking her body, her muffled screams louder by the minute.

Instead of leaving her mound, he kissed her harder, licked deeper, nibbled on her until she was beside herself, crying into the pillow.

“Please, Phoenix, no more, I can’t—” she cried as he moved his tongue and lips faster bringing her to another peak, her hand ripping into his hair again. “Ahhhhh...ahhhh...Stop!—I can’t...ahhhh!” she screamed into the pillow.

Desperate to have him inside her, she grabbed his hair and tugged hard until he climbed back up her body and slipped a condom on. He snickered and pulled the pillow away, kissing her flaming cheeks as he stared down at her, his eyes filled with passion. As he slipped into her to the hilt, his lips claimed hers, sharing the taste of her as he muffled both of their groans.

Moving his hips he picked up the rhythm, moving faster and faster yet. She wanted to give back to him but oh, the sweetness of having him fill her was all she could think about. Arms tight about his neck, she kissed the vein that stood out...feeling his pulse pound like native drums.

She felt him tense as he began the climb, so close. When he rubbed his thumb quickly over her clitoris, his hips pumped harder, pounding into her with a quick rhythm that sent her flying.

Ember saw stars behind her eyes as she felt herself falling over the abyss. Phoenix gasped as he flew with her, his lips capturing their cries. Their bodies shone with sweat as they floated back to Earth, sated, exhausted, and well loved.



Lana stood by the water on the sandy beach, tears pouring from her eyes. She seldom fought with her husband, but when they did fight, it devastated her. She wrapped her arms around her stomach as she sobbed, finally falling to her knees and keening from the pain in her heart.

Strong arms wrapped around her body, gently pulling her close, ignoring her futile attempt to push him away.

“Lana,” Brett whispered into her ear. “Please stop. I’m sorry about this afternoon. Please don’t be angry anymore. I love you, kitten.”

Bitterly, she laughed. “You love me! Do you love me enough to listen to me when I ask you to stop beating a man? You don’t love me enough for that, Brett. Just go away, I can’t stand to be near you.” Still, he pulled her closer, kissing her temple.

“Lana, you don’t mean that. Please, stop crying. You know it makes me crazy to see you do that.” His kisses along her neck were distracting her so she shoved at his chest, breaking his hold.

Once free, she ran from him down the beach, sobs tearing from her throat but she hadn’t gone more than a few steps when he tackled her, taking her to the ground. His body spun as they fell so that she landed safely on top of him.

Brett rolled on top of her, lacing his fingers with hers as he pinned her down.

“I do love you, kitten,” he said as his head lowered, his lips seizing hers in an offer of love.

Her fingers, her lips, and her heart, surrendered to him as his hard, hot body imprisoned her. Lana pulled her lips away and gasped, struggling to retain her anger.

“Why did you do it? Why didn’t you stop, Brett?” she cried softly as tears followed a slow trail down her cheeks and into her hair.

“I had to make sure he was right for her, Lana. I needed to know his feelings for her and hers for him were true. If he’d only been putting another notch on his belt, I’d have hurt him, and hurt him badly. I know he’s the one now. It was important for Ember’s sake. Can you understand?”

Brett’s eyes burned into hers with the question. She stared at him for a moment, thinking about what he’d said. He loved his sister so much that he had forced Ember and Phoenix to take a solid, realistic look at their relationship. To be sure that it wasn’t just sex between them. Brandon was just as protective of Lana. She could understand it, now that he’d explained it.

“I think I understand, Brett, but you scared me. I’ve never seen you so violent before, and never against a friend. I don’t care for that side of you.”

“I don’t much like that side of me either, kitten, but it’s a big part of who I am. Can you forgive me?” Brett resumed his drugging kisses, moving from her lips to her neck.

“Not the neck, oh, please...not the neck...ohhhh.” Lana shivered as the tingling sensations trembled up and down her body. He knew exactly where she was the most sensitive, and he reveled in it.

“Will you forgive me, Lana?” he whispered hoarsely.

“Yes, oh yes,” she moaned.

“Brett, honey, we don’t have a condom with us. We can’t, or I’ll get pregnant.” Lana was panting now, shivers racing up her spin, aching for him.

“Would that be such a bad thing?”

She caressed his cheek. “No, that’s not such a bad thing at all.” She gently pulled his hair to bring his lips to hers and kissed him again.



After a rowdy breakfast the next morning with the family, and lots of teasing and jokes at the expense of Ember and Lana, Brett and Lana prepared to leave.

“Take this key and I’ll write down the alarm codes. She should be safe at the cottage for a few weeks if necessary. It’s remote and private so you shouldn’t have a problem.” Brett was sending Ember and Phoenix to the Muskoka Lakes where he and Lana had their home away from home.

“Thanks. Keep me informed about the status of the case and let me know if I can help. Ember will be safe, I promise you that!” Phoenix said with confidence.

“Just check in with Jake, the owner of the restaurant beside where I dock the pontoon boat. He’ll hook you up with whatever you need, and he’s tight as a clam with information. He won’t give you away.” Handing Phoenix the alarm codes, he turned to face Ember.

“Hey, kid. You still mad at me?”

From the deck chair, Ember made a comical face and lifted her chin. “I might be. You make sure your boys know that their favorite aunt loves them, or I’ll come looking for you. I may even bring my own cop along.” Ember grinned and put her arms around Brett as he bent over to hug her, kissing him on the cheek.

“We’ll head out tomorrow. I’d like to give Ember’s feet another day to heal before we move her.” His expression softened as he looked down at her which sent shivers of awareness up her spine. When he reached out and caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers, she sighed.

After clearing her throat, Lana said, “Okay, enough of the mushy stuff. You have at least two weeks to practice that. Give me a hug, Phoenix.” Lana embraced him then wagged a finger in his face. “You take good care of our girl.”

With a mischievous look on her face, Lana leaned in close to Phoenix to whisper loud enough for Ember to hear, “When she’s not looking, take that portrait of me with the watch and burn it, okay? She threatened to blackmail me with it.”

A rumbling laugh escaped him as he replied, “Blackmail, eh? I’m not touching it. Sounds like good ammo for the future if you start sending flying plates my way!”

Brett laughed. “You have no idea. You’d better not tease her too much, my friend. She’s plain devious.”

“Nah! She loves me. Lana wouldn’t pull any of her tricks on me.” A confident grin on his face, Phoenix stepped back to watch the couple as they climbed into the car.

Just as it began to move forward, a large glass of water flew up and tipped over Phoenix’s head. He yelped and spun around, to look for the culprit. Ember grinned and pointed up above his head

The glass floated a few inches above him. Barely catching it in time when it fell, he turned, water dripping down his face and hair. “Lana Colton! Prepare to find your drawing published on the front page of the newspaper!”

Everyone laughed as Brett and Lana drove off, grinning ear to ear.

Grandfather sat beside Ember quietly. When everyone else moved into the house or went back to work, he remained. His silence was a comfort to her.

A sudden thought crossed her mind. “Grandfather, would you like to come with us? I’m going to really miss you.”

As he took her hand in his, he smiled. “Look in your heart and I’ll be with you, Little Flame. I too will miss having you here. I am glad that you and my grandson have found each other. Two broken shells finally become a whole.”

She threw back her head and laughed in delight. “You really go for the analogies don’t you?” Her face became serious then. “Grandfather, when I was hiding in the tree, I was scared and alone. I didn’t know if Phoenix was hurt

or...dead. There was a branch beside me that I held onto so that I wouldn't fall and...I think I passed out for a while, or maybe I was asleep, I don't know. The strange thing is—

“Yes, Little Flame, I was with you then.”

Malimo's knowing grin surprised her as his words sank in.

“You mean, when I was dreaming?”

“Yes. Some call it astral projection, but I believe that our spirits were united because you were in need and called out for help. I will be there whenever you need me. All you have to do is call to me in your mind. Our spirits have known each other before, in another lifetime.”

He squeezed her hand and stood up then leaned over and kissed the top of her head, turning to leave.

“Grandfather?”

Once again he faced her for a moment.

“Thank you, I...I love you,” she said, embarrassed.

Patting her head, he said, “I love you too, Little Flame. Take care of my boy.”

Ember watched him walk away, disappearing into the forest. She stared after him for a long time, lost in thought.

When she turned to sit back in her chair, she screamed.



“Damn it anyway! Phoenix, how many times do I have to tell you not to sneak up on me? You scared the—”

His lips claimed hers, making her forget what she was yelling about. When he finally pulled away, she was dazed.

“It looks like I’ll have to kiss you every time you yell at me. It seems to work remarkably well at stopping you.” He jumped back when she swung her hand at him playfully.

“Get lost, you brat, I wouldn’t have to yell at all if you’d stop—”

Again, he made her lose her train of thought with his lips, grinning around hers as he pulled her close to him.

Ember shook her head and frowned.

“I’d stop talking to you altogether if I didn’t like that so much!”

Phoenix chuckled, pulling a reluctant grin from her.

Eyes narrowed in thought, Ember threaded her fingers through his silky hair. “Phoenix, tell me where we are going tomorrow?”

“We’re going to go to your broth—”

Her own kiss silenced his words and she snickered. This time she was the one in charge. As their passion stirred, she wondered if she really was the winner, deciding that it didn’t matter, they’d both won the game.



As soon as his cell phone was in range, Brett called Jessie.

“What’s the status, Jessie?”

“Brett. We have a problem. Burns is missing. Maylin last saw him heading for the residences. She lost the two guys who were tailing him then he just disappeared. Another woman woke up in the woods near the campus alone and confused. Testing showed traces of Ketamine and she’d been raped. She doesn’t remember a thing past talking to a guy named Andrew Jensen. Maylin confirmed that the girl’s friend saw her talking to him, and others saw the two leave alone together.”

“This all happened on that campus. I think we need to get some cadaver dogs and search the grounds.” Brett said.

“I’ll get going on it. Is Ember relocated yet?”

“Within the next twenty-four hours. Can we get Maylin into the frat group?” Brett asked.

“I think so. She’s been working on it. In the mean time, I’ll get the K9 crew set up. The RCMP are beginning to look into the case. It seems that they’ve had the University under surveillance for the past month or so but haven’t come up with a thing. Burns was on to something, but was too cocky to fill me in.”

Brett knew Jessie was frustrated. He didn’t voice his concern that Burns had been caught and dealt with.

“We should be back in Toronto in two hours. I’ll call when I get Lana settled in with the boys. Oh, I forgot to tell her about the new hairdo’s Tina gave them.” He glanced at his wife, trying to make light of the call for Lana’s sake. Brett changed the subject, hoping she wouldn’t ask about the investigation. “Talk to you later, Jessie.”

After disconnecting, he waited, knowing she couldn’t help but ask him about it. It only took her the space of a few heartbeats.

“Hairdo’s?” she asked, raising a brow.

“Hmmm?” Brett pretended to forget the conversation he’d just had with Jessie.

“You know the drink of water that ended up on Phoenix’s head is pretty mild compared to that hot coffee in the cup holder. Just picture it on your lap,” Lana threatened with her arms crossed over her chest.

Brett grinned. “Okay, okay. Tina was playing makeover with the boys and she dyed their hair pink with a black stripe. Jessie says it looks pretty cool.”

“What? You’re lying!” Lana said, studying his face. The coffee cup lifted up and floated toward Brett, hovering in front of his chest.

“Hey!” He snickered then grabbed it out of the air, taking a sip before putting it back down. “All right, you’ve got me. They’re just fine. Geez! The things

I have to do to stay happily married.” Rolling his eyes, he gave an exaggerated start when she smacked his arm.

“Tell me about the call to Jessie. And it had better be the truth, buster!” Lana warned.

All humor vanished as reality crashed back into his mind. “Let’s just say that it’s not good on one count, but we are closer to finding the Birdman on the other.”

“Did anyone get hurt; one of your team members?” Always perceptive when it came to his thoughts, Lana placed her hand on his arm, waiting for him to answer.

“One of our men is missing. He hasn’t been heard from since late last night.”

“I’m sorry, honey. I know how much you care about your team.”

Brett fell silent and focused on the road, a tick in his jaw flickering from stress.

“We have to get home as soon as possible. I need to get to the precinct.” He stepped on the gas.



Two young hitchhikers walked along a quiet country road, exhausted from following a shortcut to the main highway for the past few hours. The eighteen year old boy finally threw his knapsack on the ground and groaned.

“Joe, I’m beat, let’s take a break. You got any weed with you?” he asked.

“Yeah, hang on a sec.”

Joe dropped his knapsack on the ground and rummaged through it, pulling out a clear plastic baggie with marijuana in it. He was just reaching into the bag for the papers to roll a joint when he noticed something off the side of the road.

“Hey, Ron, does that look like a leather jacket to you?” he asked, noticing a piece of black material peeking out of a pile of brush.

“Yeah man, let’s go get it. It could be worth some good money.”

The two boys jumped over the drainage ditch and climbed the bank, scrambling over to pull the brush away.

“Holy shit!” Joe cried, running back to the ditch, Ron screaming as he ran behind him.



Jessie sat in Brett’s office, giving him an update when they were interrupted by the phone.

“Colton.” Brett answered, his fist clenching as he listened.

After hanging up the receiver, Brett dropped his head in his hands and groaned.

“Two hitchhikers found Burns’ body an hour north of the city. Drug OD by needle—Damn!” He leapt to his feet and stormed over to the punching bag to slam his fist into the wall. “Damn it! He was under my bloody orders and now he’s dead!”

The kid was only twenty-eight years old.” Both hands raked through his hair as his anger mounted.

Calm as usual, Jessie sat back and waited until Brett finished beating himself up. When his partner was calmer, he said, “He didn’t follow protocol, Brett. He could have told me what was going on and we would have had backup there in an instant. Burns was cocky and took chances, and *that’s* why he’s dead, not because you sent him in there. Now instead of banging your head against the wall, let’s get these bastards and put them away. For Burns, for Ember, and all the other women the Birdman has hurt.”

Cold, lethal fury burned in Brett’s gut. “I think I’ll personally interview the two perps we caught in Bancroft. I want some answers.”



The two men who had attempted to murder Ember and Phoenix were incarcerated in the Kingston prison, two hours east of Toronto. They were scheduled to be transported to Toronto at two o’clock that afternoon.

Brett was going to meet them at the Don Jail in Toronto at five o’clock. When he got a call at one-thirty, he gripped the phone until his knuckles were white. Both men were dead by a lethal injection of heroine. The investigation was inconclusive. No one was able to discover how they were murdered since the

inmates who'd cleaned the area during that time were no where to be found. Brett dropped his chin to his chest, frustrated beyond belief.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Fire in Paradise

Cool ripples slid over firm muscles as his hands cut through the still water, propelling his sleek body far out into the lake. Phoenix stopped for a moment, waiting for Ember to catch up to him. He watched as she concentrated on her swim, her eyes closed as her face dipped in and out of the refreshing water.

Diving downward into the lake below her, he waited for her to pass. Just as her foot kicked past his face he grabbed her ankle, giving her time to catch her breath before pulling her down, into his arms.

Ready to fight, she opened her eyes and soon melted beneath his lips. They floated up together gasping for air as they reached the surface. Ember laughed aloud at his play.

“Listen to me, you brat! The last time you played water games, I got into big trouble. I would think you’d learned from that experience.” Ember giggled as he kissed her neck, nibbling along a pulsing vein while they kicked to stay afloat.



“Now, Little Flame, who would play with you if not me?” His hands explored beneath her bikini panties, bringing a gasp from her.

Though she attempted to push him away, she laughed. “Stop that, you brute! There will be no frisking of the damsel in distress in the middle of the lake.” At that, she spun around and took off, swimming for shore. Though she was fast, he caught up to her and tried a little more frisking.

Her squeals echoed across the quiet lake. Ember used her foot to push against his chest to escape him, wincing. When he stopped to see if she was okay, she took the advantage and swam away as fast as she could.

For a moment, he watched her, enjoying the play as he gave her a head start. While he waited he studied Brett and Lana’s cottage from a distance.

It was a large log style cabin standing two stories high with a wall of windows facing the lake. A deck wrapped around the second floor. The entire ten acre lot was a forest, filled with pine and cedar trees, the ground rocky, solid granite. The whole area was part of the Great Canadian Shield and the cabin stood on rock.

When he figured he’d given Ember a good enough head start, he chuckled then set out to catch her. She was nearly to shore when he slipped his arms around her waist, bringing a squeal of laughter from her. Since her feet were still healing,

he picked her up and carried her to shore, kissing her all the way. Her arms slipped around his neck, sliding into his sodden hair.

Looking for a place to lay her down to continue exploring her, he groaned when a loud horn blasted over the water. His forehead rested on hers as she giggled.

“Be a good neighbor and turn around and wave at them,” she teased.

Obediently, he turned and pasted on a grin while Ember waved and smiled.

Through gritted teeth, she ordered, “Now take me upstairs! I want to try out the hot tub!”

“Great idea.” He kissed her neck. “My wish is your command!”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Isn’t that supposed to be “Your wish is my command.”

“Exactly!” he said, bringing more laughter from her as he carried her up the stairs and into the cabin.

Once the door closed behind them, he angled her so she could lock it and set the alarm. Then he kissed her, deep and long, his tongue delving into her mouth to duel with hers.

“Mmmm,” she pulled her head back. “Wait, Phoenix, we’re dripping all over the floor.”

She shivered in his arms as he murmured against her neck, “You have no idea!”

Her throaty laughter filled the room. “So, grab a towel and dry us off. Then we can get up to the hot tub and I can take care of your...dripping.”

Phoenix’s eyebrows shot up. “Yes ma’am!” he said, hurrying to fulfill her wishes.

When he moved to the stairs, she cried, “Wait, wait! I want to take some wine up with us.”

Though he groaned in dismay at the delay, he turned with her still in his arms and headed for the kitchen. He had to bend down so she could reach the wine bottle in the fridge then moved over to the cupboard for the glasses. He sighed with relief thinking she was done, but she giggled. “One more thing! Take me to the bar, please.”

“Yes ma’am. Is that the last stop?” he asked hopefully.

“Oh yes. Then we play.”

With the wine and glasses held in one hand, she picked up the bottle of sweet liqueur then nodded at Phoenix, giggling when he raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Once they were in the huge bathroom en suite, he sat her down on the side of a large teal-green whirlpool tub.

Finally, he let out a deep breath of satisfaction and brushed his hands together. “What next mistress?”

Ember’s eyes were filled with amusement as he waited for her answer. She tilted a wine glass and gave him a sultry look, nodding toward the tub.

“Hot water might help.”

“Yes, ma’am!” In a hurry, he rushed to turn on the tap, making sure the water was the right temperature. When he turned back to her, she had the wine poured and offered him a glass, eyeing his chest with interest.

“Hmmm...I think you might just do, my handsome warrior. Now, strip off those trunks and come help me with my bikini.” Ember acted like a queen, issuing orders while she sipped her wine.

He was only too happy to obey her commands, but before she would allow him to take off her suit, she looked over at the candles. Phoenix released a low growl but set about lighting them. Once again, he moved to strip her but she shook her head slowly, her eyes full of promise and mischief.

“I believe there are some aromatherapy oils in that wicker basket. Perhaps you can find something I like.” As she played the sultry temptress, she leaned forward to display her deepened cleavage. For effect, she whispered, “Something I *really* like!”

“Oh, yeah!” he cried and tore into the basket, coming up with rose oil. Though not a fan of the scent, he was willing to use it for her, thankful when she shook her head slowly.

“Ylang Ylang?” He took off the lid and grimaced, looking over at Ember for her answer.

One brow raised in answer.

Relieved, he dropped the offending oil back into the basket and picked up another. “Lavender?”

“Perfect!” She blew him a kiss of approval and sipped her wine while he added a few drops to the water, looking up at her to see if that was enough. She tilted her head and he added five more drops. Another quick glance revealed her smile of approval. “Bonus.” Once he’d put the bottle away, he reached for her top with eager hands but she pulled back from him again.

“The door?” Her voice was low and husky, filled with promise.

He ran over to close and lock it, even though there was no one to disturb them.

Again, she diverted him, having him pull the blinds then turn off the lights so that only the candles filled the room with ambient light. When he moved back to her side again, she finally showed her approval, her lips twitching with a potential smile.

Eagerly, he took her wineglass and put it on the ledge. He reached up to undo the thin straps holding her bikini top behind her neck, easing the tie slowly until the bow popped open.

Since she couldn't stand without hurting her tender feet, he scratched his head, trying to decide how to take her bottoms off. A moment later, he grinned, winking at her then picked her up, throwing her over his shoulder. Ember shrieked with laughter.

He slid the panties down over her hips, past her bottom and on down her thighs, but he didn't put her back on the side of the tub again. Instead, caressing her soft cheeks, he slid his hands down the back of her soft legs, stroking lightly over the backs of her knees. Along the inside of her satin thighs, he continued to explore, her body shuddering in response as she moaned and squirmed.

One exploring finger moved higher yet, sliding up to cup her hot mound, and seeking refuge within her. Her cry of excitement made his groin twitch with impatience. Still captive, she twisted, whimpering as her hands pushed against his back to keep from falling. Another finger joined the first one. He was pleased when she gasped in response.

Ember wrapped her arms around his waist upside down, even as she cried out again as his fingers moved in and out of her, faster now. With her moist lips

and tongue, Ember kissed his spine, laving it between gasps. She gave a low giggle when he shuddered, increasing the rhythm of his fingers as he added a third one.

Her shout of ecstasy echoed in the room as her control broke, her hips jerking, her thighs quivering. She gasped for breath. “Phoenix,” she moaned his name against his skin, her heated breath sending chills of desire up his spine.

Gently he kissed her hip and stepped into the deep tub with her still over his shoulder. He whistled a carefree tune as he turned off the water, pushing the button to start the jets pulsing. As her teeth scraped over his spine, her tongue following in mild defiance, he shuddered.

In a sudden shift, he brought her in front of his chest, cradling her in his arms to claim her lips and tasted sweet wine. Once he lifted his head, he smiled down at her and lowered her into the frothing water. The scent of lavender and candle wax surrounded them as he joined her, his palm resting on her stomach.

“I do love you, Ember,” he murmured.

Tears filled her eyes and she looked down at the bubbles.

With his finger, he tilted her head back. “What’s wrong? Does that bother you?”

A tremulous smile quivered as she struggled to answer. “I just...find it hard to believe, that’s all.”

Her response surprised him. “What do you mean by that?”

Her chest rose with the deep breath she took as she pulled her chin away, a lone tear slipping down her cheek.

“I...I used to date someone who always told me how inadequate I was. It was either that I was too fat, or too tall, wore the wrong clothes, or said the wrong things. I could never do anything right for him. I guess those feelings of inadequacy are still a part of me.” She wouldn’t look at him.

“Sounds like he was the one with the problem, Little Flame, because in my eyes, you’re perfect just the way you are.” With tender care, he kissed away the tear and cupped her cheek. “Look at me.” When she met his gaze, he continued, “I mean that. I’m not just saying it to make you feel better.”

Pain flashed through her eyes. “You don’t understand, Phoenix. When that guy drugged me...raped me, I—” The tears flowed over and a sob escaped. “Why does a guy like him have to drug a girl? He was handsome, charming even. He could probably get any girl to go to bed with him. Why did he do that to me? Why did his friend kill Julie?”

Phoenix gathered her in his arms and held her close to his heart, lightly kissing the top of her head. “Ember, the man was sick. That’s not your fault or Julie’s. We’ll catch the Birdman and put him away for a very long time. I promise you that. Brett and Jessie are working on the case and you know how dedicated



they are.” With both hands he cupped her cheeks and looked down into her beautiful eyes. “It was not your fault, nor Julie’s. Never believe it was.”

Ember reached up and caressed his cheek with a wet hand.

“How is it possible that I can be so lucky to have you in my life? I love you, Phoenix. I really do love you.” Her fingers slipped into his hair as she pulled him close and kissed him with unrestrained passion, showing him just how much she did love him.

Once she released his lips, he pulled her close, encircling her in his arms to hold her tight. When she tried to move away, he held her in place until she snickered, tapping his shoulder to get his attention.

Phoenix acted surprised as he released her, making a comical face. “What? You don’t want me to hold you all night long?”

She snorted, unable to remain serious. “Sure, but later. I want to get back to our bath. I have an idea that I’d like to try out—if you’re willing that is?”

Playful, he panted like a puppy, “Yes ma’am! I’m yours to play with.”

Giggling, Ember pushed away from him. “Okay, then here’s the deal. Move some of those candles out of the way and sit up on the ledge for me.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll do anything you want.”

Ember laughed again when hot wax dripped on his finger as he moved the candle too quickly. “Don’t kill yourself, buddy. I need you in good shape for the

next few hours.” Her wicked grin had him finishing his chore in record time and practically jumping up on the ledge, planting a goofy grin on his face.

“Only the next few hours?”

“For now. Lie back against the wall and close your eyes.”

“Don’t I get to watch?” He pouted his lips.

Lower lip caught between the teeth, Ember’s eyes shone with humor, yet she tilted her head, crossing her arms over her naked breasts and waiting for him to comply.

“Oh, all right!” he said, huffing. Phoenix leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes obediently.



Ember opened the bottle of liqueur and dribbled it over his chest, nipples and down his body, into his navel and over his hard staff.

“Mmmm, smells like oranges,” he said. “Can I open my eyes now?”

“Not unless you want me to stop my game?” she replied, her voice husky with desire.

“Okay, okay, I’ll keep them closed...please...proceed.” His quick reply had her snickering.

“Now, I’m new at this sort of thing, so bare with me,” she said, suddenly uncertain.

When she stood in the tub, she ignored the twinges in her feet and moved up his chest to where the liqueur started then began to slowly lick his skin, inch by agonizing inch, sucking on one nipple then moving to the other. His rod, hard against her abdomen, twitched as she moved downward, her breasts skimming over him as she gave all her attention to his firm skin.

When she finally met with his navel, she dipped her tongue in, swirling it around as she lapped up the nectar. His groan and shudder gave her the confidence to continue so she moved a little farther down. He gasped when her breasts brushed over his staff. Her lips were just inches away.

She stopped, hesitant. He opened his passion-glazed eyes in question.

Ember began to blush with a furious heat all over, whispering hoarsely, “I don’t...I never—”

“Do only what you feel comfortable with, Ember.” His shudder of desire helped her find the courage to continue.

Eager now since he didn’t balk at her advances, she sat back a little and gently circled his member with her fingers, watching his eyes. They glittered like black diamonds, burning with need. Her tongue came out and took a tentative lick of the tip of him and he sucked in a breath. Licking harder, she smiled when he groaned, his eyes closing tight.

“Phoenix?” she waited until he looked at her. “I need you to tell me what you like, to show me what to do.”

His body shuddering in response to her actions, he nodded. He whispered, “Lick slowly around the tip.”

She did as he asked, over, and over again, lapping up the sweet liquid.

“Now...start from the bottom and slide your tongue up to the tip.” His eyes were closed now. His fists clenched as he trembled.

This time she licked slowly part of the way up his staff then began once again, making sure she captured each drop of liqueur before moving higher.

“Ahhh...Ember...would you like to put him in your mouth now?” he croaked, near the edge of control.

Seeing the bead of moisture at the tip, she lapped it up, surprised at the salty taste of him. When she put her lips just over the tip, she shuddered with him, heat pooling in her abdomen. Braver now, she took more of him, sucking and swirling her tongue around him. He was quiet for a while, so she stopped, dissatisfied with his reaction.

“Tell me more, show me what to do.” She took him in again and Phoenix’s hands cupped the back of her head.

“Ember...if you want to stop, just tap my leg. I don’t want to scare you or hurt you. Promise?” His agonized question turned her on and made her feel cherished and in control.

With his hands guiding her head, she pulled him deep into her throat. Shocked at the sensation, she stopped. When she noticed the pleased expression on his face, she did it again and soon she had a rhythm going, his hands warm and gentle on her head as he helped her pick up the pace.

When his eyes flew open, he gasped, “You might want to pull out now. I can’t...last much longer—”

Ember didn’t want to stop. She was excited, burning with passion from watching his bliss. She picked up the pace and felt him tense, his hands clenching behind her head as he came closer and closer to the edge. Seeing how she affected him, she felt herself come and moaned. That was his undoing and he arched his back, his hips pumping as he released.

Not expecting her mouth to fill so quickly, Ember nearly gagged, but held firm until he finished, swallowing over and over until he stopped. She was pleased at her accomplishment.

Gasping, Phoenix slid down into the water and held her close. Kissing her forehead, he asked, “Are you all right, Little Flame? Did I hurt you?” His worried expression brought a smile to her face.

“That was definitely more than a mouthful.”

His chest shook with chuckles as he kissed her.

“Thank you for that gift, Ember. You’re an exceptional student.”

Something in her memory tugged at her at his words but she couldn’t quite remember what it was, her stomach clenching in a fear she had to fight back.

Phoenix hadn’t noticed since he had his eyes closed. Soon he distracted her, running his finger along her jaw and down her chest.

“You are all sticky ma’am. Would you like some help cleaning up?”

“I certainly would.”

Warm and damp, his tongue licked the remnants of liqueur from her lips. With his mouth, he worshiped her face then focused on her sticky neck, covering every inch until she was giggling uncontrollably as he tickled her. Her heart raced as he neared her breasts. Capturing her nipple, he gently bit and worried it, licking and sucking as her hands came around to hold his head in place. Her head fell back as she moaned.

“Harder, please,” she cried. “Yes, oh, yes,” she moaned.

She felt him hard again against her knee, aching with need as he moved his fingers down into the pulsing water, finding her and slipping one inside. His lips still held her nipple captive as he added another finger in and began to pump in and out of her.

Already highly stimulated from pleasuring him, Ember cried out, riding the waves of her first orgasm. Her hips jerked as he kept up the pace yet she wanted more. When she settled he picked her up and placed her on the ledge, spreading her thighs.

“What are you...oohhhhh...ahhhh.” Ember shrieked as his lips found her and brought her to a second peak. Even though her hips stopped moving, he kept going, dipping his tongue in deeper for more. She pulled at his hair as a third wave crashed over her.

“Phoenix,” she screamed. “Now, please, I need you inside me now!”

His hair imprisoned in her fingers, he stretched to reach for the condom and struggled to put it on. When he was ready, he picked her up and made her straddle him, entering her channel in one deep thrust, building her moans up to cries again.

Held close in his arms, she rode him though he helped her move with his strong hands on her hips. Eyes closed in bliss she let her head drop back on her shoulders as she found a rhythm. With one hand, he cupped her breast, rubbing his thumb over her engorged nipple, bringing her closer still.

Suddenly her eyes flew open and their gazes met as she cried out, pulsing around him.

He didn’t need any urging but joined her as they flew to paradise together.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Burning Both Ends

Birdman sat in the office chair tapping a pencil on his coffee cup, the repetitive rhythm calming the chaos in his mind. Cold fury burned in his gut as he thought about the screw ups his protégé had made in the past week. Not only did the police have an amazingly accurate drawing of his ring, but they had found the snoop's body within twelve hours of its disposal.

The walls were closing in and he needed a distraction to take the eyes of the law away from him. The kid they'd caught had been an undercover cop, and a good one based on what his plant at the precinct told him. Not only had he made it as far as the window of Birdman's bedroom, but he'd witnessed the girl sprawled out on the bed, an offering from Jensen. The only thing he didn't know was if the kid had contacted anyone to tell them about his discovery. It was time to send the cops in another direction to take the heat off.



Jensen had become too confident and was getting greedy. A source had informed Birdman that Jensen was taking money on the sly, providing women and drugs to others under the table and keeping the money for himself. He released a low growl of frustration then threw down the pencil. He'd believed that Jensen was loyal to him, his right hand man. He was wrong.

Now, Birdman had no choice but to dispose of him. Looking down at his ring, he grimaced. It was foolish to keep wearing it, although he'd done so for decades, but since the police knew what the custom design looked like, and no one else had a ring like it, he had to get rid of it too.

A slow, wicked smile grew as he realized he could kill two birds with one stone, Jensen and the ring. Relaxing, he picked up his coffee cup and took a sip. At the knock on the door, he called out, "Come in."

Jensen walked in with a swagger and a confident grin on his face. "Good morning, boss. You wanted to see me?"

Birdman smiled, "Yes, Andrew. Have a seat."

Once the man was sitting, Birdman set his trap. "You've been working overtime, bringing me the finest selection of women I've ever had, and I wanted to reward you for your efforts. I've thought long and hard about this and...well, you're like a son to me, Andrew, and I'd like to give you a special token of my appreciation."

A look of pleasure crossed the man's face as he sat forward in his seat, eager to accept the gift.

"That's very kind of you, boss. I have a cute little dish lined up for you tonight. Petite blond, big boobs and a mouth made for more than just kissing. I think her hot little friend, a tall brunette, would make a nice addition if you'd like both of them at the same time." Jensen's confidence was at a high level today and he was eager to please.

"That sounds spectacular, my friend, but I have a little extra job for you today. There's a woman who lives north of the city, off campus. I have my eyes set on her and her uncle is willing to pay good money for a shipment of cocaine on top of selling her...services, shall we say, to me. I'd like you to take Benny and Lou and deliver the shipment as well as bring her back. Are you up for it?"

"Well sure, boss. Whatever you need! The other two babes can wait a night or two. We have another frat party on Friday and they'll both be there."

"Excellent. You'll be heading out in the next hour. I want to give you your gift before you go." With reluctance, Birdman took off his favorite ring and handed it over to Jensen whose eyes widened.

"You're giving me your ring? But boss! You never take it off. Are you sure about this?" he asked in wonder.

“I am. I want you to know how much it means to me for all you’ve done.” Birdman said, “You might want to polish it up good before you put it on, I’ve been wearing it for a long time.”

He watched as Jensen used his shirt to polish the ring, removing any fingerprints, then he slipped it on his ring finger. It was a perfect fit.

“Wow, thanks, boss. I’ll go get ready for our trip.” Jensen stopped and stared back at Birdman, his eyes filled with excitement. “Thank you very much, sir, I appreciate your trust in me. I’ll bring the chick back for you later today.” He headed for the door, staring down at the ring.

Once the door closed behind Jensen, Birdman picked up the phone.

“I have a job for you. Come to my office immediately.” Without waiting for a reply he hung up, staring at the indent on his finger left from the ring. No one would guess the meaning of the ring, and all of the attention from the cops would now be diverted toward Jensen. It had been a morning well spent.



Jensen rode shotgun beside Lou while Benny sat quietly in the back. They had been driving for close to an hour now, and Jensen began to fidget.

“I thought the place was only half an hour north of Toronto?” he asked Lou.

Lou never smiled, yet his lips twitched before he said, “The place is just up ahead.”

Annoyed, Jensen frowned and fell silent. They soon pulled into a cheap motel parking lot, and Benny went into the office.

“What’s the deal, Lou?” Jensen asked, beginning to sense that something wasn’t right.

“We have to wait for our contact in the motel room.” Lou stared at the office until Benny came out with the key and nodded to Lou to move the car in front of the room. Once parked, Lou got out and pulled a briefcase out of the trunk, before following Benny and Jensen into the room. Locking the door behind him, he said to Jensen, “Might as well make yourself comfortable. I hear the guy’s bringing a couple of chicks for us to play with.”

“Really?” Jensen’s concerns disappeared.

“Yeah, the boss wanted to make sure you were paid back for all your help, he said to give you both of them while we take off for a while.”

Jensen relaxed and loosened his shirt, brushing his fingers over his short spiked hair. He was getting hard just thinking about the women. As he looked down at his new ring, he smiled. The boss finally trusted him, and now he was getting his rewards. Life was good.

For a moment Jensen watched Benny whose back was turned to him. He heard the clasps opened on the briefcase while Lou moved over and sat on the bed beside him.

“So, the boss gave you his ring? That’s a pretty nice gift.” Lou nodded at it.

Jensen looked down at the ring glittering on his finger and at that moment, Lou pounced on him, throwing his much larger body across Jensen. Held in place with a forearm across his throat, he couldn’t shout for help.

“What the hell—Lou, what are you doing?” Jensen choked out, struggling to get free.

Benny grabbed his arm and held it down, jabbing a needle into it.

Jensen hadn’t seen what Benny was doing but when he felt the slight prick in his arm, he knew what was happening. Unfortunately, he didn’t get a chance to say a thing as the heroine took affect and he sank into a dream world.



For hours, Phoenix had kept his distance as Ember sat enjoying the peace and quiet of the lake and forest on a lounge chair. Her fingers ran the colored pen over the art pad, but she wasn’t paying attention, lost in another trance. Her eyes never once looked at the scene she was drawing.

After walking up to her quietly, Phoenix was about to kiss her when he stopped, staring in amazement at the image she drew. Coming around to Ember’s side, he noted the faraway look in her eyes as she stared into space. He sat down on the chair beside her, letting her continue.

For over thirty minutes Phoenix watched her draw, marveling at her skill. The pen flowed quickly over the work, capturing every minute detail. It was nearly complete. The face was the only thing Ember had to finish.

Suddenly, she gasped and her eyes flew open. The pad and the pen were thrown aside, and she began to shake, gulping in large amounts of air, her hands covering her face as she fought back tears.

Phoenix lifted her onto his lap and cradled her in his arms. He didn't say a thing, but held her, rocking and rubbing her back in small circles while she curled into his neck, trembling.

They stayed that way for an endless time, oblivious to the world around them. Phoenix realized then he wanted to stay with her, commit to her, live with her. He was ready for the next step in their relationship. He wondered if she felt the same way.

When the terror had subsided, Ember looked up at him, her eyes deep pools of pain.

"I was back there again, Phoenix. He was on top of me and I couldn't move, couldn't fight. I tried so hard but I couldn't even scream. He raped me and I couldn't fight him!" She gasped, visibly struggling for calm.

"Hush now, Ember. Listen, do you want me to call Brett or Lana for you?" he asked gently, hiding the fury he felt at the men touching her.

With vehemence, she cried, “No! Oh, no! I just want you to hold me. Don’t let me go, please, don’t ever let me go.” Ember’s fingers had threaded through his hair and she gripped him tight, holding him to her.

When he looked down at the drawing where it had fallen, Phoenix noted that everything was in minute detail except for the face. The ring was there again and the room behind the man even had artwork on the walls that matched those in the house she had found herself in that day.

“Ember, do you think you can finish the man’s face?” Phoenix asked softly, kissing her temple.

“Face? What are you talking about?” she asked, confused.

Nodding down at the paper, he said, “In your drawing. You left the face out.”

Ember sat up and stared at it in confusion. “Phoenix,” she said, stunned, “I didn’t draw that! I’ve never seen it before.”

Stunned, he fell silent for a moment. She had no idea she’d drawn the picture. It was completely from her subconscious.

“I watched you, Ember. I’ve been sitting here beside you for at least a half-an-hour. You did draw it. And that’s the room where you woke up that day, every detail of it.”

Wide eyes filled with horror met his. “Oh, my God, it’s like the drawing I did of your grandparents. I don’t remember doing it either.” Ember shuddered. “What’s happening to me?”

“Have you ever heard of automatic writing? It’s a form of psychic ability where the subconscious mind takes over, without conscious thought, using the help of an outside intelligence, or what we call a spirit guide. In your case it’s in your drawings and not with written words.” He held her tighter to his chest, and kissed her forehead.

With all the things locked inside Ember’s mind from her ordeal, Phoenix wondered if the images she drew from that night were hidden away in her memory. The doctor had said she may or may not remember what happened. It appeared that the art was going to help her release it from her subconscious.

“I’m going to call Brett. I think it would be a good idea for you to go under hypnosis. You have the information in your mind, Ember. We just have to pull it out so we can catch this guy.” He felt her body tense as he asked, “Are you willing to try it? For Julie and all the other women it has happened to also?”

Put that way, Ember finally nodded. “All right, Phoenix. I’ll do it, but can we wait until tomorrow? I don’t want to leave here just yet.”

“Sure.” Phoenix held her for a while longer until it began to rain. Ember gathered up her artwork and he picked her up and carried her inside, placing her



on the cushy black leather couch. The fire was low in the fieldstone fireplace. Black and teal accented the room in throw rugs, blankets and pictures of Aztec designs framed in either black or teal.

The most stunning item in the room was the four foot wide coffee table made from a six-inch thick slab cut from a cross section of a cedar tree supported by the roots of a tree as legs. A large kitchen, to the side, had plenty of pine cupboards lining the walls. There was a beautiful, rustic light made from tree branches hanging in the center of the room from the cathedral ceiling.

After locking the door and setting the alarm, Phoenix moved to the bar and poured Ember a glass of wine. Not much of a drinker, Phoenix stuck with a cold beer from the mini fridge.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, handing her the glass.

She shook her head and didn’t speak, but sipped her drink in silence. When she put the glass down, she looked up at him with wide, hungry eyes.

Phoenix didn’t need words to understand what she wanted and put down his beer, moving to her side. Offering comfort in the only way he knew would help her, his lips met with hers, doing his best to take all other thoughts from her mind.

With frantic fingers, she began pulling at his t-shirt, about to strip it off him when the phone rang, disturbing them. She groaned in frustration and sat back while he went to answer it.

Phoenix answered on the kitchen phone, keeping his voice down. Finally finished with the call a few minutes later, he went back to the living room and sat down beside her, taking her hand in his.

Eyes wide with fear she looked into his eyes and waited for the news.

“Ember the man with the ring was found in a motel earlier this morning, dead by drug overdose. It’s over. You can go back to Toronto now.” Phoenix spoke in an impersonal tone, hiding his concerns that she would go about her life without him now.

“He’s dead? Really? What about the man who killed Julie?”

“Based on your drawing, he was the same man.”

A look of uncertainty filled her gaze as she stared back at him. “What about...us?”

“I’ve been thinking about that all day, Little Flame.” He too felt like he was on unsure footing. For a moment, he didn’t know what to say.

“Oh, well then, I guess I should go pack.”

She wouldn’t look at him and he wondered if their relationship was over now that she could go back to her life.

When she attempted to rise from the couch, she cried out in surprise when he pulled her into his arms and made her look into his eyes.

“Ember, I don’t want to leave here. I don’t want to be without you, ever again. I want you to move in with me, share your life with me. Stay with me.” His lips crashed down on hers, showing her just how much he needed her, wanted her by his side.

Hot tears flowed down her cheeks as her arms slipped up around his neck, threading through his long hair. He wore it loose for her, because she’d asked him to. When he lifted his head, he was unsure if they were a good sign or a bad sign.

“Does that...mean no?” he whispered.

A tremulous smile graced her mouth. “That means yes, Phoenix. I don’t want to be away from you either, ever.”

“Whoop!” he shouted, kissing her again, yet this time harder, hotter, wetter as he lifted her off the sofa and took her to the soft rug in front of the fireplace. Their bodies melded together as he kissed every inch of her he could, until the clothing got in his way.

About to remove her shirt, he looked up and saw the windows were wide open for view from the lake. Not wanting to share their lovemaking with nosy boaters with binoculars, he picked her up and carried her upstairs, kicking the bedroom door shut behind them.

Once he’d placed her on the bed, his fingers swiftly undid her blouse and slipped it off, followed by her shorts, panties, and bra. His shorts soon followed

then he lay over her, his skin burning against hers, his groin throbbing with the need for release.

She stopped him for a moment, contentment in her eyes. “Are you serious, Phoenix? About moving in together?”

“Oh, yeah! I want to be with you every day. I love you.” His lips came down to meet hers but she put her hand over his heart, halting his progress.

“Can we talk for a minute?” Ember asked, biting her lower lip.

He had to hold back a groan, but nodded.

“I know you were married before. Will you tell me what happened?”

Not wanting to talk about it, he said, “We married too young and she chose someone else when I was away on assignment. End of story.”

When he dipped his head to reach her lips again, her fingers pressed against his mouth.

“It’s not the end of story if you still hurt from it. Please, talk to me.” She held his gaze as she waited.

“I don’t really want to talk about it, Ember. It’s in the past now. I’d like it to stay there.” His felt anger stir at her determination to bring up his past.

“All right, Phoenix. But...I won’t move in with you until we clear the air. I don’t want your ex-wife and all the baggage that went with her to shadow our relationship.”

“What? That’s blackmail!” Though he tried to joke about it, he could tell she was serious. He couldn’t believe what she’d just said. Unless he talked about his past relationship, she wouldn’t commit to him! What was that all about?

He stiffened with anger and moved off her, walking over to the window to look over the lake. Suddenly it was hard to catch his breath. That particular part of his life had been pushed so far behind him he didn’t want to open the box again. That would just lead to trouble. Yet, he did owe Ember an explanation. It was true what had happened to his marriage had haunted him for years. He figured he might as well get it out of the way now. Waiting wouldn’t change anything, and he wanted to be with her now, always.

“Brooke and I met in high school and married young. We didn’t have any kids. I was training to be a cop, and after five years of marriage, I had a chance to go undercover. The Narc squad needed a young cop, and my being aboriginal helped. We were going after a big drug lord in Toronto but it was going to take months to infiltrate and take them down.”

“It was my job to gather info and get close to the main man, proving my worth to him. I had to do some things I’m not proud of, but after six months, I finally had all the evidence I needed and notified the right people, sending the whole ball of wax to jail. Mission accomplished. It was a pivotal point in my career.”

Though he hated rehashing old wounds, he continued, “I hadn’t seen or spoken with Brooke in six months. She was kept informed that I was okay on a regular basis by a fellow officer at the precinct. I didn’t call to tell her I was coming home. I wanted to surprise her.” A bitter laugh escaped and his fists clenched tighter on the window sill.

“I walked into my own bedroom to find a *friend* from the precinct having sex in *my* bed with *my* wife! I packed up my things and left without saying a word. I never hit him, or her, like I wanted to. I never said a word. I just walked out and didn’t look back.” Phoenix fell silent, staring out at the lake as the sun began to set.

“I’m sorry, Phoenix. That must have been hard to do,” she said, her husky voice filled with support, not pity.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever get married again, Ember. I can’t promise you that. It was a bad time in my life and I won’t go there.” The muscles in his back bunched with tension.

“I can’t promise you marriage either, Phoenix, not after what happened to me. However, I can promise you that while we do have a relationship, I will be true to you and I expect the same back. If you decide you want someone else, just say the word and I’ll walk away, no questions asked.”

Phoenix heard her words. Though they should have made him feel relief, he felt like his heart had been pierced with a sharp arrow. After telling her that he wouldn't commit to marriage, when she said the same thing back, it hurt! He was confused.

Ember whispered, "Come to bed now. I need you, Phoenix."

He turned to face her. The room was aglow with soft peach light bathing Ember's silky white skin with an ethereal glow as she lay naked on the bed. The sudden lump in his throat was hard to swallow as he stared at her beauty. When she held out her hand, he took it and climbed into bed with her.

Slowly, her finger curled around one of his long locks and she pulled him closer, winding it until his lips were a hairsbreadth away from hers.

"Make love to me, my handsome warrior." With a tiny tug, she closed the distance and soon kissed away his pain, his anger, and his feelings of betrayal. They were all forgotten as her tongue slipped into his mouth, exploring and dueling with his. Soon, he lost himself in his Little Flame and she was all that mattered.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Illusion Of Flame

“Don’t you think this is just a little too easy, Brett? We’ve been scouring the campus for the guy for days now and all of a sudden there he is, dead of a drug overdose in a dumpy motel miles from Toronto. He didn’t even have any drugs on him except for the one syringe and one vial. It just doesn’t feel right to me.” Jessie said.

“I know what you mean, but he had the ring on, Jessie. He was seen with one of the girls who’d been used and discarded like Ember was. We don’t have any proof to support that he isn’t our man. Ember is the only one who can ID the man. She drew his image to a ‘T’. I guess we’d better get her down here so we can close the case.” Brett ran his fingers through his hair, hating that he had to bring his sister into it again.



“Maylin called this morning. She was out searching for clues near where Burns disappeared. His car was left on campus but out of sight. I think we need to intensify the search.”

“Jessie, the Chief said we have enough to close the case and finalize the details. There’s another case waiting for us.” After slamming his fists into the punching bag on the wall a few times, Brett thought about the repercussions of bringing Ember home. He didn’t like the idea one bit, his gut instincts screaming that there was still a threat to her.

“So what are you going to do?” Jessie asked.

Brett fought back a grin. Jessie always knew when he had something brewing. When Brett worked on the punching bag, it usually meant he was thinking. Always patient, Jessie sat back and waited while Brett worked it out in his head.

Finally, he turned to Jessie. “Here’s what we do. Let’s get Ember down here and get her to ID the man. If he’s the one, then we let it go. If he isn’t, then we dig, and dig hard, with or without the Chief’s approval. I think this guy was a distraction, but I can’t back that up without proof.”

“I’ve never known one of your gut instincts to be wrong, partner. When are you going to call her?”

“No time like the present.” Brett was grim, unwilling to cause his sister more pain, yet it had to be done.



When Ember came down the stairs gingerly on her tender feet, she smelled pancakes, and grinned. She could get used to Phoenix cooking for her. The man was a wonder in the kitchen.

As she hobbled down the stairs, Phoenix came running and with a big grin swept her off her feet, bringing a squeal from her. Without restraint, he kissed her with a loud smack of his lips then carried her to the kitchen, placing her on a chair at the table.

She couldn't help but giggle at his antics. “This is great. If you do all the cooking, I can sit back and draw you...maybe even without your clothes on. Oven mitts are optional.” She grinned suggestively.

For a moment he appeared to be considering her idea when she smelled something burning.

“Oh, Phoenix, the stove!”

“Now see what you made me do! I can't be a good cook with you distracting me, Little Flame.” After flipping the pancakes, he brought the teapot of sweet grass tea over to the table, placing the cups beside it.

Once he'd loaded the plate with pancakes, he grinned, placing it front of her.

When she looked down at the food, she couldn't swallow the lump in her throat. Staring up at her was a plate full of heart shaped pancakes surrounded by strawberries cut in half, also heart shaped.

As he knelt beside her, Phoenix took her chin in his fingers and gently turned her head until she was looking at him. "What's wrong? Don't you like pancakes?"

Her voice was rough with emotion as she looked up at him to answer. "Yes, I do. I've just...I've never had such a romantic breakfast before. Thank you." The tears of joy flowed freely now and Phoenix kissed them away.

"Hey, now, you're going to ruin your breakfast. Please don't cry." His hand cupped her cheek as he gave her an achingly sweet kiss.

When the fire alarm went off, he swore and jumped up, running to the stove to place the pan of burnt offerings in the sink. He opened the window and patio door, taking a tea towel and flapping it at the alarm.

Hysterical with laughter as she watched him, Ember kept wiping the tears from her eyes.

He stopped and stared at her, the alarm still blaring. Hands on his hips, he gave her a stern look. "You know, you make it very difficult to be romantic!"

Ember dropped her gaze, fighting back laughter. "Sorry, boss, I'll be good." A snort escaped and she burst into giggles again.

Phoenix was by her side in two strides and started tickling her. Ember's shouts and squeals had him laughing too, until the phone rang. They both stopped short, staring at each other in dismay. It could only be Brett, and he wouldn't call unless it was important.

Since the alarm was still blaring, Phoenix raced to get the phone in the living room and left her to turn off the stove. Taking the tea towel she swiped it at the alarm until it stopped shrieking. Then she reluctantly moved to the living room to see what was going on.

His expression grave, Phoenix looked up at her, eyes filled with concern. He handed her the phone and said in a toneless voice, "Brett wants to talk to you."

Apprehensive, she swallowed hard but took the receiver from him.

"Hello, Brett."

As though prepared for her reaction, Phoenix slipped his arms around her waist and made her sit down. Her knees became weak from what her brother was telling her. She was silent while she listened then nodded her head. "Yes, Brett. I'll come in. Do you need me today or tomorrow?"

Brett told her to come in the next morning and after a little personal conversation, she hung up. She sat there holding the receiver, staring at it as though it were a snake. Phoenix took it from her, hanging it up.

“It’s over. I can go back to school now, Phoenix. The man with the ring is dead.”

She was in shock. Phoenix picked her up and took her upstairs again, and put her to bed, lying down beside her as he held her in a secure embrace. He continued to whisper sweet nothings to her until she dozed off.



Early the next morning, Phoenix woke up to an empty bed. Instantly awake, he jumped up and began searching for Ember. His calls to her received no answer in the cabin. Concerned, he threw on his shorts, ran down the stairs and out the front door.

Relieved when he saw her sitting on the end of the dock with her art pad, he quietly walked up to her. With her back to him, she didn’t see or hear him approach. She was in a trance again, drawing images as they came to her. She stared off into space.

As the pen moved quickly over the page, Phoenix was amazed at how fast the drawing came together. The background was of a ceiling fixture and the top edge of closet doors, indicating she was lying on her back staring up at the man that was above her. The feeling Phoenix got from the image was eerie.

The man’s hand gripped the edge of her shirt, tearing it, the ring on his hand facing her, his naked chest covered in dark hair. There was a tattoo of an eagle’s

head on his shoulder with the same design as the ring but the symbol was in the center of its eye. The feeling the image portrayed was fear, helplessness, and anger. The man's face was blank; just a dark shading. Her pen avoided the area.

Her focus was just over the left shoulder of the man where another face was forming. After a few minutes, Phoenix sucked in his breath. The face became that of Andrew Jensen, his expression filled with a sick satisfaction and sexual excitement. *So, there was more than one man.*

Ember changed the page and began sketching again, her hands moving faster now, frantically, creating a similar scene, but this one with Jensen's face, as he stared down at her. It looked as if he were angry with her, a violent expression. The dark stranger stood back as though watching over Jensen's shoulder as he took over, raping her.

Sobs began to build in Ember as she drew, her strokes becoming harsh, full of fury until suddenly, she threw back her head and shrieked. Before she could throw the pad into the lake, Phoenix grabbed it and tossed it farther down the dock. He tried to pull her close to him, but she was still in the trance and fought with blind terror.

"Ember! Ember, listen to me," he called to her, pulling her close. She began struggling like a wildcat, hitting him and screaming as he tried to hold her.

Phoenix had to lie on top of her, pinning her body to the dock as he held her wrists to keep her from hurting herself.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. I’m here with you. Ember, stop fighting, I love you. Please stop,” he begged her, unable to pull her from the trance.

Finally, out of options, he slapped her across the face.

Immediately, she was back, staring into his eyes, her lower lip quivering. His hand mark on her cheek was turning pink. Phoenix kissed her there, whispering sweet words and professing his love, apologizing for smacking her, his own eyes filling with tears.

*She needs time, Grandson.* His grandfather’s voice caressed like a whisper through his mind.

*I don’t know what to do, Grandfather.*

*Love her. Support her. Share her pain.* Grandfather’s voice faded. He was gone.

Quiet now, Ember lay sobbing into his chest. Phoenix picked her up and carried her back to the house, putting her back into bed and covering her up. She fell asleep instantly.

He stood watching her for a time, unsure of what to do. Then he remembered the art pad on the dock and went quietly down the stairs to get it.

When he stepped outside, a chill came over him. A feeling of eyes watching, burning as they stared at him, had the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end as he approached the lake.

There was nothing on the dock. The art pad was gone, the pen lying forgotten. Someone had taken it. Alert, he listened for any sound of an intruder, his eyes scanning his surroundings as his body coiled to react to any threat. No one was visible. There were no footprints near the dock, which meant they'd come by boat. Just to be sure, Phoenix cautiously approached the dock and peered down into the water, looking for the pad. He was sure that he'd thrown it to the center of the dock. The wind wouldn't have moved it since it was heavy.

A scan over the water showed nothing. No one was out today since tourist season was over. Edgy, he headed back to the cabin with long strides. As he neared the door, he heard a thump, and Ember's muffled scream. Taking the stairs two at a time, he quietly moved to the bedroom. Peeking around the door, he saw Ember sleeping, but not in the same position that he'd left her.

As he approached the bed, he felt a presence and turned just in time to see a large man swinging his arm. It was one of the two who'd attacked the girls on Eagle's Nest. In a quick move, Phoenix was able to dodge the fist and slammed his shoulder into the man's abdomen, sending him crashing backward into the door. They both went down to the carpet.



An arm circled Phoenix's neck from behind and began choking him. Jabbing his elbow into the man's groin, he broke free of the hold and struck out, connecting with a chin then he sprang to his feet. When the second man rushed at him again, Phoenix grabbed his lapel, dropping to his back with his feet in the man's stomach and tossed him over his head. With a loud scream the man flew over the guard rail surrounding the upper floor hall, sending him down to the first floor with a loud crash.

The moment Phoenix got to his feet and turned around, something came crashing down on his head and he fell to the floor like a rock, darkness engulfing him.



A deep groan sounded in the distance, muddled in his aching head. As he came to, Phoenix suddenly jerked, realizing that Ember was in danger. The moment he sat up, he nearly fell back again as nausea washed over him in waves.

Able to pull himself up on his knees, he saw the bed was empty, and fury filled him. Ember was gone! It took great effort, but he struggled to his feet, holding the wall to keep from falling again. The memory of one of the men falling over the railing brushed his mind as he stumbled into the hall and looked down. He was sprawled on the carpet. Phoenix made his way down the stairs.

Feeling for a pulse, he found the man was dead. It looked like his neck was broken judging by the unnatural angle of his head. Fear for Ember spurred him to action as he rushed unsteadily to the door and made his way to the dock. No one was there. The sensation of someone watching him was gone. Ember had been kidnapped! A wave of terror battled with his fury, and he let out a roar that echoed over the lake. "Emberrrrrrrrr!" he shouted.

*She is not far grandson, follow your instincts.*

Malimo's voice was comforting and calm inside his chaotic mind. After taking a deep breath to clear his thoughts, he ignored the wave of pain that brought on and raced back to the cabin.

He picked up the phone and called the police, then Brett, telling him that he was in pursuit. Without waiting for a response, he dropped the receiver and raced down to the dock, starting up Brett's 150 horsepower motorboat. It was a top of the line twenty-two footer, which Brett seldom used for pleasure, only transportation.

Only stopping long enough to go back to the cabin for his gun and some supplies, including a warm blanket in case Ember needed one, he worked on autopilot. She'd been unconscious when he last saw her. If he let himself think about what might be happening to her, it would drive him crazy, so he focused on finding her.

Finally ready to go, he took off at full throttle, leaving the open cabin behind him for the police to investigate. Brett would explain the situation fully and take care of the details while Phoenix rescued Ember.

As the boat flew over the water, Phoenix cleared his mind and let his intuition guide him to her. He knew he was going in the right direction. He could feel it in his bones.

When he got close to the landing spot, the hair on the back of his neck lifted, chills shuddering up his spine. She was nearby. He pulled out the binoculars and studied the lake and the shoreline.

There! He saw a boat pulling up to a dock on the south shore. A man lifted her and threw her over his shoulder as he climbed out and headed at a hurried pace toward a tan-colored Honda Civic. Opening up full throttle, Phoenix aimed for the dock, his eyes on the car. Phoenix panicked as he saw the Honda pull out, heading east on the lakefront road. They only had about five minutes on him thanks to Brett's boat.

Slipping into dock, Phoenix had barely stopped the boat before he cut the engine and was on deck, tying it down with a quick loop. Now to find a car! An older couple stood next to one, about to climb in. Phoenix ran up to them, showing his ID.

“Please, I need your car. This is an emergency. I’m a cop and a woman’s been kidnapped. I have to catch up with them.”

The man nodded.

“That’s fine, son, but we’re going with you. We won’t give up our car, but you can drive.”

Without time to argue, Phoenix took the keys. They climbed in, the couple sitting in back.

“Buckle up. We’re going to be moving fast.” His concentration on the road, Phoenix mentally searched for Ember, frustrated when he couldn’t ‘feel’ which way she had been taken.

*A motel on the highway, southbound, called the ‘Golden Eagle’s Rest’,* Malimo murmured in his head.

“Son? Didn’t you hear me?” the man asked.

“Oh, sorry, I was thinking. What did you say, sir?” Phoenix was polite but still focused.

“I asked if you knew where we were going. You seem confident, like you have a road map to follow.”

“Oh, I have an idea of where he’s taking her. We should be there in another ten minutes or so. I’ll get out just past the motel and you can have your car back. I really appreciate your help.” Phoenix said, grateful.

“That’s fine. Which cabin are you staying at, Detective? I don’t remember seeing you around before,” the woman asked.

“The Colton’s. The woman is Brett’s sister.”

“Oh, my! We live only four cabins down from them. It’s such a beautiful place that Brett and Lana have, and their boys are darlings. We often give them cookies when they walk down for a visit.”

When Phoenix didn’t answer, she continued, “I’m Ethel and this is Bert, my husband.”

Barely able to hold onto his patience, Phoenix glanced in the rearview mirror at her and said respectfully. “I’m pleased to know you. Call me Phoenix.”

“Phoenix. If you need a phone, we have a cell with us,” Bert offered.

The realization that he’d forgotten his cell in the rush to follow Ember hit him. “That’s great. Would you call Brett for me?” He gave them the number, watching for the hotel. “We should be there any minute now.”

“Hello, Brett? This is Bert Simmons from Muskoka. We have your Detective Phoenix here. We’re chasing after your sister and he wants to talk to you.” The man handed the phone over to Phoenix.

“Brett. I’m following them to The Golden Eagle’s Rest Motel on Highway 118, East near Bracebridge. I’ll be there in about two minutes. I’m going in alone. You might want to send backup.”

“How did you know where they were going?” Brett asked.

“You’re married to Lana and you need to ask me that?” Phoenix said, unable to tell him with the couple listening.

“Got it. Good luck.”

After he hung up, Phoenix said, “Bert, Ethel, I’m going to drive past to see if I can spot the car then I’ll double back and jump out. You two have been a great help. Thank you.”

“No thanks necessary, son. You just save your girl.” Ethel said in a tone full of excitement.

As he passed the hotel, Phoenix watched the parking lot and saw the car, partially hidden behind an SUV. There was no sign of Ember or the man. He drove about two hundred feet then made a fast ‘U’ turn, pulling the car over a hundred feet before the driveway.

Once out of the car, he grabbed his bag, nodded at Bert then winked at Ethel. “You two are my heroes.” At that, he raced off into the woods. Sloshing through water and mud, he climbed back up the bank and disappeared into the bush. He was determined to save Ember and prayed that he wasn’t too late.

## Chapter Eighteen

### Chasing the Flame

The first thing Ember felt when she woke up was a sore neck and the vibration of a car beneath her. She realized that she was sitting up in the front seat of a car, her hands tied in front of her, but her feet were free. Her chin had dropped to her chest and her head had bounced around.

There was a strange smell too which she recalled from what was on the rag that the man had held over her mouth before everything had gone dark. When the two men had rushed into her room, she'd barely had time to react before they had her pinned down on the bed, the cloth muffling her scream before everything went dark.

Although she was frightened, she was sharp enough to keep her eyes closed and appear to be unconscious, waiting for a chance to escape. She didn't know where Phoenix was, or if he was even alive. Fighting back tears, she concentrated on breathing slowly. Thoughts of Malimo coming to her aid in the forest the night

she'd run from Phoenix came to mind as did his last words. Think of me and I'm with you.

*Grandfather, I need your help.*

*He is coming for you, Little Flame.* Malimo's voice floated gently through her mind, comforting, soothing her. Somehow she sensed that Phoenix was still alive and coming to get her. She struggled to hide her elation, planning her escape.

The seatbelt and shoulder strap held her arms down, pinning her tied hands so she couldn't slip the clasp loose. If she waited until they stopped, there was little chance of her getting away. She glanced at the driver from the corner of her eye but couldn't see into the back seat to search for the other one. The man was large and too strong for her to fight him off...unless she caught him by surprise.

Since her feet weren't tied, she wondered if she could kick him and slam her foot on the breaks. That, however, might cause an accident and innocent people could get hurt. Ember nearly groaned in frustration but caught herself in time.

The car slowed and turned into a driveway, the bump knocking her head back so she had a few seconds to see where they were. At the sight of the motel, Ember began to shiver. Not again! Not ever again! She was not going to be a victim to this man's depravity. He was in for a surprise if he thought she would go meekly.



*Grandfather! Tell Phoenix I'm at a motel. I didn't catch the name on the sign though. I'm afraid!* She whispered in her mind.

Malimo's reassuring voice calmed her. *He's right behind you. He knows where you are going. Have faith, Little Flame.*

It was difficult to still her trembling as she waited in silence. When the car stopped and he lifted her head to see if she was still out, she played opossum, keeping her neck loose. Satisfied, he undid her seatbelt and got out of the car.

Just what she'd hoped for, with the seatbelt gone she could surprise him when he opened her door. It was her only chance. As soon as her door opened, Ember lifted her feet and shifted sideways, kicking the panel which knocked the man off his feet. About to scream as she jumped out and started to run, the seatbelt caught on her arm and held her prisoner giving him time to get back up.

Though he held a hand over her mouth, Ember struggled to get free, kicking and twisting away from him. As soon as he released her mouth, she tried to scream but his fist connected with her jaw and her body crumpled.



"Bitch," the man swore as he lifted her up. He looked around for witnesses but didn't see anyone so he carried her to the room. Another man opened the door as he approached it and he slipped inside, the door shutting quickly behind him.

After placing her on the bed, the two men quickly put a gag on her mouth and blindfolded her. Then they tied her feet together.

Wiping at the sweat pouring from his forehead the kidnapper cursed again. “Damn but this woman is a pain in the butt. The Birdman had better pay us damn good today, or I’m quitting.”

“Davis, you’re insane if you think you can just walk away from the Birdman. Look what he did to his sidekick when he double-crossed him. You’d better be careful what you say, or you could be a dead man too.”

“Yeah, you’re right French. I’m just pissed off at her. Williams is dead. Her boyfriend dumped him over a railing and he broke his neck. I wanted to kill the bastard myself, but the boss’s orders were strict. Keep it low key, no noise, and no extra mess to clean up.” Davis wiped his forehead again.

French leaned in close to Ember’s face and touched the swelling on her jaw. “He’s not going to like that, but at least this time she’ll be awake when he does her. He gets really excited when we tie them up and blindfold them. They fight harder that way. Do you think he’ll let us have a go when he’s done with her?”

“Who knows? He did last time. I haven’t had this one though. She’s pretty hot. Maybe we should take her stuff off before he gets here?” Davis stared down at her and licked his lips. He loved it when women were helpless.

“No. You know he likes to play with them first. What is the matter with you man? You’re just looking for trouble. We don’t touch her until he gets here.” French was also staring down at her. He ran his fingers lightly over the inside of her thigh. “Man, she’s so soft. It’s a shame we have to kill her when we’re done.”

Davis reached down and slid his hand up the inside of her other thigh, slipping his fingers just inside her shorts, his other hand grabbing at his tight pants.

Just then, the door crashed open and Phoenix flew into the room, gun held on them. “Police! Freeze!”

The two men jumped back. Davis narrowed his eyes, glad of the chance to take on the boyfriend again. The fact that he was a cop just made it gravy. Since he was behind French, he used him as a barrier, shoving him into the cop and diving after them even as a shot rang out and French dropped to the ground.

Losing his gun as he crashed to the floor beneath French, Phoenix shoved the man aside, scrambling to get to his feet. Davis slammed a meaty fist into his jaw, stunning him.



When Phoenix entered the room and saw the creep with his hand on Ember’s unconscious body, rage filled him. Though his senses were rattled by the strike, he bent over and barreled into the man’s stomach with his shoulder, taking

him to the ground. He heard the wind knocked out of the man with a loud, “Ooofff...”

Knuckles cracked against bone as the kidnapper tried to fight back but Phoenix grabbed the man’s wrist and flipped him over onto his stomach, pinning him with an arm lock. He slammed the man’s face into the floor, shouting, “What the hell did you do to her?”

“Nothing. I just knocked her out with my fist. Ahhh...” he yelled as Phoenix wrenched his arm again.

“Who sent you? And you better tell me the truth, buddy.” His teeth were clenched in fury as he glanced over at Ember, desperate to check her to make sure she was all right.

“I can’t tell you that. Ahhhh...” Another twist of his arm kept him immobile.

“You will tell me, or by the time the cops get here, you’ll wish you had.”

“Ahhhh...” he screamed. “Stop! It was the Birdman. He paid us to get her.”

Fury burning in his eyes, Phoenix growled. “What were you going to do with her?”

“We were only supposed to bring her to this motel where he and his men would meet us. He was going to pay us then. We never even met him. We were hired by phone.”

“What did you do with the art pad?”

“It’s in the car.” The man was shaking now, unsure in the face of Phoenix’s fury.

When he struggled to get loose again, Phoenix used pressure points along his arm to force him back down to the floor rather than beat him into submission like he wanted to do. He lodged his knee into the man’s back to hold him there while he undid the rope that bound Ember’s feet, using it to tie the man’s hands behind his back.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Phoenix warned, he checked the other man then ran over to Ember’s side. Relief flooded his gut when he found she was breathing.

“What did you give her?” When the man hesitated, he yelled, “When you took her, what the hell did you give her?”

The man shouted, “It was just chloroform, man! The cloth is in my jacket in a plastic bag.”

Cautiously opening the man’s jacket, Phoenix used the bottom of his T-shirt and took the plastic bag out. Carefully opening it, he took a quick whiff. Chloroform! He also removed the hunting knife from its sheath.

Hearing sirens, he looked out the front door and saw an OPP cruiser pulling up. Two officers jumped out, guns drawn and moved with cautious measure up to the motel room.

“All clear, Detective Phoenix McCoy here,” he called out.

The two cops opened the door with their guns held on the perps who lay on the floor. One cop trained his gun on Phoenix as he stood beside the bed near Ember with his hands up.

“One wounded, this one tied good and tight. This is Ember Colton.” Nodding toward her, he went to her side and lifted her eyelids. She was still out cold.

“Ember,” Phoenix called, undoing the ropes, he removed the gag and blindfold. Gently he tapped her cheek and called softly, “Ember wake up.”

The gun was still held on Phoenix.

“My ID is in the back pocket of my jeans,” he said, holding his hand out and slowly taking it out, handing it to the man, his eyes never leaving Ember.

Once the cop had checked the ID, he said, “I’m Gordon. What’s going on here, McCoy?”

Phoenix held Ember in his arms, brushing her hair back. He noted the lump on her jaw and caressed it, wondering how anyone could harm her.

“That man...” he said, pointing at the one he’d tied up, “...kidnapped Ember. His partner in crime is dead at Brett Colton’s cottage. He fell over the second floor railing and broke his neck. There’s a cruiser on its way there to check it out. There’s a criminal called Birdman who’s supposed to be coming here to rape her. If you want more info, speak with Brett Colton or Jessie Chan from the Toronto

detachment. Ember drew an accurate portrait of the rape scene. The pad's in the trunk of the car outside."

"The ambulance is here, McCoy. Is she going to the hospital?" he asked.

"Yes. I want to make sure she's okay. When you talk to Colton, tell him to meet us at the hospital."

"We have to process the crime scene. I'll have someone bring the art pad in. You can take it with you for Colton, since it's his case. I'll send in the medics." Gordon left the room.

"Ember, please wake up. Come on honey," he murmured.

"Excuse me. Can I get in there and have a look?" a woman said. She was a paramedic and had the equipment to check Ember's vitals. The other paramedic was working on the man who'd been shot.

Though he remained close, Phoenix moved back a bit. "There's a plastic bag with a rag covered in chloroform on the table. I don't know how much or how long he held it over her face, but she's really out of it. He also hit her on the chin to knock her out, he told me."

Phoenix moved to the other side of the bed, holding Ember's hand.

"Her life signs are normal. She should be okay. I'll set up an IV just in case, and we can transport her to the hospital. We should be there within twenty minutes."

“I’ll carry her out, forget the gurney.”

The woman was about to protest but shrugged and let him lift Ember up to carry her, following with the IV bag in tow.



Bitter black eyes narrowed when the black car slowly passed the motel, seeing the cops and ambulance in the parking lot. One of the men the Birdman had hired was being led to a cruiser and the other was wheeled out to the ambulance, followed by Phoenix McCoy who carried Ember in his arms. They climbed into the ambulance.

Driving away, he cursed. Again, the woman had escaped. Now he had two more men to dispose of. It had been so close. Davis had told him by cell phone that the girl was secured and waiting for him. The anticipation had built so high he had taken a chance of getting a speeding ticket as he rushed to the motel. That damn Indian had screwed it up again!

He turned the car around and headed back to the city, disappointment leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He would have to arrange for two women tonight, and this time he wouldn’t be so gentle with either of them.





“Excuse me nurse? I’m looking for Ember Colton,” Brett asked, fists clenched, his stomach queasy with nerves.

“Are you family?” the nurse asked.

“I’m her brother, and also the officer in charge of her investigation.” He pulled out his ID and showed her.

“Follow me, Detective.” The nurse led him into the emergency room and took him to Ember’s side. Phoenix was already standing there holding her hand.

When Ember saw Brett, she cried out, lifting her arms as he gathered her close and kissed her forehead over, and over again.

“Oh, God, Ember, I thought we’d lost you! Are you okay?”

“I...I’m fine Brett. Stop. Please stop! I’ve never seen you cry before.” She wiped at his tears, her expression filled with awe.

He slipped his arms around her and pulled her close, letting the tears flow as he ran fingers through her hair in a soothing motion.

Phoenix stood silent. Brett glanced at him and knew that Phoenix understood a brother’s love. He suddenly felt a kinship with him that was closer than he’d ever had with any man before outside of Jessie. They both loved this woman, this wonderful, beautiful woman.



Since Phoenix didn't want to take Ember back to the cabin with the investigation going on, he took her to his apartment in the east end of Toronto.

It was on the twentieth floor of a high security building in the center of a busy metropolitan suburb. Cars whizzed by while pedestrians filled the busy streets as Brett drove Ember and Phoenix home. The doctor had released her after testing, with little more than a severe bruise on her jaw. The after effects of the chloroform were gone. She was nearly good as new. Once Brett had dropped them off, Phoenix took her to the lobby and they waited for the elevator, holding hands.

"Did I ever tell you how Brett met Lana?" Ember asked him.

"No. I understand he was undercover as an author at the publishing house she owns."

At first she grinned but winced, touching her jaw.

"Well, Lana didn't own it then. Not until her friend and boss, Roger Brinkman, was murdered by the killer he'd hired Brett to protect Lana from. They actually met while she was waiting for an elevator. She said the lobby was extremely busy so she stood at the back waiting for the crowd to die down when this hunky guy came up and asked if she would help him. Before she could say more than *okay*, he swept her up in his arms and kissed her. He said he was trying to hide from a hoodlum who was trying to track him down from an old undercover case, and he used her to hide him."

“Sounds like a Brett thing to do, to me. Did she smack him?” he asked, gently touching her sore jaw.

She snickered. “No. She was so stunned after he kissed her that she could only stare as he got on the elevator and the doors closed behind him. She’d never been at a loss for words before. A little while later, she found that he was the supposed new author Roger had wanted to introduce her to. Boy, was she surprised, and angry!”

The elevator dinged and they stepped into it, alone with each other. After pressing the button for his floor, Phoenix slipped his arm around her shoulders.

“It seems like it worked out just fine for them. I’ve seldom seen a happier couple.”

Eyes filled with tenderness, he lowered his head until his lips caressed hers in a feather light kiss.

Ember slid her fingers through his hair, deepening the passion between them. The moment the coals of their desire were kindled, the elevator stopped and two people waited to get on at their floor.

Heat flushed her cheeks as Ember took his hand and pulled him past the doors, limping as she dragged him along. Chuckles echoed in the hallway until the elevator doors closed. Embarrassed to have been caught in public with her hormones raging, she kept her eyes down and walked.

“Ah, Ember?”

“What,” she said, pulling him along the corridor.

“We’re going the wrong way.”

She looked up at him in surprise to see that he was biting his lip to keep from laughing as he followed her meekly.

Annoyed, she did an about face and dragged him along the opposite way, her face burning, her head down.

“Little Flame?” he asked, his voice choked with laughter.

“Now what?” she snapped, looking up into his sparkling eyes.

“We just passed the door. Would you rather we keep walking?” he grinned.

“Oh, shut up and just open the damn door!” she growled, holding back a grin.

Once he’d unlocked the apartment door, Phoenix swept her off her feet, laughing at her squawk of surprise. He carried her inside.

“What are you doing, you goof! Put me down.” She was trying hard to be angry with him but failing miserably.

Phoenix didn’t even let her take her shoes off, or see the apartment, carrying her straight to his bedroom and laying her down on the bed as he kissed her with unrestrained passion. He stripped his shirt off while his lips held hers captive.

Ember followed suit, yanking at her t-shirt, shoving her shorts down over her hips. Suddenly her eyes flew open and she froze, shoving him away. With a gasp, she rolled away from him, trembling. Once she was on her feet, she looked around frantically for a place to run but panicked when she couldn't find one.

"What's wrong?" Phoenix stood close behind her.

Unable to breathe, she gasped again, trying to suck in air. Phoenix moved fast, sitting her on a chair and pushing her head down between her legs.

"Breathe, Little Flame. Breathe." Phoenix kept talking to her, calming her, coaxing her to take deep breaths.

It took her a long time to calm down enough to talk to him. Her tears began to dry up as he held her close to his naked chest.

"I don't know if it happened again! I don't know if they touched me...rraa..I can't! I can't do this. Oh, my God!"

Before she could get all worked up again, he took her face between gentle hands. "Look at me. Look at me, Ember! Nothing happened. You were not in that room for more than ten minutes when I broke in. They were still standing, talking to each other. Their clothing was intact, and so was yours."

"I feel dirty. I need to shower. Please," a single tear slid down her cheek and he caught it with the tip of his tongue, and pressed a kiss where it had rested.

“Come with me.” Holding out his hand, as he had that first day, he waited until she placed hers in his with complete trust. He led her to the large bathroom and opened the door to let her enter first.

Ember stared at the room, stunned for a moment. Not only was the white tub large enough for two people, but there was also an equally large shower stall with frosted glass doors.

The tiles on the floor and walls were turquoise. The room filled with colorful aboriginal patterned towels and artwork. Even the soap-filled hand pump, toothbrush holder, and cup were hand painted in similar designs. It was like he’d brought his family and heritage with him.

Candles surrounded the tub in the same combination of colors and a thick, fluffy white mat rested in the center of the wide floor.

“It’s magnificent,” she whispered.

“It’s a piece of home. I don’t miss it as much when I’m in here. My mother and sisters made most of it. They have a kiln and make ceramics with aboriginal designs. The local stores buy them for the tourist season. Mother and the girls make a ton of money each year with it. Do you want a shower, or a bath?”

“Shower, please,” shivering, she crossed her arms over her chest, rubbing up and down her biceps to warm herself.

Phoenix leaned past the frosted glass doors and turned on the water.

“I’ll leave you alone then.”

His eyes said he wanted to stay but would give her space if she needed it.

“No!” she cried out, afraid to be alone. “Please, Phoenix, will you shower with me?”

He waited for her to undress, giving her the option to make the first moves.

Unable to meet his eyes, she undressed and slipped into the shower.

Phoenix smiled and flicked on a switch, and an orange light came on in the ceiling.

“Oh! What’s that light for?” she asked, curious.

“It’s a heat lamp. The color is relaxing and it keeps the air warm.” Before he joined her, he turned off the main light which left the atmosphere warm and cozy, sensually stimulating.

Ember let the water flow over her for a few moments, silent as he waited. Before long she held out her hand. Once he’d stripped, she pulled him inside with her.

Glad that he let her set the pace, she stood in the hot stream of water and scrubbed her skin hard, her back to him. When he held out his hand beside her, she handed him the soap. Phoenix took it from her and gently scrubbed her back and legs.

Need filled her and she turned to face him, her eyes on his pendant. She took the bar of soap from him and began to wash him, avoiding his swollen member. When the front of his body was done, she twirled her finger to indicate that she wanted him to turn around.

Phoenix stood still and silent, letting her have her way. When her hands gently scrubbed his inner thighs, so close to his genitals, a groan slipped out and he froze. Her hand slid under him, over his sack, rubbing soap into every crevice, around and around in small circles.

Beneath her fingers, she felt him shuddering as he gasped for air.

Her hands left him and he turned around again, at her urging. Like a mannequin, he let her move him back until his skin met the tile wall. She took his arm and placed one of his hands flat against the glass door at shoulder level, doing the same with his other one on the opposite wall. Wet ebony hair fell in long strands down his chest past his shoulders, brushing above his nipples.

Whispering, though her eyes remained on his pendant, she said, “Don’t move.”

On her knees before him, Ember rubbed soap into her hands then dropped the bar, gripping his staff to apply the froth over his smooth skin with both hands fisted around him. She cleaned every inch of his steel hard rod.



She stepped aside to let the hot water wash the soap off him. When he shifted, she put her hand on his abdomen, murmured, “Don’t move. Not until I say.”

Again, she grasped his thick staff in her fist then leaned in close and licked the tip, barely touching him. When he gasped, his body jerking along with his staff, she froze, waiting for him to obey her.

His throat moved as he swallowed hard, yet he waited for her to continue.

Her tongue darted out again, this time starting at the base of his staff and slowly, very slowly, seared a path up to the sensitive spot just below the ridge, then started all over again.

His legs began to shake and he sucked in a deep breath. Though she knew he was struggling for control, she continued to work her magic. Tipping his head back as if he were in pain, he let out a low growl from deep in his throat, especially when she twirled her tongue around the base of the tip.

Stopping to lick the glistening drop from the tip of him, she closed her lips around the head, stopping when he groaned again.

The agony of waiting was in his eyes as she looked up at him but she refused to continue until he complied. Finally, he took a deep, shuddering breath and waited for her continue. When she took him fully into her mouth, deep in her

throat, she felt his knees nearly buckle while his hands pressed hard against the walls in a death grip.

Heart racing with excitement and the need to control the pace, Ember moved her mouth slowly up and down his member and felt desire stirring in her womb as it contracted. She moved her mouth faster, one hand sliding to cup his sac, rolling his balls between her fingers. The other hand gripped his butt cheek, her nails digging into him.

When her eyes met his, and she stopped, her lips hovering over the tip of him, she was rewarded with a flash of fire flickering in his eyes. The orange glow from the heat lamp had turned him into a golden warrior, straight from a historical romance novel.

She engulfed him and began moving again, enjoying the change in his eyes as they seemed to melt into liquid chocolate. Catching her breath, she moaned, her juices pooling low in her belly. Again, she picked up speed and watched as his eyes nearly rolled back in his head and his body tensed. She knew from the look on his face that he wanted to tell her to stop but was afraid that she might.

Her hot sheath pulsed as she felt him creep closer to the edge, his chest pumping as he panted for breath. Closer, she drew him to the edge of bliss, digging her fingers harder into his cheek to hold him deep in her mouth. She watched his face fill with ecstasy as he came, bursting into her mouth. His bright white teeth

showed in the dim light. He ground them together in a grimace releasing a war cry and let loose.

For endless moments after he finished, Ember sucked on him gently, caressing him with her tongue with loving care. Slipping her lips off him slowly and circling his waist with her arms, she hugged him to her, his member resting on her cheek. Gentle fingers came down to tenderly stroke her hair as he waited for her to speak to him.

Tears flowed down her cheeks at the tender joy she felt from being with her warrior. She trusted him completely and knew he would never harm her. She had finally conquered her fears, and was ready to face life again. The horror of her abduction was shoved away into a dark corner of her mind where it was unable to harm her anymore.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Fire Baiting

In the lecture hall, Maylin Mitchell waited until most of the students had left before approaching the professor. She'd been unable to integrate into the main crowd of students but decided that dealing with the professors could lead to information on other faculty members. Besides, this man's residence was in the area where Burns had disappeared.

Carrying her heavy books close to her chest so they pressed her breasts upward, Maylin gave the impression of an innocent young student, easy prey for sexual predators. Her short plaid mini skirt and low cut stretch t-shirt showed off her modest cleavage. Noting how the professor's eyes went directly to her chest before lifting to look in her eyes, Maylin thought he was either an old leech, or he just might be part of the drug rape ring as she suspected. Now, it was time to wave a little bait in his face.

“Professor,” she said in a husky whisper, her eyes wide and innocent. “May I speak with you about my paper, sir?”

As she shifted her books, her t-shirt pulled tighter across her breasts, drawing his eyes down before he cleared his throat and quickly shifted them up to meet her eyes again.

“What can I do for you, Miss—” Since she was new on campus, he didn’t know her name.

“Angie, sir, Angie Bronson. I just transferred from Ottawa. I did this paper on court processes and I didn’t get a very good mark.” She lifted her suddenly tearful gaze to his. “What did I do wrong? I don’t *know* what mistakes I made, only that I got them wrong. Do I need a tutor? Is there any way I can redo the paper and get a passing grade? My parents will be so angry if I don’t pass this course. You see, they’re paying for my education so I can be a lawyer. They remortgaged their house and everything!” She made her lower lip tremble.

In his eyes, Maylin saw desire though to his credit, he hid it quickly. Though she was more petite than the type of women who’d been raped on campus, she could tell he was interested.

“Well, perhaps we can work something out, Angie. We wouldn’t want your parents upset with you now, would we? Can you meet me in my office tomorrow afternoon? My last class ends at three o’clock.”

'Angie' licked her lower lip, as if having a hard time making a decision. She shifted her books again and one of them fell to the ground.

"Oh, shit! Oh! I'm so sorry, sir. I don't mean to be rude." She bent over to pick up the book, her mini skirt showing a quick view of extremely brief red lace panties, and no pantyhose.

Maylin thought she heard him bite back a groan as she stood and adjusted the pile in her arms. When she raised her gaze once again to meet his, she sniffed a little and waited a moment for effect.

"Okay, sir. I'll be there as close to three o'clock as I can, but I have to run from the other side of the campus to get to your office." She gave him a bright grin.

"That's fine, Angie. I'll wait for you. I hear there's a frat party tonight. I hope if you attend you won't be feeling the after affects of the fun in class tomorrow."

*Score! He's fishing, trying to find out if I'll be at the party, perhaps to have some handsome fellow meet up with me and offer me a drink?*

"Well, I don't usually go to the parties, sir, since I don't know anyone here."

"Nonsense, my dear. How will you meet people if you don't hang out with them? You should go and have a good time. It will help you to clear your head," he urged, and looked over her shoulder at someone. "Jason? Come over here for a minute, will you?"

A very handsome young man, the size of a linebacker, came bounding down the stairs, and approached them.

“Yes, sir? Did I do something wrong with my paper?” His fake concern was so obvious, Maylin almost laughed, dropping her eyes to appear shy.

“No, son. I want you to meet Angie. She just transferred from Ottawa. I would appreciate it if you would make sure she feels comfortable at tonight’s frat party. She doesn’t know anyone on campus.” The professor smiled at her as though he were a father figure.

“I’d be happy to. I’m Jason. I can introduce you to everyone then you won’t be so alone. Would you like me to pick you up at your dorm room at eight o’clock?” He was like a puppy, eager to please.

“Oh, that’s okay, Jason. I can find my way there if you tell me which building. I really appreciate your helping me, though. I’d...I’d better go now. Thank you professor, for everything, I’ll see you tomorrow at your office at three o’clock.” She turned and practically skipped out the door, her skirt flipping up enticingly to give the men a quick view of her tiny red panties.



After changing into jeans and a t-shirt, Maylin arrived at the frat house at eight o’clock that night and found Jason waiting for her. He offered her a drink

right off the bat. She gave him a grateful smile as she accepted it but didn't take a sip.

"Thank you, Jason. Can you tell me about some of the people here? I don't know a soul!" she asked, smiling up at him.

"Ah, sure. Well, most of the guys here are on the football team. A bunch of the chicks are cheerleaders and the rest are just chicks we invited. It's considered an honor to be invited to our frat house."

"Really?" Maylin exclaimed, her eyes wide with innocence. As a large, drunken frat member tried to pass by, Maylin 'accidentally' spilled her drink on the floor.

"Oh, look at the mess I've made. I'm so sorry!" she cried, covering her mouth with her hands as she stared down at the spilled drink. Fake tears filled her eyes.

"It's okay. I'll get you another one. Don't worry about it. I'll be right back." Jason looked annoyed, though he kept his cool. He left to get her another drink.

Maylin studied the other women in the room. Two of them fit the profile of the women who'd been date raped recently; long hair, curvy figures, young, innocent looking.

She didn't see any of the men pushing drinks on them, thinking that perhaps it was a bit early yet. There were only two exits; the front door and the kitchen



door. From what she'd heard, the women were taken right out the front door, appearing drunk as the men escorted them out.

"Here you go," Jason said, handing her a fresh drink.

"Oh, thanks, Jason. So, where are you from?" she said, pretending to sip from her drink.

"I...uh...come from northern Ontario."

She snickered playfully. "Do they have towns or cities in northern Ontario?"

"Sure, yeah, we do. Um...near North Bay."

*He doesn't want to give me details in case I fingered him. Interesting.* Maylin took another imaginary sip from her cup.

"Let's go sit down on the sofa, Angie."

"Okay." She sat down beside him, doing her best not to smile as he watched her closely.

"So, Jason, how come a hunk like you doesn't have a girlfriend? You're not gay are you?" she asked, her voice loud enough for others in the room to hear.

Chuckles came from those around them.

"No! Hell no, I'm not gay," he cried, looking around them. He gave her an angry look.

"Oh. Sorry. Then you have a girlfriend?"

"No. I don't."

“Why not?”

“Uh, well, I just don’t. I kind of like you though,” he said, though his expression showed he was still angry at her remark.

“You do? I’m just a little mousy girl. I would think you’d like a tall woman with lots of curves.”

Though he shook his head, he stared at her drink, watching as it met her lips again. He almost swallowed for her, as she tipped the cup up.

“No, I like petite women, like you, Annie.”

“Angie,” she said, grinning.

“Right. Angie. Sorry.”

“You know, I’m not feeling very well all of a sudden. I think I’ll head to the bathroom. Where is it?” she asked, turning to look around her.

“Down the hall on your left, just before the kitchen.” His eyes filled with excitement as she stood unsteadily.

Suddenly, she ‘slipped’ and spilled half her drink on him, giggling.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Putting a hand to her head, she stumbled past him and made her way to the bathroom. Instead of going into it, she went straight out the kitchen door and hid behind some bushes to watch while he searched for his prey.

His boss would be very upset with him when he reported in.



When Maylin phoned Brett to report in, she was livid. “No! I’m not backing out now! I don’t care if you found a guy with a ring on his finger. This professor has a deep ring mark on his finger. Anyone could have taken the ring and slipped it on the guy’s finger.”

“Maylin, the Chief says the case is closed. The two men were hired by the Birdman before Jensen was found dead with the ring on. Come on in, that’s an order. I don’t like it any more than you do, but we have the perp and the ring. We’ve been ordered to close it.”

Brett was frustrated, sure that there was more to the case as Maylin too believed, but an order was an order and he had to follow it.

The sound of a sudden coughing fit came through the phone. Maylin mumbled, “Sorry sir...I’m not feeling well. I think I have to call in sick tonight and maybe tomorrow too. Gotta go now.” She hung up the phone before Brett could say a thing.

He grinned and shook his head, then sat back in his chair. Maylin was a persistent cop and nothing held her from solving a crime. Unfortunately, Brett was going to have to head to the campus himself to bring her back. He liked her courage but remembering Burns’ defiance, and the end results of it, he was determined to prevent the same thing happening to Maylin.

Though reluctant, he called Jessie. “Time for us to go back to school. We have to pull Maylin out kicking and screaming. She thinks she has a hook and wants to keep fishing.”

As he listened to Jessie speaking, there was a knock on the door. “Hang on, Jessie. Come in.”

When Phoenix entered, a serious look on his face, Brett said into the phone, “Jessie, come in here please.” He hung up and stood to shake Phoenix’s hand. “Nice to see you back. Where’s Ember?”

“She insisted that I drop her off at her dorm. She wanted to pick up her things and speak to her professors about making up the time she lost.” Phoenix didn’t look happy about it.

Jessie knocked and came into the room. “Hi, Phoenix.” Turning to Brett, he handed him a sheet of paper. “I was going over the list of faculty from the university. Strictly the instructors in Ember’s courses and I found something interesting.

Brett looked at the list and then up at Jessie. “What am I looking for Jessie?”

“The ring. The symbol means bird. Eagles are birds and the Japanese professor of law’s name is Washi Takasu. Washi means eagle eyes. I ran a make on him and a few years ago, he was under investigation for the murder of his wife but

nothing could be proven. She died from an apparent drug overdose.” Jessie’s eyes had hardened.

“The case is officially closed, but Maylin thinks she’s on to something and based on the information we have, I agree. She said there is a professor she spoke with who had deep ring marks on his finger as though he’d worn a ring for a long time and had taken it off recently. I’m willing to bet it’s Takasu.”

“Ember is over at the campus now. Look at the latest drawings she did.”

Brett pulled out a folder, opening it and spreading the pages across his desk. All three men tensed as they studied the contents. Phoenix looked like he was ready to run straight through the wall, forcing himself to stay and listen to what Brett was saying about the Birdman.

“If he’s the one who’s having the women drugged and raping them, then we have a big problem.” Brett’s eyes met Phoenix’s. “Ember’s going to talk to him about her courses. She’s going to fall right into his hands.”

Brett pulled out the drawing of the man’s hand with the ring and the photos of the deceased with the ring on his hand, Brett placed them side-by-side and froze.

“Oh, my God!” Turning the two pictures towards Jessie and Phoenix, he waited for them to take in what he was seeing.

“Shit!” Phoenix swore and made to run from the office.

“Wait! Phoenix, we need to get in there undercover. We can’t blow this or Ember and Maylin could get hurt. Bear with me. I have a plan.”

Brett proceeded to quickly outline his idea then all three men ran from the building as if the hounds of hell were nipping at their heels.



After Ember had packed up her things at the dorm room, she left them there to pick up later and made her way over to see her professors about making up time on her courses.

The first three professors were still in class and she had to leave messages for them. The forth one was in and promised her the chance to make up the tests she had missed, under the circumstances.

Knocking on Professor Takasu’s door, she was surprised when he called for her to enter. At a quarter to three in the afternoon, he was usually in class.

After opening the door, she found him standing with his back to her, staring out the window.

“Professor? I’m sorry to disturb you, but I’ve come to ask for an extension on my paper from last week.”

Takasu stiffened then turned slowly and gave Ember a wide grin that didn’t meet his eyes.

“Hello, Miss Colton. I noticed you were not in class. I hope that all is well with you?” he asked. His hand moved to his desk drawer, moving some things around inside it.

“I had a little trouble, and my friend...Julie Robbins...she died, and things have been...difficult. I—” Ember was watching his hand fishing in the drawer. When his other hand settled on the desktop, she froze. It was the hand! Now missing the ring! He was the Birdman.

“I...have to go. Thank you for your time.” Fear snaked through her gut as she backed toward the door. When her hand touched the handle, he pulled out a gun.

“You’ve made it very easy for me, Ember. I appreciate that. Now, you’re going to stay calm and quiet and you’ll walk with me. If you try to escape, or scream for help, I will kill you. This gun has a silencer. I doubt anyone will notice.”

“You? You are Birdman? I don’t understand. Why did you...why did you rape me, and kill Julie! Why all those other girls too. Why?” she cried, trembling.

“Ah, why indeed! Perhaps it was just because you were there, easy pickings. Your friend was a mistake, the idiot who took her slipped too much in her drink, but she was good while she lasted. So were you as a matter of fact, and so you will be again, before I have to dispose of you.” With a dramatic sigh, he shrugged, waving his gun toward the door. “It’s such a shame really. Even my boys enjoyed you.”

“You are vile, you bastard! If you think I’m going to walk beside you like a lamb to the slaughter, you’ve got another thing coming. I’m awake now, not stoned out of my gourd, an easy victim for you.” Ember was ready to fight, tired of feeling like a victim.



“Oh, Professor, I’m sorry I’m late but I—” She stopped, her eyes widening in surprise. “What’s going on?”

Birdman cursed then waved the gun. “Close the door, young lady. Quietly now.”

Maylin shut the door behind her and moved to stand beside Ember. She had recognized the girl when she saw her heading to the professor’s office but was unable to stop her in time. After making a quick call to Brett to let him know what was happening, Maylin barged in on the Birdman, knowing he couldn’t kill Ember in his office for fear of getting caught.

As he picked up his phone and dialed out, he kept his eyes on the women. “Bring Tom with you and get in here, Jason, now.”

Ember stepped forward and pushed Maylin behind her in a protective gesture. Maylin tried not to grin. She was a fourth degree black belt in Kung Fu and could take care of them both, yet she let Ember push her back and was able to take the safety off her gun and prepare it for when the time was right.



With an act to keep up, Maylin whispered to Ember loud enough for Birdman to hear her. “Why is the professor pointing a gun at us?”

Snorting, Ember growled, “Because he’s a murdering rapist who hasn’t got the balls to take on a mere woman. He has to hide behind a gun or his muscle bound, brain dead, jackass henchmen. That’s why he’s pointing a gun at us. He’s not man enough to take on a woman alone.”

Surprised at Ember’s attitude, Birdman grinned. “Ah...so you do have some fire in you. I did wonder.”

“You have no idea,” she snarled back.

The door opened behind them and two tall, good-looking men came in, closing the door behind them.

“Take these two back to my place. Put them in the basement room and lock it up tight.” Turning back to the women, he said, “Not one sound, not one attempt to escape or Jason will shoot you. Won’t you, Jason?” he asked, turning his cold black eyes on the young man. “After last night’s disappointment, I expect that you won’t let me down again, will you?”

“Yeah, ah, I’ll shoot them if they get out of line.” Jason’s body language said that he hadn’t killed anyone before.

“But I thought you liked me. You can’t shoot someone you like, Jason.”

He rolled his eyes and grabbed her arm in a firm grip.

Maylin made plans as they turned to leave the room. Jason was a weak link and she planned to use him, the only problem was finding the right time.

Each of the men held a woman by their upper arm, standing close with Tom holding the gun in Ember's side. The professor walked behind them, carrying his briefcase and greeting his students as they passed by as though he didn't have a care in the world.

Sure that Ember hadn't caught sight of Phoenix standing behind a group of students, Maylin thought that was best. Only her eyes moved to acknowledge him. She gave him a hand signal to let him know there were guns involved. He stayed back, blending into the crowd.

Once they were away from the busy hub of the university, the men took the women to a van and forced them inside. The professor left his car and climbed into the van to drive, leaving the men sitting beside the women.

Jason was nervous, his eyes darting to his boss and back to Maylin while Tom was more confident. Maylin looked over her shoulder to see Tom put his hand on Ember's bare thigh, rubbing up and down. He was cocky, until Ember snapped, "Are you allowed to fondle me? I thought you were just a guard or something?"

Her question had the desired response as Birdman's eyes shot to the rearview mirror in warning as they left the parking lot. Tom's hand left her thigh.

Maylin smothered a smirk and kept up her innocent expression, turning to face forward. She was confident that Ember could take care of herself.

A few minutes later, they pulled up to the residence building and climbed out. With no one in sight, the men quickly ushered the women inside, taking them to the basement.

Once they were alone in the ridiculously bawdy red room with the door locked behind them, Ember turned to Maylin. “I’m sorry you got involved in this. I’m Ember Colton.”

“I know who you are, Ember,” Maylin’s innocent façade was gone and now she was all business, surprising Ember. “My name is Maylin. I’m an undercover cop. I work for your brother. It took me a few days, but I finally figured out who Birdman was. I was on my way to set up my operation to catch him in action when I saw you enter his office.”

“I don’t know why I didn’t suspect him. My memories of what happened...the...the rr...rape...are so vague. Oh!” Ember stared back at Maylin with no small amount of fear in her eyes. “Rape! Looks like it might happen again.”

“Not on your life. I saw Phoenix on the way here. Brett and Jessie are here too, and I happen to have a gun and a black belt that says it won’t happen again. I’ll make sure of it, Ember. I promise you that.” Once she’d loaded the chamber, she

slid it into the waistline of her jeans behind her back and pulled her sweatshirt down over it. Turning to Maylin, she said, "Let's kick their asses!"

## Chapter Twenty

### That Bird Is Cooked!

Once the front door shut behind Birdman, Phoenix shifted to a closer position behind the van parked on the street in front of Birdman's residence.

Fear for Ember shook him harder than he expected. Determined to take Birdman and his cohorts down, he spoke quietly into his mike.

"Ready." He kept out of sight as he waited for the others to confirm.

When Phoenix saw that Maylin had been taken with Ember, he felt elated. Maylin knew how to take care of herself and she would tell Ember that help was on the way to give her confidence. Little Flame had been through so much. It was a wonder she wasn't the next candidate for Prozac!

Jessie's voice whispered in his earpiece. "Ready." He was positioned behind the building, prepared to enter through a back window. To the left of the building, Phoenix saw Brett slip up beside the wall, his gun raised. The rest of the squad worked to keep civilians out of the line of fire, ready to move in when called.

“Ready.” Brett whispered.

Through the van window, Phoenix could see men moving around in the front room. Though only three entered with the women, there could be more inside. The waiting was the hard part. He gritted his teeth and tried not to think of what might be happening to his woman. Phoenix stayed in place even though he wanted nothing more than to rush in and take them all on to save Ember. Just the thought of living without her was killing him. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

Shocked, he thought about that. After a very bad experience with marriage, he’d thought that he would never want to get married again. Until this moment, he’d believed that. Now, he wasn’t so sure, but he didn’t have time to think about it at this point.

A hand pushed aside the curtain and Phoenix moved out of sight, whispering to Brett, “Heads up.”

Brett ducked back also. He was going to scan the basement windows to see if the women were down there. It was imperative they know where the women were before moving in.

After checking three of the six windows, Phoenix watched as Brett knelt beside the next one and cautiously peeked inside. “I have them in sights. They’re standing, talking to each other. No one else is in the room as far as I can see.”

Phoenix felt hope blossom in his chest, anxious to get moving.

Again, Brett murmured, “Wait, I found something on the ground by the window. It’s a cell phone. On the LCD screen is the owner’s name. Rory Burns!”



Placing the phone back on the ground, out of the way, Brett left it for the squad to find when the takedown was over.

After another quick peek around him, he got down on his stomach in the mud and put his eye as close as he could to the window. He tapped lightly on the pane in a quick code he knew Maylin would understand.

Apparently Ember didn’t hear it, but Maylin did. Nodding at Brett, she went back to talking to Ember. Brett stayed close, watching them in case the men entered the room. “They’re alone and okay. Maylin’s aware of us,” Brett whispered. The window was too small for either of them to fit through. The rescue would have to be a front door operation.



Behind the house, Jessie waited. After watching the back of the building for the past ten minutes, nothing had moved. The other men inside stayed in the front of the house. He moved closer, heading for the large bedroom window. The

building was old, but the windows were sliders, more than ten years old and not a high quality. They would be easy to break into.

He slipped his gun into his belt and pulled out a large penknife then began working on the lock, slow and quiet, in case someone entered the bedroom.



“Boss, I can’t just kill the women. I’ve never killed anyone. This was supposed to be all about drugs and sex, not murder! Andrew is already dead and we don’t even know who did it!” Jason paced, afraid to look at Birdman’s face. He was knee-deep in hot water.

Tom didn’t have the same problem. “No one knows they’re even here. Why don’t we spend a few hours playing with them first before we kill them?” When Birdman narrowed his eyes, he added. “After you get first go, of course! I bet that little one would be a real treat! Why don’t we dose them up and once we’re done, we take them for a ride.”

“Oh, I plan on having my fill, Tom. The problem I see here is Jason. I won’t have him telling tales to the cops. We have a good system going here with the drug sales. Having the women is just a side bonus.” He turned to stare at Jason’s heat flushed face. “What’s it going to be Jason? Are you in or are you out?”

“Ah, well, I’m in but—”



“There is no but, Jason. Yes or no? It’s very simple.” Cold black eyes glittered with anger and the small scar beside his eye had turned white with tension.

“Yeah, I’m in,” Jason said, feeling trapped. He wanted nothing to do with murder but he wouldn’t mind having that Ember Colton again. She was hot!

“Good. Now go and prepare them. Remember to lower the dosage for the little one. I want to spend a nice evening playing with her before we send her on her way. You can both have Ember. I think I’ve had my fill of her.” Nodding to the two men, he moved off toward his bedroom.

Jason grimaced, sensing an air of doom and cursing under his breath for allowing himself to get involved with Birdman.



“Remember, just stay back and let me handle things. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

Maylin had outlined her plan for when the men came back but Ember protested.

“Maylin, I will not just sit back and be a victim while you take on two men two times your size.” If it had been any other situation, Ember might have laughed at Maylin taking on the men alone, but she was terrified that the woman would get hurt because she was protecting her. She was about to say more but Maylin held up a hand.

“They’re coming. Please Ember, do as I asked you. I need to concentrate and you’ll only distract me,” Maylin whispered and moved to get in place.

Maylin looked over at the window and nodded.

Before Ember could look to see who she’d been nodding at, the door opened and Jason and Tom entered.



Jessie had the window unlocked and was just about to open it when Phoenix whispered, “Incoming, Jessie.”

Slipping around the side of the house just in time, he nearly tripped over Brett who was laying flat on the ground with his face to the window.

His partner spun around, yanking his gun out from his belt, Brett thankfully recognized him and Jessie breathed out a deep sigh of relief. Within seconds Brett’s gaze flew back to the window.

“The two boys are visiting our girls, Phoenix. Birdman is out back in the bedroom. All clear. Keep it quiet.”



After turning the shower on, Birdman took off his shirt and stood in front of the mirror. The tattoo over his heart of an eagle’s head with the Japanese symbol of the bird centered in its eye stood out in stark contrast to his skin.

He rubbed his stomach, wincing as he noted the extra pounds. The women he kidnapped never had the ability to see it anyway, but he was vain and it disturbed him to see the way the fat pushed out over his belt. It only seemed to get worse as he got older.

When the young women on campus looked at him with distaste, it enraged him, but he was able to hide his feelings from long years of practice.

Ember Colton! That one had nearly taken him down with all her meddling and the damn drawings! Her accuracy was amazing, especially since she had only a quick glance or two before running away. If only he had been able to catch her that day. He should have checked the bedroom before he killed the kid, but he'd been in a hurry.

Now there was the new one, Angie. He felt himself harden at the thought of her and decided he would shower later. It was time to play. Turning off the water, he headed for the basement.



With an ear to the front door, Phoenix, listened for footsteps. It was eerily quiet on the main floor.

"The two boys are visiting our girls, Phoenix. Birdman is out back. All clear. Keep it quiet." Brett's voice whispered into his ear. Phoenix went to work on the lock, working as fast as he could.

When he heard footsteps, he froze. “Someone’s moving on the main floor,” he whispered, listening as they faded away. “I think he’s coming downstairs, Brett. Let’s move it!” Frantically, he tore at the lock. When it clicked open, he slipped inside.



To keep the men off guard, Maylin widened her eyes and stared up at the two men to appear terrified.

Ember was at the back wall beneath the window, unaware her brother was a few feet above her, watching with his gun drawn.

“What do you want with us?” Maylin asked, keeping their attention on her and off Ember.

“Well, you girls must be really thirsty, so we brought you a couple of drinks,” Tom said, leering at her.

“Oh, gee. That’s really nice of you, Tom.”

He snickered and handed Maylin a drink. It looked like cola, but she knew it was laced with drugs. Neither man had a gun with him.

When Maylin smiled and took the drink and appeared to take a sip, Ember gasped in alarm. Before anyone could move, the liquid flew into Jason’s face and Maylin had Tom down on the ground, the second glass smashing to the floor.

Jason started toward Maylin but Ember ran at him, the force of her body slamming him into the wall and stunning him.

Maylin had Tom by the neck and soon he slumped to the floor, unconscious. When she turned to find Ember held tight in Jason's arms, kicking and scratching him, she cursed. He screamed when Ember's teeth sank into the skin on his chest.

"Ember, get down," Maylin ordered as her small, powerful foot slammed into Jason's kidney then the back of his knee. He dropped like a rock, crying out when his leg buckled at an odd angle, his knee out of joint. Screams of agony rang out as he clutched his leg but stopped abruptly as he looked down to watch a pool of blood form on his shirt, a hole in his chest from the silenced gun held by Birdman. As soon as Jason slumped to the floor, face first, Birdman's gun swung up to aim at Maylin.

"My, my, aren't you full of surprises. For such a tiny woman, you're very dangerous. Are you a cop?" he asked.

"No! Leave her alone," Ember shouted, trying to push Maylin behind her, but she shoved Ember out of the way.

The momentum had Ember landing on her back on the floor, shock on her face.

An amused chuckle came from Birdman, who kept the gun focused on Maylin. Strong too! I'm rather disappointed that you and I won't be able to play.

As he lifted his gun, about to pull the trigger, a body slammed into him from behind, taking him to the floor.



“Shit! Ember is in the way. I can’t get a bead on him and Maylin’s going to get shot. Phoenix, Jessie, one of you, get the hell in there!” Not bothering to whisper, Brett kept his gun focused. When Ember went flying to the floor, he was ready to shoot but at that moment Phoenix flew through the door, Jessie right behind him.

Brett got up and raced for the front door. “All units close in! I’m entering the house, three cops and Ember Colton are inside in the basement. Two perps down and McCoy has the Birdman down, but not secure. Repeat, the Birdman is down but not secure!”

At a run, he rounded the house and threw open the door, heading down the stairs two steps at a time before crashing into the room, gun at ready.

Maylin had her gun drawn and was keeping Ember down, out of danger. Jessie had already cuffed Tom, and Jason was dead.



Still struggling with Birdman who held tight to the gun, Phoenix hung onto him, rolling around on the floor. The gun disappeared, the Birdman still beneath Phoenix. Suddenly the men jerked as the muffled sound of the silencer went off.

Ember screamed, "Phoenix!" She tried to get up but Maylin held her down. "Let me go, let me go!"

No matter how hard she struggled, Maylin refused to release her. Tears of frustration and fear filled Ember's eyes until she felt Phoenix's arms pull her close.

"It's okay, Ember, it's over. Are you all right?" his deep, soothing voice was like music to her ears. As she leaned back to look up at him, she saw blood and screamed, her hands digging into his arms. "Oh, my God, you've been shot!"

"No. I'm fine. It's his blood, not mine, Ember. Look at me." When her eyes stayed focused on the blood, he gave her a gentle shake. "Look at me, Ember."

When she did as he asked, he smiled to reassure her and she relaxed.

Cupping her face in his hands he leaned in close and kissed her. "I love you, Ember," he whispered.

A snort came from Brett across the room and Phoenix turned red. He started laughing and Ember looked up at him in question.

Opening his shirt, he showed her his microphone. With an adorable grin on his face, he shrugged. "Well that settles it. Now the entire squad knows that I love you, and frankly, I don't care if they do. I do love you, Ember Colton"

Pulling her close, he kissed her again, losing himself in her until Jessie grumbled.

“Hey pal, give us a break here, we left our girls at home.” More laughter followed.

Once he broke the kiss, Phoenix grinned at Jessie. “Eat your heart out, hotshot!”

He helped Ember up and held her close by his side as he shut off the radio and pulled the earphone out, tucking it in his pocket.

Jessie pulled Tom to his feet, reading him his rights as he led him from the room. The paramedics came in and began working on Birdman. He was still alive and although he required surgery, it looked like he would live and face the proverbial music. Maylin came over to speak with them.

“Ember, I just want to tell you that I’m impressed. You didn’t lose control and you were very brave.” Maylin smiled.

“Me! Holy crap! You took down those two guys, and held me down. I couldn’t budge. You’re so strong.” Feeling a kinship with the woman, Ember hugged Maylin.

“You were a wild woman, Ember. I thought I might have to knock you out for a minute there—I just hope you’ll invite me to the wedding. Now that’s an event I wouldn’t want to miss!



Heat flushed through Ember's cheeks and she looked down, embarrassed. "We...we won't be getting married, but thanks."

"Oh, sorry. A little foot-in-mouth disease. Well I have to go. I hope to see you again soon." Maylin patted Ember on the shoulder and gave Phoenix a look that said, 'are you crazy?' before turning to leave the room.

Phoenix squeezed Ember's shoulder. "Let's get out of here. I've got a bit of paper work to do and we need to get your statement, then we can go home."

Still unable to look at him, Ember nodded, wondering where 'home' actually was anymore. She supposed, now that Birdman was caught, that she'd move back in with Brett and Lana. She didn't want to live on campus anymore. A wave of melancholy washed over her, leaving her feeling alone and unsettled. All thoughts of living with Phoenix lost as she thought about his problem with commitment. She'd decided that she did want marriage, but only to him. Living together was never going to be enough for her. Their relationship was headed for a dead end.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Inner Fires United

“They’re here,” Chailyn yelled. She stood on the front porch, practically dancing with excitement.

The rest of the family joined her, each of them grinning as the Mustang pulled to a stop and Phoenix jumped out, rushing to open Ember’s door for her.

The minute she was out of the car, Chailyn and Keyanna screamed and ran to her, throwing their arms around her and chattering like magpies.

“We missed you.”

“How long can you stay?”

“We heard you helped catch Birdman.”

“You’re so brave, Ember!”

“Did you bring your art supplies?”

The girls took turns firing questions and comments at her and Ember giggled at their enthusiasm.

“Girls! Let the poor thing get out of the car. She’s had a long drive.” Aiyana came over and held Ember close for a moment. Leaning back, she cupped the girl’s face in her hands. “Welcome home, Little Flame.”

Unshed tears filled Ember’s eyes and she hugged Aiyana again. “Thank you.” Once she’d stepped back, Ember looked up at the three brothers who stood at a distance, knowing not to come too close to her. Ember had a surprise for them though. She’d talked to her self silently all the way to Bancroft and she’d decided that it was time she got over her fear of them.

Crooking her finger at Taran, she smiled. When he came closer, looking uncertain, she put her arms around his chest and hugged him, surprising even Phoenix. She was shaking, but felt no fear and stepped back.

Next, she crooked her finger at Tadi and he came forward with a grin, gently hugging her and moving back quickly. Then Misu came forward and she hugged him too. Misu however gave her a boisterous hug.

“Our Little Flame has found her courage! I’m proud of you.” He let her go when she squawked and started giggling.

Tadi frowned, “Hey, that’s not fair! You got a bigger hug than me!”

Ember teased, “One step at a time, Tadi. I still haven’t completely recovered from your *last* hug!”

Everyone laughed. Aiyana took Ember's arm and led her into the house. She took her directly to the large living room and stood back as she stared at the wall.

"Aiyana, the portraits, you had them all framed. They look beautiful."

"Beautiful? They are magnificent! You have such a wonderful gift, Little Flame. It's time you did something with it."

Embarrassed, Ember walked over to the wall, looking up at the portraits. She touched the rustic, carved wooden frame with reverence. "The frames are beautiful. They suit the portraits perfectly."

"Taran is a carpenter. He is very gifted. When he touches the wood, it speaks to him, shows him how to carve it. He made Grandfather's *siyotanka* and he did the aboriginal artwork. Taran said he had to hold the wood over the portraits first before he could begin carving them. His gift is similar to yours. It comes from the spirit within, from the heart."

As Ember let out a deep sigh, she felt tears burn behind her eyes at the beauty of the spiritual feeling she got from the frames. Since meeting Phoenix, she'd become aware of her spiritual side.

Aiyana, there's an empty frame. Did I miss a family member?" she asked.

"Yes, you did...my daughter." Aiyana waited patiently for the question.

"I didn't know you had another daughter. Who is she?"

"You." Aiyana turned and led a speechless Ember to the kitchen.

“Let’s get you something to drink and eat. You must be tired from your trip.” Aiyana put her arm around Embers quivering shoulders and walked her back to the kitchen.



The loons were singing in the early morning stillness as a mist curled slowly over the surface of the lake and a fish jumped, leaving ripples of ever widening circles floating over the still mirror.

Ember breathed deeply. She loved it here at the lake. Phoenix had brought her to stay at the cabin five days ago and this morning they were heading back to the city.

After Phoenix, Brett, Jessie, and Maylin had saved her from Birdman, Ember thought that Phoenix would expect her go back to living at Brett’s, and that their relationship would fade away. She was wrong. However, they were stuck in limbo, living together at his apartment, yet with a barrier between them that hadn’t existed before. It was like something was missing and Ember had no idea how to fill the void.

Though just as loving and attentive as he’d been before, Phoenix had stepped back a pace, as if he too was unsure of how to bridge the gap between them.

The trip to Bancroft, a month after they'd moved in together, was a relief. Ember had missed Aiyana and the girls. She even missed the antics of the brothers. Grandfather, she especially yearned to see. Tipping her head, she listened to the silence then snickered.

"I wondered when you would show up."

Deep gravelly laughter rang out over the lake.

"You are getting good at sensing my presence, Little Flame. It's good to have you home."

After he sat down next to her, Grandfather took her hand and held it. "Something is bothering you and in turn my grandson, Little Flame. What is it?"

Emotional all of a sudden, Ember got up on her knees and hugged him close. "I missed you so much, Grandfather." Her body shook with the need to talk.

His strong arms came around her, holding her close, rocking her while she collected herself.

Finally releasing him, she sat back. "I'm sorry, Grandfather, I have no idea what's wrong. Once the crisis was over, we seemed to put a wall up between us and I don't know how to break it down."

"The secret to breaking down the wall would be to find out what it was that made you both put it up."

“Ha!” her bark of bitter laughter echoed over the still lake. “If we knew what it was, then we could remove it. I’m so frustrated. The only time we feel close is when we...” Realizing what she was about to say, Ember covered her face with her hands to hide her embarrassment. “Oh, God!”

His deep chuckle warmed her as Malimo patted her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Little Flame, I used to know what that was like also.”

“Okay, that’s it! I’m jumping headfirst into the lake to drown myself now!” she muttered from behind her hands.

Malimo’s burst of laughter scared the loon and it took off, disappearing into the trees in protest.

“For such a brave girl, you still have a lot of fears to face—Have you two talked about it?”

“Gee, why didn’t I think of that?” Ember asked sarcastically.

“So, you tried but did not find the answer?”

“No. We didn’t talk about it. I try to bring it up but either he changes the subject or distracts me with—” Dropping her head as the blush started up again, she cried, “Ahhhhh! I’m so confused!”

As though taking pity on her, Grandfather patted her back. “It will work out, Little Flame. I know it will. Give it time.” He fell silent.

Ember dropped her hands from her face after a minute and took a deep breath. “Thanks for the vote of—” as she turned to look at him her mouth dropped open in surprise. He had vanished. Her eyes scanned the area but saw nothing, no one.

“For crying out loud! First he won’t stop sneaking up on me and now he just disappears!” Throwing up her hands in disgust, she soon grinned when his distant laughter echoed around her. “You brat!” Ember muttered, and laughed.



Finally back at Aiyana’s home after a silent ride, they pulled up to the large garage in the back of her cabin. Phoenix got off the all-terrain vehicle and helped Ember dismount.

For a brief moment, he leaned down and gently kissed her lips. “Go on ahead of me, Little Flame. I need to put this away and I’ll be right in.”

After she tugged his hair to gather another kiss, she left him, feeling his eyes on her as she walked away. Playfully she wiggled her bottom and was rewarded with his laughter. When she peeked over her shoulder, she grinned and blew him a kiss. His grin and burning gaze filled her with warmth.

Her talk with Grandfather gave her hope that she and Phoenix would work things out.



It was mid-afternoon. Phoenix had found something interesting to distract her and therefore they hadn't left the cabin until near lunchtime. Her stomach growled as she opened the door to the back porch and entered the house.

When it closed softly behind her, she froze. A man's voice rose in the kitchen and she quickly moved across the room to see what was wrong.

Standing face-to-face was Aiyana and a native man around the same age. He was furious and appeared to be drunk. His fists waved threateningly at her.

"I'm moving back in and you can't stop me, bitch. You are so worthless. I never should have moved out in the first place. This is *my* house. *Mine!*" His fist flew and Aiyana's head jerked back at the force of it.

Suddenly the man was flat on the floor with an armful of wildfire as Ember screamed at him, "Don't you dare hit her. Don't you dare!" Her fists flew as she began hitting him, holding him down in her fury.

"Stop! Get off me you crazy woman! Get off!" he screamed, his arms up to protect his face from her blows. He was unable to dodge her flying fists.

"You have no right to hit her, you bastard! You get the hell out of here and don't you *dare* come back. Do you hear me?" she shrieked.

Arms circled her waist, pulling her off him, but she was unaware, still fighting to get at him, fists and feet flying. "Get out now! Get out!" she screamed, fury lending her strength as she fought the arms holding her.

The man staggered to his feet and wiped at the blood on his lip. Swaying, he warned, "I'll sue you, you bitch. No one can put me out of my home. I'll—"

"Do you want me to let her go?" Phoenix asked, his voice dry.

The man's eyes widened. "No! Keep that crazy woman away from me!"

Ember squirmed, her eyes burning with anger, "Let me go! I'm going to kick his ass!" she yelled.

At that, the man flew out the door and left the building. Ember still tried to go after him, but Phoenix held on until she let the fire fade.

As soon as he let her down, she ran to Aiyana, holding her close in her arms. "Are you all right, Mother?"

Silence met her question as she held the woman tight. Then, to her surprise, she heard Aiyana start to laugh. At first, it was a small chuckle and soon she was laughing hysterically, her two daughters and three sons joining her.

Holding Aiyana by her shoulders, Ember looked at her as though she'd lost her mind. A quick glance around showed that the others too were laughing as if they'd just seen the funniest thing in the world, except for Phoenix, who stood silent, staring at Ember with a strange expression on his face.

"Marry me."

She thought she'd heard Phoenix speak, sure that she misunderstood what he'd said.

With the laughter, no one heard him so he spoke louder.

“Marry me!”

Everyone stopped cold and a stunned silence filled the room. Ember had her back to him facing Aiyana, and she froze in place, her eyes widening with shock. Meeting Aiyana’s amused expression, Ember still wasn’t sure if she’d heard him right. Phoenix had made it clear that he didn’t want to get married again.

“Ember, I asked you if you’ll marry me?” he said softly.

Spinning around, her heart filled with a mixture of joy and fear, she whispered, “But you said you didn’t want to marry again, Phoenix, you didn’t want me in that way.”

His lips twisted in a wry smile. “You are everything I’ve ever wanted in a woman. Your passion, your flame, fills my heart, burns into my soul. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. I want to marry you.” His chocolate eyes burned with an inner flame, melting her heart.

“I guess I should have beat the crap out of someone before this. Think of how much time we could have saved.” Though she gave him a tremulous smile in answer, she could tell he waited to hear her words. The rest of the family stood still as statues, watching the couple before them.

Aiyana nudged Ember, pushing her toward Phoenix to break the stalemate.

The ice broke as flames took over. Ember breathed out, “Yes. Oh, yes, Phoenix!”

His arms closed around her, his lips claiming hers in a passionate kiss.

Lifting his head, Phoenix stared into Ember’s eyes, and said to his mother, “Don’t wait for us for dinner.” Picking her up in his arms, he made to leave the house, but Aiyana cried, “Wait!”

Keyanna handed Ember a picnic basket and Chailyn gave a thick blanket. Phoenix’s eyes never left Embers as he nodded and took her outside. Brett and Lana were getting out of their car with the twins but he kept walking, disappearing into the forest with her in his arms. She didn’t notice anything but him as he walked for a few minutes.

She finally moaned, unable to wait any longer. Phoenix looked like he felt the same way and set her down in a secluded glade, then he took the basket and dropped it on the ground.

“I love you, Little Flame,” he said as his lips brushed gently over hers.

“And I love you, my handsome warrior,” her fingers laced in his hair, breaking it free from its tie. She pulled his head down to mate his lips with hers.

In minutes, they were lying on the blanket, naked, kissing and moaning in their wild passion. Her flames of desire ignited his and they both shouted as he

entered her, his hips moving fast as if he couldn't get close enough. In the final moment all barriers burned up and the two flames became one.

## Epilogue

Phoenix sat at his desk facing a young woman and her mother. Both women were shaking, tears rolling down their cheeks. He had transferred to the Toronto Police Services Sex Crimes Unit since coming back to work. It was tough working under the emotional strain but it felt good to help people, women who had to face such a horrifying, violent crime as rape.

“Becky, I know this is very difficult for you. No one should have to go through what you have. I have to ask you questions and you might not want to answer, but we want to get the guy who did this to you, so I’m going to need your help. Do you understand what I’m saying?” he asked softly.

Her big, blue pain-filled eyes looked up to her mothers for support. At the woman’s nod, Becky said, “Yes, sir. I understand.” A sob escaped her.

“The man who gave you the drink at the bar, can you describe him if I have a police sketch artist sit down with you?”

This was the tough part. Drug rape crimes were difficult to solve since the victim was often confused after they woke up, their minds muddled, blocking out details.

“I’ll try, sir. I don’t know if I can remember very well, but I’m willing to at least try,” she said, gripping her mother’s hand tightly.

“Good. I’m going to take you to see the artist now. Follow me please.”



Once they left the office, Phoenix took them across the hall to a small conference room and opened the door. A woman sat waiting for them, her sketchpad and pens on the table in front of her, large with child.

Phoenix met his wife’s eyes and they shared a brief glance before Ember turned to the young woman.

“Hello, Becky, Mrs. Davidson, I’m Ember. Please have a seat.” Ember shifted in her chair.

Once the women were seated, Phoenix took a seat farther away, giving them space so they could work.

Gently taking the girl’s hand, Ember spoke in a soothing tone, “Now, Becky, I’d like you to close your eyes and clear your mind of any thoughts. Think only about a beautiful lake surrounded by trees. Everything is still and quiet, only the birds are singing—now take a deep breath. That’s it. Watch the water on the lake,

a fish jumped and left a circle of ripples, the only thing moving on the lake. Watch the ripples spread. It's very peaceful."

Smiling gently at the girl's mother, Ember continued.

"Becky, keeping your eyes closed, I want you to think about being at the bar last night. Think about the man who bought you the drink and describe him for me. Take your time and if you need to stop, that's okay. Can you do that for me?" she asked softly, releasing the girl's hand.

"Yes. He was taller than me. I'm five foot eight and he was about three inches taller I'd say. His body was pudgy, but only a little. I'll never forget his eyes, they were blue, dark blue and he had a small scar on his nose, like he'd had a fight and had stitches—"

Becky continued talking for the next hour. Phoenix brought bottles of water over and stayed silent, taping the session.

Ember's hand moved over the canvas, her eyes staring off into space as the image emerged. Her eyes would twitch every few minutes as if something was annoying her, but she kept going.

"Oh, my God! That's the guy, exactly!" Tears filled the girl's eyes as she looked at the drawing.

Phoenix spoke. "The face in this drawing is the man who gave you the drink at the bar and raped you last night?"



When Becky nodded, he said, “I need you to speak aloud for the tape machine, Becky.”

“Yes. That is the man who raped me last night.” Throwing herself into her mother’s arms, she cried.

“Detective, I think we need to go now,” Ember said quietly, her eyes speaking volumes.

He turned to the women, “My partner, Detective Ella Parker will take over from here, ladies. My child has decided to make an appearance.”

“Oh. You poor thing! You sat there and drew that horrible man and the whole time you were in labor? I can’t believe you did that!” Mrs. Davidson said in amazement.

As she climbed unsteadily to her feet, Ember smiled. “If it helps put Becky’s attacker away, I’d have the baby right here and keep drawing.” Ember turned to Becky. “You just remember something for me, okay? You are not at fault. You did nothing wrong. The fault lies with the depraved man who did this to you. Remember that, okay?”

Nodding, Becky whispered, “Thank you.” Detective Parker came in and led the women away.

“Let’s get my new daughter to the hospital,” Phoenix said, kissing Ember just before a contraction hit. She doubled over, gasping as he held her close, rubbing her stomach until it passed.

Phoenix swept her up into his arms and strode swiftly to the exit, grinning at all the well wishes and teasing that came from the precinct’s officers as they passed.



Hospitals seldom kept healthy mothers and babies more than a few hours due to government cutbacks. Phoenix brought his girls home by noon the next day since she was born in the wee hours of the morning.

After helping Ember out of the car, he reached into the back seat and released the seatbelt holding his daughter’s car seat in place. Picking the chair up, he covered her delicate face with a thin receiving blanket to protect her until she was inside.

Neighbors shouted out congratulations as they made their way to the front door. Phoenix and Ember had bought a bungalow in a quiet suburb in Rouge Hill right after the wedding.

Ember opened the door and was stunned. Phoenix’s entire family and hers were in the living room as well as Jessie and a very pregnant Tina.

“Surprise, Ember,” said Brett quietly. “We didn’t want to startle the baby so it’s a quiet surprise. He kissed her on her forehead and gave her a gentle hug.

“Come and sit down, daughter,” Aiyana said, leading Ember to the couch.

Gingerly she sat on the edge of the sofa, still tender from the birth. Lana gave her a pillow and blanket, helping her to lie down.

Phoenix had the fun part and took his daughter out of the seat to cradle her in his arms. He pulled the cloth away from her face to show everyone her perfect beauty. She already had her fist in her mouth, sucking loudly on it.

“Oh, she’s beautiful,” whispered Keyanna.

“So perfect! Look how tiny her hands are,” Chailyn added.

“Of course she’s perfect. She’s my daughter,” Phoenix said softly, his finger brushed over his daughter’s black silky hair and tender cheek. Immediately, she turned her face toward his hand and let out a tiny squeal of protest. “Ah, now that’s your mother’s department.” His deep chuckle shook his chest as he took her to see Ember.

Having gotten over blushing in front of their family long ago, Ember placed a receiving blanket over her shoulder and bared her breast for her daughter. The baby latched on to the nipple and make loud smacking noises of pleasure as she fed.

“Momma,” a tiny tike cried, running up to Ember.

“Hello, sweetheart. Did you miss me?” Kissing him, she juggled the infant and toddler until Phoenix scooped him up.

“Hello tiger, we brought home your new baby sister. What do you think of that, Ash?” he asked, nuzzling Ash’s tender neck.

“My baby sister is in Mommy’s tummy,” he said, his serious brown eyes staring up at his Daddy.

“Not anymore. She came out to meet you.”

Ash tucked his head into his father’s neck shyly and everyone laughed.

“Have you named her yet?” Taran asked.

Phoenix grinned and looked at his wife with warm eyes. “Well, we have Phoenix, which stands for fire, and Ember, the little fire, Ash, also from the fire so we decided to continue the tradition.”

Ember smiled, “Cinder Aiyana McCoy.”

“Ha! Our own Cinderella!” Misu laughed.

“Not on your life, buddy,” Ember said, giving him a look of false wrath. “Our Cinder will not be bowing to anyone’s wishes. She’s going to have just as much fire as the rest of us!”

Throwing his hands up in supplication, Misu cried, “Okay, okay. Don’t release the ‘Little Flame’ on me. Our father is still terrified of you.”

Everyone laughed and Phoenix remembered the day he'd had to pull Ember off their drunken father. That was the moment his life changed for the best.

He'd been thrilled that Ember changed her career choice, and joined the police academy. She was the top police artist in the force and highly requested. Her ability to draw nearly exactly what the criminals looked like in the victim's minds, and being female helped the women who came to her relax enough to gather crucial information for the cases.

Once Cinder was finished eating and her Auntie Lana had changed her bottom, she was passed around to the loving family members.

Taran's eyes filled with sadness when he held her. He quickly passed her on to Tadi, leaving the room.

Phoenix glanced at Ember. At her nod he followed him outside to the back deck.

"Are you okay, big brother?" Phoenix asked quietly, placing his hand on Taran's shoulder.

"Yeah. Hold on to every minute you have with them, Phoenix. Before you know it they'll be adults and you'll wonder where the babies went."

"You'll see them again, Taran. They are at an age now where they can make their own choices. When they do decide to see you, don't worry about the time

you lost, just begin building new memories. Looking back on past mistakes is only helpful if you learn something from them.”

“You’re pretty smart for a kid.” Trying to lighten up, Taran turned and gave Phoenix a smile. Phoenix knew it was forced.

“Let’s go dig into some of that food everyone brought,” Phoenix said, slapping Taran on the back.

“Sure. Let’s do that.”



After a long day at work, Phoenix was exhausted. He only wanted to spend some time with the kids and Ember and then hit the sack. Some days were worse than others, and he was always conscious of the chance of burnout from the emotional stress of dealing with victims. He needed a break and wanted to spend some time at the cabin in Bancroft.

It was unusually quiet in the house and he tensed. Something wasn’t quite right.

“Ember?” he called. Silence greeted him as he made his way on silent feet into the hallway.

On the floor was a white rose. He bent down and picked it up, frowning. He followed the trail of white petals that led to the bedroom and pushed the door open. The room was filled with candles of every size and shape, all of them white.

In the center of the king-sized bed sat his wife, dressed in a white satin negligee surrounded by white petals. The scent of fragrant roses filled his nostrils, stirring his senses. Her long, silky black hair was brushed to one side, falling down her shoulder, curling around her full breast.

Beside the bed was an ice bucket filled with a bottle of wine and two glasses. A basket of succulent fruit and a bowl of whipped cream sat on the end table.

“What’s this all about, wife?” he asked, leaning against the door jam with his arms crossed.

“It’s about our daughter being six weeks old and me missing you...very much.” She gave him a ‘come hither’ smile and patted the bed beside her.

Raising an eyebrow, Phoenix leaned his head back and looked down the hall. At her husky laugh, he turned back to face her and waited for her to talk to him.

“Lana has them for the night. I pumped a few extra bottles of milk and left them with her. We are alone at last.”

She picked up a strawberry and dipped it in whipped cream, using her tongue to lick slowly around the red flesh, her eyes closed until she popped the berry into her mouth and chewed slowly, swallowing. Opening her eyes again, thick black lashes framing them, she stared at him and licked her lower lip.

The air left his lungs in a whoosh as he swallowed hard. Phoenix tried his best to look nonchalant but failed miserably when his staff hardened, protesting the lack of use over the past few months, and made his jeans uncomfortably tight.

Biting her lip, Ember chuckled low in her throat, once again patting the mattress beside her.

Fire burned his groin as he closed the bedroom door and walked to the bed, climbing aboard to give her a slow, sensuous kiss.

Her fingers began undoing his shirt buttons then she slid her warm palms over his naked skin, her lips still held captive in his. What had been smoldering ignited and their bodies burned for each other.

When her fingers fumbled with the belt Ember growled into his mouth in frustration.

Phoenix chuckled and released her lips only long enough to make fast work of his pants. Soon he was naked and running his hands over her silky gown, his thumbs coming to rest just beneath her breasts, bringing a moan from her.

“Please, Phoenix, hurry, I’ve missed you so much,” Ember whispered, urging him with her hands.

“What’s the hurry, Little Flame? We have all night.”

“Ohhh...you are the hurry...I need you so.”



He grasped her wrists and pushed her back on the pillows, holding her arms over her head to slow her down.

“Hmmm...Seems to me, that you owe me one for that shower,” he said, grinning as he planted little kisses along her throat.

“Shower? What shower?” she asked, gasping as his teeth nipped at her neck.

“Before we had children, we had a shower in my apartment when you took advantage of me, and made me hold still while you had your way with me.” He licked and nipped around her collarbone, gradually moving down toward her breasts.

Her sultry laugh told him she remembered.

“Ah...I think it’s time for payback, don’t you?” he asked, halting his assault to gaze into her eyes.

She shook her head but he could see the grin she held back twitching on her lips.

“Oh yeah, payback!” Excited with his game, he released her wrists. “Let’s get this out of the way first.” He helped her remove her negligee, leering at her.

“Now. Mrs. McCoy. Lie flat on your back and keep your hands here.” He indicated the bars on the headboard. “No moving them and not one sound, okay?”

Shaking her head no, she nevertheless stayed put, holding onto the rungs of the headboard, her hands directly above her head.

“Does that mean you don’t want to play? I could always go watch the hockey game.”

He made a move as if he was going to leave and she cried out, “Okay! I’ll play.”

A wicked grin on his face, Phoenix nodded then sat back as though trying to decide where to start. He gripped his chin with his thumb and finger and stared at her, running his gaze from the top of her fingers, all the way down to her toes.

A small sound escaped Ember and he stopped, staring into her eyes with an eyebrow raised. She bit her lip and kept silent and still.

Finally making his decision, he moved toward her feet and leaned down, licking the top of her foot. Ticklish, Ember jumped and had to wait an agonizing minute before he continued.

Soon Phoenix was immersed in giving her foot attention, running his tongue over the bottom, holding it in place when it jumped, sensitive to his touch. Then he was moving up her leg, his kisses and nips traveling up the inside of her thigh, feeling her tense when he came so close to her center. She held back a groan of dismay when he stopped and sat up.

He frowned, sitting back on his feet as he stared at her legs. “I’ve forgotten something,” he said and paused, then moved back down to the other foot and

began the same process. By the time he stopped just below her mound, she was unable to stop her groan.

“Ah, ah, ah! You’re forgetting the rules. No talking.” Seeing her look of frustration, he grinned and moved up to her fingers, wrapped tightly around the rungs of the headboard.

Taking one hand in his, he began kissing the palm, opening it up to lick and suck on each finger, sliding them one at a time into his mouth. When each of them were done, he slid his tongue down her palm, kissing and licking until he found her wrist. Here he paused and gave special attention to the sensitive skin before moving on, trailing down her arm, giving the same attention to the crook of her arm before placing her fingers back around the headboard.

Once he reached her shoulder, he stopped, holding completely still as he felt her body tremble beneath his lips.

“Now, Little Flame, you don’t expect me to forget the other one, do you?” he teased, chuckling when she sucked in a breath. He continued to the other hand. She was sweating by the time he stopped at her shoulder, her arms shaking.

His lips moved to kiss the moisture from her forehead, moving over her eyebrows, eyes, cheeks, the tip of her nose, her jaw, chin...and then...he stopped. Her lips were left alone and he paused before moving over to her earlobes and

down her neck, across to the other side of her neck and moved up to stop at her sensitive earlobe.

Ember panted, her whole body shaking with reaction. Reaching over to the plate of fruit, he plucked a cherry and dipped it into the whipped cream before bringing it to her lips. She automatically opened her mouth and he paused, shaking his head.

“But I didn’t ask you to eat it.” Plopping the fruit into his own mouth, he tore the cherry from the stem, his white teeth flashing before his lips closed. Spitting the pit into his hand, he threw it on the table and took a strawberry, dipping it before bringing it to her lips.

Her eyes pleaded with him until he finally gave in, sliding the fruit between her lips. When she tried to suck his finger inside, he grinned and pulled it away.

He continued his exploration and kissed a line straight down the center of her chest, passing her swollen breasts. They started leaking milk and he paused to lap it up with his tongue.

Ember was whimpering when he finished but he didn’t stop. Slowly, he moved down over her belly, kissing the stretch marks, a badge to remind them of the two gifts they’d received.

A quick peek at his wife's face showed her holding her eyes tightly shut as she tried to control her urge to scream. He slipped between her legs and her eyes flew open, desperate hope in them.

He chuckled when she snapped her eyes shut again. Sliding his hand slowly up the inside of her trembling thigh, he lifted her leg and put it over his shoulder, doing the same with her other leg.

Ember was rocking her head back and forth. Her jaw clenched. When his lips touched her core, she screamed but he kept going, using his tongue and lips to tease her until a short time later her hips jerked over, and over as an orgasm pounded through her in thick waves of pleasure.

Putting on a condom he slipped inside, cautious of hurting her. He seized her lips and worshiped her body as his hips thrust at a steady pace. He didn't stop when her hands threaded through his hair, holding his lips to hers, or when her hands pulled too hard, holding on desperately as her second orgasm rocked her, taking him with her over the edge of desire fulfilled.

Ember gasped. "Oh, Phoenix! I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you?"

Not knowing what she meant, he chuckled and lifted his head from her breast where he lay, spent and replete. "Did you hurt *me*? Aren't I supposed to be the one asking that question?"

Holding the hair in front of his eyes, she looked surprised when he laughed until tears streamed down his cheeks. His whole body shook hers as he lay on top of her, his softened rod still resting inside her.

“What is so funny?” she asked, confused.

Wiping at his tears, he said, “You’ve...been ripping...my hair out...since our...first time together...I was thinking...of buying a wig!” He dissolved into laughter again.

“You never told me!” she accused.

“It’s worth it. Rip away. You’re worth every strand.” He kissed her, his body still shaking with mirth.

Some time later, they lay quietly together in the silent house. Together, they spoke at the same time.

“I want to move to Bancroft.” Laughing, they both asked, “You do?”

Ember sat up, giggling.

Reaching over the side of the bed, she squawked when his hand met her bare bum but laughed, lifting up her art pad.

“I did this the other day. It just came to me. At first, I didn’t know what it was but then I realized that this is our future. I want to raise the kids away from the city, near your family.” Raising his eyes to meet his, she said, “Our family.”

He brushed her lips with a kiss.

“I’ve been thinking about it too. As a matter of fact, I put in for transfer. I should have asked you first, Ember, but I just had to do it.”

The drawing of the handsome log home made him smile. “I know where this is. There is a lot near Mom’s place. She sectioned off the entire property into parcels of one hundred acres for each of us. This is my parcel. See that boulder beside the thick pine tree? That’s at the front of the property facing the road.”

“Do you mean it’s a go? We can move home?” Ember asked, smiling, her eyes simmering with love.

Loving the way she accepted his family as hers and how they always seemed to want the same things, he cupped her face with his warm palm. “When?”

Shrieking with joy, she threw the pad and tackled him, kissing him with a loud, wet smacking sound.

“You are the best husband a girl could have! I found a builder and gave him a copy of the plans to see what would be involved and he can have it up in three months once the ground is broken. Since it’s only March, we have all summer.”

Pretending to be angry, he growled, “You chose the house and builder without me?”

Her face dropped, her excited expression turning to dismay.

“Well of course I did. Don’t you want your brothers to help us build our dream home?”

Phoenix couldn't hide the amusement in his eyes and laughed when she hit him with a pillow, crying, "You brat! You knew I had done it all along, didn't you?"

"Taran didn't want me to deck him for going behind my back so he called me two days ago, swearing me to secrecy. We can break ground next week, since I already have the permits and Taran will take care of all the other details. There's already a well drilled and that's the biggest thing to worry about. There's plenty of water."

"Oh, Phoenix! I'm so happy!"

A leering grin lit on her face, she mused aloud, "I think...it's time for payback." Diving on top of him, she giggled as they wrestled on the bed. Soon their lips met and the fires rekindled between them, burning bright as the two flames united into one.

*The End*



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Author Bio:

I have written creatively since my youth. I've written for newspapers, and did technical writing as an Environmental Technologist. I also write non-fiction about health and environmental issues. As a fulltime author I am tenacious and creative with my stories, losing myself in my characters and their exciting lives. The paranormal fascinates me to no end and I think cops are hot! It's wonderful to live for a few moments as a cop, private investigator, or firefighter, to name a few characters, as I weave stories filled with danger and suspense. Many of my characters are multi-cultural; First Nation, Asian, Black, and more... I love this job!