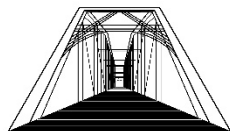


HEROES OF THE FLAME
RISE OF PHOENIX

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ELIZABETH ANDERTON



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DEDICATION

I have a few people to thank, so this may take a moment. Buckle your seatbelts!

Ok, the first person I would like to thank (and emphasize) for introducing me to my publisher is Sachin. I couldn't have done these final vital steps in the upcoming journey of becoming who I want to be without his help. Another very special person I would like to emphasize—even prioritize—is my best friend and unbiological “twin” Keira, who got me into writing in the first place. Keira, I couldn't have fallen in love with writing without those long, hysterical Facetime writing sessions. Because of those, the quotes document will never die, and I will forever laugh at the typos we both wrote and said.

I would also love to thank my parents, for being so supportive. It can't be easy having a teenage daughter! Especially not these days. . .but I'm trying, and I hope this book will be the start of something amazing that will prove that, including to myself.

Ok, we're almost there! Just a couple more! You're doing great!

Thank you, Mrs. Burroughs and Mrs. Gunn, my favorite English teachers (so far) in high school. You're both incredibly supportive, and your classes have given me such joy other classes can't replicate in the same way.

My next thank-you goes to God, for helping me to write, and learn how to, and for giving me the talent in the first place. There is so much I would love to thank him for, but if I did that this would go on for much longer than the average teenage attention span (though for adults I'm not so certain), and let's face it—I've already maxed it out as much as possible.

And thank you, readers, for choosing this book to share this timeless tale and for choosing Brin's life to dive into and enjoy along with her. (Ok, maybe enjoy is a strong word, at least for her...) and I couldn't thank you enough for letting me take up small moments between classes or meetings, hours at home on the couch, or even precious moments at midnight when you can't sleep or are at a friend's house. You help make this dream of mine possible.

“The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire.” -
Ferdinand Foch

Anyway, to the story . . . 🔥

CHAPTER - 1

ALLEYWAY

The dark alleyway crawled with rats who moved in and out of the dancing shadows. My eyes darted from one corner to the next, scanning every sign and every possible landmark in the dingy place in the hopes of figuring out where I'd gone wrong. All I found were grimy dumpsters lining the sides of the brick high-rises every few yards or so, typically next to one locked door after another. Somehow, I'd taken a wrong turn on my way to the park my friends and I had agreed to meet at that night, despite having made the journey millions of times since I'd moved back to New York City.

I continued down the alley, knees slightly bent and ready to spring, arms poised to hit. A chill ripped through my spine as the feeling that someone was watching me raced through my mind. Great. A defenseless sixteen-year-old girl sneaking around in a strange alley late at night, without permission, in New York City. Not the best situation in the world. A burst of adrenaline surged through my veins like fire. Something inside—my instincts, I guessed—urgently whispered for me to run. I disagreed. I'd become a bit of a thrill seeker, drunk on adrenaline. My instincts continued to urge me to leave, and for a moment I paused, listening to all the voices in my head. I had a really bad feeling about this. As I was deciding, my legs seemed to get bored and carried me farther into the alleyway, worsening the feeling of foreboding.

Suddenly, a dark figure appeared. Then another, and another, until I was surrounded. The first figure stepped out of the shadows, wearing a nasty grin accessorized by a jagged, crude scar along the side of his face and still bleeding cuts on his lip, cheek, eyebrow, and chin, like he'd just come from a fist fight. My own hands twitched eagerly at the thought of my bony fists connecting against his bleeding skin and jawbone, but I resisted the urge to swing.

"Well, what's a pretty, young thing like you doing in a dirty, dangerous place like this?" the man asked, casually stepping closer like he was a friend and asking about my day.

I stiffened, which he seemed to take notice of in an instant. His smile curled into a sneer.

"Aww, is the little girl getting scared? I wonder where her parents are?"

His eyes considered me. I flinched just slightly. The man raised his chin, further inspecting me.

"Or maybe . . .," he murmured to himself, seeming to take in my appearance, "she's alone?" He seemed amused by the idea.

"But I wonder," he began again, walking around me in a predatory circle, "if she knows how dangerous New York can be at night." His smile grew hungry.

"Boys, maybe we should teach her a lesson about wandering into places she shouldn't?"

He seemed to play with the words, clearly enjoying himself as he said them, like a school bully stretching out his upper hand during a fight. In the blink of an eye, he seemed to lose patience. He raised his arm, flicked his hand in a "go" motion, and the crowd closed in around me, choking off any hope of escaping alive.

Cold, hard terror and anxiety crashed into me like waves, surprising me so much I staggered. I hadn't felt those since . . . no. I attempted to throw up a mental wall as the dark memory resurfaced, but my mind began to cloud, try as I might to resist. Perhaps dying was a chance to finally be done with it all. Yes, I wanted to be done. The memory pressed against my hopelessness, willing me to accept what was coming to me . . . but not like this.

Stubbornness filled my veins—if I was going out, it was going to be with a bang.

I stepped towards the closest gang member and got him right in the jaw. A satisfying crunch cracked in the air as he gasped in agony, clutching his jaw. I swung at the next member, but this one was ready for me. He caught my fist, twisted my arm, and kicked me to the ground. Pain filled my side as I gasped for air. The world was in such a blur. One moment he was a few steps from me, the next he was hovering over me with a knife in his hands. Our eyes met and mine widened. As he got ready to end it, my hands groped the ground for something—anything—to throw at him. My fingers wrapped around a rough, cold object and I threw it at him. It smacked him right in the nose, cracking a little and leaving behind some grime before crashing to the ground and shattering. I'd managed to get a glass bottle. While that guy was occupied, I found a full trash bag lying next to a dumpster and picked it up, arms straining, and swung it at the next guy that came for me. He was out of the way as the bag knocked him into the wall.

I glanced up to face the next opponent. As she approached, I noticed a wide-open exit. It led deeper into the alley, but it was better than nothing. I ditched the heavy bag with a grunt and dashed farther into the alleyway, pounding footsteps pursued behind me. My breaths became steadily shallower in panic, and I sped up as my legs strained. I was practically flying through the shadows, not daring to stop for anything. Suddenly, an obstruction appeared in the gloom and I skidded to a stop, just barely keeping from crashing into the end of the alley. The footsteps were getting closer.

Panicked, I searched the area for a place to hide, but there was nothing that would conceal me well enough. The dumpsters were mostly empty and I figured the gang would check there pretty quickly, all the doors were locked, and there were no shadows big enough in the dim lamplight to hide in.

Immediately my thoughts shifted to what my grave would say? Probably: “Brinley Connelly, disobedient daughter, crazy party girl, and school disappointment. Hopefully Heaven will straighten her out.” I wondered how my parents would react to me going missing.

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Would they be mad? Would Mom miss me—despite all the mistakes I'd been making recently? Or would she just be sorry they'd been so hard on me, whether or not I deserved it? Would my dad miss me? I doubt it. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and pressed myself against the wall, ready to accept defeat. So this was how it would end. The infamous "Crazy Connely" defeated by a few gang members. My palms pressed against a few of the bricks to feel the real world before I disappeared forever. I didn't even know what to expect when it came to death. Would it hurt? Would I see a light? Would I just disappear into a timeless void? I knew some of my relatives believed that when you die you go to Heaven or Hell, but I wasn't so sure. I took a few deep breaths before opening my eyes again. As I watched the gang members finally appear, I braced myself for death. I just wished I could say goodbye to my friends and family and apologize for how I'd been recently.

But death never came. Instead, the alley faded away, and I found myself in a giant, dark room, as if I'd slipped through a door in the wall.

CHAPTER - 2

STATUE

There was no obvious way in or out. A pulling sensation tugged at my core. A vague thought pricked at my consciousness. After some difficulty, I managed to force it into words. It was a thought I could interpret.

The only way out is the same way you came in.

By fading through the wall? I took a few deep breaths to fight off the panic. How long before the gang members found me? I couldn't be that far away from the alley. Another thought pricked me.

They won't find you here, said my consciousness or whatever it is sending me these messages. Or maybe I was imagining it. Was it possible to hallucinate from panic? I had no idea, and I didn't have much of a desire to find out. A third thought pricked me.

You have two choices—go home or face a challenge.

I could go home? But how? And even if I did, my mom had to know by then that I'd snuck out. She'd be furious. And if she hadn't noticed yet, then she'd be able to figure it out by my dirty clothes and my bleeding knuckles. It was too late to turn back. But what challenge would I face? Surely it couldn't be worse than what my mom would have in store for me? What even was this place?

Turn around, a voice seemed to whisper in my ear.

I jumped about a foot and stumbled, twisting around to face the other side of the room. I gasped. On the other side of the room

stood a massive, gently glowing statue of a giant bird . . . a phoenix. As in, the mythical animal. I felt a pulling sensation drawing me towards the statue, and I limped over to it. Somewhere in the run, I must've pulled a muscle, or maybe it was when I tripped and twisted just then. As I approached, the statue came into more detail. My eyes widened at the intricate feathers in the swooping wings, the sharp points of the clawed talons gripping a stone branch, the cruel smoothness of the beak, the strong torso, and the intensity of the sparkling, ruby red eyes that seemed to stare directly at me when I came closer. As I examined it, my eyes couldn't help being drawn to two orbs it carried in its swooping wings, which folded a little around the bottom of the torso. One was a brilliant, fiery red that deepened into a mysterious, blood red in the center, while the other one was a clear blue that deepened into navy, like the depths of an ocean. Just looking at the blue orb gave me anxiety. I kept walking closer until I stood right in front of them.

Choose, the voice commanded gently in my ear like a soft wind.

“What if I don't want to?” I whispered. I could've sworn I could hear chuckling.

You may stall destiny, but not avoid it. You have been chosen.

For what, though? Chosen to be a disappointment to my family since I just couldn't get over my past? Chosen to be a failure because I'd rather die than live? Chosen to be a freak? What was the point? The only reason I could see for living was to feel the rush in my veins, the burn of adrenaline—the kind you could only get by breaking rules and running a risky game. I felt the familiar loneliness and pain settle on me, dragging me below the surface of the water. And I let it. There was no way back from where I was going. The pain solidified into complete numbness in minutes. I closed my eyes to watch the darkness settle in.

Suddenly, a warm breeze blew past my heart, reawakening the fighter that had been dormant for what felt like a lifetime. A fire sparked in my heart.

You already have the spark for the flame. All you need is the wind for a blaze, the voice whispered.

A bright hope glittered somewhere in the depths of my being, shedding a small amount of light on the black pain. It intrigued me with its blazing warmth in my numb and frosty wasteland, offering the idea that life could once again dwell in that space like it had when I was a kid.

You have potential . . ., the voice seemed to consider for a moment. *Choose*, it commanded.

I stared at the orbs. I could feel this was a second chance. A way to redeem myself. A way to prove to myself I was good enough. That I wasn't a failure or a disappointment. My eyes darted between the two orbs.

"Be wise," the voice advised, sounding like the wind.

I took a deep breath. I already knew which one I preferred and why. My shaking hands reached out for the fiery orb, eager to feel its forgiving warmth. True to its color, it gave off a soothing warmth that seemed to defrost my entire body, melting away the pain and hopelessness.

I stared into the swirling reds, unable to look away. I breathed a sigh of relief as I let it in. And for a moment, the world was bright and clear, like it had been when I was a kid. As suddenly as the feeling came, it left, but the warmth stayed. The orb glowed brighter and seemed to hum with energy. Before I knew what was happening, it started dissolving into some sort of fiery energy, which climbed up my arms and into my heart, burning my upper left arm just below my shoulder in the process. In the blink of an eye, I felt an energy swirling and writhing in my core, filling up that empty space that constantly craved adrenaline. As I looked around, I could physically see all of the places warmth emitted in the room that ordinarily I would not have known about. It was like an extension of my body. Everything looked flammable. Then I blinked and the warmth disappeared. The swirling in my core faded away, but I could feel its presence was still very much there. Half of me screamed in panic, but the other half was strangely calm and reserved. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes to enjoy it. When I opened them, I was in my bed at home—still in the clothes I'd been in when I'd been attacked, except there was no sign that

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anything had happened. It was as if the fire had melted away the bleeding and the dirt and not just the numb and pain. Before I hadn't believed in miracles, even small ones like that. Now I wasn't sure what I believed.

CHAPTER - 3

FIRE, FIRE

“Where were you?” a familiar voice from behind me asked.

I turned around to find Mason glaring at me. We’d made a bet on whether or not our friend Ace Pierce would show up. Apparently while I was facing death in the alley, he had actually shown up. I bit my lip to keep the smile down and took a breath to calm the jittery warmth in my chest as I turned to face him.

“I got lost,” I replied honestly.

Mason snorted. “Yeah, right. You know the area like the back of your hand.” He shook his head. “Nah, what’s the real reason?” he insisted.

“No really, I somehow took a wrong turn. By the time I made it out, I’d been gone too long.”

I was pretty good at partial truths. Mason scrutinized me as if remembering the same thing. I stared back at him, challenging him to accuse me of lying. He shook his head and offered me a surprised look.

“You really got lost?”

I nodded. “Mhm.”

I turned around and kept walking towards the entrance of Glacey High, the closest high school to my house. Within seconds, Mason had caught up to me and matched my stride.

“So . . . are you free after school today?” he asked, glancing at me.

Had I just caught a faint nervous glint in his eyes? Wary of what that meant, I put my cool girl face on. I shrugged.

“I don’t know—I have homework my mom is making me do tonight. Why?”

I wanted to see if I could pull out the reason behind the nervousness. I already had an idea why, but Mason shrugged.

“I don’t know, I just figured . . . if you weren’t doing anything . . .” His voice shook slightly.

I raised an eyebrow, causing his cheeks to flush. That proved it. I sighed.

“Mason . . . I don’t know. Why do you wanna hang out so badly?” I asked.

He shrugged. “You just seem kinda distant lately, is all. I miss you.” Mason scratched his head.

I took a deep breath. I needed to do this gently.

“What’s the real reason?” I asked quietly, careful to make it seem less like I forced the words through gritted teeth and more like I was genuinely curious.

He smiled, although it seemed a little forced.

“What do you mean?” he asked hesitantly.

I chewed on my lip. Mason was my best friend. I didn’t want to lose him—but he could get incredibly touchy when it came to emotions. A scene flashed before my eyes of Mason as a freshman, flipping his lunch on a senior’s shirt the previous year. The senior had been obnoxiously taunting Mason about being cooler than the ‘coolest kid’ in our grade, as he was older and knew so much more about life. I don’t know why, but for some reason Mason took it personally, and his temper flared. He’d never really gotten mad at me before, but there had been a few times I’d been afraid he would. When Mason was mad, you better run. My mom never liked Mason for his lack of control over his emotions. I liked him for that. He made me feel a little less crazy. I tugged self-consciously at my backpack’s straps as we walked towards our lockers. They just “happened” to be right next to each other, since Mason had bribed

another kid in our class to switch lockers with him in order to be next to me. I put my things in my locker in silence, trying to figure out what to say. Finally, he sighed.

“Fine. I’ll . . . I’ll tell you.” His voice shook slightly.

I nodded and waited. He took a few deep breaths, glancing around the hallway.

“Come closer—I don’t want people hearing this,” Mason insisted.

I rolled my eyes and stepped closer. The tips of our toes were almost touching. He leaned forward as if to whisper something in my ear. Suddenly, a crazy look sparked in his eyes that I knew all too well. He wore that look every time he was about to “go big or go home,” as he’d say. His head changed trajectory, and within an instant, his mouth was on mine. His hand cupped my cheek as he kissed me. I just stared wide-eyed. I didn’t think he’d do that. I could feel some fire in the kiss, too, which was really awkward. After a few seconds he pulled away, flushed and seeming not entirely there. A blink later he was staring at my surprise, and I watched with dread as cold, hard fear and embarrassment darkened his face.

“You don’t feel the same?” he whispered.

By then a lot of people in the hallway had noticed what was going on and stood around taking photos and videos of the exchange: one of the coolest guys in school was being rejected by one of the coolest party girls. I shook my head gently.

“You’re like a brother to me,” I whispered.

His eyes widened, instantly letting me know I’d said exactly the wrong thing. I watched as an angry fire lit up his eyes. He took a few deep breaths, but the anger and pain won out. He slammed his locker door shut and stomped off, plowing through a group of gawking freshmen in his rage. Once he had disappeared around the corner, I closed my locker and banged my head on it. What had I done? I just hoped it would blow over soon. I didn’t want to lose my best friend. The bell rang and I was forced to remove my now aching head from my locker and trudge to my next class. At least I didn’t have first period with him. Maybe after he threw some things around, we could talk.



Me

Hey, are you still mad at me?

I waited anxiously for him to reply. The text went from “Delivered” to “Read,” but there was no reply. After a few minutes, my phone dinged.

Mason

Water girl.

I stared in complete shock at what he’d called me. That had been a nickname the doctors had given me. He knew I hated that name more than anything. I gritted my teeth against a roaring wave of pain, helplessness, and anger. How could he? I’d tried not to hurt him! Now he thought he could do that in revenge? I threw my phone onto my bed and laid down on it, hands covering my face. It was my fault. I should have waited a little longer to prod it out of him so that I could think of a better reply than “you’re like a brother to me,” especially in front of the entire school! Cloudy, black self-hatred crept up my spine and slithered like dirty water into my heart. But it couldn’t settle where it usually did. The strange energy burned it away immediately. My phone dinged again. I forced myself to check it.

Mason

Don’t talk to me.  

Tears blurred my vision and threatened to spill over. When they did, they released a strange rush, and I lost my balance a little, so I quickly laid back down to steady myself. Then I smelled something burning—like fabric. My hands felt weirdly warm, like they’d been

touching a heater for a while. I sat up and glanced down at them. They were red and smoking. With a yelp, I bolted off my bed and waved my hands around to cool them down before staring at the hand-shaped burn marks on my blanket. The energy writhed in my heart. Horrified, I glanced down at my shaking hands.

“What the heck?” I gasped, my voice cracking from panic.

I felt another strange rush as my hands began smoking. With a burst of energy my hands suddenly caught fire. A terrified scream ripped out of me, and I tried to put out the fire using a blanket lying on my floor, but that only spread the fire. I heard footsteps approaching my door. I dashed into my bathroom, turned on the sink, and plunged my burning hands and blanket under the cool water, sighing in relief as the water put out the fire. As I watched the water run over my hands, I noticed that the fire hadn’t burned me. It had only burned the cloth it had touched, but not my skin. My mind flashed back to the previous night, remembering how the orb had seemed to dissolve into me. What was that thing? My thoughts were interrupted by a knock on my door.

“Brin? Are you okay? I heard a scream,” my mom asked from behind the doorway.

I glanced at my terrified reflection in the mirror.

“Mhm!” I replied.

She seemed to weigh how true that was before she left. Carefully, I took my hands out from under the water. They were still smoking, and the room had filled with steam. I gingerly dried them on a towel like I was handling a grenade, then stared at them. How had that happened?

I rushed out of the bathroom, opened my computer, and looked up anything relevant to what was happening to me, even searching comic books, having to take my hands off the keyboard occasionally when they smoked a little worse. I skimmed through most of it, but I found a few articles particularly interesting. There were some old urban legends of people who disappeared, then came back with mysterious abilities. The descriptions weren’t quite the same, but it was the closest I’d gotten to what was happening with me apart from the comics. I found a few superheroes I was already familiar

with—Human Torch, X-Men’s Phoenix, Superman, the works. I clicked on Phoenix’s profile and read through her abilities. I wondered if I had any control over the fire in me. Now that my hands had finally stopped smoking, I had no desire to reignite them. But . . . could I do it again? I would never know if I didn’t try. I closed my eyes and tried focusing on the swirling sensation in my heart. Nothing happened. I tried over, and over, and over, and over again, but still nothing happened. After what felt like the hundredth try, I was ready to throw something heavy across the room. I tried it one more time, still frustrated, and I finally felt a rush up my arm and a warmth on my hand. Frustration exploded into satisfaction at my victory. But then it went out. I just stared at my hand for a minute, contemplating my failure and chewing my lip. After trying several times more, I still got nothing. Why was using this stuff on demand so hard?



In the bathroom at school a few days later, I tried it again. It worked for a full minute. Over the past few days, I’d been trying relentlessly whenever I was alone. Most of the time it didn’t work, so whenever it did, I cherished it. It seemed to work the best whenever I felt some sort of strong emotion, particularly negative emotions, although the positive ones did seem to do something. I watched as the flame slowly burned down, leaving my palm bare and returning the cool air in the lemon disinfectant-smelling bathroom. I was using this practice time to skip homeroom. I hated homeroom. Especially now that Mason wasn’t speaking to me. He’d moved into my homeroom group a few weeks ago, and we’d been dubbed the “Dynamic Duo of Destruction.” It was great. I remember when he first joined, he’d given the teacher a “gift” the both of us had made him. Mr. R. had happily opened the gift—only to be slimed in the face. It stained his white shirt pink, and everyone had found it hilarious for months—except for him, that is. He’d given Mason

detention, and I served it with him, even though there was no evidence tying me to the crime.

I laughed at the memory, but it turned into a sigh, with regret swelling in my heart. We could still be friends, I just didn't . . . well, I didn't want to be with him. Not in that way. I'd only ever liked a few guys before, and it had never ended well. My luck was never good. I hadn't liked anyone for a long time—I'd given up all that. There really was no point when you were like me.

The regret burned up, causing my skin to warm and making my entire body smoke. After a few deep breaths it stopped. I'd found out the hard way only the day before that just because my skin was fireproof, it didn't mean my clothes were too. I'd lost my favorite top in the process. And my favorite pants. The bell jarred through my thoughts bringing me back to the present. I grabbed my things and walked to my next class.

As soon as the teacher walked in, I realized I'd forgotten to do my homework. Despite the fact that I was a little crazy and a disappointment, my grades were still passing—if barely. Anxiety spiked as that realization thudded to the base of my stomach. With how low my grades were, I really couldn't afford a single missing assignment. It was too late now, though. Classmates stood up and turned in their homework. Dreading the face I'd see my teacher make, I made sure I was the last one up as I trudged over to the homework basket. I took a steadying breath and began to put my empty homework sheet in the basket, but I never got to set it down.

The bang of an explosion filled the air. Screaming. So much screaming. Everyone in my class looked up and strained their necks in the direction of the explosion. There were more explosions and more screaming, until the noise got so close, I was sure it was in the next room—

“Everyone DUCK!” my teacher yelled as the back wall blew out, spraying bits of dust and dry wall everywhere and blanketing the entire back of the room in debris.

The hole took up at least half of the back wall, through which a dark figure emerged in the midst of the debris-filled air. I sank to my knees, coughing like everyone else from the grime. All the

homework was scattered, and I noticed immediately how close the homework was to the burner, which a piece of debris smashed, leaving an untamed flame going. A trail of hazy, pink heat emanated from the flame, and I watched it as it wafted across the room and over classmates and debris. I could feel the potential it held as if it was asking me to use it. Distracted by it, my eyes tracked the hazy pink heat path as it spread through the homework, over the cabinets, through some of the appliances, and straight over one of the kids in my class. It kept going past where I could see it, but I was intrigued by the possibility of the flame. The figure stepped out of the rubble with an evil grin, drawing my attention back to the present. Something pricked my mind. That smile looked familiar. Why did it look familiar?

“Oh Brinleeeeyy,” the stranger called, gazing around the room.

“Where are you hiding? I know you’re in here!” His voice sounded a little strange—strained—and the tone made it obvious that, whoever he was, he’d lost his mind.

“Come on out—I won’t hurt you. I just wanna have a little . . . uh, talk. You know, like what you wanted to do the other day?” he taunted, walking into the center of the room. For the first time, I noticed his black clothing, and I had to bite my lip to stop myself from letting out a yelp when I saw . . . black vines? They encircled his legs, went up his chest, and came out like tentacles on his back. They donned so many vicious-looking thorns they almost looked bulky. His upper face was marred by shadows no matter where he looked or stood. Why couldn’t he see me? I was in plain sight. But whenever his eyes searched the area I was in, they seemed to glaze right over me. His grin only grew worse with each passing second.

“Alright, play it the hard way. I’ve always liked hard to get.” He searched another minute before his grin faltered and an angry light entered his eyes.

“Did you lie to me? Now that we can talk, you don’t even take the chance!”

I had no idea what he was talking about. The only person I’d talked to like that recently was . . . Mason. Mason’s face flashed in

my memory—that same grin, only a little more sane than this guy’s, and the same voice but steadier—it all clicked into place.

“Oh Mason. What happened to you?” I whispered, grief stricken. The sudden grief took me aback for a moment.

Getting impatient, Mason stretched his hand out, causing one of his tentacles to copy his movement, and flicked the burner towards the homework pages. My eyes widened as they caught and spread immediately like a wildfire in a bone-dry forest. Mason laughed in delight, and the sound of it sent chills up my spine. Mason had never laughed like that, not even during his craziest moments. Like when he’d jumped off a roof into a pile of hay the previous summer. He’d been allowed to come with my family back to our old town when we were visiting friends.

My old best friend thought he was mentally unstable. I didn’t blame her. As far as I knew, he probably actually was, but I couldn’t really judge, considering my own state. The sound of crackling flames on wood roused me from the flashback. Mason picked his way through some of the rubble as he made his way out the door.

“Wait!” Clary squeaked.

He turned around. “Yes?”

He seemed to think she was about to give me away. I was honestly a little worried she would.

“Who—who are you?” she managed to squeak out before her voice got so strained with fear, she seemed unable to form any other words.

Mason smirked. “Black Thorn.”

He turned around and exited, walking around the corner and out of sight. I sighed in relief and got up from the floor. A few people jumped at the sight of me, including Clary.

“Where were you that entire time?” Clary nearly yelled, terror still glittering in her eyes.

I furrowed my brows. “What do you mean? I was right here,” I replied in confusion.

One of the boys—I hadn’t bothered to remember half of my classmates’ names—shook his head. “No. You disappeared after the explosion, then reappeared just now.”

I shrugged. The crackling flames soon had everyone's attention. The entire class exited the room as the teacher went to find the nearest fire extinguisher. I don't know why he didn't already have one; it just shows how much Glacey High sucked. A strange pull tugged on my chest, begging me to go to the fire. I obeyed, curious as to what would happen. It pulled me closer and closer until I was touching the flames. I took a breath in, before enjoying the feel of the flames on my skin. It was still a little freaky that it didn't burn me, but I was slowly getting used to that. Suddenly, the pull tightened and the flames seemed to be vacuumed into my hand. I felt a searing blaze all the way up my arm and into my stomach. It hurt in a strangely satisfying way. Pain ripped through my gut like I was being burned from the inside. Or even cooked. I gasped as it spread through my gut. My skin got increasingly warmer and warmer until it grew unhealthily flushed. I ran through the hole in the wall, paying no attention to how fast I was going, until I was outside in the open air. My instincts took over, and I shoved the scorching warmth from my body. It sprayed from my hands like they were a blowtorch, licking the air hungrily but finding no fuel. Then the warmth was gone. A relieving emptiness settled in my gut as the burning healed. I walked around the school until I found the mass of evacuated students standing in lines and slipped in before anyone could figure out I'd been missing.

CHAPTER - 4

FACING MASON

“Are you alright Birdy? Are you hurt?” Mom practically smothered me in a hug when I got home an hour after the “Black Thorn” attacked the school.

“Mom, I can't breathe!” I pushed away from her, gasping.

She had always been a little stronger than she knew. She offered me an apologetic smile, pairing it with an almost hysterical laugh.

“I'm sorry, Birdy. You could've been killed!” Her voice got an octave higher and strained at that last part. She only did that when she was about to have a mental breakdown about something (well, crying hysterically for an hour, refusing to get off the couch or out of bed, etc.).

A while back, we had to go to a psychiatrist because I'd been acting weird, and we found out I'd inherited some . . . unwanted things from my family after he asked a series of questions. Mom had decided it was her fault instantly, and as soon as we got home, she spiraled downhill worse than she ever had before. Dad had to make dinner, wash dishes, help my siblings with their homework, do the rest of the housework, pay the bills, put my siblings to bed, and attempt to get some work done for his job. I'd decided then and there to be as independent as I could. I even helped Dad with some of the chores, since I felt bad. I blamed myself for most of

everything that was happening. As my mind began to focus on another unhappy memory, I snapped myself back to reality.

“I have homework I need to do,” I lied.

Mom nodded and released me. I practically sprinted upstairs, threw my bag down, and got a lighter. I hadn’t touched it since I’d moved to New York. That had been a dark first couple of weeks. Let’s just say, I’d nearly tried some very . . . unhealthy habits in an attempt to fit in and make some friends. I wouldn’t advise going down that path. I’d thrown away most of the stuff from that time, but for some reason, I liked the lighter. Now I was glad I’d not thrown it away. I lit it and touched the flame, feeling the now semi-familiar sensation of touching fire without being burnt.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to recreate the sensation I’d felt when I’d seemed to absorb the flames consuming my classroom. After a few minutes, I managed to draw in the tiny flame. The only problem was, I didn’t know what to do with it. It didn’t hurt nearly as much to absorb such a tiny flame as it did to absorb that blaze, thankfully, so I guessed I had more time to figure out how to dispel it. I tried thrusting my hand forward, as if the momentum would help. I tried taking deep breaths and imagining the flow. I even tried using the small bit of heat I could feel in my gut to light my hand on fire. Finally, I tried pushing the heat out. At first it didn’t work, but after a minute, I felt a change and a small flame spit out of my hand, dissipating in the air.

A small smirk hovered over my face. So that was how you did it. I practiced for hours, for the first time eager to see what I could do. I was especially curious as to why “Black Thorn” hadn’t been able to see me when I was right there. I added that to the slowly growing list of things I needed to figure out. Also on that list was to ask Mason how he’d become the Black Thorn. Or if it really was him. It had to be! That smirk had been way too familiar, and he’d addressed me particularly. Possibilities flew through my mind. When I faced him about it, what if he denied it? What if he was scared, or he didn’t want to stop? Or what if it controlled him, and he didn’t remember whenever he was Black Thorn? What if he was the Black Thorn full time? How did he even become Black Thorn?

Had he found an orb like mine? If so, did that mean I could become a villain? I shuddered at the thought. No, I didn't want to be a villain. I'd much rather be a hero.

Could I be a hero? I wondered absentmindedly as a small bonfire curled up my arm from my palm and licked the air. I suppose it was a possibility. To be honest, something deep inside did actually want to be the hero for once instead of the victim, or the troublemaker. I couldn't stop stirring up trouble, so I might as well use these talents—including the new fiery one—to actually do something useful. Maybe even turn myself around. On the other hand, it could actually make things worse. I had no idea. Real superheroes do not exist. Or if they do, they do a really good job at hiding; maybe I am just incredibly uninformed.

My only problem is that I don't know how to be a superhero. I knew from the comics that you had to have something to contribute, some superpower, and you have to practice it and make a suit and all that, but how would I get a suit?

How would I even find a place to practice? I couldn't practice in my room forever. Eventually, someone would walk in on me, or they'd notice the scorch marks scattered around my room. The only place I could really think of was wherever the phoenix statue had been. Just thinking about that place made me shiver. I didn't want to go back there. Not so soon after I'd nearly died. Too bad that was the best place I could think of for some privacy in New York City.

I mean, I guess I could always look for an abandoned building in a deserted alley. I'd much rather do that than go back to the phoenix statue. I sighed and extinguished the hand-held bonfire. I'd gotten good at lighting fires on my body. I made a mental note to find a better place to practice when things calmed down. Hopefully some place where my closet wouldn't constantly catch on fire.



Me

I need to ask you something. Meet in the science room in 5?

After a couple days of doing virtual school while construction workers and police worked on blocking off certain rooms and rebuilding, I texted Mason. Nothing much had happened in those few days, other than me trying to muster up the courage to confront him about Black Thorn. I doubted he'd respond, though. He hadn't responded to any of my other texts. My eyes widened when I saw the little speech bubble with the ellipsis. After a minute, it disappeared, and I could read the text.

Mason

Fine.

Just one word. That was the most he'd said to me in about a week. I got out of my seat in History and signed out. I tried to make it look like I was going to the bathroom, but in the last few yards, I diverted and went towards the science room, looking over my shoulder to make sure I wasn't caught. I was technically ditching. I made it to the science room just in time. My heart jumped into my mouth as soon as Mason came into view; he slipped in the room and leaned against the wall casually. His eyes lazily swept the area until he found me. Pain flashed in his eyes before he replaced it with indifference. He set his jaw and pushed off the wall, walking towards me. I swallowed my fear and forced my legs to continue standing firmly. We met in the middle of the room. I swallowed.

"Hi." It came out stronger than I felt. As far as I could remember, my voice had never shaken from nerves.

He nodded. After a minute of awkward silence, he glanced around and sighed. I noticed instantly he didn't look me in the eye. Most of the time he avoided looking at me altogether.

"What is it?" he asked, a sharpness evident in his voice. Neither of us wanted to be there. My hand ripped through my hair, messing it up even more than it was.

“Don’t do that,” Mason’s voice sounded strained, like he was holding something back.

My brows furrowed. “Do what?” I asked. He scratched his head, still refusing to look me straight on.

“That thing you do. With your hair, when you’re stressed or uncomfortable.”

A smile hovered over my face. “I never told anyone why I do it,” I whispered.

He grumbled a few words that would’ve made my mom wash his mouth out with soap.

“Hey, it’s fine. It’s . . . kinda sweet you noticed,” I replied, wanting to put him at ease. I reached up to touch his arm like I used to whenever I comforted him, but stopped and pulled back, thinking better of it.

He stared miserably at my hand before turning and staring at the wall.

“I didn’t want to . . . you know.” He sighed.

I nodded. I knew what he meant.

“I know. I never wanted to either,” I replied.

He nodded, taking a deep breath. “I shouldn’t have kissed you. I should’ve just . . . talked it out.” Regret shone heavily in his eyes.

I sighed. “It’s fine. I just want things to get back to normal again,” I admitted.

A small smile curled on his lips. “Me too.”

He finally met my eyes for a second before grimacing and looking away again. I took a deep breath. This was my moment. I didn’t want to ruin this progress, though.

“I . . . have a question,” I whispered.

He nodded, encouraging me to ask. I stuffed my hands in my pocket to keep them steady.

“Do you know anything about Black Thorn?” I asked.

His gaze whipped back to me. “If I did, I’d tell you,” Mason whispered.

I nodded, feeling like an idiot. I’d just indirectly accused him of being a criminal. Honestly, I was just surprised he hadn’t stormed off yet.

“Sorry, it’s just—something about him . . . his smile, I think, reminded me of you. And he mentioned something only you and I know about,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow.

“I remind you of a potential supervillain?” he asked, frowning.

“No, no. It’s not that. I don’t know—maybe I was just missing you and taking another walk down memory lane.” I shrugged. I could see confusion and anger warring in his gaze. I hoped confusion won.

“You’ve missed me?” he asked roughly.

“Of course, I have. I can’t stop thinking about what’s happened with us. You’re important to me, Mason.”

I was a little surprised to find that it felt at least mostly true. I was so used to telling lies that it had become difficult to be completely honest. It really didn’t help that I didn’t know what was true in me, but that’s not much of an excuse for the actions I’d taken in my past.

“Is that all?” he asked, with an edge to his voice.

“Were you expecting more?” I asked.

He shook his head. “When you actually miss someone, you don’t accuse them of being a supervillain.” he growled.

Oh gosh.

“But I do—”

“No, you don’t!” Mason yelled.

I glanced at the door to make sure no one would notice the outburst.

“I’ve seen you! You’re happier with me gone!” Tears formed in his eyes, but he wouldn’t let them fall. I shook my head, staring at him with wide eyes.

“You never even cared. I was just a tool to help you get back at your parents.” He took a shaky breath. “Your wrecked mom and your rich dad . . . be glad you have a dad at all, no matter how he treats you!” he grumbled.

As he walked away, he turned back towards me.

“If you really wanna know if I’m a supervillain, I’ll tell you. But don’t expect anything else from me.”

Then I was left alone in the science room to go over what just happened. I walked back to class in a sort of daze, only partially noticing that I entered the room and sat down.

CHAPTER - 5

HIDEOUTS

The afternoon sunlight cast looming shapes over the snowy sidewalk as I looked around downtown for a good alleyway or abandoned building. At this point, I couldn't practice any longer without a space for myself. The day before, my typical practice in my room hadn't gone well. I'd just lit a decent fire in my hand when my mom burst in with a pile of freshly washed clothes. In an instant, I hid my hand behind my back, hoping she didn't notice the sparks and smoke rising from behind my back. It would freak her out, and she'd have another one of her . . . breakdowns. I didn't want to do that to her, especially since she'd managed not to have one for a while. She was really proud of her current record, and I didn't want to ruin that for her. As she set down the white basket full of clothes for me to organize, I tried to extinguish the flame without moving it. All I could do was hope Mom didn't notice my panicked focus as I attempted to shut off the flame. To my horror, she glanced up in my direction.

But she said nothing, in fact, she seemed to gaze right through me. My mind flashed back to when Black Thorn had appeared, and I'd . . . disappeared. Was that happening again?

Taking a leap of faith in my potential nonexistence, I stayed completely still until she left. As she exited the room, she walked past a mirror on the wall. My blood turned cold with fear at what I saw in the reflection: nothing. Nothing at all. There was my bed, my

dresser, the rest of my untouched room, and the rug I stood on was empty—I just wasn't there! I took a half-step, half-jump back and watched as my reflection reappeared.

Returning to the present, a street lamp was so kind as to introduce itself to my face as I walked absentmindedly down the sidewalk, jolting me out of my reverie. I rubbed my forehead as pain slammed through my skull, and I felt it reach down into my heart, tugging up savage irritation. Several words that would earn you “soap in the mouth” surfaced on my tongue, but I swallowed them before they could take shape. I continued walking, still rubbing my head.

Within an hour, I'd found an abandoned warehouse in a secluded area. I assessed the chains, boards, and various other things that littered the floor or leaned against the high, echoey walls. There were holes in some of the walls, and a few of them looked very unstable. So I hefted some boards around, careful to watch for protruding nails, grabbed a rusty and bent (but in otherwise usable condition) hammer and saw, and got to work patching up all of the holes I could reach.

By the time I finished, it was time for me to get home or Mom would get suspicious. Cautiously, I opened the building's side door slightly and snuck through silently, hoping I wouldn't attract the attention of any nearby gangs. This part of the city was riddled with them. Sure enough, I'd nearly made it to the street when trouble came, and I made a quick promise to myself never to be out in the alleys around dark again. (Note to self: *Don't make promises you can't keep.*)

Shadows of creeping beings snuck up the walls behind me. I could feel their heat and mentally see their positions from it. Two were right behind me, most likely to maintain the upper hand if I made a run for it. Three darted behind dumpsters and cardboard boxes to my left, and two did the same on my right. My hands itched to burst into flames, but I waited cautiously. There was still a chance to get out of this as long as I didn't expose my ability too early on in the fight.

Even with fist fights that left me with broken noses, black eyes, and disappointed parents as my only experience, my feet set into a fighting position, even though I'd never actually learned it. My rewards for the fights I'd been in were usually detentions and being grounded for a month. Here, the punishment for losing would not be so lenient.

It was better to fight them here and now than to go back the way I came—revealing my warehouse—or to keep going and possibly endanger any civilians still out or even expose my fire to more people than necessary, which I was planning on using since it was my only counterbalance to their advantage in numbers. The two gang members behind me—a grungy man and a beat up-looking woman—smiled as I turned around. They said nothing, only advanced towards me. I had an almost overwhelming urge to bolt, but I held my ground, forming a plan for how to get out of this new mess on the spot. I've gotten really good at that recently. As soon as the woman got close, she whipped out a knife and began swinging it at me.

Reflexes I didn't know I had kicked in as I dodged the knife. After about the third swing, my hand shot out, grabbed the handle of her knife, and I watched as it slowly filled with heat. She screamed in pain and dropped the knife.

As she cradled her hand and slunk away, the other gang members finally snuck out of the shadows and surrounded me, some sheathing their weapons in the hopes I wouldn't be able to hurt them the same way, and others confused at what had just happened, warily holding their knives in front of them. A smirk curled on my face, and I flexed my fingers.

Now this is practice, I thought as they closed in. With almost no effort, I found myself flying through them. My limbs seemed to have a mind of their own—and all that was on their mind was survival. Within a minute, half of the gangsters were on the ground. Adrenaline roared through my veins, warming my skin to the point I thought it would catch on fire. As the final gang member fell, I smelled smoke.

Sure enough, my hands were on fire and the rest of my body was slowly starting to fry my clothes. I took a few deep breaths to calm down until the fire flickered and turned off, then I quickly patted the flames off my jacket, leaving scorched fringes around my wrists. I made it around the corner and to a bench next to a nearby phone booth before collapsing. Not the best place—and certainly not the most comfortable—but oh well.

Those strange reflexes had taken a lot out of me. How would I get home? It would take a while for me to regain enough energy for me to walk all the way back to the bus stop, and even then, I wouldn't get there in time to catch the bus based on how long I'd spent fighting for my life against those gang members. I allowed myself a few minutes before staggering to my feet and slowly making my way up the street. I regretted leaving my phone at home in my room and locking the door, but that was the only way to make sure my mom wouldn't know I'd snuck out—well, the only way I could think of on the spot. Too bad that ensured I was alone in the streets of New York all by myself. At the brink of exhaustion, I finally just leaned against the wall of a strangely familiar alleyway and reached out to whoever I thought was listening in my head. I didn't know if there was some “higher being” or whatever, but if there was, I wanted their help. I felt a strange, searing pull.

Look down, a familiar voice seemed to whisper in my ear.

I did and found a trail of small orange flames leading me deeper into the alley. Like a fool, I followed it. What else was I supposed to do? I was exhausted, there was no one around, I had no phone and no way to contact my parents, and I was too far from the bus stop to make it back home in time. As soon as I got a few yards into the alley it all came rushing back—why it was so familiar. Adrenaline surged again as I spurred my legs to move, and I flew through the area until I reached the far back wall. Maybe the gang members were in another area? Or taking the night off? But right as I reached the back wall, I heard the shuffling of multiple sets of feet. In a panicked frenzy I pushed myself up against the wall, thinking if I replicated what happened that night maybe I'd get back

into the room with the phoenix statue. Nothing happened and my panic jolted higher.

Press your hand to the brick, the voice commanded.

I did so, and a bright orange, spidery crack spread from my hand until it formed a doorway in the dirty brick. I melted through the doorway like I had that first night and turned around to face the phoenix statue. *What do I do now?* I wondered, walking up to the statue. The blue orb was still there, which meant no one else had seen the statue since that night. Good. I didn't have to worry about anyone with water powers. Hopefully I never would. If I did, I could easily see us as enemies. Or maybe we'd never meet—New York City is a big place, and the world is even bigger. Anyone could run into the phoenix statue and just take the orb. My mind flashed back to the night I'd gotten my own fire powers. *Then again, maybe not . . .* I remembered the voice telling me I had potential and to take the orb. Lifting my eyes, I stared into the ruby eyes of the phoenix, which seemed to bore into me. I didn't know anything about the statue. It seemed like the voice I kept hearing whenever I was near it or calling out to it—so far—belonged to it. How was that possible? It was only a statue. Or was it? As far as I knew it wasn't a statue at all. If it was a statue, it was the strangest statue I'd ever seen.

Come closer, the statue coaxed.

I obeyed. Somehow, I knew it wouldn't hurt me, no matter how strange and mysterious it was. I approached it until I could reach out and touch it.

Concentrate on the fire in your home, it commanded.

It seemed like a random idea, but I followed through. My mind flashed back to the fireplace in my family's living room. I remembered my first winter in New York, warmed by the fire, completely mesmerized by its glow, and wished I could just . . . become it. I wanted to burn everything and make something new from the ashes.

Flames erupted all over my body, and I couldn't see anything, couldn't feel anything but the warmth and power, couldn't think about anything but the heat. It took me some effort to return my

focus on the place I'd envisioned, but what the phoenix had told me stuck in my head.

Suddenly, I could feel my body reforming and I found myself lying in the fireplace. I hadn't been expecting this to happen, but I wasn't surprised either. Quietly so as not to alert anyone to the fact that I was relaxing in the fireplace, I carefully opened the grate and crawled out, wiping the ash off me. My clothes were badly scorched. I quickly ran up to my room, picked the lock, and changed into good clothes. I was running out of options in my wardrobe—I really needed to find some fireproof or at least fire-resistant clothes. I sighed as I pulled on my last pair of good pants. Now my closet was as empty as Mason's head!

CHAPTER - 6

SUPER START

“Have you seen Mason?” Ace asked me in second period.

I wondered why he was looking for Mason since they weren’t even that close. He’d only been to the park with us once, on the day I got my powers—he wasn’t really that social, but he still tried. I shook my head.

“He’s been kind of distant from me for a while,” I reminded him.

Ace nodded.

“Why are you asking, anyway?”

Ace sighed. “We were supposed to meet up for a project during study hall, but he never showed up.”

Oh, for a project? I wasn’t surprised then. He’d done the same thing to me before.

“Could you text him?” I queried, wondering whether Ace had anyone’s number.

He shook his head. “I only have Bree’s number.” He studied me for a moment before speaking again. “Could I have your number?”

I gazed at him for a moment, wondering whether he actually wanted it or not. Usually, people didn’t want to be my friend. He shifted uncomfortably but stayed firm in his question. Finally, I sighed, deciding he meant it.

I smiled. “Sure,” I agreed hesitantly, pulling out my phone.

Once I'd given him my number, he texted me to make sure it worked. I added his number to my contacts list and gave him a dingo picture since I didn't have any pictures of him on my phone and I figured doing an emoji would be a little stupid. I probably should've already had his number anyway. As soon as I texted him back to show I'd gotten it, I saw a mass of people rushing to class, signaling that it was time to get back to it.

However, on my way to my next class, a crash sounded from across the building, screams following it. I stopped in my tracks. Ace ran up beside me, even though every sensible person was either frozen, asking teachers what was going on, or running away from the noise. Mostly the latter.

"What was that?" he asked in a panicked voice.

"I don't know."

All I knew was that my legs were itching to run towards the sound, and my hands were twitching to light something on fire. I could feel my reflexes drawing me towards whatever had happened. I had no context as to what was causing that, and yet I could feel something in the air had changed.

Danger.

I raced towards it. I dashed through halls, down stairs, and past entire sections of lockers before reaching the chaos. Broken glass was strewn across the floor, shattered to the point of glitter. A few chairs lay splintered on the ground, and a door leading outside hung loosely on its hinges. There was movement in one of the classrooms. Carefully, I stepped around the broken furniture, my feet crunching on glass as I approached. Once I reached the doorway where I'd caught the movement, I froze. There he was. Black Thorn. He paced through the room, hands twitching agitatedly, seeming not to notice me. After a minute, he looked up at me and smiled.

"There you are." His cold voice seemed to slice through the room.

He stalked towards me, driving me back from the door. He kept driving me backwards until I was against the lockers.

"I have you now."

Black Thorn smiled ruthlessly as he reached a black, gloved hand towards me. Anger surged through me, and smoke curled from my hands. I grabbed a locker handle with my hot hands and ripped it right off, my hands melting through the metal, then punched him in the face as hard as I could. He staggered but recovered quickly, unfortunately.

“Is that all you’ve got, firebird?”

I gritted my teeth. Thorn reached out his hand and was about to touch me again when an object soared into view.

“DUCK!” someone yelled.

I did and a wrecked chair hit Thorn right in the gut, causing him to stumble away from me. I staggered towards the voice as Thorn threw the chair at the wall. The chair broke and clattered against the ground in a heap of wood chips and splintered wooden stakes.

“Go! I can handle this!” I yelled breathlessly at whoever had saved me. I heard them come closer.

“How?”

I recognized that voice. It was Ace!

“I’ll think of something!” I growled.

I heard him stumble away—I assumed he left—and I ignited my hands. Thorn smiled, amused by my lighting-up display.

“Fiery hands won’t stop me,” he chuckled.

I shook my head. “Not alone they won’t.”

I had no idea what I was doing, so I hoped my new instincts did. I ran at him and sent a scythe shaped flare of fire at him before ducking a blow and shoving my hot hands in his face. He screamed in pain from the combined attacks, but he was far from dead. I gritted my teeth against the pain of a black substance spreading up my arm when he grabbed at my fingers, trying to pry them off his face. As soon as I pulled away, a rush of heat seared down my arm and burned away the black. Thorn growled something unintelligible and ran at me.

I kicked his feet from under him and stomped my foot hard against the floor. Flames surrounded him, just big enough to contain him for some time. I turned around to find Ace staring at me in awe and fear. I stared back into his brown eyes, momentarily

mesmerized. Flinching, I ripped my eyes away and returned to the problem at hand.

“We need to go!”

Sirens blared from outside the door. As we ran from the scene, I glanced back. The flames and the villain were gone. I sighed and turned my focus back ahead of me.



When my mom opened the door after school that day, she glanced at a shivering Ace and gave me a questioning look.

“We’re working on a school project,” I lied smoothly, wrapping my arms around myself so she wouldn’t notice my lack of shivering.

“Did school get out early?” she asked.

I nodded. “Little accident. They’ll tell you about it later,” I assured her.

She nodded and let us in. We went straight up to my room. As soon as the door was mostly closed, Ace released the confusion I’d made him hold in since the attack at school. All they had done this time was block off the part of the school that had been damaged, but at least we’d ended a little early.

“What—how—why—what WAS that?” Ace started pacing. “I mean, there’s got to be some sort of logical reason for this, right?” His voice went up an octave.

“Why didn’t you leave when I told you to?” I snapped.

Ace paused and looked at me, his brows furrowed in concern and confusion, as if the reason were obvious.

“Because you were in trouble. And . . . you help your friends when they’re in trouble,” he replied a little hesitantly.

I shook my head and threw up my hands in exasperation, accidentally unleashing a curved blade of flame into the air that burned my wall. His eyes widened. I winced, but resolved to deal with that later.

“Why? We don’t even know each other!” I nearly yelled.

His eyes widened and he stopped pacing. I took a deep breath.

“Sorry. Sorry. I just don’t understand how you can be so . . . loyal to someone you barely know,” I whispered, perplexed. I looked away from Ace, already regretting the outburst.

Ace walked up to me and smiled. “Because I want to know you,” he answered.

I nodded slowly. I chose to ignore the slight fear in his eyes as he eyed the new burn on the wall.

He turned back towards me. “But I do have some questions.”

“Okay . . . what do you want to know?” I asked uneasily.

This was taking a strange turn. Ace studied me for a moment.

“You know, the basics. And eventually, the deep stuff. But for right now, I’ll settle for: what just happened? Do you have, uh, superpowers? Or was that some sort of trick?”

I raised the corner of my mouth at his mild humor, my eyes smiling with me. Since he’d literally watched me fight, I figured there was no point trying to hide it anymore.

I nodded. “Yeah. I guess they can be considered superpowers.”

His eyes widened again and I watched in fascination as curiosity drowned out the fear. That had never happened before. I mean, I figured he was still a little scared, but it was nice that . . . well, it was nice that this was going differently than my usual attempt at making friends.

He glanced at me cautiously. “Um, do you mind if I ask more questions?”

Clearly, I had his undivided attention. “Alright. First question?” I replied.

Ace grinned and started pacing. “Okay . . . umm . . . okay, I got the first one,” he turned to face me with his arms out in a low shrugging gesture.

“How?” he wondered, his voice nearly a whisper.

I took a deep breath. “It all started a few weeks ago, the night we were all supposed to meet at the park.” I launched into the story, telling about getting lost somehow, nearly getting killed by gangsters, finding the phoenix statue, gaining my powers, and being transported back home. It felt weird to talk about the statue, like it

was a secret I was meant to keep to myself, but there really was no other way out of this besides telling the truth.

“And . . . ever since I’ve been experimenting,” I finished.

Ace nodded. “So. what exactly can you do? I mean, besides burn your wall with that fire scythe thing.”

I thought for a minute. “I’m not entirely sure. As far as I can tell right now, I can set my hands and body on fire, set other things on fire, burn my clothes, turn invisible, see how flammable things are, and somehow transport myself using fire,” I listed off.

Ace grinned. “That’s cool.”

My cheeks turned pink as I shrugged. “Not the burning my clothes or my room part, but I guess the rest is cool, though,” I admitted. Every kid wanted to be a superhero at some point. I just happened to be the lucky, unlucky one.

Ace laughed. “I bet. I wish I could do that stuff.” Then the rest of what I said seemed to catch up with him.

“Wait—you said it burns your clothes?”

I nodded, and with a flourish, I showed him a trash bin full of burned clothes, then opened my worryingly empty closet. He whistled.

“I can ask . . . mom if I can borrow her old fireproof clothes she used for fire-fighter trainees. I won’t tell her it’s for you.” He glanced at me. “Just make sure you don’t mess up the style or anything, since that would be suspicious. Although I’m pretty sure it’s durable,” he finished.

Why did he hesitate? I rolled my eyes. Ace raised an eyebrow but held my gaze after my eyes had done some exercising.

“Thanks. I’d really appreciate that,” I managed to force out.

He nodded.

“I should probably start practicing,” I said after a moment.

We both just stood there, staring at the burn on the wall. The awkward silence stretched for what felt like forever. I couldn’t take it anymore.

“If you want, you can come with me.”

Ace glanced up, eyebrows raised in surprise.

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind the company.”

Ace smiled. I glanced away again.

“Come on.” Snatching my wallet in case we got hungry, we walked to the bus stop.



“This is where you practice?” Ace asked as we entered the old, abandoned warehouse.

I nodded. “I just found it last night. It’s nice and out of the way.” My voice echoed slightly.

Ace hopped up on some stacked wood. “What’s first?”

I looked around. “No idea,” I admitted, pulling out my phone.

Ace studied me for a minute. “We could go off the comics. That usually has some good info on the supernatural.”

I looked up from my phone. “That’s actually a pretty good idea,” I agreed.

Smiling, he jumped from the stack of wood. I searched up firepower comics and found some interesting things while Ace read over my shoulder. My body stiffened at his closeness, but he didn’t seem to notice. He pointed to a few that looked pretty cool.

“We could try those.”

I shook my head. “Nope, if I’m going to do this, I’m starting with the basics.” I put my foot down.

He laughed. “Sorry, I’m just a little excited. I’ve never had a friend with a superpower.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course, you haven’t. Superheroes aren’t exactly real.” I pointed out.

He shook his head. “You’re proof they are.”

I looked up from my phone and turned towards him, searching his face for any mockery before sighing and looking away.

“I don’t think I’d be a good superhero.”

Ace raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Why not? You have the agility and the powers. You just need the costume and the name and you’ll be all set!”

I shook my head. After a moment, he laid his hand on my shoulder.

“Why not?”

I shook my head again, but this time to get rid of the memories of all my mistakes. Still, one in particular managed to come into focus. The worst one. Anger rushed through my veins like a wildfire. I threw a fireball at the far wall. As soon as it hit the wall it exploded, sending a wave of heat through the frost-encrusted warehouse. The metal wall shuddered but maintained stability. I took a shaky breath.

“Sorry. Bad memories.” I regained my composure quickly. When I looked back at Ace, I found him studying me, like he was trying to figure me out. Goodluck with that . . .

“Alright.” I sighed

It took me a minute to speak again.

“What basic power do we want to look at first?” I asked, turning my phone back on.

“I think we should work on your fireballs,” he decided for us.

I laughed. “What, that mini explosion when I lost my temper wasn’t good enough?” I teased.

Ace smirked. “Oh, it was good. But we can make it better.”

The confidence in his voice temporarily reassured any uneasy feelings I’d had from earlier. If he believed in me, maybe I could be a superhero. My mistakes had led me down a path that wasn’t great, but that’s what the fire was here to remedy. It had already made my anxiety much better than it had been before. Maybe I had a chance at a better life by becoming a superhero. Besides, who else was going to stop Black Thorn? Obviously, the police weren’t doing a good job at it. Perhaps, I could do what they couldn’t. It would be dangerous, but I could handle it. The only question was: would it be worth it?

CHAPTER - 7

LIKE COALS IN A FIRE

“Hey,” Ace greeted me at my locker a few days later. He hesitated before talking. “My mom gave me the fireproof stuff. I hope you didn’t burn everything already?”

I could tell he was trying to ask if he was a little late without being weird. I glanced at the bag he was holding and smiled.

“Yeah . . . my mom had to take me to a thrift store to get more clothes. I burned up my last pair of pants and my last shirt.”

I didn’t think he needed to know that I’d burned all my other clothing, though, including my shoes and coat. I just hope I could forget that day. I’d had to walk around wearing a towel and mom’s slippers in the store for an hour, since mom hadn’t trusted me with her clothes. She could not understand how I kept managing to destroy my clothes all of a sudden, and she didn’t really want to find out. I took the bag and stuffed it in my locker, making a mental note to grab it before I left. I didn’t have any desire to come back after school just for a bag of clothes.

“Thanks, Ace. I’ll look at them at home,” I promised him as I finished getting my things situated. I really was grateful and I hoped he knew that.

“I was wondering . . .,” he said after a pause, “if I could come help you practice again today?”

I nodded. I wouldn’t admit it, but it felt nice to not be alone in this. It was hectic already. I still wasn’t quite used to some of my

abilities, so there had been a couple close calls during class. I figured I'd have more yet. Besides, every superhero needs a mentor, or a trainer or, well, even just a friend.

"Sure. Wanna come over?" I asked.

Ace nodded. I slammed my locker shut—people thought I did that to be cool, or because I was always angry, but the truth was, if I didn't slam it, the dang thing would never close. I didn't want to risk my things being taken, like they had in the first few weeks I'd been at that school. I definitely knew a few people who would take my things, and I didn't want to imagine what they'd do with my new fireproof clothes. Ace walked with me down a few halls until he had to go the opposite direction for his first period.

"See ya in class." He waved.

I just nodded and continued to my destination.



I opened the bag while Ace watched me expectantly. I wondered how well he'd been able to get the clothes. I really didn't need any suspicious parents on our tail.

"Oh wow!" I grinned as I pulled the first shirt out.

It was a simple gray crop top. I continued digging to find some pants, shorts, sweaters, jackets, and plenty of shirts, enough of which were my size. Ace told me that the clothes had just been sitting around his house for a few years, which made me feel better that I was helping him clean out his house and not being a burden. Relief flooded me. I don't know why.

"Thanks!" I hugged him, feeling tingly. When I realized what I was doing, I pulled back quickly.

He turned away, coughing loudly but clearly smug about it. My cheeks warmed slightly and I scowled at myself.

"I should get practicing." I remembered.

Ace laughed. "Try out the new clothes."

I nodded, picking a few items from the bag. Ace stepped into the hall and I heard him descend the stairs as I slipped into the bathroom and changed my clothes. I tried on the crop top, a pair of slightly ripped jeans, and a cropped black sweatshirt with what looked like printed flames. I wondered if Ace's mother was a professional seamstress or something. As soon as I was done, I hurriedly caught up to Ace, who was eating a snack that my mom had given him.

"Your mom's nice," he noted as he finished the snack, cleaned up, and joined me at the door.

Mom came into view.

"Where're you two going?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

I ignored it. "Out," I replied, trying not to snap. These mood swings were not helping me with my depression.

Mom grinned knowingly and raised her eyebrows at me. "Seeing friends?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No, not exactly." I instantly regretted my reply when her smirk turned into a sappy grin. So much for being honest with my parents . . .

"Have fun, you two. Don't stay out too late!" Mom waved us out, winking at me. "He's cute, honey!" she whispered. My cheeks burned, and I practically dragged Ace out of there, desperately hoping he'd heard nothing.

Once we were around the corner, he spoke up. "What was that about?"

I shook my head. Luckily, it seemed he hadn't noticed.

"It was nothing. She just misunderstood the situation, that's all," I replied.

"Wait . . . did she think we were going out?" Ace caught on.

I winced slightly. Did he really think that was a terrible scenario?

"Yeah. She seems to think I . . . um . . . like you, or something."

My cheeks burned worse. I had no idea why. I didn't like Ace, did I? How could I like a guy like him? And one I didn't know well? He was cute, but . . . cute guys could be deceiving.

He coughed. "Do you like me?" he asked in a gentle voice that made me want to scream.

I flinched. “No. You’re just a friend, and barely that,” I snapped, trying to ignore the butterflies in my stomach.

Ace just laughed, and we continued walking. “Alright, Fire Girl. You just don’t want to admit it,” he teased, looping his arm through mine and pulling me down the road.

My face grew hot. Was it possible that I was falling in love, or whatever? At the very least, I might have a slight crush. But surely, I had enough going on that I wouldn’t be distracted by that, right? I wasn’t so sure about any of this as we continued to walk to the bus stop. I wondered briefly if there was a way I could teleport through fire and bring Ace with me in that form. It would certainly be faster—if I could even find a way to activate it on my own. The bus ride seemed to be a little longer than usual as I anticipated what this practice session would be like.



We finally entered the warehouse, ready to test out these new clothes.

“Time to see how fireproof this really is!” I announced.

Ace smiled at my enthusiasm. I seriously hoped these clothes didn’t burn up, since I’d forgotten to bring my wallet or any extra clothes. I crossed my fingers as I let the fire loose. My entire body soon ignited, and I let it burn for a minute before extinguishing the fire. I looked down. The clothes were scorching hot, but otherwise unscathed. I smiled in victory.

“They really work!” Ace cried happily.

I laughed. “Yeah. Now I can finally do some proper practicing. Whatever that means.” I lit a fire in my hand for emphasis. Ace smiled, pulling out his phone.

“I think I have a general idea for how that might work.” He showed me some comics of superheroes with fire powers on his phone.

“I’m going to buy some hardcopies as well, for backup.”

I smirked. “I had no idea you were such a comic book geek, Ace.”

He smiled a little. “I’m not. Only if you need it.”

The words touched me, but I didn’t want him to think anything, so I just kept a straight face.

“So, what’s first?” I asked, pretending to ignore what he’d said.

Ace began to pace. “Well, I was thinking that maybe we could review your fireballs before trying something else out.”

Probably a good idea.

“Alright.”

Before he could say another word, I lit a fire in my hand, cupped my hand to shape it into a ball, and threw it hard against the cement wall. It exploded on impact into a mini cloud of flames.

He nodded. “Now let’s try rapid fire.”

“Rapid fire?”

Ace nodded again. “I wanna see how fast and how accurately you can throw those.”

I gave him a bit of a strange look.

“What?” He laughed. “You might need that skill during a fight once you become a superhero!”

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. “Alright, I’ll take your word for it.”

“So, you’ll become a superhero?” he asked with hesitant hope.

I raised my eyebrows. “I never said I would.”

He laughed and came over to me, lightly punching me in the arm. Honestly, sometimes Ace reminded me of Mason. That . . . wasn’t an amazing thought. It felt kind of like he was replacing Mason when he did stuff like this. When I didn’t reciprocate the punch, he frowned.

“Sorry, was that too much?” he asked a little bashfully.

I shrugged. I didn’t want to give him the wrong impression, but Mason was one of those people who is hard to replace. Ace studied me.

“Mason?” he asked.

I stared at him in surprise. He lifted the corner of his mouth in sympathy.

“It’s hard to lose a best friend.”

Yeah. After a minute, I squirmed a little under the silence before snapping myself out of it and clapping my hands.

“Alright, rapid fire it is.”

I formed the first ball, then the next, and gradually got faster at it. Too bad my aim wasn't always spot-on. Ace burst into laughter when I accidentally managed to singe a stupid, old poster on the opposite wall from where I was supposed to be hitting. He stopped laughing when I got annoyed at that and sent one towards him. He yelped and got out of the way just in time. I rolled my eyes; I wouldn't have actually let it hit him, even if he hadn't moved.

I smirked and kept practicing. Finally, Ace recommended I stop. I was sweating. I may be immune to being scorched, and I may not be too bothered by the heat, but that didn't stop me from being worn out by the repeated exercise. Unfortunately, the fire did nothing for that.

“Do you wanna go on a walk to cool off?” Ace suggested.

“Sure.” That sounded nice.

We made our way out of the warehouse and up the street. As we walked, we came across a Halloween costume shop, which was currently mostly full of old Christmas decorations. Ace stopped and stared through the fake web covered windows.

“What?” I asked amused, folding my arms. “I don't think either of us have enough to spend on Christmas decorations.”

He just pointed at one of the displays. I walked over next to him and admired what he was pointing at. It was a red and orange assassin suit, complete with a hood, a mask, a foam sword sheathed on the back, plastic daggers at the waist, and knee-high, red and orange boots that seemed to have sturdy soles.

I smiled. “Is that what you're staring at?”

“No, I'm staring at the blue, boy version of it,” he teased, pointing to the blue suit next to the red one, then snorted. “Yes, I'm staring at that red one.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you thinking of getting it? I doubt you'd fit in it. You might have to lose a few pounds in order to get the curves you need. Maybe switch your gender,” I teased.

“Ah yes, I can see it now,” Ace went along with it, putting his arm around my shoulder and hugging me to his side before sweeping his arm in some grand gesture, like they do in movies when they’re trying to “show” you something you cannot exactly see with your own eyes—only imagine. My side tingled.

“After losing a few pounds and going into surgery, I could wear that costume and scare little kids to death.” Ace sighed dramatically, like it was a pleasing thought. “Just what I’ve always wanted.” We both burst into laughter.

“No, I was thinking that could be your superhero suit.” He pulled out his wallet and checked the price tag on the suit. He wrinkled his nose in a really cute, disgusted face.

“That’s expensive. I’ll have to wait until the next time I get paid.”

I chewed on my lip. “Or the next time I come down here, I could just bring my wallet and see if I can’t buy it myself,” I offered.

He shrugged. “Either way.” He pulled out his phone and took a picture of the suit before we continued walking.

“Wait, you have a job?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Where do you work?” I didn’t know a ton of kids in my friend group who worked. They probably weren’t responsible enough.

“At the cafe near school—Wednesday afternoons from three to six and Saturday nights from seven to nine.” He winked conspiratorially at me.

I just rolled my eyes. “You’re a dork,” I mumbled.

Ace chuckled. We continued walking for a little bit.

“Hey Brinley, what are you doing Friday?” Ace asked randomly.

“Um . . . not much. Why?” I glanced at him.

“Well, I was wondering if you wanted to—”

We heard an explosion of some sort. We both stared in surprise in that direction. Instinctually, I ran towards it, completely forgetting about Ace altogether. I hid at the entrance of an alleyway closest to where the explosion had come from. After a few minutes of sneaking around, I heard footsteps and turned around to see Ace with a bag.

“What’s that?” I asked, before realizing what it was. My eyes widened.

“I told you I’d get it!” I scolded him.

He rolled his eyes and shoved the bag at me.

“You need it now,” was his only response. I opened the bag.

“Where do I change into it?” I whispered in slight panic.

His eyes darted around.

“Uhh . . . behind that dumpster!” Ace pointed to a very dirty-looking dumpster.

I scrunched my nose in disgust. “Ew.” Another horrifying thought occurred to me. “What if there are gang members nearby?” I asked.

Ace gave me a level stare, right in the eyes. “Then I’ll keep watch and warn you if I see anything.”

After a long moment, I took a deep breath and slipped behind the dumpster. I took the costume out of its bag to try and figure out how to put the thing on, when I felt a burst of energy flow from my core directly into the clothes. I jumped, dropping the clothes and hoping that they didn’t burst into flames. To my surprise, they didn’t. At least not exactly. The seams glowed a golden orange that seemed to branch throughout the fabric before a strange symbol appeared at the base of the hood. It looked like . . . a phoenix brooch. It was a beautiful, blood red, metal phoenix. It looked like the bird held a flame, which I found kind of odd, since phoenixes were already known for fire.

I also noticed the boots seemed to be a bit thicker, and they each donned a little flame symbol on the front where it would meet the knee. I shook my head, and picked up the suit. The fabric was heavier and smoother than it had been, almost like it was made of scales instead of fabric. It was lighter and felt better on my skin than a Halloween costume should.

I took the foam sword out of its scabbard, thinking I didn’t need it, but the foam was gone. I stared at my wide-eyed reflection in the blade as I felt more energy from my core go through the blade, causing it to glow faintly. It was the same with the daggers, just without the glowing and the flowing energy. I took a deep breath,

trying to ease my spinning mind, before quickly sheathing the daggers and trying to figure out how to put the dang suit on. If there had been a zipper, it had obviously disappeared. How the heck? The only opening was through the neck of the hood, so I resolved to somehow fit through it. (I knew I couldn't, but if people needed me, wasn't it worth a try?) Suddenly, the suit glowed again and disappeared. I scrambled around looking everywhere for it, even coming out from behind the dumpster to see if I could find it, while also slightly freaking out about the fact that an inanimate object had disappeared. As I stepped out, I felt something on my face and covering my head. I went up to feel what it was and realized I was wearing skin-tight, red gloves.

I screamed a little, I'll admit, which caused Ace to come running from wherever he'd been guarding. I heard his footsteps from behind me. I turned around with wide eyes. He stopped in his tracks and just stared at me. At this point, I was really glad I was wearing a mask to cover my red cheeks. It was just . . . the way he looked at me for a second. Anyway, he snapped out of it.

"You look . . . good," he complimented awkwardly, his cheeks turning pink.

I nodded, staring at my gloves wide-eyed.

"W-why did you scream?" He asked, changing the subject.

I swallowed. "Well, um . . . it disappeared, then suddenly, I was wearing it," I explained.

"A magic suit."

He seemed to like the idea of that more than I did. Of course, he wasn't the one who had to wear it. And who knows what the suit could do? Wanting to throw something, I unsheathed a dagger. Ace's eyes widened more than I thought they could when he saw the blade. The real blade. I threw it into the building wall next to us. It bounced off before flying back to my hand. I jumped backwards and quickly sheathed it. After a few shaky breaths, I turned towards Ace.

"Wish me luck."

With that, I turned around and ran into plain sight before I could change my mind. The boots had amazing traction on the ice! The

criminals—bank robbers, apparently—were just coming out of a small bank, with their bags full of cash. I honestly couldn't get over the irony. Wasn't every superhero's first job something to do with bank robbers? Or was that just me? Anyway, I approached them. When they noticed me, they stopped.

“Who are you? Some new kind of party clown?” one of them asked, laughing.

The others joined him. I was trying very hard to keep my knees from bumping together as I stood there frozen and silent.

One of the others piped up, “Hey, you mute?”

I didn't do anything. Why was I so scared now? Wasn't this what I'd been building up for? But I didn't feel ready. The thought of Ace watching me fail only made it worse. I . . . kind of wanted to impress him. I started to wonder why, but I shoved all that out of my head. I couldn't focus on that right now—not when I'd voluntarily put myself in a very dangerous situation. If my mom found out . . . oh gosh. I quickly pushed that terrifying thought out of my mind as well.

“Let's get going already! We're wasting time!” one of the bank robbers complained.

“Alright, alright. Just gotta deal with the clown first.”

One of the robbers came up to me, balling his fist. I knew what was coming. It would hurt. He wound his arm back, and I knew it would become the hardest knuckle sandwich I'd ever eaten. Hard enough to knock me out. Right before his fist made contact with my face, my instincts kicked in, saving me from possibly dying, becoming a hostage, or receiving a really bad headache in the morning. Without forming a single thought on the matter, I grabbed his arm, dropped to the ground, and swung my foot under his, resulting with him lying on his back, gasping, and with my foot firmly planted on his chest as a form of dominance and assertion over his defeat. Two more came at me with their loud footsteps slapping the ground. I punched them hard, dodged, kicked, and basically became a ninja on the spot with moves I never even learned. I figured it was the fire. It had become a part of me already

in many other ways, so I guess why not with my instincts too? Soon the robbers were all lying on the ground moaning.

I felt something heavy hit the back of my neck. I stumbled over and whipped around to see one who came out of nowhere advancing on me—and of course he happened to be the biggest! Why not, huh?

I scrambled away and he smiled ruthlessly.

“Let’s see how good you are against me, girl.”

He swung another punch, which got me right in the face. I tasted blood and felt something running down my nose. Probably blood. I wondered if a magic suit could go in the wash. I seriously hoped so, considering how grimy super suits must get after a good fight. I staggered, giving the guy the opening he needed. The robber grabbed me by the neck, squeezing slightly, and pinned me against the ground. He pulled his other arm back and punched me. I moved my head just slightly so he only hit the ground. His knuckles came back scratched and bloody, but he didn’t seem to care. Why thank you very much, luck! He tried it a few more times before grunting in frustration, while I continuously moved my head just barely to avoid the blackout punches.

He squeezed my neck a little more. I coughed and gasped and started gurgling a little, fighting for air as he continued to squeeze. I wondered how long it would take for him to break my neck. Based on his bulk and my skinny-as-a-stick frame, it probably wouldn’t take too long. It certainly felt like he was nearly there. I could barely move my limbs under the pressure.

Finally remembering I had fire at my disposal, I fought through the terrified haze, shakily grabbed onto his muscled wrist with both hands, and turned my hot-hands on. Flames arose and licked his hands, burning his flesh. He let out a scream and scrambled away, landing on the ground, cradling his wrist and smothering the flames that had found their way farther up onto his arm. I struggled up, clutching my neck and coughing, putting my mask down as I did so. Some blood came out. Whether the blood was from my cut lip, bloody nose, or my throat, I couldn’t tell. I just finished hacking as soon as I could, put my mask back on—despite not being able to

breathe easily and not liking the smell of blood. It was pungent since my face was bleeding, and since I'd just nearly been choked to death, I naturally was a little unable to hold my breathe or anything. Regardless, I turned back to the man. He glared at me in pure hatred as he struggled to get back up, still cradling his singed arm. I could smell the burned flesh from where I stood several yards away from him. Gathering my courage, I stalked towards him. He tried to rise but didn't quite get there, instead landing back on his butt on the pavement. I vaguely noticed a crowd that had gathered at the very edge of the "battle-field" and the sound of cop sirens getting closer.

I stalked closer to him feeling the fire amp up on my anger. I punched him hard in the face and lit my hands on fire. Just as I was about to burn him mercilessly, I caught some motion in my peripheral vision. I looked up to find Ace watching me. He shook his head slightly, telling me I'd done enough. I didn't need to hurt him further. I stared at the man on the ground. He'd tried to kill me without a second thought. He'd tried on purpose. And not in a painless way. I heard the whispers from the old vicious thing in my head that had caused me the most pain over the past couple years egging me on. *Hurt him! He almost killed you easily.* Do it before he can try again. I wanted to listen to those voices so badly. They were right, he had almost killed me. I glanced back up to Ace. He shook his head again, this time a pleading look evident on his face when he saw my tortured anger. I felt something . . . strange when I looked at him. It was confusing, but it shed enough light on the matter for me to make my decision.

I put out the flames on my hands and stepped away just as the cops showed up. They put the robbers in shackles right as some News vehicles arrived. One of the cops stared at me before walking up to me.

"Who . . .?" she asked.

I gazed steadily into her eyes. I really wanted to be dramatic with my next answers to these people, like superheroes often are in the movies, but to be honest? I was pretty shaken up. Anyone would be. And my face and throat hurt, much more than they had in any fist-fight at school I'd participated in. Not to mention my limbs felt

like they were about to fall off, both from the karate I'd pulled on the robbers, but also from the sheer exhaustion of what I'd just accomplished. I took a deep breath to steady myself and gave the first name that came to mind.

"I'm Phoenix," I responded, my voice sounding a little raspy from nearly being choked to death. Speaking caused another fit of coughing. I felt some blood come out. That didn't seem like a good sign . . .

"Are you okay?" the cop asked.

I nodded. "Yeah," I managed after coughing. "Nothing that a little nearly being choked to death won't do for you." I cleared my throat, wincing.

The cop's eyes widened. "Are you sure? We can take you to the hospital—"

I raised my hand to stop her, regaining some of my dignity.

"I'm fine, really." My voice sounded almost normal after clearing my throat.

The cop eyed me before nodding. Suddenly, News people surrounded me.

"Who are you? Where are you from? Why are you here? How did you manage to stop those robbers by yourself?" The News people continued asking millions of questions. My eyes widened a little. I didn't like this. Not at all. I searched the crowd outside where the News people held me prisoner and found Ace slipping into the alley we'd been in just before I ran out to stop the robbers. I ducked my head and plowed right through the sea of questions and annoying microphones, running in the opposite direction from where Ace went and disappearing into an alley, splashing some slush as I went. I made sure to go in a good way to make sure no one was following me before circling back and sneaking into the alley Ace hid in from another entrance. When he heard my footsteps he turned, looking up from his pacing, and smiled.

"You're alive!"

"Yeah," I said, pulling down my hood and lowering my mask.

His eyes widened a little when he saw all the blood on my face.

“We might need to have a first aid kit on standby . . .,” Ace thought out loud.

I was about to agree when I felt a searing warmth on my face and throat. I touched my lips and nose, and I found that the bleeding had slowed. Ace smiled again.

“So now you can heal yourself.”

“It seems I can.” I smiled back, gazing happily into his eyes.

I felt the strange feeling again on my face, which distracted me from the fact that the suit could apparently switch with my normal clothes—don’t ask me how, I still couldn’t tell you, and it’s been a while—so I nearly jumped a foot when I found myself wearing my normal clothes, despite not having made the conscious choice to change. Ace checked his watch.

“We should get back,” he reminded me.

We practically ran to the bus stop, arriving just as the bus was about to leave. The driver seemed a little annoyed, but thankfully she didn’t complain. If she had, I was so tired I probably would’ve lost my temper and burnt the entire bus down. Apparently, I fell asleep on the bus, because I felt Ace nudging me when it was time to get off. Drowsily I got up, stumbled off the bus, and Ace had to support me all the way back to my house. I collapsed on the couch and fell right to sleep.

CHAPTER - 8

PHOENIX

At school the next day, everyone was talking about the “mysterious ‘Phoenix’ figure” who had saved the day by beating up the robbers. It took nearly all my willpower to keep up pretenses. Ace sat next to me during lunch while I listened to my friend's conversation about Phoenix.

“I heard she can breathe fire,” Charlie said.

Clarissa laughed. “That’s not true. I heard she can light other people on fire.”

Some of my friends laughed at that.

“I heard she can use fire to fly, like you would with a jetpack.”

“How? Would it come out of her feet?”

Shrugs all around.

“Well, I heard her suit is fireproof!” Clarissa countered. “How else would she be able to light her hands on fire without burning her gloves?”

Ace chuckled quietly.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you could actually do most of those things,” he said in a low voice.

I snorted. “Maybe. I guess only time and experience can really tell.”

Clarissa cleared her throat. “Hey Brinley, Ace, care to join the conversation?”

Not really, I thought. Too bad it seemed I had no choice in the matter. Neither did Ace.

“What do you two think Phoenix can do?” Clarissa stared at us like it was an interrogation. I cleared my throat.

“Well . . . um . . . I think you guys covered all my ideas,” I lied. I wasn’t entirely sure of all that I could do, but I knew some of it. And almost none of them happened to be what they’d mentioned.

“Oh, come on, you have to have some idea!” Charlie egged.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Um . . . maybe she can throw fireballs?” I said uncertainly.

I glanced at Ace. He smiled. Clarissa targeted him next.

“Well Ace, what about you?”

Ace pretended to think for a moment. “I think maybe she could do whatever she sets her mind to? We don’t know the full extent of her powers, so there’s really no sure way to tell.” He glanced at me as he said this.

Charlie groaned. “Ugh! Not more of that ‘you can do whatever you set your mind to’ crap!”

Charlie feigned throwing up, which earned some giggles across the table. I rolled my eyes to play along, but I snuck a grateful smile to Ace. He nodded slightly back before the topic changed.



When I got home that afternoon, Mom was watching the News. I stared at myself on TV. Mom glanced up from where she sat on the couch.

“Oh good, you’re home.” In the blink of an eye, she was up. “Have you seen the News?”

I shook my head. Technically, I wasn’t lying. Mom grabbed the remote off the coffee table and turned the volume up, as if I couldn’t hear it plenty well already.

We don't know who this mysterious hero is, the reporter said. And we didn't get any answers from her, but the police did. They say one of their officers, Officer Jones, got a name. The News lady paused for dramatic effect.

The hero called herself “Phoenix,” possibly after the legendary bird of fire. Unfortunately, that’s all we found out about her before she ran away into the alley—

Mom turned the TV off, cutting off whatever the News lady was about to say. I’m sure she wouldn’t have been too happy about that if she’d been at my house.

“Ace told me yesterday you were in that area.” Mom put the issue straight out there. I saw her hands shaking, and knew what that meant.

“Mom, it’s fine. We weren’t in that area—”

“IT IS NOT FINE!” Mom shouted, turning the TV back on and rewinding the footage. At the very start of the News broadcast, she pointed out a figure in the crowd. It was obviously Ace.

“You were right there when this happened!” Mom yelled.

I winced, watching as her hands shook even worse. I started the countdown to danger-zone.

“Mom, we were fine. The fight never even got close to the crowd. There was no chance we could’ve gotten involved,” I soothed.

She took a few deep breaths. “I know.” Suddenly, she froze. “But when you came home you had some scratches on your face. Like the ones you used to get whenever you were in fights at school.” Her tone turned cold, and I knew phase one of her breakdown had begun. I had to get out of there fast. Her breakdowns had become a stimulus for me. I took a deep breath.

“The crowd was a little . . . unsteady afterwards, but nothing too dangerous,” I lied.

I felt my mood changing like it had so many times before as a frigid darkness closed in, slowly turning everything gray and lifeless. I felt like crying, but I couldn’t. I turned around and went upstairs to escape her before it could get worse. I texted Ace.

Hey, can I come over?

I knew he'd be shocked by the sudden request, but the walls in my room seemed to be closing in, and I was starting to hear Mom's wails from downstairs. So much for her streak. Guilt swirled in my stomach at the thought that I was the one who ended it, but what choice did I have? People needed me when I took down the robbers.

Ace answered a few long, torturous minutes later.

Ace

Sure, come on over.

Relief flooded through me as I packed a bag full of my homework and some other things I'd been hoping to do when I got home. I got out the rope ladder hidden at the very back of my now full closet, opened the window, and used the ladder to climb out. Once I was down, I carefully shook the ladder free and hid it in the bushes before grabbing my bike and heading to Ace's house, never mind the ice.



"Welcome!" Ace greeted me a few seconds after I rang the doorbell.

"Thanks."

I smiled a little, but my mood was still gray so smiling was more like a chore than anything. He glanced at my slightly stuffed bag before I put it down.

"I'll give you the official tour," he declared.

"Alright," I agreed.

I needed to know my way around quickly, whether I felt like a tour or not. We went through the kitchen, the living room, the dining room, a couple offices, a sewing room, his basement, and his upstairs, which had a few more offices—he claimed that they were

only used really as guest rooms or study areas—and three bedrooms.

“My little brother, Sims, and I share a room. My little sister, Sadie, gets her own room, since she’s a girl, and my parents didn’t think Sims or I would want to share a room with a little girl anyway,” Ace explained.

I grinned. I loved little kids.

“My little sister, Ada, and I used to share a room. Now she and my little brother, Zach, have to while Ada’s room gets re-painted. My mom is merciful enough not to make me deal with her right now,” I replied.

Ace seemed very interested in my siblings.

“How old are Ada and Zach?” he asked.

“Ada’s fifteen, so a little over a year younger than us. Zach is ten,” I responded, although it took me a second to remember. I hadn’t exactly been the best sister to them lately.

“Sims is ten. Maybe Zach and my little bro could hang out sometime!” Ace suggested enthusiastically.

I gasped mockingly. “They could! I’m sure Zach would love that!” I agreed.

Ace laughed. “I’m sure Sadie wouldn’t mind joining them sometimes, but I’m not sure they’d want to hang out with a five-year-old.” Ace scratched his head a little.

I shrugged. “I think he would. I’m pretty sure he still likes little kids at least a little. I know I do.”

Ace smiled at me softly. For some reason my cheeks warmed a little.

I cleared my throat. “Anyway, we should get some homework done. Or die trying,” I reasoned.

I really didn’t feel like doing homework, so I hoped Ace could help me through it. After all, Ace supposedly had perfect grades.

He nodded. “I can help you if you want. Just don’t tell my parents—I don’t need them bragging about that as well as my grades.” Ace’s cheeks turned a little pink as he led me into his room. His brother Sims sat on the floor with a laptop.

“Hey Sims, I’d like you to meet one of my friends,” Ace introduced.

Sims was a cute, skinny little boy with Ace’s light brown, messy hair, someone else’s blue eyes, and his own cheeky little grin. As soon as he saw me, his eyes went wide.

“She’s pretty” was the first thing he muttered.

“Thanks,” I replied, touched.

Ace smiled down at the boy, leaning against the frame of his bunk bed with his hands in his pockets.

“Sims, this is Brinley. Brinley, I think you can guess who this is.”

I rolled my eyes at Ace. Sims stood up and walked towards me.

“It’s nice to meet you Brinley.” Sims stuck out his hand, implying a handshake. I gave him my hand and we shook.

“Woah, you have a strong handshake!” I commented, genuinely surprised. Most of the kids Sims age I’ve met—including my own brother—like to be silly when it comes to handshakes, using their entire body instead of shaking someone’s hand like a normal human being. Sims smiled at the compliment.

“Thanks. Momma says when you meet someone new, it’s polite to offer a handshake and make sure it’s nice and firm.”

I nodded. “Your momma isn’t wrong,” I agreed.

Sims gave me an adorable dimpled grin before releasing my hand. I melted a little on the inside.

“So do you like to play UNO?” Sims asked.

I laughed. “Do I? I practically use that game to kill people!” I had way too many memories of destroying Mom, Ada, Zach, and my friends with that game. I already loved Sims. Ace watched the exchange with a satisfied look.

Sims turned to Ace. “Yep, she’s a keeper!” He gave Ace a thumbs up in approval.

Ace nodded diplomatically while I cracked up. I noticed he couldn’t seem to wipe the grin off his face as he watched Sims and I interact. Sims went to one of the desk drawers and withdrew a deck of UNO cards.

“Ace do you wanna play with us?” Sims asked.

He nodded. "One round. Then Brinley and I have to do some homework."

Sims nodded, already shuffling the cards. The three of us sat down on the ground while Sims dealt. It was a wild round, all of us ending up with what felt like twenty cards before Sims won. I yelled some gibberish in response, as I had been one card away from finishing. Ace had three.

"How?" I laughed. Sims showed me his trick.

"Woah. I had no idea you could actually do that legally," I replied, genuinely amazed.

"Yup! It doesn't work every time, but it nearly does."

Sims cleaned up the cards. I quickly got up and got my backpack. Ace met me in one of the studies.

"Brin, I think you've won my brother over." Ace chuckled.

"Yeah, I think so!" I laughed, pleased with my success. "He's a cute, little boy."

Ace smirked. "Yeah, Jane likes to brag about him to her friends a lot. They're all practically waiting for her to keel over or something so they can adopt him," he teased.

I wondered why he called his mom by her first name. He didn't seem to feel the need to explain it, so I just ignored it.

I laughed. "I don't blame them! I'd adopt him myself if I were old enough!"

"I'll add you to the ever-growing list, then."

I rolled my eyes and opened my bag. After a moment, Ace spoke up, sounding a little uncertain.

"You . . . don't mind that I called you 'Brin', do you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. I've been called much worse. Besides, friends give each other nicknames anyway." I shrugged. I pulled a few papers out of my bag and looked up to find Ace studying me curiously.

"What names have you been called before?"

I caught a hint of worry. I shook my head.

"Nothing you need to be concerned about. It was at my last school, so they're not of any concern now."

One name in particular stood out, even after all that had happened since I moved a couple years before. It was the one Mason had dared to call me. I shuddered a little at the name, but quickly regretted it when I caught Ace still studying me, the worry more evident than before. I pasted on a smile.

“We should get working.” I changed the subject. Ace nodded, but never really wiped the look of slight worry off his face.

“So . . . what nickname would you give me?” he asked randomly partway through the homework session.

I’d just managed to get a page of work done, although not very well. I usually said it didn’t really matter as long as no one yelled at you. (Although don’t take that as an excuse not to do your best! Do as I say, not as I do.)

“Hmm . . . I can think of one off the top of my head, but I shouldn’t say it,” I admitted. That got Ace’s attention.

“What is it?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nope. I’m not saying it.” I could be stubborn when I wanted to.

“Oh, come on! Don’t leave me hanging!” he complained.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. It’s a donkey, basically. It’s not a completely accurate name for you, but I’m pretty ruthless with roasts.”

“Oh!” he replied. Then he laughed. “Yeah, I can see how that would apply.”

I could think of a few others too, but I would implement them when I felt ready. We continued with homework for a while until Ace stretched and got up.

“I’m gonna get a snack. Wanna come?”

I nodded and followed him down to the kitchen. He got out some crackers and fruit, and we sat there eating in silence for a few minutes before his mom came in.

“You must be Brinley!” Ace’s mom exclaimed when she saw me.

I smiled politely and nodded to confirm. Ace’s mom shot a happy look at Ace who smiled a little, but I instantly recognized it as fake. I’d worn enough of them myself to read them. But why?

“So, whatcha been up to?” his mom asked.

“Sims had us play a round of UNO—”

“Just like him,” Mrs. Pierce commented.

“And we’ve been doing homework ever since,” I summed up.

“Well, if you two want any cookies, I can get them out. Freshly made.”

Mrs. Pierce got some cookies wrapped in tin foil from the counter. They were waffle cookies, like the kind Mason’s grandmother would make. I took a bite. Delicious.

“Thanks, Mrs. Pierce.” I didn’t want to be rude.

Ace seemed to freeze in the middle of his cookie. I instantly felt terrible, but I wasn’t sure why.

Mrs. Pierce smiled sadly. “Oh, dear, I’m not Mrs. Pierce.”

She wasn’t? Then who was she? A babysitter? She couldn’t be the babysitter. She sighed and looked at Ace.

“I think this is a matter Ace should tell you on his own. If he wants to.”

I nodded, feeling worse and worse by the second. Ace nodded, taking the entire plate of cookies. If his—whoever that woman was—minded, she didn’t say. We made it back to the study room before Ace said anything.

“Do you want another cookie?”

By then my stomach wasn’t happy with me. I shook my head. “All yours.”

He nodded and continued to eat them like he had a void for a stomach. I gave him a funny look.

“What?” he paused mid-bite to ask.

“You really that hungry?” I asked.

He looked down at the already half-empty plate of cookies before setting it down on one of the nearby surfaces.

“No. I just . . . have the habit of eating when it comes to talking about stressful subjects. Takes the stress out,” he grumbled.

I wished I could do that. If I ate when I was nervous or stressed, it made me feel sick.

“Hey, I’m really sorry. I just assumed she was your mom,” I apologized quietly. “I shouldn’t have. I guess I just wasn’t thinking—”

Ace held up a hand to stop me and forced a smile.

“It’s alright. It happens a lot—I’m used to it,” he assured me.

And yet I could see in his eyes something was bothering him. I stood up and moved to the seat next to him, ready for a therapy session. I’d had plenty of those with Mason back when he was still speaking to me.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” I asked gently.

Ace studied my face wearily for a minute before shrugging.

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine. If you do, take your time,” I said in a soothing voice.

Ace cracked a smile. “Brin, I had no idea you could be so mothering.”

It was a half-hearted tease, but it was still a try. I decided to go with it, if that meant lifting his spirits.

I smirked. “How else do you think the rest of my friends survived?” I asked.

Ace’s smile grew a little. “So, you admit we’re friends?”

He caught on to that bit apparently. The truth was, I really did want to be friends with him. There was just one slight complication which I only partially had figured out. I was starting to think that maybe . . . I shoved the idea out of my head. I needed to focus on making my friend feel better, not on whatever was happening inside of me.

“Yeah, of course we’re friends. Why wouldn’t we be, after everything we’ve already been through together?”

Who else could say they’d trained their superpowers and become a superhero with their friend by their side? Or even had their friend there while they fought criminals? As far as I could tell, I was the only one who could rightfully say that. Because it was true. Ace seemed genuinely happy for a few seconds before it faded back into the mood he’d been in since I assumed his family situation. He took a deep breath.

“I live with foster parents. Mr. and Mrs. McCohen. My parents died in a fire a few years ago,” Ace admitted, gripping the arm of his chair like it was his lifeline.

My eyes widened and, much to my surprise, tears welled up.

"I'm really, really sorry," I whispered.

Ace nodded, then attempted a smirk. It failed. Miserably.

"Well now you know I'm not as perfect as I seem," he joked, but it fell dead.

"I don't know, you still seem pretty perfect to me."

It just slipped out. I had no idea where it came from. He looked up at me, surprise coupled with grief and . . . something else.

"I mean perfect as in a really good candidate to be a friend," I corrected my slip smoothly. I hoped.

He nodded slowly, but I figured he wasn't quite sure what had just happened.

"You seem more perfect than me, anyways," Ace mumbled.

I shook my head. He gave me a curious glance.

"I'm . . . not." I forced a laugh before changing the subject. "It must've been hard to watch me control fire, and even harder to help me become a superhero," I realized, remembering how his parents died.

Ace nodded. "It was a shock at first. But I figured, hey, if you could make fire better—better than something that took lives—then maybe I could help it along."

"I'm glad you're helping me," I admitted.

Ace smiled. A real smile, this time. He took a deep breath. "We should finish some of this homework. When does your mom want you back?"

I ignored the question and instead pulled my homework over to my new spot.

"Brin, when does your mom want you to go back?" Ace asked again, this time sounding slightly concerned.

"Oh? Um, I don't know. I'll call and ask."

I got up, pulled my phone from my pocket and went into the hall, borrowing one of the other study rooms in order to hopefully have some privacy. I called Ada. It took her a few seconds to pick up.

"Hey Ada. What's up?" I asked politely. I had no doubt she was rolling her eyes.

What do you want? You never call me, she asked impatiently.

“I was wondering if Mom’s calmed down yet?” I asked. I heard movement and a door opening. She’d probably been doing who knows what in her room.

She’s calmed down enough. I’d wait another hour or two, though. Ada answered helpfully. I took a breath and let it out as quietly as I could.

“Thanks. I mean it.”

I had no idea if it was the fire, or how dramatically my life was changing, or Ace, but some sort of change made me genuinely a little sorry for how I’d treated my family lately. For the first time in too long.

Where are you? Mom freaked out even worse when she realized you were gone. She thought you had left because you didn’t want to be around her anymore, Ada demanded.

I sighed, shaking my head. “It’s not like . . . that.”

I didn’t feel like explaining much to Ada. For the past couple years, I’d chosen to keep most of my family in the dark about what was going on with my life. It hurt too much to even think about explaining, let alone how tired it made me when I tried even a small attempt. All they knew was that I’d changed, Mom had a part in it, and I’d gotten into some . . . not great things recently. I shook my head again to clear away the bad memories.

“I’m at Ace’s house,” I said with a sigh.

Who’s Ace? I could tell from Ada’s voice she suspected something. My cheeks burned unhelpfully.

“No! No, it’s not like that. He’s just a friend. Besides, all we’re doing is hanging out with some of his family and doing homework. At least, that’s the gist,” I added that last part quietly.

I could practically hear her eyebrow raise as she said, Uh huh.

My past experiences with boys—which thankfully wasn’t much of anything, but it was still something—had unfortunately taught Ada to suspect any boy I took the time to get to know like this was more than just a friend. But Ace and I were just friends, right? I wasn’t too sure. I realized Ada was speaking again.

When are you coming home? she asked.

“Uhh . . . in an hour or two. Depending on how fast Mom calms down,” I answered. Nothing. Which probably meant she’d nodded.

What caused her to break her streak in the first place? she asked.

I smiled sadly. “Don’t worry about it. It’s something that she’ll hopefully be used to pretty quickly. And before you say anything, Ada—no, it’s not anything bad. This time . . .,” I trailed off as the possibilities shone before my eyes. A real smile blossomed on my lips. The kind of real smile I hadn’t worn in so long, I’d almost forgotten how to. “This time, I’m finally doing the right thing. I can feel it.” The feeling burned deep in my core.

I hung up before she could ask any more questions. The right thing. Yes, that’s what being Phoenix was. It was the right thing. The way to fix things with my family, my world, and myself. The way to finally heal. It was time I transformed from the troublemaker and the villain into the fixer and the heroine. This was my story, and I wasn’t about to let some . . . thing in my head control it. I’m proud to say this was the true start of my story, from this moment on. I found a new purpose, and I was ready to begin a new destiny; it was just waiting for me to grab it. And, oh heck, I was going to grab it.



Over the next week, I’d gotten a few more surprise jobs as Phoenix. I’d stopped two robberies, a few muggings, and a few other cases of theft. By Saturday, Ace and I decided we needed a better way to hear about crime happening around the area, as well as a better way to get to and from them.

“We could just watch the News and see what’s going on?” I suggested.

Ace shook his head. “No, that would only work for bigger crimes,” he pointed out.

I sighed. “I know. And I probably shouldn’t be doing any huge crimes yet,” I conceded.

Ace nodded his agreement.

“So, what do we do then?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Unless you have any tracking powers we don’t know about, there isn’t much we can do.”

I sighed. I hated feeling defeated.

“We have to do something. Or else, one of these days, we’ll completely miss a crime.”

I stared at the wall in his study. Mr. and Mrs. McCohen had invited my family to dinner, because they wanted to get to know them. My mom, after hearing more about Ace, also wanted to learn more about the “mysterious” new boy, of whom she’d only seen once. As soon as we arrived at the McCohen house, Ace and I sprinted upstairs to avoid the awkwardness.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you really did have a tracking power, though.” Ace mumbled as his foster mom called everyone down for dinner. Once we’d all been seated at the table, Mrs. McCohen began the polite conversation.

“How was your day at school, kids?” she asked.

Sims smiled. “We did some coding in STEM!”

He was so excited, I had to smile. Ada rolled her eyes, although it was not hard to miss the slight smile she wore as well. I glanced at Ace, who sat across the table from me. He was watching my sister’s reactions. Mom elbowed me, smirking a little.

“What’s with the smile, Birdie?” she whispered, glancing at Ace, who was now concentrating on his food.

“What?” I whispered back, unable to look away from Ace for a second.

When I did, I found my mom giving me a small, sappy smile. I shook my head and continued eating. I let my hair fall over my blazing cheeks. I heard someone say my name, and I glanced up. Thankfully my cheeks had gone back to normal. My mom coughed to hide her laughter at the confusion apparently evident on my face.

“Hmm?” I asked.

Mrs. McCohen chuckled. “I asked how your day was,” she repeated.

“It was good.”

I glanced again at Ace. He was smiling at me. I felt my cheeks grow a little pink as I felt something warm and soft light up in my

heart. I looked away. Throughout dinner, Mom wouldn't stop giving me small, sappy smiles; meanwhile, I kept finding myself looking at Ace and trying to stay focused on the conversation. Suddenly, the topic of my first visit came up.

"What made you comfortable enough to let Brinley come over here the first time?" Mrs. McCohen asked my mom.

Mom looked up from her dinner.

"Huh?" she asked.

I bit my lip hard. I'd kind of forgotten to tell her I'd gone to Ace's house . . . she hadn't asked when I'd come home! She'd just sent me straight to bed after hugging me to death.

"I mean you barely knew us, so it must've been a leap of faith to let her come here at the last minute," Mrs. McCohen went on. My eyes widened slightly. Ace gave me a confused look. Mom turned towards me slightly.

"I . . . didn't know she came here. I assumed she was at someone else's house, based on what Ada said."

I glanced at Mom. I could see the hurt. Mrs. McCohen raised her eyebrows.

"Well, did she never tell you?" she asked.

Mom shook her head. Before the conversation could get worse Ada jumped in—thank goodness! I owed her one—and began talking about school and the funny things that had happened with her friends recently. Finally, dinner was over, and Ace led me upstairs and back into the study.

"So, any ideas?" he asked, meeting my gaze. It took me a second to recall what we had been talking about.

"No, but you never know," I replied. Sims opened the door and peeked in.

"Whatcha guys doing?" Sims asked, his eyes darting between us.

I smiled. "We're just talking about school. Boring stuff. What's up?"

Sims seemed pleased with the attention. "Nothing. I'm just bored." He shrugged.

"I could introduce you to Zach?" I suggested.

“That sounds awesome!” He came in, took my hand, and literally dragged me down to where Zach was sitting.

“Hey Zach, have you met Sims?” I asked.

Zach was a tall, medium-build boy with my dad’s dark brown hair and gray eyes. Zach shook his head and walked over to Sims.

“I’m Zach,” he introduced himself.

Sims smiled and stuck his hand out for a handshake.

“I’m Sims. It’s nice to meet you Zach.”

They shook on it while I turned to leave them alone to bond. I felt this almost overwhelming need to get back to Ace.

“How are they getting along?” Ace asked, looking up from his paper a second after I entered the room.

“They’re doing great.” I smiled.

Ace quickly returned it, and I felt the butterflies get a little excited. He set his papers down and sprawled out on the couch-armchair, gazing at me steadily. A sadness swept over his beautiful, brown eyes.

“Your mom is nice,” he noted for the second time.

I nodded since I didn’t know what else to do.

“Must be nice to still have your mom,” he whispered.

I wasn’t so sure. The first thing that came to mind when I thought of my mom were all the breakdowns and flaws I’d seen over the past couple years. I’d grown up way too fast after having to wade through the depression that took hold of me. The depression takes away and hides everything good, every good instinct. It’s like being thrown into a tumultuous sea, with little to no light, and you don’t know how to swim. I’d imagine bits of flaming flotsam that appears just behind the crest of a wave, making you brace yourself by trying to get in a gulp of air before being forced under. And that’s assuming you catch sight of it before it hits.

Returning back to the present, I realized I hadn’t responded, but that I was staring at the wall, thinking about my own world inside my head. He took this silence as an opening to pry, even though I could sense his worry at my silence.

“Since she’s so nice, why didn’t you tell her you came here that first time? I thought you did,” Ace cut straight to the point.

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself out of the comfortable but degrading haze. “Ace, I really need to focus on my homework,” I replied, snapping out of it.

After a moment he stood up and sat next to me on the couch.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” he asked.

I sighed. I couldn’t, though. My past had more mistakes than his probably did. Not to mention the depression, and everything. There were some things that no one could understand unless they have lived through it and learned it the hard way.

“Brinley, what’s going on?” he asked gently.

I forced on a smile. He did deserve to know something, but that didn’t make it any easier to bring it up to someone who still seemed a bit like an outsider.

“Nothings’ going on. Why would there be anything going on?” I asked.

Ace studied me. “Because I know you.”

I closed my eyes, trying to keep the sudden anger from springing free of my grasp. I cursed myself silently when a little slipped through.

“No, you don’t,” I grumbled darkly. I didn’t know if he did. I really hoped not.

He paused. “Brin, are you okay?” He sounded genuinely concerned. It seemed he was almost always worried about me.

I nodded, forcing my eyes open. “Yes,” I lied. When he still didn’t look convinced, I sighed.

“Alright, fine.” I looked down at the papers in my lap before staring at the coffee table. How should I start? I wanted to be as vague as possible.

“My mom reacted badly to the footage of the Phoenix stuff, so I snuck out for some peace.”

I hoped that was enough. I turned towards him. After a moment he nodded slowly. I could feel bitterness simmering in the depths of my heart. I lit a fire in my hand and just watched the flames for a few minutes, letting the dancing shape and heat mesmerize me.

The thought of burning something down was tempting. Remembering Ace's parents, I clenched my hand into a fist before I could follow through with the temptation.

When it was time to leave, I said goodnight to Ace and had to practically force Zach to finally say bye to his new friend. I took that as a good sign. I was happy he found a new friend so fast. As far as I knew, he still didn't have many friends at school. I could be wrong, though.



That night, I couldn't fall asleep. The evening kept replaying over and over in my head. I couldn't stop smiling whenever I saw Ace in my memories, and then feel embarrassed when I recalled Mom's suggestive smiles. I knew what they meant. Did I really like him? I thought for a moment. I grabbed my phone and looked at the photo gallery. I had quite a few pictures of us from all the times I'd already been over to his house. I went all the time because of my mom's nearly daily breakdowns these days. I found myself smiling absentmindedly at Ace in every picture, memorizing his face, his hair, his clothes, his smile, the way his nose crinkled ever so slightly when he smiled . . .

I caught myself just in time, eyes wide as I uncovered a feeling from somewhere underneath the numb. The fire helped me to bring it out to a place where even if I did go numb, I'd still be able to feel it, for good or bad. The fire held it there since I wasn't strong enough myself. So, it was true. I was in love with Ace. For some reason, the prospect only made me smile bigger. My heart felt light and the entire world lit up. I couldn't wait to see Ace again.

CHAPTER - 9

TROUBLE

I stared at the clock in my last class, watching it slowly tick away. As soon as the bell finally rang, I practically launched from my seat. I swung my backpack over my shoulder and met Ace in the lobby. The night before, my mom and his had decided I can just go straight to his house for a few hours each day before going home. He smiled when he saw me. I couldn't help but smile back, my heart fluttering.

"How was your day?" he asked.

I groaned. His smile grew wider as a laugh escaped him.

"Yeah, I kinda figured," Ace agreed.

"Then why'd you ask?" I replied, forcing my smile down, and raising an eyebrow.

Ace scratched his head and rested his hand on his neck, looking out the window before turning to face me and looking me in the eye.

"You ask those kinds of things to people you care about."

There was a sincerity in his eyes, as well as something else behind it. I shrugged, walking a few steps closer to him and leaning lazily against the wall while we waited for the bus. The silence stretched for a few minutes before I spoke up.

"Homework for an hour, then practice?" I asked vaguely.

He nodded. I nodded back, getting out my phone. He got out his phone, looked something up, and laughed.

"What?" I asked.

He grinned at me and showed me a meme on his phone. I snorted in amusement. Shortly afterwards, his bus arrived. We climbed on board and talked the entire way. The conversation flowed easily between us. Once the bus came up to his house and we stood up, I noticed Mason sitting near us. He stared at us with a hurt but understanding look on his face. He looked away once he realized I'd caught him.



“I think it’s about time we see if you can do anything else,” Ace declared.

“What should I do, then?” I asked.

He thought for a moment. He got this twinkle in his eyes whenever he was trying to think.

“Can you manipulate the heat?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

I closed my eyes and tried to feel around for heat that I could collect. I felt the air grow slightly warmer before reverting back to its natural temperature. I opened my eyes and Ace nodded, folding his arms.

“So you can, you just need more practice,” he concluded, checking the time on his watch.

“Do you want to go on a walk?” he asked, looking at me.

I nodded, trying not to look too eager. He led the way out of the warehouse. Going on a walk had become nearly a daily ritual. I concentrated on walking down the street since it was suddenly slightly complicated to use my feet in order to move. My phone buzzed and I pulled it out to find a text from my mom. Within seconds, I could feel the anger and bitterness simmering somewhere deep down, trying to pounce on me, but the fire held it back. Thank goodness. I closed my eyes to try and shove it down. As I was working on that, I felt a tug somewhere in my power. Around

Mennyl Street. My eyes shot open. We were a few blocks from there.

“We need to get to Mennyl Street.” I told Ace.

He gave me a confused look.

“Why?” he asked.

I didn’t know how to explain it.

“I . . . don’t know. I have a hunch. We’ll see if it’s right,” I offered.

I really hoped it was. It felt right. We speed walked there, nearly running, but we didn’t want to bring extra attention to ourselves or slip on any slush. Within a few minutes, we managed to get to the street, and after walking down it a bit, it became apparent I was right. Someone was struggling to unlock a car, so a possible car thief. I sighed.

“Do I really need the suit for this?” I complained to Ace.

He nodded.

“But—it’s not like there’ll be any fighting.” I motioned towards the car thief in emphasis.

Ace sighed. “There might be. You never know.”

I knew he was right. Besides, my common sense told me that if any villain saw my face, it would be bad. Also, my reputation was spreading, and some villains were starting to get scared of me, which worked both for and against my advantage. Maybe this person would just run away and forget the car. Or maybe they’d fight back. I guess there was only one way to find out. I bit my lip and ducked into one of the alleys. I closed my eyes, calling for the suit using my power. After the first couple crimes, I was getting the hang of it. This time it only took a few seconds before I felt the material on my body change. I exited the alley fully suited. Yes, fully suited. There had been instances where some of my suit had been missing. It had only been the sword, gloves, and boots, thankfully—but still. Ace distanced himself from me but smiled. I smiled back, glad the mask hid my blush. I rushed in and approached the robber.

“If you want a car, you could just save up for one like a normal person, you know,” I offered.

The car thief practically jumped a foot in the air. I stifled a laugh. I didn't think heroes were supposed to laugh at that sort of thing. Then again, I wasn't exactly a hero. Or not a typical one, anyway.

"Where did you come from?"

It sounded like a woman this time. I couldn't tell, though, because she wore a mask and wasn't exactly built like a stereotypical woman. Maybe she was transgender? Or maybe she just didn't care about what society thought of her. Either way I wished her the best. I put my hands behind my back. I'd come up with this slight habit of acting a little cocky whenever I dealt with criminals. It helped with the nerves.

"I came from my mother. Before that? No idea." I shrugged.

The person I thought might be a woman rolled her eyes.

"You know what I meant," she growled, her hand inching back towards the car.

I pretended I didn't see it. "Not from this street, that's for certain."

Another eye roll.

"What? I can't exactly tell you where I'm from. That would put my identity at risk! That's literally superhero 101 stuff!" I teased.

She growled again. I noted her hand was inching back to the car. As soon as she'd nearly touched it, I grabbed her hand lightning fast, and let my instincts take over. Within seconds, she was trapped against the hood, squirming. I wished I had super strength, but that was clearly not one of my superpowers. If there were others like me, which I now assumed from the existence of the water orb, then maybe someone else had whatever powers I lacked. I trusted Ace had called the cops when a few minutes later I heard sirens and a police car pulled up. The police officers who came out seemed a little annoyed at the prospect that I'd done their job for them, but they tersely thanked me anyway—although not to brag, I'd like to see them catch criminals and supervillains better than me—and put the woman in handcuffs in their car. As they were driving away, Ace walked up to me, checking to see if the coast was clear.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

I shrugged. “I just got in touch with my power, and it showed me the way. I guess.”

He grinned. “That means we don’t need a tracker!”

I smiled. But we weren’t done yet. I tried it again and we ran to Genival Drive, then to Forest Road, as well as several other locations. By the time I switched back to my normal clothes and we were making our way to the bus stop, I was more exhausted than usual, and Ace had a bruise or two from slipping on ice. Apparently, the tracking took a lot out of me. A darkness had begun to grow and lurk somewhere behind, slowly draining my energy. That probably just meant I needed to get used to it, though. As we rode home on the bus, my mind wandered to Mason, like it often did. How we’d take walks down these streets and buy ice cream, and how we’d joke around in the stores, or the many times we’d met up with friends or hung out in the park. Black Thorn hadn’t shown up in at least a month. I wondered if that meant he’d just given up, or if he was just biding his time before he could capture me and do whatever he planned to do to me.



The next day, as I was tracking for the third time, a specific area jumped out at me. Ronmin Road. My eyes snapped open in terror. I couldn’t tell if it was my terror or someone else’s. I’d been able to sense the negative emotions of the criminals I’d been capturing that day, as well as some of the negative emotions of the victims or bystanders, but this fear was new. I burst into a full-on sprint, with Ace struggling to catch up behind me, although I could feel something slowing me down.

“Where?” he managed to huff once he caught up to me.

My breathing hardly missed a beat as I answered, almost breathless, “Ronmin Road.”

I ran faster, racing through alleys, down sidewalks, and down more alleys before I made it to the road. The closer I got to it the

worse the feeling got, until darkness edged into my vision for a moment before fire came and batted it away. I skidded to a stop; my eyes huge. I'd hoped Black Thorn had decided to call it quits after his long absence, but apparently, he'd gotten bored of looking for me specifically. Or maybe he was just trying to get my attention? I had no idea. I just hoped he hadn't linked me with the Phoenix, since he'd seen my powers the first time we had a proper facedown. Fury tore through my veins, and before I knew what I was doing, I was shooting fireballs at him. He turned around and grinned his cold, malicious grin. The kind that could make even the meanest people on these streets shiver. I noticed some smoking on his vines. I smiled in victory at the damage, but it soon disappeared when the vines re-grew themselves and began to lash out at me. I leaped, dodged, spun, flipped, and twirled out of the way, going everywhere in the process. I didn't know what would happen if those touched me, and I did not want to find out.

"Everyone GET OUT OF THE WAY!" I yelled at every bystander, including Ace.

Ace nodded and worked to get the people on the sidewalks away from the fight. I continued to shoot fireballs at Black Thorn, although it was in vain. He never stopped smiling.

"I see you've gotten better. Not good enough, though."

He made his own ball of something in his hand. All I could tell was that it was black before he hurled it at me. I ducked. The ball collided with a nearby building, turning an entire wall black. Another ball missed me, hitting another wall and blasting a hole through it. The building's infrastructure was mostly being held up by the pillars now. Within seconds, the building was teetering. I could hear people inside screaming. I stomped my foot, using my anger to create a circle of fire, blocking anyone from getting within range of us. Hopefully, it would also keep Black Thorn inside. I made sure it was plenty high before running out of it and into the building.

"Everyone OUT!" I yelled to the inhabitants.

It turned out to be an office building. Typical. People scrambled out of their offices and desks, down stairs, and streamed out into

the street. I kept climbing levels, and when necessary, I welded beams back together to buy enough time for everyone to get out safely. I worked as fast as I possibly could, my heart pounding so hard against my chest I was sure everyone within a ten-yard radius could hear it. Finally, I managed to get the last few people out, and just as I got out myself, the building made a groaning sound that cut right through the chaos, and it fell over into a pile of dust and debris. It was only a few stories tall, but it was still fascinatingly terrifying to watch collapse—like watching the collateral damage from an action scene in a movie but in real life. I turned back to my circle of fire, remembering Black Thorn, and ran straight through the flames again. He was gone. I couldn't understand how the heck he did that! With a growl, I stamped my foot, extinguishing the flames. I hoped next time I'd get him. Sirens rang and multiple police cars pulled up. I hoped they didn't think I'd caused the damaged building. Whatever they thought, some of them had their guns trained on me, while most just surveyed the damage. I walked over to an alley almost completely spent. The adrenaline I didn't realize was fueling me slowed in my veins. Before I could disappear, however, a police officer came over to me, holding handcuffs.

“What, you think I'm the one who caused this?” I asked, motioning towards the ruined building.

The officer sighed. “We don't know, but you're the only one still here. We need you for questioning.”

The officer opened the handcuffs. I stepped away.

“Then question me right here. Surely you don't have to go through all the trouble of bringing me in? Besides, there's plenty of others who saw what happened.”

I was too tired for this. Besides, whatever happened, I did not want to go to the police station. Not fun times and my identity could be compromised. Before the officer could answer, a News van pulled up. I groaned. Great. This meant an even bigger breakdown from my mom when I finally got home tonight. Her breakdowns for the past couple weeks hadn't been too horrible, but I had the feeling this one would be pretty big.

“Gotta go!”

I turned and waved to the officer just as the News people got their cameras rolling. I ran into the alley, hoping mom wouldn't make any connections between me and this fight. I suspected she might, though, since Ace was here. He met me on the other side of the alley. Just as I changed out of my suit, I felt a familiar, unwelcome, cold pain crawl in next to the fire, making my eyes well up slightly with tears. What was going on? I watched helplessly as the world around me turned gray in my head, the magic fizzing out. I knew this feeling. And I hated it. I glanced at Ace, who stared at me in obvious concern. Okay. I anchored myself to him, as he was the only thing I saw before me that was still bright and magical. Thank goodness for that. I wondered if this attack would get any worse.

"Are you okay?" he asked while we walked back to the bus stop. We'd decided to finish early for the day.

I pasted on a smile. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just a little annoyed that Black Thorn got away again."

It was a partial truth. Did that mean it was a lie, though? Familiar whispers whisked through my head as memories blurred my thinking and a mental fog came in whisps. Nothing felt okay as the numbness settled in beside the pain. It was a weird contrast with the glowing warmth and the fire. The glowing warmth blazed whenever I looked at Ace, reminding me that everything would be alright. I could tell Ace didn't entirely believe me, but he didn't ask any more questions on the bus ride. Once we got to his house, we acted like nothing had happened, hoping to mislead his family, just in case they had already watched the News. I dreaded going home the entire time I was hanging out with Ace and his five-year-old sister, Sadie. Sadie was a blast, and her level of sassiness matched mine, making me laugh. I played dolls with her in her room while Ace went to talk with his foster mom, and continued playing until he brought up snacks. I decided I never wanted this time at his house to end. I would've given a lot to stay with Ace and his family. I texted mom and asked if I could stay over for dinner. Thankfully, she responded, which told me she hadn't watched the News yet. I smiled at the reply. Ace watched me in anticipation.

As soon as he saw my face he grinned. “You can stay for dinner?” he asked.

I nodded and watched in amused satisfaction as he did an enthusiastic fist pump. I laughed. Ace left again to go tell his foster mom.

While I waited, Sadie leaned in towards me and whispered into my ear, “Ace likes you.” She grinned.

“Of course, he likes me. I’m his friend.”

She didn’t stop grinning, pleased with something. I was about to ask what kind of “like” she meant exactly when Ace came back.

“Come on, Sims wants your attention now.”

He took my hand, pulled me onto my feet, and led me into his room, where Sims sat on the floor with his laptop again. I would complain about being pulled every which way, but I honestly really loved it. Normally at home, people didn’t care much about my presence. That or I pushed them away. Here I felt loved and wanted, and here I couldn’t push anyone away. They’d always come back sooner or later, sometimes repeatedly if they really wanted your attention. I knew what Sims wanted immediately. I took out my laptop and played Minecraft with him. Ace joined us, and we set up a good place to live and just had a fun time in each other’s company, even though I did get blown up by creepers a few times.

Much too soon, Mrs. McCohen called everyone down for dinner. Sims and Sadie argued about who got to sit next to me, which had been really sweet—at least in my opinion. I was about to dig in when Ace’s sister reached for my hand, and everyone around the table began to bow their heads. Huh? Ace, who had beat his brother to the chair on the other side of me, gently took my hand as well, bowing his head. My hand tingled at his touch. I bowed my head as Mr. McCohen began to offer up what I recognized to be a prayer. My family sometimes said prayers, but it was only because my dad used to be Jewish. And that only really happened on Jewish holidays. We didn’t celebrate that stuff much. Once the prayer was over, we all dug in. I suddenly found myself being extremely self-conscious about eating since Ace was sitting right next to me. The

conversation wound easily around the table throughout the entire meal. All too soon, it was time for me to go home.



That Saturday morning, Ace called me to ask if he could come over to my house. I asked Mom—I hated her sappy smiles—and told him to come over. A couple hours later, he was at my door. I ran down and tried to get to the door before Mom did. No such luck.

“Oh, here she comes!” Mom stepped aside, wearing a slightly mischievous grin and letting me take her place as she continued to do whatever she had been doing in the living room.

Ace was blushing a little, adding to my dread that she embarrassed him.

“Hey, come on in,” I invited, getting out of the way.

He smiled. “Thanks.”

I closed the door behind him and showed him where he could take off his shoes. We ran up to my room before Mom could do anything. Once we reached my room, he paid closer attention to what my room looked like, since last time, he was too busy freaking out.

“I kind of figured you’d have more rock bands and stuff on your walls,” he commented.

“Let’s just say there’s more to me than meets the eye,” I replied mysteriously.

He looked back at me over his shoulder, smiling slightly, an eyebrow raised. I ignored my flushed cheeks.

“Besides, I don’t have money,” I pointed out.

Ace laughed. “Yeah, that kinda helps,” he agreed.

I found myself staring at him as he laughed. I quickly joined him to cover it up.

“I just realized . . . besides the games we play at my house with Sims and your powers, I don’t actually know much of the basic

stuff. Like favorite colors, animals, that kind of stuff,” Ace pointed out.

“Same for you,” I returned.

“We could play some sort of game—that would be a good way to do that,” Ace hinted.

I snorted. “Okay, okay! I get the hint!” I laughed.

I had an idea. I went to a small trunk next to my closet, opened the lid, and withdrew a couple notepads and pencils.

Ace glanced at them curiously before looking back at me. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Well . . .,” I began, “my sister and I used to play a game with anyone new we met. We’d get a pad of paper for each person and a pencil.”

Ace nodded as I talked.

“It’s called ‘Guess the Best.’ The goal is to get the least number of points by guessing the answers to different questions correctly. The winner gets a treat, whereas the loser gets slimed.” I grinned at that last part.

Ace mocked panic. “What kinds of questions are they? Are they basic things like favorite color? Or do they get deeper than that?” he asked.

“I guess you’ll find out.”

I put the paper and pencils on my bed and walked back to the trunk, pulling out a medium-sized plastic container full of cut up and folded slips of white paper.

“Ada and I’ve been working on this for years. Whenever we find or think of a good question, we write it on a piece of paper, cut it up, and add it to the collection.” I gazed down at it proudly.

It had taken us a few years to collect so many questions. I walked over to Ace, collected the notepads and pencils, and set the things on the floor.

“So, what’s the treat?” Ace asked.

I shrugged. “It can be anything. Usually, it’s some candy from the candy stash, but on good rounds it could be a slice of cake, or a craft, or even an abnormal outing. Mostly depending on my mom’s mood and schedule.”

“Who goes first?”

I smiled slightly maliciously. “Rock-paper-scissors,” I replied, putting my hand up.

He smirked in confidence and copied me. “Two out of three?” he suggested.

“Yep,” I agreed. Ace just barely won.

“How?” I gasped in exaggerated surprise.

“Sims knows a lot of tips,” Ace explained.

I stared at him open-mouthed. “Aha! Well, Mr. Kid-Pleaser, you go first. Draw a question out of the container.”

I watched Ace exaggerate being picky about the paper he chose.

“No, no, not this one. It’s too ripped—it could be a low-quality question. One that’s so basic it doesn’t matter if a word or two is missing. Not this one—it could be a hard or embarrassing one, based on how tightly folded it is—”

“Just pick one!” I encouraged, laughing slightly.

His eyes glittered as he chose another random paper, unfolded it, and cleared his throat before reading it.

“If you could body swap with someone, who would it be? Why?” Ace read.

I wrinkled my nose. I could think of a few people, but the reasons why were all personal, and I didn’t think he’d ever guess any of them. After a minute, I picked my person.

“Alright, you can guess,” I said.

He nodded. He thought for a minute. “Alicia?”

I shook my head.

“Gracey?”

I shook my head. That’s two points.

“Mason?”

I practically gave myself a headache shaking my head. Three. Ace was silent as he considered who it could possibly be for a moment.

“Rod?”

I shook my head. A few guesses later, Ace gave up.

“Who is it?” he asked.

I chewed on my lip briefly before answering. “You.”

I looked at him. His brows wrinkled in confusion, and he'd just started to open his mouth to ask why when I practically blurted it out.

"Because your family is so different from mine. The feel is different, and you seem to have better relationships with your family for the most part." I glanced away. I'd been in a bit of a rush when choosing. Besides, he deserved to be let in a little after sticking with me through so much already.

"Brin," Ace calmly reclaimed my attention.

I turned back to him, an eyebrow raised in confusion. I hoped he didn't see the panic in my eyes. When I looked in his eyes, though, I found compassion.

"Whatever it is, I'm here," he promised.

After a breathless moment, I nodded. Ace pushed the container towards me.

"Your turn," he reminded me. I wrote down his points and picked a piece of paper.

"How do you calm yourself when you get angry or upset?" I read.

I looked back up at him. He furrowed his brows and narrowed his eyes a little in thought before nodding.

"Okay, uhh . . . you take deep breaths?" I guessed.

Ace nodded. "That's part of it."

How the heck was I going to guess this, when I didn't even know the first thing about it?

"Okay. My last guess is . . . maybe you listen to music or something?" I asked.

Ace nodded.

"Was that it?"

"Well . . . I just take several deep breaths and force myself to do some sort of activity or listen to something that's soothing, I guess. That usually works once I've decided I should be done being mad," Ace replied.

That sounded like a solid plan. Maybe I could try that sometime. I pushed the container back towards him, and he pulled another one out.

“Are you keeping track of my points?” I reminded him.

He offered a sheepish smile before scribbling something down.

“I’ll give you two points for that,” he decided.

I pursed my lips. “I think it should be more like two-thirds of a point, since I guessed parts of your answer,” I argued.

Ace raised an eyebrow. “What exactly are the rules?” he asked.

I wrinkled my nose before handing him the paper with the rules scribbled on it. He read through them, grinning.

“Nope, it says here: ‘each guess gives you one more point.’ So, technically, you have two points,” he reasoned.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

Ace grinned as he unfolded his question. “Ooooh, this is a good one!”

He grinned wickedly at me. I felt some blood drain from my face.

“Just kidding. It’s not that kind of question—”

I pushed Ace over, annoyed at the fact that he’d actually worried me. I lost my balance in the process and ended up on the floor next to him.

He laughed. “How’d you lose your balance when you’re on your knees?” he teased.

I smiled awkwardly. “I can be clumsy,” I replied, getting back up to a sitting position.

Ace followed me. Before I knew what was happening, I realized how close he was to me. We both froze. I stared past him, unable to meet his eyes. I could feel something strange in the atmosphere. I forced some air through my lungs. I couldn’t speak, so I was surprised when I managed to get out, “Question?”

Ace silently fumbled the piece of paper before whispering, “When are you the most yourself?”

I knew the answer immediately. I continued to look anywhere but at him, having a hunch of what would happen if I did. I closed my eyes and nodded.

“With your family?” he guessed in a lowered tone.

I forced a headshake.

“With Mason and the others?” Ace guessed again, although he sounded a little strained.

I shook my head.

“W-when?” he asked.

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to look him in the eyes. It was surprisingly hard, but I managed to do it. We were so close. I had to close my eyes again in order to speak properly at all.

“When—I’m. With you.”

My voice sounded a little weak in its whisper. I opened my eyes and stared into his brown ones. But Ace didn’t meet my eyes. He was staring a little lower. I felt a pull so strong I couldn’t resist. His face grew slowly closer as my eyes strayed to his lips. I wonder . . . the rest of the thought floated just out of reach before I could grasp it. I’d stopped breathing. His arms shifted weight subtly as his body leaned. My eyes slowly closed.

“Hey! I heard Ace is here—” Ada burst into the room but stopped dead when she saw us.

Ace and I sprang away from each other, both of our cheeks turning red. I smelled singed carpet, and quickly put out the embers and hid them behind me before Ada could notice anything. Ada grinned the widest grin I’d ever seen on a human being.

“Were you guys about to kiss?” she asked gleefully, like she’d never even heard of the idea.

A twinge of irritation pricked at me and snapped me awake.

“No, we weren’t. We were just playing the questions game, that’s all,” I forced out, regaining my composure.

Ada shrugged. “Whatever. Anyway, Mom wants to know if Ace wants to stay over for dinner.”

Ada turned towards Ace. He opened his mouth and closed it a couple times before managing to get some words out, his face still pink.

“A-actually, I um, I have to get to work at seven and I need to go home first.”

He quickly got up and walked to the door. But before he left, he turned around and looked directly into my eyes.

“See you later, Brin.” He offered a small smile before going out the door.

I listened as his footsteps proceeded down the hall and descended the stairs. After a couple minutes, I peeked out the window and caught him walking down the driveway. The rest of the world faded away as I watched him go. Once he was gone, I forced myself to pull away. I’d forgotten about Ada. So when I saw she was still standing there, with that horrible grin on her face, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“You like him!” she exclaimed.

I shook my head. Hard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lied.

Ada rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on. You look at him differently than you do other guys. I’ve seen it in school. And I’ve seen how well you two get along. It’s obvious you like him.”

This may make me a bad sister, but I kind of forgot that Ada went to the same high school as me. After all, she was only a year younger than me.

“It’s okay,” she added. “I won’t tell anyone. I swear,” she promised, putting a hand over her heart.

“Cross your heart?” I asked, implementing our old promise system.

She nodded and I caught a secret pleasure at the implication deep in her eyes.

“Cross my heart.”

I nodded, got up, and we shook on it. Once we’d finished shaking hands, we hooked our pinkies together like a chain and let go.

As Ada walked towards the door, I spoke up, “You’re wrong.” My voice shook at finally admitting this out loud.

Ada let out an exasperated sigh. “Brin, how many times do I have to tell you—”

“I love him.” I forced out, interrupting her mid-sentence. I could feel it. Somehow.

She stared at me for a moment before giving me a knowing smile. “He is pretty cute,” she stated, the smile growing when I blushed again.

I agreed. Way too much.



My eyes snapped open.

“Gremlin Drive,” the name practically popped out of my mouth.

Then I was running. Ace caught up quickly. After a few weeks, we still hadn’t talked about our “moment” back at my house. The awkwardness hadn’t completely gone away with the issue unsolved, but we’d just ignored it, alternating houses every other day. Of course, every time Ace visited, Ada would snicker and give us her knowing looks whenever we were together. I shook my head to clear those thoughts away. I needed to focus.

As we came to Gremlin Drive, I instantly saw the problem. A huge billboard sign was teetering awkwardly as if it was deciding whether to fall or not. If it fell it would crush an entire restaurant full of people. The base of the billboard’s pole was covered in a black substance. I ran over to it and touched it with my hands where it was starting to split and melted it back together so it would—hopefully—have more strength. I found some abandoned supports from an old building site nearby and welded them onto the pole, just in case the other method was a bust. Once the job was done, I cautiously touched the black. It quickly spread up my arm faster than the fire could burn it away. Black Thorn. The black substance melted off the sign and disappeared.

“So, this is the way to lure you out, ‘Phoenix.’”

I recognized Black Thorn’s voice. I whirled around, my hands becoming hot, and as soon as I saw him, fire involuntarily shot from my hands like a flamethrower. I didn’t know I could do that. Black Thorn merely stepped aside until the flames died. Looking pleased

with something, he melted into shadow and disappeared. My gut clenched and I stared at the spot he'd been. So that was how he did it. But why didn't he attack me? It made no sense, unless he was testing me. I walked back towards Ace, exhaustion tugging at me. Suddenly, the world turned black and everyone but Ace morphed into a monster . . . in my head. Pain roared up, and I felt tears pool in my eyes as all the light left. My limbs felt weirdly heavy, and a bitterness resided with the sense of melancholy. What was going on? I'd had miniature attacks for a few weeks, but nothing like this. I felt like I just wanted to die. I stumbled into the entrance of an alley and fell face first on the ground, barely noticing the pain through the fog. Hurried footsteps seemed to echo in the distance, but warm hands clenched my shoulders. Ace helped me up, but I was limp in his arms for a few seconds before I was able to grit my teeth through the pain and force myself to help him move me.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

I shook my head, but instantly closed my eyes in pain as the lie sank deep into the open wound. More unpleasant thoughts began to whip through my brain.

You would lie to your own friend? the voice asked.

He wouldn't understand! I tried to fight back.

You're right. He would run away if he knew. No one likes a mental case. That's why the entire school stays away from you. It's all your fault. That's why your mom has breakdowns. That's why your dad hates you . . .

I couldn't shut these out. Ace shook his head.

"You don't have to lie. You just had the weirdest face off against Black Thorn—if you're hurt, you can tell me. We can find first aid or—"

"Not that kind of hurt." I managed to whisper, taking deep laborious breaths that hardly helped at all. *You'll be fine if you just breathe!* I told myself over and over again.

Ace paused for a moment, staring at me.

"What kind of hurt is it?" he asked gently.

My teeth gritted without my permission as voices began to whisper repeatedly: Don't tell him. They wouldn't shut up!

My hand hovered over my forehead before I forced it down. Holding my head was a last resort, and something I'd only done during the worst attacks. I refused to do it now, as it was a sign of weakness. My voice seemed to be stuck. I tried to feel the fire but it was blocked by the darkness. What's going on? I wondered. I had to force myself to take it one minute at a time. The darkness was screaming at me, flashing bits and pieces of old, unhappy memories from the past couple years—memories I'd gone over so many times, I had every detail memorized, like a checklist. Red eyes flashed and gleamed in the darkness. Before I could do anything to prevent them, tears streamed down my face as the horror show leaked through my walls. The monster inside me stirred. I clutched my head and leaned against the wall, no longer able to refrain from such actions. Breathe. Breathe. BREATHE! I commanded myself. But I didn't want to breathe. All I wanted to do was push away Ace and implode on myself. I just wanted to die. Arms surround me while I tried to keep my sobbing quiet.

"It's okay, Brin. It's going to be okay," Ace soothed.

I shook my head. "No," I croaked.

He didn't pull away. He just held me tighter until I finally had the strength to speak.

"Nothing's okay," I whispered. I allowed myself to bury deeper into his arms. I felt safer in his embrace—he was a tangible place the monster hadn't tainted yet.

"I'm here. Always," Ace whispered into my ear while we just stood there hugging.

I took a deep, shuddering breath before I felt the fire creep through the darkness and disperse it, allowing light and warmth to cascade back into the dead space. I sighed in relief as I watched the world regain its color and the pain dissipate. I realized I was still in my suit, so if anyone had seen us, they'd have gotten an idea of who I was.

"Thanks for . . ." I was unable to finish the sentence. I didn't know how to say it anyway. Loving me? Being there for me? Being a good friend? But Ace seemed to understand what I meant and smiled.

“Always.”

I closed my eyes and felt the fabric on me change back to my normal clothes. As we started to walk out of the alley, Ace finally spoke up.

“A few weeks ago, during that game, you said, ‘when I’m with you,’” Ace brought up.

Why was he mentioning that now after carefully avoiding it for so long? I nodded, instantly feeling the butterflies. He turned his head towards me.

“What did you mean?” he asked.

I wondered what he thought I meant. But I didn’t ask that. I wouldn’t know how anyway. I was still recovering from the attack. Each one takes something from me.

“Everyone has a mask,” I began, looking down the sidewalk ahead of us. “Some happen to have theirs on more than others.”

I stared straight ahead. That was the only way to not give away how wrecked my nerves were.

“There’s very little that makes me or lets me put mine down, for any reason.” I took a breath and let it go.

“When I’m with you . . . it’s easier.” My voice cracked. “The only downside is that it makes it harder for me to pretend I’m okay around you,” I whispered. I risked a look and found I had his undivided attention. I chewed on my lip.

“You wanted to know if I was okay,” I reminded him.

He nodded, adding in a small “still do” before I could continue. I nodded back and closed my eyes briefly. I planned to use the freedom I now had to finally tell him.

“I’m not okay. I never am,” I practically whispered that last part, shivering slightly from the early spring air.

Ace walked closer to me in a protective way. I continued to stare straight ahead. I took yet another deep breath.

“When I was little, I had an . . . accident. I had to go to therapy for a few years to move on from it. During one of the sessions, they found another thing. Something I . . . um . . . inherited from someone in my family,” I explained cautiously, still staring ahead. I wouldn’t be able to continue explaining if I wasn’t walking and

staring ahead. I was very sensitive to reactions from people I care about. Always was, and I always will be—probably even after I hopefully get better someday. I could see him in my peripheral vision, though. I stuffed my hands in my pockets, not sure what else to do with them. I gritted my teeth, and my eyes hardened with determination.

“The therapist diagnosed me with Dysthymia. It’s a kind of depression,” I confessed.

I pulled my hands out of my pockets. I had been holding my phone so tight I had white knuckles. I needed to make myself calm down. Or at least internalize it more.

It’s okay. He can be trusted. He won’t walk away. None of this is your fault. I reassured myself.

Ace was quiet for a while, and the entire time I wondered if I had said too much. If I’d lost him, even. I put up my walls against the bombarding thoughts. He didn’t talk much on the ride back and continued to be silent until we reached his house. Once we got in his room, though, he immediately hugged me. My skin tingled all over, and I sank into the warm embrace, forcing myself to breathe. He’s safe.

“Thanks for telling me,” he murmured in my ear. We stayed like that for a couple seconds longer than necessary before he pulled away.

CHAPTER - 10

A BUMP UP

“You ready?” Ace called to me from the other side of the warehouse.

I nodded. It was time to burn some homework. He tossed the paper in the air and I let loose, recreating the flamethrower move I’d done when I encountered Black Thorn a few days before. Fire shot out of my hands, washing the area in deliciously scorching heat, melting all the frost nearby. The paper was gone within a second. I pulled my hands back and grinned, wiggling my fingers a little as leftover smoke from the fire hugged my fingers.

“That was awesome! You seem to have much better control over some aspects of your powers,” Ace commented, his cheeks slightly flushed, probably from heat.

“Why, thank you.” I bowed cockily.

He burst into laughter and walked over to me.

“I think it’s about time we went and caught some criminals,” he suggested, offering me his arm and grinning, his eyes glittering from laughter.

I rolled my eyes, pushed him, and ran to the door, cackling.

“Race you!” I called when I’d gotten near the door.

“Not if I get there first!” Ace called from somewhere behind me.

I rolled my eyes, stopped, and turned around. I raised my arms in a “come and get me” gesture. A challenge. Ace sprinted towards me.

I grinned evilly. “Come and get me!” I yelled before turning around and sprinting the last twenty or so yards to the door.

Right as I got there, I felt him put his arms around me as he caught up, partially crashing into me. My face warmed when I realized his arms were around my waist.

“Challenge accepted.”

I chose to act cocky to hide my already wrecked nerves.

“I still won!” I defended myself.

Ace shook his head. “I think I win.”

I gave him a confused look. Then I noticed how close we were. The name of a street pricked at my consciousness. A hard prick.

“Denz Street,” I whispered.

Ace nodded and we raced there. Once we arrived, I stared at the damage.

“Oh crud,” I breathed out.

A building was burning, another one was blackened, and there were several wounded bodies on the ground. Black Thorn stood in the midst of the wreckage.

He’s playing with you, I heard the phoenix say.

Why? I asked.

Black Thorn turned around and grinned when he saw me.

“Well, it looks like our dear Phoenix has arrived!” he cackled.

I was glad none of the bystanders were conscious, since I wasn’t in my suit yet.

“What do you want?” I called.

Black Thorn walked up to me. “Revenge,” he whispered.

I gritted my teeth, getting into a ready stance, spreading my feet, and balling my fists.

“What did I ever do to you?” I asked through my teeth.

His smile grew. “Not me. My little . . . friend. You’ve known who I am from the start.” He seemed amused by this.

I instantly caught on. I flashed back to the conversation I’d had with the very person I’d suspected and how it ruined a friendship.

“Mason? But he hasn’t told me he’s you. He said he would.”

“What if he was afraid of my power?” Black Thorn licked his lips, as if he liked the thought.

Fury flowed through my veins like magma.

“If you did anything to him—”

Black Thorn stopped right in front of me. Ace started to come between us in a defensive gesture. I held up my hand to stop him.

“I can handle this, Ace,” I said without taking my eyes off Black Thorn.

Thorn smirked. “Yes, she can handle this, Ace,” he mocked in a high voice.

I was struggling to keep my temper under control.

“I didn’t do anything to him he hadn’t already done. I simply encouraged, amplified, informed.” He shrugged.

My eyes snapped towards his vine tentacles, which were inching towards me. He was trying to distract me.

“But what does this have to do with me?” I asked.

Black Thorn grinned. “I can tell you that soon, but he won’t.”

I stared at him. Icicles of fear grew in my stomach.

“What?” I asked.

“You’ll see. Let’s just say . . . I’m his monster taking over. You should understand all about that.”

His grin widened when my face reddened. My body was shaking from the effort of standing there rather than feeling my fiery fist impound his face. I smelled smoke and felt scorching flames licking my hands. I was ready to act. I had him! So why couldn’t I do it? I would’ve before. Thorn chuckled, and that’s when I realized it. He told me he was Mason to ensure his safety. He knew I’d never hurt Mason. Not on purpose. He still wanted control over me. The pieces came together.

He was going to kill Mason. So, either way I lost. I didn’t want to hurt Mason, and I didn’t want to lose him, either. I was gritting my teeth so hard I was sure they’d break. I closed my eyes and felt it all settle in. I felt Thorn move away from me slightly, probably satisfied. I turned around and started to walk away. Suddenly, I felt

something climbing my leg. The fire rushed to it and burned it away. More came.

I whipped around and burned the vines attacking my leg to a crisp. Thorn growled in pain before sending a ball of black at me. I dodged. He came at me and I ducked, running a bit away from him. I closed my eyes to change into my suit, but he didn't give me enough time. I whipped around when I heard him coming. I sent a fireball at his ink ball, causing an explosion of heat and cold, red and black, that blasted us both back. Immediately, I set my hands on fire and walked towards him, operating entirely on adrenaline-filled fury. As I got to him, he smirked.

"You're not going to hurt Mason, are you?" he asked.

I stopped dead in my tracks. Police and News vans pulled up and my muscles tightened when I remembered I wasn't in my suit. Thankfully, I was hidden behind Thorn and some rubble, so they hadn't seen me yet. My feet burned into the ground as I wished I was anywhere else. I wouldn't be able to get into my suit in time based on how fast the new arrivals were getting out of their vehicles and approaching the scene. Any second they'd see my face, and Phoenix wouldn't be much of a secret anymore. I looked around frantically for a good hiding place, but there wasn't anything good nearby. There was nothing I could easily crawl into or lift, and there were too many of them to simply use the rubble as cover. They'd clean up the rubble anyway. A memory of my house's fireplace flashed into view, as vivid as if I were seeing it in real time with a clear, healthy mind. And just like that, I was engulfed in heat and moving fast. I struggled to hold onto the image, remembering the last time I'd done this.

Familiar with what was happening, I tried to take a relieved breath but found I couldn't breathe. I was suffocating. Panic spiked and shot through every part of me, making me very aware of the fire around me. Just as quickly as the panic came, it left as I arrived just outside my house's fireplace extremely grateful there wasn't anyone in the living room at that moment. I made my way out of the room, out the door, and rode my bike to Ace's house since I couldn't text him until I had my phone. I let myself in and ran up

to the study. Once I had it, I texted him, telling him what happened. He assured me he'd be at his house soon. I tried waiting in the study for him, but I was bored and decided to try wandering around the house. Mrs. McCohen found me in the kitchen.

"Where's Ace?" she asked.

I forced my face into a neutral expression to hide the smile that tried to peak out when she said his name.

"Oh, I went ahead on our walk and came back early, since I have some things to do," I explained.

She nodded. "Would you like some snacks?" she asked.

I shook my head politely. I wasn't hungry. I plopped down on one of the couches in the living room and began to read from the kindle app on my phone. I hadn't read in a while, but it felt right to read in this quiet moment in this safe place. When I heard the door open, I finished the sentence I was on and looked up to find Ace coming into the living room. He sat next to me and casually put his arm on the couch behind me.

"How'd you disappear? I was so sure the cops and the News people would find you!" he whispered.

"You know how I told you I can turn into fire and transport to places like that?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I think I've figured out how to do it on demand," I said.

Ace smiled. "That's much more convenient than walking."

I smiled back. I'm sure the conversation would have continued if Ace's foster mom hadn't come in and sat down across from us. Old memories of sit-downs with my therapist flashed in my mind before I could do anything about it. Ace removed his arm from behind me. I tried to ignore the pang of disappointment that bled through my heart. She smiled at us.

"You guys are cute, just hanging out."

She looked at Ace, who seemed to be unsure whether or not to glare at her or die a little inside. I instantly hoped this wasn't going where I thought it was. My smile became forced.

"Well, downtime is hard for teenagers to get," I reminded her, hoping she would drop whatever she was thinking.

She did, thankfully, after glancing at Ace and compressing her lips into a line briefly. I set my phone down on the armrest and she seemed to grasp onto the topic of phones as if her life depended on it. Considering Ace's expression, it might well have.

"Do you have any fun apps on that?" Mrs. McCohen asked, motioning towards my phone.

"If by apps you mean games, then no. I don't have many games on it."

Mrs. McCohen cocked her head slightly. "Then what do you do on it?"

I glanced at my phone before answering. "I usually just text, use social media, watch YouTube, listen to music, read, or do practical things or stuff for school," I answered. Man, that was a long list.

"That sounds like a better use of your time than whatever Sims and Ace do, not counting the social media." She sent a teasing smile at Ace, who just rolled his eyes, obviously tired of the conversation already.

"What do you like to read, Brinley?" Mrs. McCohen asked.

"Fantasy, sci-fi, really anything slightly unrealistic," I replied. The more unrealistic, the more of a break from normal life it became.

She nodded. "What about the other genres? Like . . . oh I don't know . . . realistic fiction or romance?"

I stared at her for a moment.

"Both of those are good. I prefer realistic fiction over romance, though. It's great when a book has good ships or some drama."

Mrs. McCohen nodded. Ace stood up suddenly.

"We should go upstairs. We need to get some homework done." He seemed to be desperate to get out of that conversation.

Once we were back in the study, I gave him a curious look.

"What was that about?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

I didn't believe him, but I didn't want to push him either. After a few minutes of doing homework, I reached into my pocket for my phone, but it wasn't there. Panic choked me when I couldn't remember where it was.

“I lost my phone,” I stated bluntly, getting up and searching for it.

Ace got up and helped me. After searching a few rooms, I walked through the living room and found it on the arm rest. As I turned around to go back to the study room, Ace was standing immediately behind me. His closeness hit me like a wave. Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe. My legs glued themselves to the floor. Neither of us moved. Instead, we stared at each other briefly before looking away. My cheeks felt like they were on fire, and it had nothing to do with the fire inside me. I tried to force my legs to move, but I swear, they turned into pillars. How could my own legs betray me? I looked anywhere but at Ace.

“So . . . you like the ships in books?” he asked.

I nodded awkwardly.

“Do you like it when they delay the first kiss, or do you prefer it when they just . . . get to the point?” he asked.

I noted a subtle shake in his voice, like he wasn’t sure about the question but needed something to fill up the silence. It was the kind of anxiousness where anything sounded better in the moment than silence, no matter how ridiculous. I swallowed, knowing the answer immediately.

“I prefer when they . . . um . . . just do it, but that’s not the way those things work,” I forced out, cringing at how hoarse my voice sounded.

Ace nodded, smiling, although he seemed slightly distracted.

“Speaking of ships . . .,” he mumbled, slowly closing the distance.

I stared at his lips in a trance.

“What about ‘em?” I mumbled.

My voice sounded extremely fragile because of my inability to breathe correctly. His lips moved to answer, but his voice seemed more and more distant as he drew closer. He gently took my hands and leaned forward. Against my will, my body also leaned forward and met him in the middle of the gap. And suddenly, I was floating, far away from everything I’d ever known. I felt him gently pull me a little closer, one hand holding onto mine firmly as the other let go

and gently touched the side of my face. Then he pulled away, leaving me gasping for breath despite how gentle it had been, and my face probably looking like a tomato. Ace's cheeks had caught fire as well. The imprint of his lips lingered, and I fought the urge to touch mine in wonder. Had that really just happened? I forced the grin off my face as he studied me.

His eyes widened in horror. "I-I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have--"

My grin broke free, becoming too strong for me to contain, and my blush deepened. The horror and dread melted away in his gaze, replaced by unquenchable happiness and only mild embarrassment.

"It's fine," I commented in a low voice, looking away.

When I glanced back at him, he was staring at me with pink cheeks and a shy smile. My heart instantly melted. Why did he have to be so cute? A small squeal broke through the silence, causing us both to whip around to the door near the stairs. There, Mrs. McCohen and Sims stood watching, both of them obviously straining to contain themselves at what they'd just seen. But while Mrs. McCohen stared at us in a motherly "they're so adorable!" kind of glee, Sims stared at my feet with wide eyes. That's when I noticed the heat and the smell of burning carpet. I covered it up quickly and looked back at Ace. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor, obviously flustered.

"Come on, we should get you home," he mumbled, meeting my gaze.

I nodded and he led me into the study, helped me pick up my things, and walked me to the front door, slipping his hand in mine. He opened the door for me like a gentleman. (Note to all boys: most girls love chivalry! But don't be surprised if some of them try to return the favor.)

"See you tomorrow."

He grinned at me, and I turned around in the doorway, smiling back. His cheeks were still pink. I offered him a tentative wave before walking down the front steps. I was engulfed in euphoria the entire way home. I could still feel the imprint of his lips on mine long after the kiss. Even if I didn't have the fire, that alone could've warmed the late-winter chill.



When I got home, I found Ada sitting on the living room couch and looking at something on her phone. When she glanced up, she smiled, and I blushed all over again. She instantly sat up straight.

“Ooh, did something happen between you and Ace?” she asked.

A small smile alighted on my face at the memory.

“Ooh, something did happen! You have to tell me!”

Ada patted a spot beside her on the couch enthusiastically. I rolled my eyes but complied. Once I’d sat down, she started the conversation.

“Soo, what happened?” she asked.

It took me a moment to find the right words.

“We kissed,” I whispered, unable to keep the grin off my face.

Ada gasped in delight.

“Your first kiss!” she exclaimed.

I shook my head. Ada frowned.

“You mean you’ve already had your first kiss, and you didn’t tell me?” she pouted.

I chuckled in an attempt to make light of it.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen. And the guy was more into me than I was him,”

I explained vaguely. Ada nodded, her eyes widening in recollection.

“I remember seeing the video of Mason,” she replied.

I winced. “Yeah, um . . . he didn’t really appreciate that,” I replied.

I realized that could be said for both the rejection and the video, but she seemed to know what I meant.

“I can understand why. I’d be pretty mad myself if something like that was recorded and leaked,” she agreed.

I played with the hem of my shirt for a minute and let the silence stretch until it became awkward.

“How come you never talk to me about anything anymore?” Ada whispered.

I glanced at her and found a sadness in her eyes I hadn’t caught before.

“Well, until just now, really,” she hurriedly corrected herself when I was about to protest.

I sighed and stared at the wall, trying to sort through the tangled web of blurry thoughts whispering to me. I closed my eyes while I slowly built my response. She had no idea what was going on in my life, and it would take forever to catch her up at this point. I wasn’t even entirely sure. Besides, she didn’t need to know about certain newer developments.

“I . . .,” I tried to start the vague sentence I had composed in my head, but my mouth couldn’t figure out how to form the next words. “It’s . . .”

I gritted my teeth in irritation. An idea lit up my head, and I decided to risk it. After all, I didn’t know how else to do it.

“Do you have any questions?” I asked instead.

Ada hesitated, then nodded firmly. I tried my best to mentally brace myself for whatever she’d hit me with.

“What happened? Once you stopped going to therapy, you were never the same.” She looked me in the eye.

I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. Really? Did she have to pick that one? I had to try to answer it, though.

“A lot happened. There’s no specific . . .” My voice faded away as I tried to figure out how true that statement was. I shook my head.

“I’m not sure where to start. I just . . . don’t want you going down where I was headed,” I explained.

Ada nodded, although it was clear she didn’t quite understand.

“Was there some sort of . . . root to whatever happened?” she tried.

I thought back to it. “Like an event or condition?” I asked.

She nodded. I thought for a moment.

“Well, I guess it was the accident that started it. You remember how I started going to therapy to deal with the trauma?” I asked.

Ada nodded and motioned for me to keep going.

“After a few years, right before I started high school, a new thing came up.”

Ada nodded again. “That’s when you started acting weird.”

I sighed, “Yeah.”

“But what exactly happened? All I know is you came home that day from the therapist after acting weird for a while, and nothing was ever the same. You basically shut everyone out,” Ada recalled.

I could see anger and despair warring in her eyes. I looked away.

“Yeah. That . . . was a dark time. I was diagnosed with Dysthymia, a kind of depression,” I whispered.

Ada perked up a little and moved towards me, sitting next to me. The great part about us was that, before all this started, we’d actually been in a good place. Ada had been a friend. These days, she just seemed like this unreachable light, one I didn’t deserve to have. But now it felt as though I was getting closer again, thanks to Phoenix. Ada laid a hand on mine, an old gesture I had used on her whenever she was scared, hurt, or upset in middle school.

“I’m here. I’m not going.” She smiled wryly. “I can’t anyway. You’re my family. I literally can’t.”

She chuckled at her own joke. I managed to roll my eyes. I opened my mouth to explain things more when Zach suddenly came down the stairs, completely unaware of what he just interrupted. I clamped my mouth shut.

“I need to do some homework,” I excused myself, “or die trying.”

I hurried up the stairs and into my room before she could say anything. I couldn’t actually make myself do homework. Whenever I opened up that much or to someone new, it took a lot out of me. It let some cold invade, even though the fire had been keeping most of it at bay. Thank goodness. I gave up quickly and ended up binging YouTube and playing with a new way to use fire. I’d figured out by accident this morning that I could make fire float and manipulate it into different shapes. I was currently turning it into a chili pepper. Then, thinking about the statue, I turned it into a phoenix.

I felt something weirdly deepen in the fire when I did this, and I could've sworn the phoenix shape glowed extra. I quickly flicked my hand, and the fire broke into a shower of floating sparks, which I let float like stars around my room. The lights were out, so it looked really cool. I smiled in relief at the calming effect it left. It was a sense of complete peace. I could feel the warmth from the sparks radiating in the air. I closed my eyes to embrace the warmth. I must've fallen asleep, because when I woke up it was 2 a.m. and my phone had been blasted with texts. One stood out in particular, though. It had been sent only a few minutes ago.

Ace

Come to my house ASAP.

CHAPTER - 11

TRACKER

“It’s two in the morning, Ace!” I half-groaned, half-shivered when he opened his front door. He was ready for my grumpiness, though, probably because I’d made it very clear over text.

“I know, but this is important,” he whispered before putting up a finger to his lips.

I sighed and walked in. I was glad it was too dark for him to see my face.

“What could be so important you had to drag me out of bed?” I asked.

I expected him to shoot back with a joke, but what I could see of his face was completely serious. Anxious, even. That’s new.

“Sims knows,” he replied in a barely audible whisper.

I stared at him in disbelief. I almost thought I’d heard wrong. Was it because I’d accidentally burned the carpet? I’d hoped he would just brush that away and forget about it, although knowing him, he’d probably think it was a cool phenomenon and ask about a million questions about it. Ace nodded as if confirming what I was thinking.

“He wants to be our ‘guy in the van.’ His exact words,” Ace told me, lips in a tight line like this displeased him. I furrowed my brows in concern.

“Is he still up?” I asked.

Ace shook his head. “Before I came down here, I saw him sound asleep in his bunk. We should be good for a bit,” he replied. “We should still be quiet, though. He’s a light sleeper.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. With that said, he led me up the stairs and into one of the studies, the farthest away from his sleeping family, I noticed. As soon as he closed the door, he turned the light on.

“Ahh! Can’t we leave the light off? I’m still trying to be drowsy,” I grumbled.

Ace shook his head, squinting in the light as well.

“We both need to be fully awake for this.”

I huffed, which earned me a small smile from him. I glanced away until the smile vanished.

“So, he wants to be the ‘guy in the van’? What even is that, exactly?” I asked.

I mean, I knew it meant technical stuff, but that’s about it. I didn’t know what the specific job entailed and the consequences that were attached to it. I wasn’t a comic book geek! Yeah, I’d watched all of the Avengers movies, and I’d seen all the Spiderman stuff, and yes, I’d seen a lot of X-Men, but I didn’t really pay attention to absolutely everything like a fanatic would. Ace looked from me to the wall then began to pace the length of the floor, lines of agitation between his furrowed brows.

“He doesn’t seem to understand the danger,” Ace thought out loud, “but we also don’t have a choice. He’ll tell people if we don’t let him.” His pacing only increased.

“But if Jane ever finds out—”

“Jane?” I interrupted.

“My foster mom,” he replied curtly before continuing with his thought. “If she finds out, we’ll all be in a ton of trouble. She’d tell your mom about that too, and that would cause a spiral . . .”

Ace’s words faded into the background as a horrible picture of my mom having what I had no doubt would be the worst mental breakdown ever played in my mind. I shook my head.

“My mom can’t find out,” I stated firmly. It might actually kill her. Ace glanced at me, surprised by the tone in my voice. I stared

at him hard. I would not let my mom go through that. He closed his eyes.

“What about my brother?”

The question hung in the air for at least a solid ten minutes. I hardly dared to even breathe as the possibilities presented themselves. The steady breath I let out seemed to echo around the room when I finally came to a decision.

“We keep him somewhere safe while he does the work,” I suggested in a low voice. I had no desire to risk Sims, but I also didn’t want to risk my mom. Ace rubbed his eyes.

“I could lose him.”

I understood his reluctance.

“I know. But there are always ways to keep that from happening,” I pointed out.

Ace sighed and passed a hand through his hair. “I know. It’s just . . . I can’t lose more family.” He sounded so defeated as he said that.

“I know,” I whispered.

His gaze turned to me, grief filling his eyes, anger flashing. I forced myself to keep from taking a step back.

“Do you, though? Do you really know how it feels to lose people? Or be at risk to?” he asked.

My face softened a bit. I approached him to put a hand on his arm, but he backed away. I sighed.

“Yes, I do,” I paused to collect my thoughts. “My mom has things called ‘mental breakdowns’ when she gets stressed, upset, or overwhelmed. The first day Phoenix showed up, she had one for multiple hours. If she knew I was Phoenix, she’d probably . . .,” I closed my eyes and forced the words out, “kill herself.”

Ace’s eyes widened and he seemed a little less defensive about his position. He understood how that felt, yet he didn’t understand the weight of it to me—what exactly it would do to my family if Mom died. We wouldn’t be sent to a foster home or an orphanage, we’d have to live with my dad. He was about to say something when I cut him off.

“And I’ve had moments where I’ve gotten dangerously close to the edge myself. A few times I was hanging on by two fingers, sometimes staring down the length of the cliff,” I continued.

I wasn’t going to let Ace speak until I was done. If I did, I may not ever tell him this last part.

“And when I was five . . .” The scene replayed almost vividly, old terror reawakening when I remembered the water rushing over me, stealing the air from my lungs.

“When I was five, I almost drowned,” I gasped. It felt almost like I was back in that terrifying moment again. I was going down, down, down, down . . .

“Brin.” Ace gently took my hand, instantly shooting sparks up my arm. It startled me back into reality, and I blinked away tears as they pooled in my eyes.

“I was walking by the river that bordered the backyard of our house at the time,” I began, my voice shaking and cracking with the effort to withhold tears. I hadn’t told this story in a long time. Terror crept up my spine and began to worm its way into my heart as I let the memory fully replay.

“I’d been playing out there by myself. It was snowy, but parts of the river weren’t completely frozen. I just wanted to dip my hand in and see if I could take a rock back inside so I could do one of my little crafts I used to do. But—” My voice cut out. The tears descended my cheeks and dropped to the ground. My sight was too blurry, so I didn’t know what was on his face when he pulled me in for a hug. All I knew was that I was in his arms, and he whispered comforting things to me. We stayed like that for a while as the trauma and the butterflies seemed to be having a fight with each other. I couldn’t breathe for the longest time, wondering if I’d suffocate there. When I was finally able to pull away, I finished the story, ignoring the whispers in my head.

“But I fell in, and the tide swept me downstream. The water was so cold, it instantly stole my breath. The water on the surface was solidifying, and my body was turning blue. I screamed with what little air I could get out whenever my thrashing brought me up to

the surface, but I didn't think anyone heard me. Only my mom was home, and I didn't even know where she was," I said wearily.

"Just before I reached the part of the river that was completely solid on the top for miles, my mom grabbed my hand and pulled me out. She rushed me into the house, covered me with blankets and towels, got me some hot chocolate, and called an ambulance. I spent about a week there."

My voice was dead. It carried no tone—no nothing. I stared at the floor, just waiting for Ace to start regretting his connection to me at all. No one really wanted to be around me once they realized just how messed up my life was. Except for Mason. Somehow, he'd fallen in love with me despite all that. I wasn't sure how he did, but looking back, it was honestly kind of nice. It reassured me in a way, that no matter what, there would always be people who loved and cared about me deeply. I just hoped Ace ended up being the same. So far, he was, and I was eternally grateful for that.

Don't make this all about you! the whispers screamed in my head. *You're selfish for making him worry more about you than his own family.*

I shook my head and scattered the voices, but they'd already made puncture holes in my heart before the fire could help burn them away.

Ace took a deep breath. I held mine.

"Alright. We have to make sure Sims is perfectly safe, though."

I let go of my breath. "I can make sure of that myself," I promised. For once, I knew I could keep it. It felt great. A giant yawn ripped through me.

"Welltimeforbed . . .," I mumbled during the yawn.

Ace smiled and my breath caught. He took a step forward and hugged me again. I hugged him back this time, breathing in his scent. I wanted to stay there in his arms forever. It was soothing, and safe, and warm, and filled with all my happiest memories. It was heaven. But I had to get home, so I pulled away and ventured down the stairs. Ace followed me out the door and walked beside me for a few minutes. I gave him a sideways glance, smiling a little.

"You're walking me home?" I asked.

"I figured you might want some company," he explained.

I rolled my eyes but couldn't keep from grinning. We walked in silence for a little while before either one of us dared to disturb the nighttime peace.

"Are we ever going to talk about earlier today?" Ace asked cautiously, keeping his voice down just in case.

I was instantly glad he couldn't see my face.

"I'm not sure there's anything to talk about," I replied honestly.

When someone kissed another person, it was usually quite clear why. Ace stuck his hands in his pockets. He seemed to glow faintly. I could barely make out a small smile displayed on his face from the glow.

"Yeah . . . I guess there's not much to talk about," he agreed.

Another pause.

"Sims thinks I should ask you out." He laughed gently.

I smiled and bit my lip, trying and failing to keep it down. "Then why haven't you?" I asked, staring at the ground.

"Because I don't know whether you'd want to or have time to."

I rolled my eyes. "You'll never know if you don't try!" I teased.

"Alright." He grinned. "Do you wanna go out with me?"

I grinned back as butterflies danced in my stomach. I was starting to become addicted to the euphoria, it was so different to what usually encased me.

"Yes, I'd love to," I answered.

Gently, he slipped his hand into mine, and I felt the electricity spike up my arm and down my spine.

"So where do you wanna go for that?" he asked.

"Hmm . . . maybe we could just hang out in the park this weekend?" I asked. I had no idea what people did on first dates.

"Okay. How about we meet at 11 a.m. on Saturday, then?" he suggested, laughing.

"Sounds good."

The rest of the way we just enjoyed each other's company. Once we reached my house, I mounted the steps and turned around for a quick wave goodbye before going in.

"See you later today!" Ace whisper-yelled as I closed the door.

I leaned my head against the wooden door, completely exhausted, before dragging myself up the steps and back to bed. I hated the fact that I had to choose either Sims or Mom, but what other choice was there at the moment? At least I had the date with Ace on Saturday to distract me from things for a bit.



“Have you talked to Sims about the techy stuff yet?” I asked Ace in a lowered voice once he came to my locker later that morning.

I noticed—as others had as well—that we’d made this a daily habit. Mason didn’t come to his locker anymore. He probably asked for his old one back. I missed him, even if he was hosting Black Thorn. I wondered what kinds of torture Black Thorn did to him, or maybe he tortured himself because of it? I had no idea. I honestly hadn’t seen him in school since the regular Black Thorn attacks started. They happened at least once a week now, although we were halfway through another week and there hadn’t been a single one. Instead of feeling relieved about the decreased workload as Phoenix, I was worried sick about whatever was going on with Mason. A quiet villain was never a good sign. I’d read enough comic books during practice sessions to know that.

“I pulled him aside this morning a few minutes before the bus came. He’s thrilled about his job.”

I caught a hint of sorrow in his eyes as he said this, and I knew he still wasn’t entirely sure about our decision. To be honest, I wasn’t either. But no matter how I felt about my mom, I couldn’t endanger her. I hated how that meant I had to endanger Sims instead, but he could handle himself far better.

“I wish there was another way. I hate feeling like I’m choosing between Sims and my mom,” I grumbled as the bell rang.

Ace nodded grimly in understanding. We walked down the hall side by side, following the crowd to our first classes when a dark figure appeared farther down the hall . . . walking towards us, dark

tentacle-like things scraping its thorns against the walls. The kids in front of us stopped and rushed back the way we came, pulling Ace and I along with them. Teachers began shouting orders and ushering kids into classrooms, thinking that would keep them safe. A lot of students were already hurt from the trampling, and Black Thorn had begun to nail students with thrown objects. I knew what he wanted—as long as I was here, Thorn would do anything to find me. I ran towards the front doors. Ace followed close behind.

We burst through the doors, then circled back around the school into the empty football field. I closed my eyes and created a trail to me using fire. Within a minute, Black Thorn tore the door off its hinges and stalked over to us calmly, although a crazed look glinted in his eyes. I spread my feet out in a fighting stance, raised my fists, and felt a strange burning on my outer arm, just below the shoulder as my suit came on. Thorn stopped just a few yards from me and got into his own stance. I glared at him. He only smiled, pleased with my anger. I clenched my fists. They itched to nail his smug, little face and break something. He held out his arms and grinned.

“Well? Let’s do this, then.”

I rushed at him and he swung, missing me by inches. He dodged my fist and launched for my waist. I spun just out of his reach and turned to face him.

“Remember, hurt me and you hurt Mason!” Thorn taunted.

The fire roared with my emotions, shoving away whatever humane part of me was left, and pulling out the “bloodthirsty,” battle-hardened warrior that had basically been, up to this point, in control. I rushed at him, aiming for his jaw. He caught my hand with a vine and flipped me. I landed hard on the ground, face first. I hoisted myself up, gritting my teeth against the pain. I tasted blood and probably fractured something or pulled something—again. This time Black Thorn came at me, I ducked his swipe, kicking him straight in the chest. Dodge. Swing. Dodge. He caught me in the chest and flung me halfway across the field, smacking me against a football pole. A sharp ringing sound pierced my ears as the world spun, and before I knew it, I was on my knees, holding onto the pole to steady myself. The fire flowed into my head and ebbed the

pain away—minimizing it and allowing me to stand back up, despite the intense throbbing in the back of my head.

The fire whispered to me, begging me to let go of my self-restraint. Thorn needed to pay for what he was doing to Mason. I knew I was being influenced by the merciless anger that was already there, but I was not making a lot of effort to resist it. Fire was building inside me, waiting to be released. There was one way I was sure to get him, and that was to unleash all the fire I had within me at him.

Suddenly, a scene flashed before my eyes of the world on fire—the school in blackened rubble, the soil permanently scarred with deep scorch marks as smoke curled into the sky, Black Thorn still on the ground. But then, Ace’s crumpled, burnt form appeared in the scene. Horror struck me like a wrecking ball, tearing the scene from my eyes and knocking me out of my anger-filled stupor. I shook my head and put a leash on my temper, calming the howling firestorm inside. I walked calmly forward, earning me a perplexed look from Black Thorn.

Without a thought, I punched the air and sent a fireball the size of my fist at Black Thorn as fast as a bullet. It caught him right in the chest and he landed on his back and skidded a few yards. He growled as he got up and used his entire body to throw a black ball at me. The act reminded me of a pitcher at a baseball game. My instincts kicked in, and I threw an arm up. A firewall sprung up and burnt the black ball, causing it to disperse. Throw. Wall. Throw. Wall. I ran towards him, minimizing the wall into a shield that appeared every time I thrust my forearm out. I unsheathed a couple daggers and swung, jumped to avoid his vines, stabbed, thrust, and finally managed to cut him on the chest. A vine curled around my waist and hurled me back again, but not as far as the previous time. And this time, I managed to twist in the air and land on my feet. My muscles burned as I threw one of my knives. Black Thorn stepped to the side and grinned.

“You need to practice your throwing—”

I smiled as I tugged the knife back towards me, gashing his side before catching the knife and throwing it in its sheath. Thorn rose

intimidatingly, his tentacles coming at me. I kept my face neutral so as not to let him see the frightening effects of his power move. I directed the fire to my arm and waited until he was virtually on top of me before shifting to the ground, clamping my hand on the grass, and letting the fire flow. A geyser came up and blasted him, throwing him high up in the sky and causing him to fly in an arch towards the other end of the field. I jumped up and stomped my foot. I watched as veins of fiery red flowed through the dirt towards him. He managed to skip out of the way just as another fiery pillar sprung up.

“Remember—hurt me, you hurt Mason!” Black Thorn taunted after I ran up to him and gave him a bloody nose.

I froze as Mason’s actual face flashed through my mind, offering Thorn an opening. He took it and nailed me right in the chin, the force knocking my head back. I’d probably have a headache and a sore neck in the morning, if not within the hour. I swung at him, but right as I would have made impact, he melted into the ground and left.

I stumbled in the empty space and screamed, “Why the heck does he never stay for the full fight?”

If he had stayed, I would have beat him. The fire backed off, leaving my limbs heavy and my head spinning. Ace ran up to me and caught me as the world faded into black.



Flashes of light. Fire roaring. My tattoo of the phoenix burned. I watched as my entire world burnt to a crisp and crumbled, the bodies of all the people I loved burned next to me on the ground. Unrecognizable. Everyone except Mason. Sure enough, Black Thorn appeared.

It’s too late. Masons’ gone, as well as the rest of your world. He smiled a little. *What kind of hero are you? Were you? Are you going to be?* Thorn questioned.

I tried to speak, to tell him this wasn't my fault, to tell him that I'm the kind of hero that never loses, never quits, but my voice refused to work.

Thorn smirked, and in the phoenix's voice, he said, *You decide.*



The dream faded into black, and I woke up, sweating, in the nurse's office. Ace and some of my other friends, as well as Ada, hovered over me anxiously. As soon as they saw I'd woken up, they all breathed a sigh of relief. I tried to sit up, but the stabbing pain in my ribs and the ache in my head and neck ripped my breath from me. Ada quickly helped me lay back down.

"How'd she get so hurt?" she whispered, furious at Ace.

He studied me for a moment.

"She was caught by one of Black Thorn's tentacle-things when she ran outside to find help."

I wondered if he made that up on the spot. Ada gave him her stare. She used it for intimidation when she was searching for the truth, as if she was staring into your soul, and I can tell you first hand that it's very effective. Ace's fists clenched, but he didn't blink. How? I admired him for being able to do that while she stared him down. It's something I had never managed to do. After a moment, she nodded and looked away, although I wasn't sure she entirely believed the story. I wasn't sure whether I would either. There was something missing.

"Why didn't she just use her phone to call for help?" she asked Ace.

There's the missing detail!

He opened his mouth and after a moment sound came out, "Because . . . one of our friends stole her phone and hid it. I found it, and I was bringing it to her when things started to happen." Ace held up my phone for emphasis.

To my relief, everyone accepted that version of the story, and the tension settled down just as the nurse came in.

“She can leave,” the nurse discharged.

Ada nodded and turned towards Ace.

“You better take her to your house. Our mom . . . isn’t handling this well.”

Ada glanced down at her phone, then at me. Ace nodded and after the nurse gave me some pills, he helped me up by the waist, put my arm around his shoulders, and helped me walk to the buses, which were called early. The journey to his house wasn’t fun. Every little jolt hurt, but at least the pain was numbed. Once it was time to get off, Ace swung my bag over his shoulder, helped me up and off the bus, up his front steps, and over to the couch, setting me down carefully. Mrs. McCohen rushed in.

“I got the email about the attack. Are you okay Brin?” she asked, inspecting me like I was her own child.

I nodded, gritting my teeth against the pain. Maybe I shouldn’t have left the nurse’s office. She’d said I was okay, but it still hurt a lot. I couldn’t breathe deeply either.

“Here, honey.” Mrs. McCohen gently helped me lay on the couch so I could rest then left muttering to herself about school safety.

Ace crouched in front of me, looking me in the eye, his brows scrunched in worry.

“You fought really well. I think you nearly had him. At least, you had him distracted enough to keep him from leaving immediately,” Ace congratulated me half-heartedly.

I closed my eyes and lay there, completely still, trying to fall asleep. After a while, Ace seemed to think I was asleep, because he leaned over, kissed my forehead and let it linger for a couple seconds before pulling away a little.

“Please get better soon. I don’t like seeing you like this,” he whispered.

I fought off a smile until he was gone. I couldn’t fall asleep for a good hour, but I finally drifted off into a restless, void-like sleep. When I woke up, I found Ace and Sims talking about something,

with Ace sitting in a chair next to me and Sims across from me. I rubbed my eyes and Sims smiled.

“The hero’s awake!” he whispered.

Ace turned towards me and slid off his chair onto his knees so he could be eye level with me, just as worried as before I’d fallen asleep. He brushed my hair away from my face and stroked it lovingly.

“How are you feeling?” he asked softly.

I sighed and smiled. “A little better.” My voice was heavy from sleep, and it dragged slightly.

He smiled a sweet, happy smile that roused the butterflies in my stomach. I smiled back as peachy red sunrays streamed between us from the setting sun. His eyes sparkled in the light, like a universe I’d just barely dipped my toe in. His smile was small, but his eyes crinkled and lifted, and I watched as a few tears formed, the worried light fading just slightly. He didn’t seem to notice his pink cheeks, which I found endearing.

“Are you ready to move into the study so we can all talk?” he asked quietly.

I nodded and rubbed my eyes. Ace reached out and helped me into a sitting position, lifted me off the couch, and supported me into the nearest study, setting me down gently on one of the comfy chairs. Forgetting the pain in my ribs, I took a deep breath and let it out. Remembering, I braced for pain, but nothing happened. I felt my ribs. They felt . . . normal!

“I think the fire healed my ribs.” I laughed, and Ace joined in.

“Why am I not surprised?” he asked happily, his sweet smile returning.

Sims giggled, which snapped Ace out of it and caused his cheeks to flush. I turned towards Sims.

“So, you wanna be the tracker?” I asked.

He nodded eagerly.

I raised an eyebrow. “You are aware you’ll be risking your life, even if you’re in a safe place?” I asked.

Sims sat up straight and nodded confidently.

I sighed. “It’s not like a game of UNO, Sims. If you lose, you lose. There’s no resetting, no re-shuffling. The scoring actually means something—lives. Whether you save anyone or not. Whether you’re making a mess of it or not.”

I could see unease sneaking into his eyes, yet he still nodded. The boy had guts; I’d give him that. Most ten-year-olds would either be overly enthusiastic or terrified. I glanced at Ace with an I tried look, before nodding to him for the next part.

Ace took a deep breath. “You can’t tell anyone what’s going on now that you’re part of it.” His gaze became intense, to emphasize the next part. “You’d have to lie or twist the truth.”

Sims took a deep breath and nodded. Ace stared at him for a few more moments before deciding his brother meant it.

“Wait, we’d need some way to communicate with him when we’re out making our rounds,” I realized.

Sims piped up. “We could use earbuds! Some of them have microphones attached so you can talk back. Otherwise, I already have what I need.”

I nodded, slightly impressed by the kid already.

“So, are we starting today?” Sims asked eagerly.

Ace shook his head. “No. We’ll start once Brin feels better,” he decided for us all.

I offered him a grateful smile. He nodded, too distracted by Sims joining our ranks to smile back. My phone dinged and I checked it, a little surprised it wasn’t dead since the screen protector had a couple cracks from earlier.

Ada

You can come back home. Mom calmed down.

I sighed. “I have to go. My mom calmed down,” I explained.

Sims and Ace nodded, both looking sad that I had to leave. They helped me gather my stuff and Ace held my hand until we reached the door. By then, I was feeling good enough to walk. Right before I opened the door, Ace held on to my arm.

“We still doing Saturday?” he asked.

“Of course. I’ll probably feel better by then,” I promised.
Ace nodded and let me go.



Sims adjusted my earbuds. He’d found really fancy ones with great sound and a great microphone. He even fitted a little tracker on them. Apparently, he’d been working on the tracker for a couple days in his free time.

“So, this will actually work?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Huh.” I marveled at the earbud.

Sims turned to Ace and handed him a video feed that attached to his shirt collar.

“Can I please come with you to the warehouse?” he begged.

Ace shook his head. This repeated a few more times—like it had all afternoon—until Sims finally gave up.

“You’ll have to bring me there someday. What if something happens to you two?” he grumbled.

A quirky smirk appeared on Ace’s face as he ruffled his brother’s hair.

“Then we need to keep you far from it. We don’t want it to also happen to you.”

Sims pouted but obeyed.

“Alright, let’s go,” Ace said to me, picking up his bag. He turned to Sims. “You’ll be able to hear and see us?”

Sims nodded.

“Good.”



“Welcome to the warehouse!” I said into the earbud.

There's a lot of scorch marks, Sims noted through the earpiece.

I laughed. "Well, I wasn't instantly good at controlling the fire, although during fights my instincts help me with the parts I haven't practiced yet," I replied.

It was sweet he thought I was perfect. I hoped I never gave him reason to think otherwise, although he did need to understand I'm not perfect.

"I brought some things I thought we should work on based on your last fight," Ace informed me, putting his bag down.

I laughed in amused disbelief. "You're grading my fights now?" I asked.

He glanced up at me while he was still bent over and smiled back.

"I am attempting to be your trainer, although I'm unqualified. So, I'm watching your fights and deciding what we need to look at," he replied evenly, pulling out some foam and plastic swords.

I did a face palm for dramatic effect. "Plastic swords? Really? I'm not a ten-year-old," I remarked.

Then I remembered Sims could hear me and hastily added, "No offense, Sims. Plastic swords are cool, just not my style."

That's alright. I know what you meant.

I let out a sigh of relief and walked over to Ace and his toy swords.

"Sword fighting, I'm guessing?" I asked.

He nodded, and I rolled my eyes.

"You do know I have actual swords and daggers, right?" I asked, calling my suit for emphasis. I felt the gloves appear on my hands and smiled, although he could only see it from my eyes. Masks don't help with expression . . .

"Yeah, I know. But I don't."

I sighed, switching back from suit to normal clothes.

"Couldn't you just find a way to get one?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Probably, but I don't need you burning the hilt or accidentally cutting my arm off with a real one. That way, if either of us makes a mistake, we don't hurt ourselves. Since it's foam." He gently bent the sword he was holding for emphasis.

“Fine. Give me a sword.” I sighed and held my hand out. He passed me one.

“Alright. I looked up sword fighting during study hall today, so I hope I have a good enough idea. If not, I’ll keep researching.”

I swung the sword and got into a fighting stance, my instincts kicking in automatically. Ace got into a fighting stance as well, and we stood there for a few seconds staring each other down before advancing. He swung, I blocked. Using the sword felt good. His moves were simple, but I found myself spinning and practically flying around, landing tons of hits on him. After a few minutes, he snorted in defeat.

“Looks like you don’t need help with that. Now let’s work on your shields. Do you remember how to do them?”

I nodded and put my forearm up in emphasis, creating one. At first it was huge, but I managed to shrink it. I reveled in the heat it radiated, lighting up the warehouse like a giant torch, because it basically was a giant torch. I could barely see through the flames, so when I caught Ace battling awe and pain from the heat, I shrank it to just the size of a small shield. He bent down and drew out a few hacky sacks and threw them at my shield. I moved the shield to intercept the sacks and they burned up instantly upon impact.

Woah, I heard Sims mutter. I grinned. I hadn’t meant to show off, but it felt good. After a few more exercises, Ace put his stuff away.

“Alright Sims, you’re up. Find us some crimes in the area.”

We waited a moment before he said anything.

It looks like there’s something on Gwen Street, he answered.

Ace and I nodded and headed out towards that area. Once we got there, we stayed out of sight until I was all suited up. I emerged from the alley to find a bank robbery, much like my first one. Ace stood beside me and surveyed the scene as well.

“Don’t die. We still have Saturday,” he advised.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not entirely my decision,” I retorted.

“Ehhh, it kinda is.” He grinned mockingly.

I pushed him playfully and ran toward the robbers. He knew better than to follow me. Once I reached the bank, I snuck up

behind the robbers in the lobby and put a ring of fire around them. They jumped and yelped in response, looking around to see who trapped them. As soon as they saw me, their eyes narrowed in recognition.

“Phoenix,” the woman who I took to be the leader growled.

“That’s my name. Don’t wear it out.” I grinned at their glares.

“So, whatcha gonna spend the money you steal from this bank on?” I asked, unsheathing, tossing, and catching one of my daggers like it was a toy. “Why are you even stealing in the first place?” I walked around them in a predatory circle.

No one answered.

I raised an eyebrow. “Alright. I just figured we’d talk before I take you down.”

I sighed dramatically and extinguished the flames with one motion. They instantly advanced on me. Predictable. I dodged their swings easily and fought back. Within a minute, they were on the ground groaning. I caught motion at the door and found Ace watching. I nodded to him and he called 911, most likely adding to the number of calls the police were already receiving at the moment. I walked towards him.

“So, how’d I do, Teach?” I teased, smirking.

“Well . . .” He feigned flipping through some notes before grinning. “You did good, Phoenix.”

I gave him a little shove. We walked out, ready to move on to the next area.

But what seemed like from out of nowhere, a familiar voice sneered, “Where you going, Phoenix?”

I sighed and turned around. I was really getting tired of Black Thorn. I wanted Mason back. Thorn stood casually on the roof of the bank. He jumped down, his vines cushioning the impact, and took his time walking towards me. I tapped my foot in impatience, anxious to get to the next crime in time.

“What do you want, Thorn?” I snapped.

He tsked. “That’s no way to treat an ex-best friend,” he pouted.

“You’re not Mason,” I said in a deadpan voice.

“But what if I am?” Thorn asked. “What if I’m his darker side? Just more . . . empowered, and the side that actually gets stuff done.”

He was trying to confuse me, and I’m sorry to say, it was working. I had no idea how this had happened to Mason, so as far as I knew, Thorn could’ve been telling the truth to mess with me. Or telling part of the truth. Or maybe it was just a lie that made sense? I shook my head in a futile attempt to clear my head.

“Why are you here? To try and confuse me? To actually fight me? Because you know I’d win,” I growled.

He laughed. “Would you? Every time we’ve fought you’ve tried. And I’m still here.”

“I noticed,” I replied bluntly. “You kinda keep running away before the fight is even over.”

I waited for him to deny it. He didn’t.

“True. But in order to survive you sometimes have to run. You should know that better than anyone. Mason knows what you’ve been running from for years.”

Black Thorn stepped closer, until we were almost nose-to-nose.

He sneered. “You’re still running, although you won’t admit it. It’ll never change, Phoenix. There will always be something to run from. And you’ll always run. It’s human nature to run or to fight. Even to surrender when the mountain looks too tall. That’s just how you all work.”

I stared coldly into his eyes. All I could see was inky black where Mason’s forest green eyes should’ve been, although I did spot a few specks of green.

“Why are you telling me this now?” I demanded.

Black Thorn grinned in evil delight. “Because your friend is dead.”

My heart fell into my chest and the cold started spreading. I stared at Thorn wide-eyed, my head erupting in chaos.

“Dead?” I whispered. That was all I could manage to get out.

He nodded. “I killed him off last night.”

I knew why he told me this instead of waiting—he wanted to break my spirit. He was one of many who has tried to break me.

Don't let him, the phoenix whispered, right before the fire roared up and blasted the cold away. If Mason was really gone, then a little scorching wouldn't hurt him at all. I hated when people underestimated me in any aspect. I grinned, crazed revenge rushing through my veins like a drug. Fire licked my fists and I punched with all my strength, knocking him back a few yards, before turning my hands into flame throwers directed right at him. I made the flames hotter and hotter with my anger. Voices in my head egged me on.

Go ahead. He deserves this.

He HURT you!

HE KILLED MASON!

My breathing sped up as the fire grew hotter—so hot that my sweat started steaming off me. I felt a gentle touch, followed by an “ouch!” and the retraction of that hand.

Sucking on his finger, Ace tried a different tactic. “Brin, breathe.”

The half of me not drunk on the crazed, sweltering, vengeful fire wanted badly to listen. It prodded the fire as if saying, “bro, listen to your guy.” But the fire shook its head, trying to push harder. Still, the good part of me prodded it over and over until finally the fire seemed to sigh and back off. My body thirsted for more fire, but instead of obeying me, it slowed down until it wouldn't come out. As it settled down, I noticed a darkness simmering underneath the bright red. I gasped, gulping down air, just realizing I'd been mercilessly suffocating myself in the flames. My hand grabbed the base of my neck. Was there really nothing there choking me? I continued to gasp for air for a few minutes, vaguely noticing the red and orange light in my veins as the fire dimmed until it was back to normal. A hand pulled my hand away from my neck, which had begun unconsciously squeezing. Arms enfolded me as Black Thorn, staggering and scorched, but smiling in satisfaction, melted into the shadow and disappeared.

“It's okay. It's okay. It's gonna be okay,” Ace chanted soothingly in my ear.

I let out a heavy breath as exhaustion loomed over me, dragging me into a warm, dark abyss.

CHAPTER - 12

ALL HECK

I woke up in Ace's house again. Ace was sitting next to me, staring at me like he was pondering something when I woke up. I sat up and burned away the dizziness.

"What was that?" Sims asked when he came in a minute later.

I furrowed my brows. What?

"You know, the maniacal-flame-thrower-move you pulled on Black Thorn."

Sims seemed to think that would ring a bell. I closed my eyes, dragging up a few fractured images until the entire scene unfolded before my view. My mouth popped open slightly, and . . . cold hard fear wiggled in. Was that what happens whenever I lose control? I replayed what happened and Sim's maniacal comment over again in my mind. I braced myself against the vivid image. I wasn't used to vivid memories. Once it was over, I breathed deeply.

"I . . . I don't know," I croaked and shook my head.

My throat was dry and scratchy, like a fire had ravaged my throat. Breathing and talking stung. Ace handed me a bottle of water that he retrieved from the table. I gulped it down greedily despite the pain and asked for more. I kept this up until I'd gotten through several bottles.

Ace smiled a little. "You're gonna have to pee pretty badly later."

I shrugged off the comment. "The water tastes good. My throat still hurts, though," I replied. So what if my bladder screamed at

me? That was the least of my problems. I held my head in both hands as a splitting headache sliced through my brain.

“How long was I out?” I gasped.

“I’ll get some aspirin,” Sims volunteered, leaving Ace and I alone.

He sighed. “Not that long. Not as long as the last time you fought Thorn,” he replied hesitantly.

I nodded. We were silent for a minute before Ace dared to ask what I’d managed to dodge with Sims.

“Do you really not know what happened?” he asked.

I hesitated before shaking my head. “I remember now. It took me a while, but . . .” I let my sentence fade before shaking my head again, finally allowing the distress and pain to show on my face. Ace was safe.

“It wasn’t good,” I choked, squeezing my eyes shut to stop the tears. A few leaked out anyway. “I can’t l-lose c-control again,” I whispered.

Ace rushed forward and wrapped me in his arms, gently rocking me back and forth.

“We can work on control,” he promised me.

That was probably for the best. I didn’t want to become . . . I shook my head, not daring to go forward with that thought. As soon as I’d calmed down, I gently wriggled out of Ace’s grip.

“I think that’s it for saving people today. I can’t go home yet, though.” I walked into the kitchen to get a snack and found Sims preparing one as well, the aspirin next to him. I took a few and chugged more water before looking through the cabinets and the fridge. I’d been there so much it was starting to feel like a second home. I got out some goldfish and fruit, since my cravings were a little all over the place. Ace came in behind me and as soon as I opened the bag of goldfish, he stuck his hand in and robbed me of my snack momentarily. I pushed him away.

“Mine,” I grumbled at him.

Ace raised an eyebrow. I knew what he meant. I rolled my eyes.

“I’m the only one here that eats them—except for you, but only when I get them out,” I retorted.

He grinned and I knew a comeback was coming. It wasn't what I expected, though.

He turned towards me, touched my arm, and said, "Mine."

There was silence while my cheeks blazed. I rolled my eyes, grateful that Sims had already left the kitchen.

"I'm no one's." I couldn't help but laugh when he started to pout.

"We still have our date in a couple days, so technically that proves you are," Ace defended himself.

I raised an eyebrow. "Who agreed to it? Who picked the specifics?" I asked.

"You," he muttered.

I nodded. "So, if anything, it's the other way around," I pointed out.

I instantly regretted it, since he grinned broader than I'd ever seen him. I realized what I'd just said.

"Erm . . ." I ate the goldfish straight out of the container while my cheeks turned into tomatoes, turning away from him since I didn't want him to see my reaction. I put the bag back into the pantry and felt arms envelope me from behind.

"Well, I'm alright having it be the other way around. You're the superhero after all. It makes more sense."

I was glad he couldn't see my face. Once my face returned to normal, I wriggled out of his hug, turned to face him, and smiled mischievously.

"First one to the study wins!" I ran off towards one of the studies without waiting for his reply.

"Which one?" I heard him yell.

My grin grew wider.



Whispering echoed in the hallways when Ace and I entered school the next morning. Everyone was staring down at their phones. I

approached Gracey and looked over her shoulder at the video playing on her phone. My eyes widened and my breath caught. I hadn't known there'd been bystanders nearby during the fight yesterday. Gracey glanced up at me in annoyance, and I caught a hint of suspicion in them. Everyone else seemed to be either thrilled or scared by how I'd reacted in the fight.

"What the heck's she doing?" I covered my surprise.

She seemed to take that immediately.

"She seemed to lose her cool over something Black Thorn said."

Gracey stared at the screen as the video replayed, over and over again. I watched the horror show, pushing down the still vivid memory before it could make things worse than it already was.

"I wonder if he knows who she is. Maybe he threatened her?" Gracey suggested, squinting her eyes at the screen as if trying to see some sort of hidden detail.

"Maybe. Or maybe he said something else that bothered her."

Gracey whipped her head towards me sharply.

"Like what?" she snapped.

I gritted through a cringe. This was why I didn't usually talk with her, despite her involvement in my group. She was always so bossy and impatient, and for a while, I'd been way too fragile to deal with people like that.

"Well, maybe he said something, like an idea or a threat to the city she didn't like?" I theorized.

Gracey seemed to consider that for a moment before shrugging.

"I guess that's a possibility. It's more fun to theorize that Black Thorn knows who Phoenix is, though."

I chewed on my lip for a second before shrugging again. "I guess."

"Who do you think she is?" she asked, watching me sharply.

"Uhh . . . I prefer not to theorize about that? I just like to think that . . . she's a symbol of hope, I guess? That even someone normal could do something so impossible?" If I knew how to pray, I'd have prayed she hadn't heard the slight tremor in my voice. She was about to respond when Ace stepped in.

“I hear Stephanie’s been acting weird lately, going out after school, coming back with mysterious cuts and bruises and things. I heard one time she came home and her clothes and hair smelled like smoke,” Ace told her.

Gracey grinned, seemingly tensing at the sight of Stephanie, and left us, jumping on Stephanie as soon as she walked into sight. I sighed in relief.

“Thanks. I probably would’ve blown it,” I said in a low voice.

He nodded before grimacing. “You know what Stephanie is actually doing, though, right?”

I compressed my lips into a horrified line and nodded. That would have serious consequences. I’m grateful I never went there, although not everyone’s fortunate enough to find a mysterious statue with orbs that give superpowers. The bell rang, making me jump a few inches.

“And on that upsetting note, it’s time to start another day!” he exclaimed cheerily.

I rolled my eyes and groaned. “You mean another day of crap? Yeah, no thanks. This is why I skip.” I turned towards the nearest door, but Ace put an arm around my shoulders and propelled me towards class.

“Nope, you’re not ditching. You’re on a roll!”

I grumbled some things under my breath and reluctantly went to class, even after we parted ways. During first and second period, I nearly fell asleep multiple times. Finally, it was lunch, and Ace and I sat with the others. I tried to ignore their conversation, but a few minutes after we sat down, Gracey—I wasn’t surprised at all—turned towards me and put me back on the spot.

“Do you have any idea what Black Thorn said to Phoenix? Any ideas?” she asked.

Everyone at the table stopped eating and watched to see my reaction. Their eyes felt like they were boring into my flesh.

“Um . . . well . . . uh . . . maybe he threatened her?” I suggested.

Some of the other kids, Florence and Temmin, nodded. Gracey didn’t look satisfied. She turned her stare towards Ace, and suddenly, everyone had forgotten about me. It annoyed me a little

that as soon as Mason and I had grown a bit distant with our friend group, Gracey had instantly taken the lead. She was really good at it, too, but not in a nice way. She was more of a dictator than anything.

Ace shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Maybe he was trying to intimidate her,” Ace replied.

Gracey sighed. “Does no one else think that maybe he knows her secret identity? Why else would she get so angry? Her veins are literally glowing in the video!”

I saw an opportunity. I leaned back on the chair, kicked my feet up, and grinned, playing alpha.

“Well,” I said loudly to gather everyone’s attention. “Did you notice how the sky in the picture is tinted? Something looks weird in the video. It could be possible that it was tampered with before it was released.”

The reason was actually probably because of the lighting, smog, and the rainclouds that had hovered over the city most of the day. I didn’t know why else it would be weirdly colored, though.

Several people shook their heads, others stared at me like I was insane. But the majority seemed either confused or shocked as they turned their gaze from me to Gracey. I’d just hinted at war. A rush flew through my veins that I recognized as fire, confidence boasting proudly on my face. Gracey blinked rapidly while she fought for a reply. She was supposed to know the ins and outs of technology when it came to social media, videos, etc. I could see the question in her eyes as she turned to stare at me dangerously.

“That doesn’t disguise the fact that she looked mad after Black Thorn spoke to her.”

I shrugged. “Or maybe it does. It’s pretty easy to manipulate things in a video. Especially if it can be accessed by anyone,” I stomped a foot on her ground. My grin widened a little when it took her a full minute to say anything.

“The source I found is very reliable.”

Man, I was enjoying this. I raised an eyebrow.

“Where did the source get the video from? Is that source trustworthy? When did they send it? Who even is the source?” I

continued to challenge. I gleefully watched as her lips compressed into a line.

“None of your business,” she grumbled.

I leaned forward menacingly. The predatory sense deep in my bones purred in delight. It felt evil, but I wanted to be evil at the moment. Evil survived in the game of high school.

“Oh, I think it’s all our business,” I interjected.

She glared at me, picked up her lunch, and stormed out of the cafeteria. My win. I settled back down and reveled in my victory for a moment. It was probably bad that I enjoyed that so much, but . . . it was honestly hard not to. The whole rest of the lunch period, students were spreading the news about the confrontation in the cafeteria. It was hurting Gracey’s reputation. Whenever I saw her the rest of the day, I could tell it bothered her. She glared at me whenever our eyes met, but I only smirked. I couldn’t help it! I knew I’d pay for it someday. I wasn’t really looking forward to that, but I knew I could handle whatever she threw at me. Nonetheless, I was grateful when school was over, and it was time to play Phoenix.



“Today we’re gonna start helping you with your control,” Ace began a few minutes after we settled into the warehouse.

“It sounds like we’re back in school,” I noted, before cringing.

“Oh gosh, no!” I replied to my own observation.

Ace just laughed.

“Anyway, I have a few ideas for how to do this.”

I nodded for him to continue. He walked towards me until he was a foot away.

“The first thing is trust exercises. First, I do want to know what he said to you that got you all riled up.”

I could see the concern in his eyes, so I agreed—reluctantly. I gritted my teeth against the boiling, bitter grief, and what surprised me most . . . the stabbing regret.

“He said . . .,” my voice cut out for a moment, “Mason’s dead. At least that’s one thing he said.”

I forced myself to breathe. Ace’s brows furrowed in worry and he hugged me, burying his face in my hair.

“I’m so sorry, Brin,” he whispered, his voice muffled.

I nodded, pulling away before a crack could appear in my wall holding back the fury. The fire only helped fight it; I had to rely mostly on my self-control.

“Let’s just get to work.” I grimaced at the weakness in my voice.

We worked on various trust exercises—I hardly smiled or laughed, though. I was too lost in my thoughts.

Ace sighed. “I get the feeling you’re not really getting into this.”

I blinked, coming out of another reverie, “Huh?”

“Exactly.”

I grimaced, “Sorry. I’m just . . . distracted?”

Ace looked at me sadly before attempting a half-hearted smile.

“Too distracted to spend time working on your abilities with your favorite guy?” he asked.

I looked away and sighed. “I enjoy this time, I just . . .”

I didn’t know how to explain it to myself. How the heck could I ever explain it to him? After a minute, a real, albeit small, smile lit up Ace’s face.

“Come on, I think you need some air.”

Without waiting for an answer, he took my hand and led me out the door and down the alley, bringing me to some metal stairs on the side of the building that New York apartments had. He vaulted over the railing as I got on, took my hand again, and we ran up the stairs, breathless once we reached the top and stepped onto the roof. I closed my eyes and felt the sun on my face, breathing in the warming New York air. It wasn’t the best air, but it was something. And it was home. Home was better than anything. Well . . . not always. Not mine. Ace slipped a hand around my waist gently and breathed deeply, putting his other hand in his pocket.

“It’s a beautiful day.” His voice rang nicely through the “silence” of New York. The distant honking of horns and other traffic noise seemed far away.

I nodded. "It is."

We stayed like that for a while before he led me back down.

"Are you ready to pick up from yesterday?" he asked.

I wasn't sure how well I'd be able to fight crime if I couldn't even fight the darkness in myself, but I'd try. It felt like I was overextending myself, like the exertion of yesterday was making the flame reluctant to summon and then retract, leaving me weak. I braced myself and nodded. He seemed to notice the hesitation but didn't say anything about it. I touched the earbud. I'd forgotten Sims had been there the whole time.

"Alright Sims, you ready to save some people?" I asked.

"Always!"

I could hear the grin in his voice. A small smile touched my face.

"Alright, let's go."

Ace and I made our way over to the first crime site Sims gave us, finding a small drugstore. I scanned the inside through the windows, although it was hard to see from all the things attached to the windows. I narrowed my eyes, trying to see what the situation was. When I blinked, all the colors changed, and red, humanoid forms appeared through the walls. There were about five of them, and one of them specifically seemed to be doing something strange while the cashier looked to be trying to get to the bottom of it. The next time I blinked, the heat vision left, and I walked into the store, deciding to go undercover first. That way I'd be able to monitor things before it got out of hand and without making a scene. Phoenix was for being flashy and for when I needed to protect myself, those I love, and go to extremes in order to get the job done. Brinley could do the rest. Hey, maybe this was a reason why superheroes had secret identities? The thought gave me pause. Was I doing this for the best of others or because of a burning need in my chest to redeem myself? Whatever. There was a job that needed to be done.

Ace and I pretended to browse through the candy section. As far as I could tell, Ace was seriously considering buying either the

gummy worms or the Skittles while I eyed the chocolate and the licorice.

“Oh cool, there’s Skittle-flavored gummy worms!” he noted, plucking it off the rack.

I snorted. He gave me a sideways glance, smiling a little.

“What? Skittle flavored gummy worms are the best!”

I shook my head. “Nah, chocolate is better. Even better than licorice,” I argued.

He playfully scoffed.

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m serious—chocolate is better than all other candy. Besides strawberry, cherry, or raspberry flavors.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. He bumped into me playfully and I retaliated, rolling my eyes while he caught his balance.

He grinned. “It’s nice that you’re so feisty.” He walked back towards me. “It makes you more fun to tease.”

I eyed him, unsure of where he was going with that. Wherever it was, I didn’t like it.

He raised his eyebrows. “Relax, I’m done. For now.”

He let the last bit of his sentence ring ominously as he tossed his gummy worms up in the air and caught them nimbly, continuing to do so until it hit the ceiling. I made my way to another section, keeping the criminal in my sight while I did so. I slowly made my way over to an aisle with a better view.

“Do you wanna get some ice cream? For Sims and Sadie?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Why not? I’m sure they’d like that.”

I nodded, glancing over towards the criminal. I could probably stop him now, but I genuinely wanted to get some things first. Besides, it was fun to play with your prey. Evil? Maybe. Mean? Probably. But it was still fun. I could see him through the reflection in the glass doors of the fridges while I examined the ice creams.

“What kind do they like?” I turned towards Ace, who was also inspecting the ice cream like it was worth thousands of dollars and you wanted your money’s worth.

“They like berry ice creams or stuff with cake or cookies in it.”

I nodded, looking for such a thing. I grinned when I found the perfect choice. I swung the door open and picked up the unicorn cake ice cream.

Ace gave me a strange look.

“What? It’ll be something they remember.” I laughed.

“Yeah, that’s true.” He smiled.

We made our way over towards the criminal. As soon as we entered his aisle, he looked up, scowled a little, and moved on. I noted the shuffling of his feet and a bulge in his coat. Definitely shoplifting.

“Do we want anything from here?” I asked. Ace gave me a calm sideways glance and shook his head before returning his attention to the shoplifter. I nodded and we calmly walked to the next aisle, coming up on the shoplifter again.

He scowled. “Why are you following me?” he grumbled.

I feigned confusion. “We’re not . . . we’re shopping, and you just happen to be in the next aisle we wanna look at,” I replied.

That only made him scowl more. I tilted my head to the side, frowning my brows in confusion. If I was going to play this role, I was going to play this role.

“Why? We don’t have weapons or anything. It’s either you’re scared of us, or . . .”

I let the implication sink in, his eyes widening in horrified surprise. He seemed to be a man around forty, who obviously didn’t care enough about hygiene. That either meant he was lazy, didn’t have time, had a messy home life, or was actually homeless. Which would explain some of his ragged clothes. If he was homeless, then he was the first shoplifter I’d found that was in that position. The rest had either looked rich or like ordinary people. But if I’ve learned anything over time, it’s that people aren’t always what they seem. The guy backed up a little.

“Stay away from me.” He bolted out the door seconds later.

“I knew it!” the cashier yelled.

I glared at him. “Then why didn’t you do anything?” I asked.

He shrank a little. “He could’ve had a knife?” he replied.

I rolled my eyes, handing my stuff to Ace.

“Can you take care of this?” I asked, handing him my wallet. He nodded and walked towards the cashier. I walked out of the drugstore, just barely finding the shoplifter as he turned into an alleyway. I looked around, stepped behind a dumpster, and changed. When I ran after the guy again, I was Phoenix. The people around gasped and took out their phones. They all made sure to get out of the way, both getting themselves out of harm’s way and enabling me to catch up to the shoplifter quickly. I grabbed his arm, yanked him back, and judo flipped him before grabbing the things he stole and leading him back into the shop with an iron grip on his arm. The police were there moments later, taking the guy from my hands.

“Thanks, Phoenix,” one of the officers, a woman with red hair, thanked me.

I nodded. “Just doing my job.”

I tried not to snicker when I noticed some of the police glaring at me with gritted teeth. They’d love to arrest me, I knew, but the citizens loved me. Also, they would have to fireproof their cells. I think they all knew they couldn’t do that. I ran into an alley and changed, heading into the drugstore through the back door as quietly as I could. I touched the earpiece.

“Sims, where’s the next one?” I whispered.

It’s several blocks away. North.

I nodded and beckoned for Ace to follow. We walked quickly to the area Sims indicated. After a few more minor crimes, Ace finally gave me back my wallet, and we made our way back to the bus stop. On the way back, I couldn’t stop fidgeting and feeling a little distressed despite the successful day. The area of my shoulder where my tattoo was kept burning weirdly. Or maybe that was just some sort of rash from when one of the bigger guys I’d fought earlier had briefly knocked me to the ground. I remembered jumping over him, hooking onto his neck in midair, and using my momentum to shove him to the ground as I landed. I’d had to twist uncomfortably in order to pull that off. My lips formed a thin line at the thought. Oh well. I could get better at that move, although I’d probably have

some soreness later from the practice. I wasn't exactly the most flexible person on the planet.

CHAPTER - 13

GROWING UP COMPLICATIONS (SUPERHERO VERSION)

I stared at myself in the mirror, trying to keep a straight face. The butterflies decided to either host a nightclub or a boxing match in my stomach—I couldn't decide which. All I knew was there was no way I'd be able to eat for a while. It was a good thing I didn't regularly have anxiety—I'd never be able to eat if I did. Ada appeared in the reflection and smiled.

"You know it's about time he asked you out," she retorted.

I shook my head, signaling that I wasn't in the mood.

She stopped instantly and smiled kindly. "You look beautiful."

I wasn't sure. I thought I did, but at the same time . . . I sighed, picking at the jeggings, pulling at the knee-high combat boots, and fidgeting with the tank top and jacket I wore. I missed wearing tank tops by themselves, but if I did my tattoo would show and raise too many questions. Mostly from my dad, who didn't like tattoos. Good thing he's not home then. I snorted derisively. It was still too cold to really wear tank tops yet, anyway. Once I caught the confused look on Ada's face, I completely changed my demeanor.

"Thanks," I replied with an attempted smile.

She nodded and glanced at her watch. "You need to go now, or you'll be late."

I nodded, trying to take deep breaths to calm down my nerves. This was just a . . . slightly fancier hangout, technically. Besides, I was Phoenix. I'd faced much worse than hanging out with a boy

before. Although this boy knew about Phoenix, my past, and gave me butterflies, so I wasn't so sure that was a fair comparison. I used it anyway, mostly since I had nothing better. When I got to the front door, Mom glanced up and smiled.

"Where're you going?" she asked.

My cheeks warmed.

"To meet up with friends."

Mom looked me over, giving me a strange look.

"In your good jeans and fancy tank top?" she asked.

I knew I was blushing, which only made the curiosity on her face grow more intense. I nodded.

"It must be an important hangout with your friends, then."

I knew what she was doing. No, I hadn't told her about Ace asking me out. Or any of the other things . . . I wasn't exactly comfortable talking to a lot of people about that part of my personal life. I turned to leave. I wasn't buying into that old classic.

"Which friends are going?" she asked, following me to the door and picking up her purse.

I stared at her. "Mom. I'm riding my bike there." I hoped my tone wasn't too harsh.

She rolled her eyes. "You won't tell me anything, so I'm going to see it for myself."

"I'd rather you not," I replied.

She raised an eyebrow. "You're wearing your fancier jeans and tank top, not telling me anything about the hangout, and it's out of the blue."

She had a point.

I sighed. "Fine. It's just with one friend and at the park," I growled slightly.

Mom seemed a little surprised, but not in a bad way. I wasn't sure why.

"Oh! Are you hanging out with Gracey or Mason?" she asked.

My lips formed a line.

"Neither. Gracey is a pain, and Mason and I haven't spoken much in weeks," I snapped.

Mom raised an eyebrow. "Who's this with, then?"

I couldn't look at her. I hated reactions. I played with the zipper on my jacket for a minute, wondering how to force the words out.

"Ace," I finally said, looking towards the door to hide the blush at the mention of his name. I heard a chuckle.

"Did he ask you out?" Mom asked gently.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and nodded. She didn't ask any more questions, only grabbed her keys and drove me to the park. We were there within minutes. Ace leaned against an early-blooming tree, waiting for me. As soon as I saw him, I couldn't breathe. He looked good in clean blue jeans, a nicely tucked-in, white T-shirt, and black sneakers. His hands were in his pockets and he gazed into the street, looking for me. The nervousness was almost overwhelming as mom wished me luck and I exited the car. I forced my legs to walk properly. Ace saw me instantly, grinning as he walked over to me.

"You ready?" he asked, grabbing my hand when we reached each other.

I nodded, not daring to speak yet.

"Nervous?" he asked.

I scoffed. "As if! I've faced car thieves, toppling buildings, and Black Thorn himself. Why would I be nervous about a date?" I asked, grimacing at how high-pitched my voice sounded. I hoped no one was within hearing distance for that.

He laughed. "Yep, you're nervous!"

I glared at him. He just rolled his eyes.

"Hey, it's fine to be nervous." He used his free hand to scratch his head a little. "I am too," he admitted quietly.

That was really sweet. I caught a smile on my face that I didn't remember allowing. Continuing to smile, Ace led me along one of the many paths through the park. We just enjoyed each other's company for a while.

"I remember there were band posters around your room. They looked like pop and country? I thought you liked rock?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. I like rock, but that's not the only genre I like. I like most music," I replied. "What about you?"

"Most music is pretty good, but I prefer jazz," Ace replied.

I laughed. He raised an eyebrow at me, although I could see the corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

“What? Is that really so surprising?”

I continued to laugh. “No, I just thought you looked more like a rap boy.” I shrugged.

He laughed. “Why, because I can rap well?” he asked.

I shook my head, still laughing.

“I’ve never even heard you rap!” I realized. Same with singing.

Ace shook his head. “That’s because I’m terrible at it. I’m even worse at singing.”

“I’ll have to hear it to believe it,” I replied.

He raised an eyebrow. “You know seeing isn’t believing, right?”

“I said hear, not seeing.”

“Same implication.” He smiled.

I pushed him. “Oh whatever! Just rap! I wanna hear it!”

He rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically. “Fiiinnee, but you have to beatbox.”

I consented and proceeded to do so. Ace cleared his throat and waited for a good time to start. He was already flushing.

“A boy and a girl walking in the park. Uhh, it was really a great start,” Ace began with the beat. I accidentally broke it a few times holding back my laughter.

“When they held hands, they . . . felt a spark?” He blushed even worse but kept going. “They were so happy together, walking through the heather—”

I burst into laughter before he could continue, and he joined me.

“Is there even any heather in this park?” I gasped between breaths.

He shrugged. “No idea.”

It took several minutes before we regained control over our laughter.

“That was terrible!” I snorted.

Ace scratched his head sheepishly. “I told you I can’t rap—”

“I liked it,” I interrupted.

His eyes widened slightly, like he couldn’t believe it.

“I can’t rhyme, though,” he pointed out.

I shrugged. “You did pretty well. I think it’s mostly just confidence that’s the issue.” I honestly thought he’d be okay as a rapper.

“You’re pretty good at beatboxing, though,” Ace complimented. “You just need to keep from breaking off.”

He bumped me with his elbow. I bumped him back.

“I was trying not to laugh!” I replied defensively.

Ace smirked. “Suurreee you were . . .”

He bumped me again with his elbow before reaching for my hand, intertwining our fingers gently. I gave him a side glance, a smile hovering on my face. I couldn’t stop thinking about what his rap was about, but I wasn’t going to say anything yet. I looked straight ahead as we walked along the path. At least, I was before Ace caught sight of a tall and sturdy tree, ran over to it, and started climbing it. I’d climbed buildings before on a dare, but after the accident when I was five, my mom had been too paranoid to let me climb trees whenever climbable ones were available. She probably wouldn’t have let me climb the buildings either, but I’d never told her that. But I wasn’t nearly as clumsy as I’d been when I was a little girl. When I reached the tree, I looked up at Ace, who was already about halfway up. He looked down at me, grinning like a little boy that had found his favorite toy.

“Are you coming up?” he asked.

I forced a smile. He assumed I knew how to do this.

“Just give me a minute,” I stalled, walking around the base of the tree, pretending to try and find a way up. I heard some noises and Ace jumped to the ground from one of the lowest limbs, brushing his hands together before brushing them against his jeans. There go the clean pants. I walked over to him.

“Are you ready to start walking again, or do you wanna keep pretending to be a monkey?” I asked teasingly.

He smirked. “Hold on, you haven’t gone up there yet.”

I blanched a little. I wasn’t sure why, but I did. Ace raised an eyebrow.

“Are you scared?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Then why’re you stalling?”

He got me there.

I shrugged. “I just don’t want to,” I lied.

He nodded, but after a minute, I sighed. I hated lying to him.

“I haven’t climbed a tree since I was five,” I admitted in a low voice.

Ace gazed at me kindly. “I could teach you. Maybe you’ll still remember how to,” he offered.

I nodded slowly. “How much exactly is there to teach?” I wondered aloud.

“Not much. Just how to tell whether a branch will support your weight, how pull yourself up, how brace your legs for a landing if you jump . . .,” Ace listed.

I snorted, trying to cover the cold fear wrapping itself around me. I followed him to where he’d climbed onto the tree and gazed up for a minute before taking a deep breath, swallowing this strange fear, and awkwardly putting a foot onto the first branch. I grabbed a smaller and slightly higher one and hauled myself up. I climbed branch over branch until I made it to the top of the tree, Ace not far behind me. Once I stopped, he caught up to me in seconds. I gazed out over the fields in the park and over the tops of some nearby trees. Then I made the mistake of looking down. As soon as I did, a paralyzing fear snatched me. My hands held the nearby branches in a death grip as my breath quickened. I stared at the ground for a few moments before just staring at the tree, desperate to get rid of this terror. What was going on?

“Are you okay?” Ace whispered next to me. I forced myself to look at him and the look on my face must’ve given him the answer. Instead of teasing me—like I thought he would—he just smiled sweetly and wrapped an arm around my waist. My cheeks flushed immediately despite the terror.

“You’re not gonna fall. Not while I’m here.” He tightened his grip around my waist protectively to further ensure his promise wouldn’t backfire. “I won’t let you,” he whispered calmly.

I nodded, taking deep breaths. The fear refused to be quieted, and I found myself trying to find a way down. He helped me, and

within a few minutes, I stood on solid ground, my legs shaking so uncontrollably, I could barely stand. Ace continued to hold me by the waist until we sat down on a nearby bench, crossing his legs and putting an arm casually behind my back with a soothing expression. I appreciated his effort to calm me down.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re afraid of heights?” he asked after a minute.

He probably regretted taking me onto the warehouse’s roof, but I hadn’t felt it there. I took a few deep breaths, still living in the insatiable relief of being safely on the ground.

“I didn’t know,” I replied weakly.

His face radiated curious concern but he said nothing. We just sat there until my breaths had returned to normal and my legs stopped shaking. I nodded, and Ace got up, giving me a hand. My legs were still a little weak, but I could stand without help now. We continued to walk through the park, hand in hand, just chatting about stupid little things.

“Speaking of siblings,” Ace continued after I told him the story of how Ada had accidentally ruined my unicorn princess onesie when she was four, so I’d dumped my cereal over her head, which ruined a new jacket she’d just gotten. He’d laughed, not even a little surprised.

“A few days ago, after you left, Sims had one of his argue-fits about there being no barbecue sauce,” Ace smiled affectionately at the memory.

“So, he’s obsessed with barbecue sauce?” I asked, laughing softly. Ah, Sims, could he get any funnier?

Ace nodded enthusiastically. “Heck yeah, ever since Elijah made his infamous barbecue chicken and apple bread pudding.”

“Hmm,” I said thoughtfully. “That sounds interesting.”

Ace made a face. “It is.”

I raised an amused eyebrow.

“What, you didn’t like the beautiful masterpiece?” I asked.

Ace rolled his eyes and shook his head, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“You’ve never even tried it!” he grumbled.

I raised my eyebrow even higher. He glanced at me and took a deep breath, calming down.

“Sorry,” he apologized.

I smiled softly. “It’s fine.”

I didn’t need him to explain. I had the feeling he thought his foster parents were trying to replace his birth parents, based on how he acted and talked about them. Or maybe it was something different, I didn’t know. All I knew is that he was having a hard time. And, since a date shouldn’t be painful—hopefully, at least—it was time to bring the subject back.

“So . . . what are you obsessed with then?” I asked, putting my hands in my pockets and bumping him playfully.

A grin snuck on his face and he looked at me out of the corner of his eye before staring forward.

“Let’s just say . . . mustard is better than ketchup.” Ace shot me another side look as I raised an eyebrow. I had the sudden desire to be dramatic. Acting on this, I raised my chin in defiance, trying to force down a smile.

“No, sir, ketchup is far superior,” I replied calmly.

Ace shook his head. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, madam, but mustard is what everyone wants nowadays.” Ace took a hand out of his pocket and waved it at a nonexistent crowd before stuffing it back in his pocket. I shook my head trying even harder to swallow the laughter in my stomach.

“Mustard is bitter, and it only tastes good on some food, not to mention the unsettling color,” I began, ignoring the playfully offended look he was giving me.

“Mustard tastes great on pretzels! Besides, ketchup is really sweet. It’s literally made from fruit.”

I sighed. “Yeah, mustard’s great on pretzels, but more things use ketchup than mustard.”

Ace raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Name one.”

I smiled at the challenge and thought for a moment.

“How about . . . scrambled eggs, sweet potato fries, potato chips, grilled cheese—”

Ace held up a hand to stop me, smiling. “Okay, okay, okay, I get it!”

He laughed, setting his hand down and taking mine. Eventually, we walked out of the park and went to get some lunch. We made it as far as actually getting our food—my burger and fries looked heavenly—when we heard people screaming. Ace and I sighed.

“Black Thorn?” I asked.

He looked out the window and nodded.

“Coming straight towards us,” he reported.

I nodded, got up, and went to the bathroom, quickly changing into my suit. I knew it was cliché, but it was the first place I thought of in such short notice. As soon as Black Thorn entered the restaurant and saw me, he smiled, ignoring the running, screaming customers and staff evacuating the building. My burger and fries were now on the floor. I glowered at him.

“Dude, I was eating!” I complained, gesturing at my food on the floor. He glanced at it and I thought I caught a flicker of sympathy before his eyes turned cold.

“Food can wait,” he grumbled.

“My stomach disagrees.” It grumbled helpfully.

He rolled his eyes. Or at least, I think he did. It was hard to tell with his hair shadowing his eyes, and the fact that his eyes were basically just dark sludge pits with some pitiful green sprinkled in there—like that would make him look any better. I let myself simmer on my hangryness before I sighed like a spoiled child. I was already done with this. I wanted my food!

“Why are you here?” I asked.

Thorn smiled. “Mason wanted to see how the date was going, is all. Too bad someone lost their temper and blew their cover.” Black Thorn chuckled in amusement.

What?

“I thought Mason was dead?” I asked.

Black Thorn froze briefly before regaining his composure.

“Well, mostly. There are still a few things I’m working on, but I have most of the control,” he replied offhandedly, but I knew from how he froze that I’d caught him off guard.

Mason was watching us? Now I felt bad. I shouldn't have, but I knew what it was like to have your crush fall for someone else and start dating them. It was pure misery. That is, if Mason wasn't already over me. I hoped he was getting there. I hadn't seen him at all after the Black Thorn attacks became a regular part of my schedule. Did that mean Mason was in a lot of pain? I had no idea how it worked, but if Mason could turn into Black Thorn when things like anger took him over, that meant he was often in pain, considering how much Black Thorn showed up. Or maybe what Thorn was saying was true. Maybe he was in more control than Mason is, and he was starting to come out more on his own when such feelings even glittered into existence. I couldn't really imagine it. I mean, yeah, my own demons had taken over plenty of times, but nothing like whatever Mason was trying to handle. And I hadn't been there for him recently, too caught up in this new relationship and this new life I'd found in redeeming myself and fixing things. Still, the part of my old life that contained Mason wasn't completely healed yet. I'd dropped it like a sack of potatoes as soon as I found some strawberries. I missed the potatoes, though. Just like I knew I'd miss the strawberries if they ever disappeared or went a little bad. I shook my head in order to focus. (Note: Don't ask me where the strawberries and potatoes came from, even I don't know!)

"Can we just get this over with? I want my food," I snapped, feeling the irritation thicken to anger. Black Thorn raised an eyebrow.

"Cranky much? I just stopped in to say hello!" he retorted, before one of his vines struck one of the restaurant walls hard, blowing a hole in it.

Before I could do anything, he did it again, this time getting the whole wall. I threw a fireball at him and rushed towards him, aiming for his stomach in a low tackle, but his vines whipped towards me and pushed me into the far wall. My vision blurred and the edges blackened. I fought to stay awake while the fire worked its magic and healed me enough to keep going. I fumbled with one of the vines as the fire raged through my skin trying to burn away all the black that crept up onto me. Grasping the vine I wanted, I burned

it for all I was worth. Black Thorn howled and let go of me. I got up, smirking, and took the opening to tackle him. We tumbled through the front window and rolled apart on the sidewalk outside as bystanders took videos of what was happening. We both jumped right up—I was very proud of how cool I looked when I thrust with my arms, curved my body, and ended up on my feet like they did in every good action movie—and ran right at each other. I dodged a gut punch and he dodged my jaw strike, and we just kept going until we both had some bruises. Finally, I'd had enough. I lit my fist on fire and got him right in the gut, letting the fire spread over his torso a little before his vines snuffed it out. I lunged, ready to get him in the face with a punch I hoped would knock him out, when at the last second, he melted into the ground and was gone.

I growled and, in a flash of anger, I lit the ground at my feet—where Black Thorn had been standing a moment before—bursting it into flames. I took a deep breath, snuffed it out, and disappeared into a nearby alley, as was customary now. I quickly changed and got back to the restaurant, pretending to have just got out of the bathroom as the civilians picked through the rubble. The store owner came in with the customers from before the attack and surveyed the damage with an air of near hysterical distress. I found Ace quickly and we were out of the building and the area before anyone started paying attention to us. We'd made it a few blocks down before the News vans drove by. I was just glad no one had gotten hurt, and that Mom would never know we'd been there during the attack. I didn't want to give her the added stress, although her breakdowns were beginning to be less severe as she slowly got used to the idea of a supervillain being around while I was out with friends. We circled back to the park and I called Mom, asking her to pick me up. Once I'd finished the call, Ace stared at a tree before turning to me, looking disappointed.

"I'm sorry our date was cut short," he apologized.

I shrugged. "It wasn't your fault."

"Still, I'm sorry."

I shook my head, smiling.

"We could always do another one sometime," I pointed out.

Ace grinned. Just then Mom pulled up to the park. I waved goodbye to Ace as I climbed in.



“Birdie!” Mom called from downstairs somewhere.

With a groan, I forced my aching limbs to work and carry me over to my door.

“What?” I asked.

Mom didn’t usually bother me in the afternoon unless she was serious about something.

“Your father is coming back from a business trip. He’ll be in town for a few weeks before his next one,” she explained.

Wait, you mean the three-month business trip? As in the one he left for a few days after his last one? I thought bitterly.

I sighed. “Why are you telling me this?” I yelled down.

I heard Mom climb the stairs. I retreated back into my room, closing the door just before she came into view. I bit back tears and let the fire singe the dread that accompanied them. Mom didn’t dare open it. She got the message.

“Because his plane just landed, and he wants us to pick him up. Your dad wants to have dinner with us tonight, as well,” Mom explained gently through the door.

I scoffed. “Where are his friends? Don’t they usually pick him up and have dinner with him?” I asked, remembering how during his visits he spends most of his time with his friends or nearby family. I figured the only reason he even had dinner with us at all was so he didn’t feel bad about ignoring us. The only good thing about his visits was that he always came home, even though most of the time it was late at night. So late that Mom was usually either already in bed or getting ready for bed. Then he’d be off early in the morning before he could even see the rest of us. I made up my mind in a heartbeat.

“You can go without me. I have stuff I have to do,” I said definitively.

“Honey, you know he won’t like that—”

“I said I have stuff to do,” I growled, getting up and locking the door, then going to my desk, putting on my headphones, and blaring music so I couldn’t hear Mom’s reasons for why I should give Dad the millionth chance in a row. Yes, I believed in second chances, but this was the millionth time—literally—and he’d blown: Every. Single. One. I was about done with him. I laid on my bed for a while, staring at the ceiling, letting my mind wander. The sound of the car pulling into the driveway woke me up from my daze and a cold, hard dread filled my stomach again.

“Birdie!” Mom called once they’d come inside.

She’d want me to help unpack dad’s bags, even though he wasn’t staying for long. I pretended to not have heard her, instead feigning being asleep when she came and unlocked my door, not caring about the message now. She sighed and gently shook my shoulder in an attempt to “wake” me. I waited briefly before I squinted and blinked a few times.

“Dad’s home. He needs help carrying his bags,” she whispered.

I just rolled over to face the wall. Mom sighed but didn’t push me. I tried to do the same thing at dinner time, but that time she made me get up, saying I couldn’t use my phone for the rest of the night if I didn’t go eat with Dad. So I took my time going downstairs, but I quickly sat down at the table so we could eat and get it over with. Finally, I looked at my dad’s spot. There he sat, back straight and face unreadable as he surveyed us, like he was selecting the best-looking animal for his show. When we locked eyes he smirked, and I knew he’d chosen.

“Brinley, how’ve your grades been?” he asked.

That was a problem. If I said, “not great”, he’d go down his usual route of telling me I had so much potential I was wasting. If I said “really good,” he’d act all surprised, then turn around and try to get me to do all sorts of academic things I didn’t want to do. So, there was really only one way to go about this that I could think of in the moment. I relaxed, ignoring the glare and the grimace from

my dad at my “bad manners,” and instead implemented a tactic I used all the time with my opponents.

“Oh, you know, just average grades. Things are going pretty okay at school, so it’s not too hard or too easy,” I replied, making it seem like I didn’t care. I shrugged. The look on his face wasn’t unfamiliar.

“How’s work been?” I asked.

I usually asked this anyway if only just to get the attention off the rest of us. Dad smiled. Did he think he was playing me? Or did he notice the new tactic? He was hard to read.

“I struck an amazing deal with some British companies, and I’m going to France to implement some new procedures. There will be lots of money coming in soon.”

His eyes glazed over like he was trying to picture how rich we’d—sorry, he’d be. I replicated his smile from earlier.

“That’s great,” I replied dryly. I turned to Mom. “May I be excused from the table, please?” I asked, using a mockingly polite voice.

Mom cringed but allowed me. I caught my dad’s reflection in one of the windows near the sink where I was rinsing my dishes. He was glowering. I only smiled ruefully and casually climbed the stairs to my room.



I heard my bedroom door open. Expecting my mom, I had prepared an argument for my behavior and why she should just leave me alone when my dad stepped into view. Dread drowned out any sense of victory I’d gotten from dinner. He’d never come into my room before—at least not since I was little, and it was only to reprimand me about calling Ada something I shouldn’t have and then to drag me into the bathroom to wash my mouth out with soap. He faced me while I pretended to ignore him.

“Brinley.”

I heard the barely contained rage in his voice. I continued ignoring him, wondering how hard I could push him. I found a weird thrill in pushing him, although I knew I'd pay for it. After another minute, he seemed to have had enough.

"Brinley!" he growled, yanking me to a sitting position on my bed.

I stared at him for a moment, recovering from the shock. No matter how much I expected it, it always shocked me when he did that. Fear wriggled into my stomach, slowly clouding my head.

"What?" I asked, masking the fear.

He looked down his nose at me. I felt my body shrink a little under that disdainful gaze. Fight you coward! I growled at myself. But I couldn't.

"That was very rude of you to mock me like you did. Your mother agrees. Apologize," he commanded roughly.

I felt the cold as I became smaller. My power withdrew.

"No," I squeaked.

He smirked grimly before slapping me across the face. My head whipped to the side and my cheek stung. It stung for a few seconds before a small tendril of fire hovered over it and the pain disappeared.

"Try again." Dad's voice hardened until it was as pointed as a knife.

I forced myself to swallow. Cold hands gripped my heart and squeezed, extinguishing my confidence. My father's eyes flashed and my body practically crumbled under the shadow. He could do anything at any moment. He was the only villain I didn't know if I could beat.

"I'm sorry," I managed to whisper, closing my eyes while the voices in my head screamed, COWARD!

He drew back. "That's more like it."

He walked to my door before pausing to add, "I would like you to come to my office tomorrow. There are some people I want you to meet."

Then he was gone. The paralyzing fear and darkness lingered before finally melting away just enough for me to actually think and manage to get some words out.

“More like some people you want to show me off to, like you’re the golden dad,” I whispered bitterly.

I wanted nothing more than to show him my power, the monster in me, and have him cower in terror. I wanted him to see who’s really the more powerful one in this relationship. But I had stayed in control. I couldn’t show him, and my powers weren’t supposed to be used like that anyway. I stayed in my bed for the rest of the evening as the sunlight faded and moonlight streamed through my windows. The rest of the fear and dread calmed down enough to let other emotions through, like melancholy. I couldn’t sleep for what felt like forever while I held my head, trying to quiet the whispers as helpless tears stained my cheeks.

At some point, I fell into a deep sleep, feeling the mercy of the darkness, even if only to watch nightmares play in my mind. I woke up the next morning still in my clothes and my face pressed into a damp pillow. I could’ve sworn someone was trying to use a hammer to escape my skull. I could remember snippets of my dreams—my dad hitting me, the sweet sickly smell of blood, the flash of flames, and the taste of tears. My tears or someone else’s? I could sleep through nightmares these days. Old memories that I’d pushed down would float by in a lull. I groaned sleepily and pushed myself into a sitting position, yawning. I staggered out of bed and, on my way to my bathroom, I caught my reflection in my mirror. I was a mess: red splotches from pressing my face against the pillow during the night, my streaked mascara making horror trails down my cheeks, and my hair was tangled helplessly. I sighed and hopped in the shower. The mascara probably got on the pillow, so I’d need to wash it.

When I came out, I felt refreshed although weakened, and a nagging in my head told me I was missing something. A deeper sorrow and dread told me I didn’t want to remember yet. I trusted the sorrow and dread more than the nagging. Eventually, the nagging brought the memory of the required office visit back to me

on its own accord, only worsening what I'd been feeling all morning. With a groan I crumpled onto my bed and just laid there thinking for an hour before Mom came in.

"Birdie, breakfast is ready," she coaxed.

I didn't really feel like eating, mostly since Dad might be there, yet somehow, she managed to get me off my bed and to the dining table. I ate half of my waffles before I excused myself and prepared to go to Ace's house. Maybe if I was there all day, I'd manage to escape going to Dad's office. I hoped this would work, at least. I was not going to be some showpiece again. I'm so much more than that. As I was preparing to go, Mom appeared with her phone in her hand.

"Are you ready to go to dad's office?" she asked. I shook my head.

"I'm going to Ace's," I pushed back.

She arched an eyebrow. "Your father told me to drive you to his office now. He wants to spend the day with you."

I could see in her eyes even she didn't believe that. I shook my head.

"I'm going to Ace's." I didn't want to argue. But I'd rather argue than do what my dad wanted me to do. Even the thought of it stressed me out.

Mom gazed at me sadly. "There isn't much you can do about it," she whispered, before grabbing her keys and her coat.



Dad's office building loomed before us as we pulled into the parking lot. It was busy for a Sunday. Hey, maybe I'd manage to get lost in the crowd and just wander around town for a bit! Mom walked me in and that hope was instantly snuffed out when she placed a hand on my shoulder and steered me through the crowd to the front desk. One of the receptionists smiled at us.

"Mrs. Connely! It's been so long! How are things?" she asked.

Mom smiled politely. “Things are going great, thank you,” Mom lied through her teeth.

I was the only one that seemed to notice. The receptionist nodded and turned her attention towards me. Her expression was blank for a second.

“Brinley? Is that you? You’ve grown!” she exclaimed. I better have. The last time she’d seen me was when I was five, before the accident—back when Dad used to take us to work with him and when he still used to play with us. Before . . .

I shoved the bitterness down, letting the fire power consume it. I’d probably regret that later, but for now I needed to be reasonably stable.

I forced a smile. “It’s been a while,” I remarked, pretending to be interested in the lobby. “This place looks way different than the last time I was here.”

The receptionist nodded. “The company has grown.”

Apparently. Why else would Dad always be gone? I nodded, beginning to walk away to “explore,” but Mom gently but urgently grabbed my arm, stopping me from walking away more than a few steps. I emptied my face of all expression when the receptionist gave us a strange look. She shook her head, dismissing it when Mom smiled.

“We came to see my husband. He wants to spend some quality time with Brinley,” Mom explained.

The receptionist smiled. She smiled too much.

“Of course! Go right on up—he’s waiting for you.”

Mom thanked her and practically dragged me to the elevator. I could feel the muddled feelings in my stomach growing worse the closer we got to Dad’s office. Each floor the elevator passed only seemed to bring me closer to my doom. Pretty soon I was hyperventilating. Mom glanced at me in irritation.

“Calm down, honey.”

Calm down? Calm. Down? Was she kidding me? The fire power perked up. I could feel my hands growing dangerously warm as I stared at her. She stared back at me. Pretty soon it was as if we were daring the other to look away and admit defeat. She knew me. She

knew I wouldn't. And I knew her. I clenched my fists in rage and felt the beginnings of a flame heating up. Before anything could happen, the elevator chimed and we reached the floor, putting an abrupt end to the mounting tension. My limbs turned into weights as I trudged down the hall. Mom opened the door and nudged me inside before shutting me in there and . . . leaving. I swallowed the tears clawing up to my eyes. Dad glanced up from his computer and smiled.

"Well, do you like my new office?" he asked, gesturing around the room.

I nodded. He didn't seem to notice my lack of enthusiasm. Or words.

He sighed happily. "I remember the last time I brought you here. Before you became . . ." He looked me up and down with an air of disapproval. I got the implication. A comeback echoed through my head, but it got wedged in my throat like a gag trying to choke me. I opened my mouth to force the words out, but I couldn't even pull in a breath of air.

Dad raised an eyebrow. "Not so feisty now, are you?" he remarked, backing his chair out of his desk, standing up, and slowly walking over to me with folded arms and a predatory smile. Why couldn't Phoenix just fight him? I didn't care about the rest of the criminals—I just wanted to wipe that smug little smile off the face of this one. Yet my body shrank a little under his confident stare. His smile grew at my silence. My hands warmed again, getting ready for a fight. I couldn't fight him, though, no matter how much I wanted. The best way to ride this out was to submit to him, just for a little while. That was the smart thing to do, lay low. I hated the thought of him having any power over me, but just looking at my already wrecked nerves, I knew he already did. With a sigh I unclenched my hands and gazed at him steadily. He could get my temporary submission, but I wouldn't let him see me scared. Dad's smile widened a little in satisfaction.

"There we go. That's the daughter I know and love."

Like he ever even loved me, I thought bitterly. He loved a lie. I've never been that daughter in my life. The closest I'd ever gotten

was right before the accident. Dad unfolded his arms and made his way to the door.

“I’d like my obedient daughter to meet some very important people.”

He shot me a look before swinging the door smoothly open and pushing me out of his office. He showed me down a few halls and down several staircases before we reached wherever he was taking me. The door opened to reveal yet another office, a woman in a black, slim, expensive-looking dress sat primly in her seat, doing something on her computer.

“Eda, this is my daughter, Brinley. Brinley, this is Eda James, our coordinator of finances and one of our main investors.”

Eda James couldn’t hide a look of complete surprise and confusion when she looked up from her computer, but she quickly masked it with a smile.

“It’s nice to . . . finally meet you Brinley. I’m sure you’re proud of how your father lifted this company to what it is now.”

She grinned, but something about it unsettled me. There was something . . . false in her voice and expression. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it yet. I nodded, blinked, and saw a heat scan of the area for a split second before my vision turned back to normal. Her brows wrinkled and her eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn’t say anything. Had she been able to tell? I wasn’t amazing at controlling that aspect of my power. Her expression changed back to the smile before I could think any more about it. My dad nudged me, but I did nothing.

He leaned over and said seethingly through his teeth, “Say ‘it’s nice to meet you too!’” His jaw was clenched slightly, so I found it amazing how he could keep the rest of his face looking calm. He made a good businessman. I gazed up at him from under my lashes.

“I can’t say something I don’t mean,” my voice shook even in a whisper.

He leaned over. “Say it anyway.”

I said nothing. Dad smiled at Eda.

“Sorry, she’s just a little tired. She stayed up late last night after my wife and I specifically told her not to. Teenagers,” he replied lightheartedly.

Eda’s eyebrows raised.

“You have a wife?” she asked.

I did a double take when I caught a slightly hurt tone in her voice. It was gone instantly. Dad’s smile suddenly became forced.

“I think it’s time for her to meet some of the others. Where are they?” he asked.

“In the planning room,” Eda directed, although she didn’t look at him.

Dad nodded and led me to wherever that was. It seemed like an even longer walk. How big was this building? And what the heck just happened in Eda’s office? My limbs felt like concrete when we reached a long room full of people arguing about something. They stopped awkwardly once we came in.

“Everyone, this is my daughter, Brinley,” Dad introduced me to the strangers.

Some of them nodded, some just stared at me, and others smiled. I wanted to squirm under the long gazes. One of them, a young man who looked about twenty, stepped forward. He stuck out his hand, and one glance at my dad was all it took for me to reach out and give it a firm shake. The man smiled in satisfaction.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Sal,” he introduced himself.

I nodded. I didn’t really care what his name was. I know that’s rude, but I didn’t really care. I could already feel my body shrinking a little. All I wanted to do was go home or go to Ace’s. I hated the way some of the others were staring at me. Some of them . . .

I shook off some of the growing fear with some difficulty before turning around and leaving. My dad laughed and apologized from behind me before closing the door and catching up to me. I made eye contact with him, and seeing the rage pulsing out of him, I ran. The fire ran through my veins, pushing my speed just a little faster than humanly possible and energizing my entire body. It was invigorating, especially since I managed to leave my dad behind. I found my way out of the building and didn’t stop running until I

was several blocks away from his office. I stopped in an alleyway and took out my phone, texting Ace before I turned into fire and ended up in his fireplace. He was waiting for me. As soon as I crawled out, and before I even managed to wipe the dust and soot off of me, he crushed me in a hug.

“It’s good to see you,” he whispered.

“It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours,” I replied.

He shrugged. “So?”

I laughed and he led me into the kitchen, getting out some snacks.

“So, what’s up?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Usually, you don’t come over at the last minute unless something’s wrong—like last time.”

Ace pieced it together pretty quickly. I took a deep breath and blew it out heavily, playing with my goldfish. He waited for me to respond.

“It’s just . . . my dad’s in town,” I replied wearily.

Ace furrowed his brow. “Wouldn’t that be a good thing?” he asked, and I could see some jealousy in his gaze.

I shook my head.

“Not when your dad is a workaholic and a selfish, rich slob that doesn’t give a . . .,” I had to bite my tongue to keep from swearing, “crap for anything but his own image.”

I accidentally singed half of my goldfish. Ace leaned over the island in the kitchen and waited until I looked at him.

“Whatever he did to you, whatever he said, I know you. And you’re amazing. I don’t care if he owns half of the world—none of it is as precious as you are,” he said in a low intense voice.

He leaned forward and kissed me for a few seconds before pulling away, still only a few inches away. My lungs wouldn’t function properly.

“If he doesn’t appreciate you, he doesn’t deserve you.” He smiled sweetly, cupping my face and tucking some stray hair behind my ear.

My cheeks warmed, and a smile grew on my face. “Thanks.”

I didn't know how he could come up with all that, and even less how it actually meant something when it came from him. The corners of his mouth lifted a little more and he pulled all the way back, getting out some toast and Nutella.

"So, besides your dad, anything interesting happening?" he asked as a change of subject.

I shook my head. "Not that I know of. How about you?" I asked.

Ace stopped for a second to think, staring into the distance.

"Oh right!" He snapped back into the present and turned his gaze back to me.

"My foster parents bought tickets to go to a nearby baseball game," he told me.

"Those are always a blast. I remember when my parents used to take Ada and I, when Zach was little."

I smiled at the memories. It was one of the few good ones I had of my parents, sadly.

Ace grinned. "Good. I'm glad you like them, because I was wondering if you wanted to come with. We have an extra ticket and . . . you're the only person I want to bring." Ace's cheeks reddened.

My smile grew. "Of course, I'll come. What day is it?" I asked.

He finished Nutellaing his toast—I don't really care if that's a word, it's what he did, because he wasn't exactly buttering his toast since it was Nutella. (Editorial Note: Wait, is it a word, though? I need to look it up. *Looks it up.* Aw dang, it's not!)

"It's this Saturday. We nabbed the last tickets."

I nodded, hoping my dad would be gone by then. There'd be no way he'd let me go, not after how the visit to his office had been. Ace took a bite out of his toast, and I threw a goldfish up into the air, catching it in my mouth.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

I tossed another goldfish while I thought.

"Hmm . . . no idea. Any ideas?" I asked.

He motioned for me to toss him a goldfish. I did and he caught it smoothly in his mouth. I snorted a laugh and he smiled.

“I just got a new game on our Xbox that Sims and I have been practicing. We could teach you what we know so far,” he suggested.

“Sounds fun,” I agreed.

We finished our snacks and threw a few more goldfish—We’re both pros at goldfish tossing and catching, I’m proud to say! I followed him to his basement, and he started up the TV and Xbox.

“Hang on, I need to call Sims.” Ace held up a finger and got out his phone, texting his brother.

After a minute, he nodded. “He’ll be down.”

“Did you tell him I’m here?” I asked.

Ace tried to keep away a smile when he shook his head.

I laughed. “Of course not.”

I wasn’t one bit surprised. We heard footsteps upstairs and Ace put a finger to his lips, motioning urgently for me to hide.

“Quick! I wanna scare him!” he whispered.

I snorted, and hid. Sims came down a few seconds later.

“Time to destroy!” he yelled.

I stifled a laugh. Sims was so cute. Ace smiled and held up his hand for a high five.

“You bet!” he agreed.

As Sims watched Ace load the game, he cocked his head and said, “You should invite Brin over to play sometime.”

Ace nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

Ace glanced over towards my hiding place and nodded slightly. I snuck around until I was behind Sims.

“How’d your date go? I never heard. Did she like it?” Sims asked.

“Yeah, she had fun. We’re gonna go out sometime again soon. And she’s coming with us to the baseball game.”

Sims did a fist pump and I smiled. It was nice to see people so excited about hanging out with me.

“So, when are you going to tell her you love her?” Sims asked.

I paused, surprised by the comment. Ace froze and I could see his cheeks heat up.

“I—um, it-it’s a little early for that. I don’t want to overwhelm her.”

He laughed self-consciously, still a little wide-eyed when he turned around to look at Sims, and then he looked at me, offering me an apologetic expression. I imagine I was just as red and wide-eyed as him.

Sims cocked his head. “Why are you looking behind me like that? Unless someone’s behind me . . .”

Sims began to turn around and I silently snuck to the side, accidentally drawing heat in from some nearby warmth, so when Sims turned around, he didn’t see me. I inched more to the side and caught the reflections on the TV. Mine wasn’t there. I smiled a little before letting it go and sweeping Sims up into my arms bridal-style.

“GAAAAHHHHHHH!” I yelled, and he gave me a stranglehold as he yelled with me. It took him a second to realize what had happened. He grinned from ear to ear.

“Brin! You’re here!” he cried.

Ace and I were dying laughing.

“Yup. Just don’t tell my mom.” I cringed a little at those words, but I didn’t take them back.

Sims raised his eyebrows. “Your mom doesn’t know you’re here?” he asked, with obvious concern in his voice.

I appreciated it, but I didn’t need him to worry about me. I forced a smile on my face.

“I’m sure she’s fine with it. I just needed a little break for a while—no big deal!”

I smiled wider, and was surprised to find this one was real. No big deal. It honestly felt like a mini-vacation, hanging out with the two of them. I took a breath and nodded towards the TV, setting Sims down.

“Is it ready? I wanna see this game you guys are so excited about.”

Ace stood up and handed me a controller as the screen finally loaded, revealing a fighting game. I grinned wickedly. I always loved those as a kid. Ten minutes later, I was destroying Ace, and Sims was cackling uncontrollably. After about ten games, Ace set down his controller roughly and laid back on the couch. I stifled a snicker.

“Do you wanna go again?” I asked.

He shook his head sharply without a word. I shared an amused glance with Sims.

“Seems like someone’s a sore loser!” I teased.

Ace rolled his eyes, but in a few moments, he was visibly better.

I stared at him. “How did you calm down so fast?” I asked.

“A change of mindset and some deep breaths. You should try it sometime.” He grinned cheekily.

I shoved him and flicked a spark at him. He yelped and shoved me back playfully. I laughed and wrapped my arms around him in a side hug and on impulse kissed his cheek. He grinned and kissed my cheek back.

“Eww! Get a room!” Sims yelled and threw pillows at us until we fell over onto the floor, all three of us laughing so hard we couldn’t breathe. I struggled to get up and Sims just kept throwing things at us. Once he ran out of pillows to throw, he threw blankets and cushions and finally just little things he could find around. Once he ran out of those, he decided to reuse some of his ammo.

“I really need my nerf gun,” he decided, shooting up and scrambling through the chaotic war zone.

“Oh no you don’t!” I replied in a loud, scratchy, high voice, running after him. We both ran up the stairs and through several rooms. I managed to grab onto him once we reached his bedroom, and I carry him in an awkward, bridal-style back down to the basement.

“I don’t feel like being shot at today,” I panted, setting him down on the currently cushion-less couch.

Sims pouted theatrically, and I rolled my eyes.

“How would you feel if you were shot at?” I asked.

He stared at me while he thought. I stared expectantly back at him. His face melted into empathy. Right then, I realized he was picturing me being shot with a real gun. That was close enough to the image I was going for, but I wasn’t sure I wanted a ten-year-old to imagine that kind of scene. It wasn’t pretty. At least, not in my mind.

“I wouldn’t like it. I might not even survive it,” he whispered, hugging me like a koala.

I smiled warmly and spread my legs out in order to better support his weight.

“I think you would. You’re a very strong and brave ‘guy-in-the-van.’ I think with that kind of attitude . . . you can survive anything,” I whispered back.

He turned his head so he was burying his face in my neck. I tightened my arms around him comfortingly.

“I know you could,” he whispered.

My gaze wandered around the room until it reached Ace. He looked just as pained as I knew looked.

“Yeah. That’s . . . what happens when something higher decides you’re worth it.” I shrugged.

“But hey, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. And once you’re stronger, you’re harder to kill. And once you get to a certain point, you’re invincible!” I grinned in a silly way.

He lifted his head. “Are you invincible?” Sims asked.

My smile faded a little. “I’m gonna be honest with you buddy, no. But I’m strong, and I’m on my way to invincible.”

I leaned forward and kissed his forehead before he slid off me and back onto the couch. Right then, Mrs. McCohen came down the stairs with a curious expression.

“Oh! Brinley you’re here!” She smiled, but I could tell something was bothering her.

“What is it, Mrs. McCohen?” I asked.

She glanced at the mess we’d made but didn’t say anything about it.

“Oh, dear, you can just call me Jane,” she replied. “And your dad’s here.”

Instantly, all the dread and fear I’d managed to bury under this light and happy time I was having came surging up, leaving me breathless. A million different possibilities flew through my mind as to why he was here and why my mom and Ada hadn’t stalled him—or stalled him longer—making my mind spin. I nodded and turned to Ace and Sims. Ace stared at Jane wide-eyed before glancing at me and getting up. Sims kept shifting his glance between Jane and I, sensing something was wrong. I made sure my face looked calm

and happy before I hugged Sims goodbye and Ace took my hand, leading me up the stairs, his shoulders tensed and his hand firmly encased around mine like he was guarding me. It suddenly dawned on me that he was guarding me, and I had no doubt he'd fight for me, even if it was my dad.

We all climbed the stairs and journeyed to the front door slowly like none of us really wanted me to go, but still going because we all knew I had no choice. I even made sure to put my shoes on extra slowly before walking to the front door where my dad stood, staring at me coldly, his arms crossed. He dominated the entire doorway, and I couldn't help feeling small. I could barely keep my hands from shaking as I said goodbye to Ace and Jane and walked with Dad to his expensive sports car. But Ace came with me and even opened the door for me, holding it as I climbed in.

As I was halfway in, he leaned down and whispered, "Text me once you're home. I'll call you soon. And if he does anything to you . . ." he glanced uneasily at my dad, who was watching us through one of the mirrors impatiently, "just come straight over. As fast as you can. I'll keep a fire going."

He smiled, but the smile didn't hide the intense worry. I nodded gratefully and slid into the backseat of the car. I could sit in the front, but I'd rather be behind my dad where I could see him and he couldn't see me easily. Ace closed the door behind me and waved sadly as Dad drove off. He was silent until we got back home.

CHAPTER - 14

BAD DAY

As soon as Dad and I got home, I ran up to my room, ignoring his yells for me to come back, saying he needed to talk to me, and texted Ace.

Me
I'm home. My dad wants to talk to me, so I can't be on for very long.

Ace
Just be careful. I don't want you to get hurt. If you want you can always tell me what happened. I'm here.

Tears pooled in my eyes. I couldn't ever describe how thankful I was to have him.

Me
Thanks.

I didn't have time to see his reply. I heard harsh, angry steps coming up the stairs, and I knew I'd run out of time. I put my phone in my pocket and walked towards the door, taking several deep breaths in an attempt to calm the rising panic. All I wanted to do was burst into flame and rush straight back to Ace's house, but that would

only make things worse. I couldn't do that for a while. I could only ride this out and do my best to get through it. *I can do this. I can do this. I can do this.* I chanted to myself as I opened the door. My dad was already standing there, hand outstretched. He seemed genuinely surprised, which was quickly replaced by anger. He took my arm and led me down the stairs and into the living room, where we found Ada and Mom hanging out by the TV. Great. An audience.

Then it clicked. Dad wanted to make an example of me, and guessing by the fear in the eyes of my mother and sister, they'd also upset him at some point as well. He wanted to make it clear that he was to be respected, and that he was in control. The fire begged for me to let it out as anger washed over me, battling ferociously with the fear stabbing my heart with its cold blades. I could feel my heart bleeding, but I kept my face emotionless as I faced him.

"What did you wanna talk about?" I asked, my voice shaking slightly.

He leaned against one of the couches, folding his arms.

"You ran out on me after you promised to meet the important people I wanted you to meet, and then I came home to your mother and your sister covering for you while you were at some boy's house?" he spat out.

I flinched slightly.

"I want to know who those people were, and I want you to apologize for running out on me and making your mom and sister cover for you against my wishes."

Dad counted off my sins but never took his eyes off of me. I didn't want to tell him who Ace was. I had a feeling that wouldn't end well. No matter what I did, the situation wouldn't end well for anyone. The least I could do was to keep the brunt of the impact off the others. The fire seemed to agree as it continued to war against the fear. I took a deep breath, already knowing what to say.

"I'm sorry. I just sometimes get a little . . . overwhelmed when meeting a lot of new people at once. It's my fault Mom and Ada kept you from finding me. I begged them to and lied about where I was going. And . . ." I took another deep breath, bracing myself for this lie. "I lied to one of mom's friends about why I was there. I

don't know the boy that well—I've only known him for a few weeks, and I don't spend a ton of time with him."

I let my eyes drop to the floor for emphasis, and I allowed the fear in just enough to make my body shrink. If I couldn't get rid of it, I could always find a way to use it to my advantage. That was the one good thing he'd taught me after my accident—although he'd never meant to. He studied me for a minute, as if trying to judge whether or not I was pretending, before nodding, satisfied with how it turned out.

"Thank you. Was that really so hard?" he asked.

I swallowed my reply and shook my head, letting the fear cover up everything insincere about this whole situation.

"You're grounded for the rest of the week while I'm here."

He shot a look at mom and I knew in an instant he didn't trust her. I took a deep breath and nodded.

"So, it's to school and back home. And no phone," Dad proclaimed.

I stared at him.

"I need my phone for some of my schoolwork, though," I replied.

He shook his head and put out his hand, staring me down expectantly. I swallowed, closed my eyes, and handed him my phone. He pocketed it instantly.

"You may go back to your room now and do homework until your mom is done with dinner."

Dad sounded a little bored when he said that, and he immediately seemed to lose interest in me. If mom was already starting on dinner, it probably meant one of her more time-consuming recipes in her crockpot. I walked calmly back up the stairs and into my room, shutting the door. Then, after a second thought, I took the chair at my desk and leaned it against the door and shut the blinds. I wanted to . . . I didn't actually have a name for turning into fire and traveling to places. I stood for a moment as I tried to think. I reached for my phone to look up some words related to the action, only to remember that I didn't have my dang phone. Laptop it is! In a few seconds, I was on my laptop and

searching words related to what I wanted to do. What came up was some sort of superpower wikipedia. I clicked on it and looked through the list of names.

“Pyroportation . . . heck no. Uhh . . . fire mimicry, fire generation, fire manipulation . . . either too long or too basic,” I murmured.

I scrolled through a few more before I found one that made me laugh. “Flaming!”

Okay, so I wanted to work on my skills and do some flaming. I smiled at the word despite my mood. I closed my computer and went to the middle of my bedroom. I had enough control nowadays that I figured I could keep myself from destroying my room. Self-consciously, I glanced at the burn on my wall. I’d covered up the spot with a poster Mason had given to me a few months before, but if it moved in any direction, the burn was visible. I’d have to find an excuse to get paint to cover it sometime. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the fireplace at Ace’s place. I felt the warmth engulf my body, and I maintained the most vivid mental picture of it I could manage until I opened my eyes and climbed out of the fireplace. Ace and Sims sat on the couch, Sims using his computer and Ace reading. I dusted the ash off me and closed the grate to the fire. Ace looked up and a worried expression filled his eyes when he saw me. I smiled.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle. I’m just grounded for the rest of the time my dad is here, and he took my phone away,” I informed them.

“I’m glad you were able to make it here,” he admitted, encasing me in a hug. I sighed and leaned into him.

“Me too.”

After a minute I forced myself to pull away.

“I have a few hours before I have to go back.” I glanced between the two of them.

“We should probably be productive,” Sims and I said in unison. We both grinned.

“Can you show me to the warehouse?” he asked.

Ace started to shake his head but Sims gave him the puppy-dog eyes. They even nearly worked on me, and I'm immune to them. Ace sighed, putting his thumb between his brows.

"Fine. But only if you promise to do exactly what we say when we say it. And if we find ourselves in a fight, you have to stay safely away from it. Understand?"

Sims nodded eagerly. Ace stuck out his hand. Sims sighed, shook it, and they did some sort of secret handshake, ending with them pounding their chests with their fists a couple times.

"Alright Brin, let's go." Ace took my hand and led Sims and me a few streets over to the nearest bus stop.

"Couldn't you just flame-teleport over there?" Sims asked as he sat between us.

"Maybe, if there's something warm enough close by it. I've never tried flaming without that source of heat," I admitted. "Besides, it's more fun to do these trips with friends."

Sims nodded, although he gave me a funny look, and chatted happily about school and his friends and videogames he'd played the entire ride while Ace sat quietly, looking at his phone or around at the passengers on the bus as if one of them would suddenly burst out black vines and come for Sims. I put a reassuring hand on his arm. He smiled at me before looking back at his phone. When we finally got there, Sims was bursting with so much excited energy, it became contagious. Pretty soon even Ace was smiling, and we all raced each other through the last alleyway to the entrance of the warehouse. I threw open the door dramatically and gestured around.

"This is the warehouse!" I exclaimed.

Sims looked around. "It's very different being here in person than seeing it through a camera." He grinned. "Can we do some practicing?"

I glanced at Ace and shrugged.

"Sure. Just make sure to stay out of the way. I don't think your brother wants you getting burnt to a crisp." I winked teasingly, walked over to Ace, and slipped my hand into his when his face paled.

“Don’t worry. We both know I have enough control now to keep that from happening!” I reassured him. I didn’t blame him for being so hesitant about showing his brother this side of our lives. It was dangerous, and Sims was just a ten-year-old boy with a ton of potential left in his life. He hadn’t been corrupted by high school or any serious failures, and he had an amazing family and some great friends. That was already more going for him than I had. I shook my head against the intruding thoughts and Sims followed Ace and I to one of the warehouse's walls.

“What do we wanna practice first?” I asked them both.

Sims grinned. “I want to see some of the things you’ve done in your battles, like those fire geysers, or maybe that flamethrower thing, or—”

“How about we start with fireballs and work our way up?” Ace asked, shoving his hands in his pockets.

I nodded, although I studied Ace for a minute.

“If you don’t want him here, we can always leave early,” I suggested in a low voice.

Ace sighed and shook his head. “Sorry. It just feels weird. I’m just being paranoid.”

“I get it. You don’t want your little brother to get hurt by what we’re doing. But if he’s working with us at all, he’d have to be introduced to it for real at some point. I already promised I’d do my best to keep him safe. I’m just asking you to trust me.” I gave him a sympathetic look.

After a moment, Ace took a deep breath. “Alright. And I do trust you.”

He closed his eyes for a moment before meeting my gaze and nodding. He smiled and I felt the corners of my mouth lift automatically.

“Okay! Let’s see your fireballs!”

He transitioned into teacher mode quicker than I could text. Which was definitely an accomplishment, considering how fast I can text. I summoned the fire and shaped it into a ball as it came into my hand before hurling it at the wall and receiving a satisfying impact. Maybe that was what I should do to get my anger out. It

certainly helped with the other emotions. I did a few more before switching to the flamethrower hands. Sims stared at me with wide eyes when I tried it against the wall.

“I think we should move to a different wall,” Ace suggested. “This one looks like it’s had enough torture.”

He was right—I could see small cracks forming inside the blackened parts of the wall where my flame touched it. It was still on fire a little. I quickly snuffed the fire out before we tried another wall—one that looked slightly less like it was about to fall apart any second. I practiced on that wall a bit longer, then I slowly worked my way on the ground until I had a circle of fire around us. I started playing with the fire, mostly because I felt like it: tossing it in the air, making shapes, and experimenting with turning the ones on the ground into different things. I kind of wanted to see how far I could go. I also wanted a bit of action. I’d felt way too powerless lately—I needed something to make me feel okay again. I wanted to feel like I was actually doing something besides cowering and hiding, which were not by choice.

“I kinda wanna go fight some criminals now,” I declared after a few minutes of making Sims giggle by shaping the fire into lots of small race cars and having them race along a fiery, floating road. I’d gotten good at making shapes from all of the nights I couldn’t sleep or had been bored in my room doing homework. I’d mostly done simple shapes then, but during practice sessions with Ace, for control exercises, we focused on the racecars since it involved a lot of different parts working together. It was simpler than controlling a lot of big fire, more fun, and less dangerous and tiring for the both of us—especially if I messed up and we had to clean up the site to avoid detection.

Ace nodded and turned to Sims. “You stay in between us. If we find trouble, stay with me. Okay?” he instructed. Sims nodded eagerly and we exited the warehouse. It wasn’t long before Sims pulled up his phone and told us a street name.

“You can find it on your phone?” Ace asked.

I hadn’t even known he had a phone! I’d only ever seen him use his computer.

Sims nodded. "Let's hurry."

We all knew that there was only a certain amount of time before you completely missed the criminal and the crime they committed. Then you'd have to find a way to track them down if it's even possible. I didn't feel like doing that.

We ran as fast as we could across a few blocks and streets, and at some point, Ace had to give Sims a piggyback since he couldn't keep up and was getting winded pretty quickly. I was worried that would slow Ace down, but he just powered through, although I could see it was taking a toll. At least all the ice and snow was gone. As soon as we got there, Ace dropped Sims as gently as he could and leaned against the wall, trying to catch his breath. He waved at me to keep going. I nodded and from the corner of the alley began to examine the crime. Two people stood looking around, talking, and exchanging something. I saw a small case pass between them. Within an instant, I was Phoenix. I vaulted over a car silently and ripped the case from one of their hands.

"Don't you know there's better ways to spend your money than getting addicted?" I asked, glancing at the case. One of them, a girl around my age wearing a hoodie suddenly lunged at me in a spike of rage. I twisted out of the way, opened the case, and dumped the pills down a nearby gutter. The girl collapsed onto her knees and stared down through the gutter at the sewer below. The other person coughed and walked away. I knelt next to the girl in the hoodie.

"Hey, it's okay. I know it's hard, but you need help. Do you really wanna throw your life away, just for some chemicals that are only making you more and more miserable?" I asked.

She broke down and started crying.

Finally, she managed to force out in a sharp voice, "Do you even know how it feels?" She shook her head, clenching her fists. "You're a superhero. Of course not. I needed those!"

Tears pooled in my eyes. I unsheathed my weapons, put them in a place she couldn't get to just in case she got much more emotional, and put my arms around her, hugging her close. She smelled like the chemicals, but I didn't really care. Flashbacks filled

my head of the rebellious part of my history. I pushed them down and focused back on this girl.

“I know how it feels. Under my mask and my suit, I’m just like you, believe it or not. I found ways to numb out my life, but I managed to turn things around, and now look where I am!” I whispered.

She perked up.

“My life still isn’t perfect, but I’m trying,” I murmured. I was talking to both of us now.

“You are?” the girl asked. I nodded. “Who . . . who are you?” she asked.

I sighed. “I can’t tell you that. All I can say is that . . . not even superheroes are perfect,” I whispered.

She nodded and stood up after a few minutes of silence. I was still hugging her, so her hood got screwed up and fell off. I sat there, staring up at her, completely frozen. She stared back at me, confused.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Gracey asked.

I mumbled something like “uhh” before shaking my head and gathering my wits.

“It’s nothing. I hope you manage to beat this.” I stood up, waved to her, re-sheathed my blades, and ran into one of the alleys. I went through a few bends before I stopped and pressed the heel of my hand to my head, closing my eyes. That was Gracey. The popular girl with everything and who was in command of my friend group, addicted to some sort of pill! I . . . I had no idea. I didn’t understand why it surprised me. I mean, that explained why she was always so rude! It could be withdrawals, but her life was so great I didn’t think she needed pills to be happy or to numb any pain. Her parents were rich and she could afford anything she wanted. But I also knew how that was. Money couldn’t buy you happiness, even if you had all the money in the world. People could wish it could, but it never would be able to. I heard footsteps and immediately took my hand from my head and opened my eyes, straightening up, but it was only Ace and Sims.

“What happened? You and that girl never really fought,” Sims asked.

I looked into his eyes and forced a small smile. “Fighting isn’t always done with fists,” I told him firmly.

I turned my gaze back to Ace. He was smiling.

“That was amazing what you did for Gracey,” he complimented, taking my still gloved hand.

We walked through a few more alleys. Absentmindedly, I tugged my mask off and put my hood down. If I thought too hard about it, I had trouble breathing and started feeling claustrophobic with the mask up.

“One more?” I asked.

Ace shook his head at the same time as Sims nodded. I laughed.

“Well, I can’t do both!” I exclaimed, taking Sims’s hand as well.

“If you could clone yourself, you could,” Sims pointed out.

“That’s true. I could. Too bad the fire can’t clone,” I replied. I looked at Ace sideways. “Though, I don’t know if your big brother would be able to handle more than one Brinley.” I grinned teasingly and elbowed him.

He laughed. “Oh really? I handle you well enough—I could handle two or three,” he defended.

I rolled my eyes. “Sure . . . if it ever becomes possible, you’ll have to prove it to me,” I challenged.

“Deal!”

He sealed it with a kiss on my cheek. I grinned, feeling my cheeks heat up a little. Sims made a sound that was somewhere between a giggle and a gag. I turned to him.

“And you can’t tell us to get a room—there’re none around.”

I chuckled at his expression. Before I could call it a day, Sims whipped out his phone and gave us another street. Ace sighed, picked up his younger brother, and ran behind me towards the next street. Once we got there, I immediately saw the problem.

“Get Sims to safety!” I ordered.

Ace nodded and disappeared, still holding the boy. I put my mask on and hood back up and walked out into plain daylight, not caring that News vehicles were already there. A gang was terrorizing

the block, some of them with knives and others with guns. They were in the middle of robbing a group of women when I stepped up and cleared my throat.

“How about you pick on someone your own size, huh? At least then the fight would be more entertaining,” I advised. I heard some of the bystanders cheering my name, and the News people hurriedly reported my arrival, aiming cameras at me. Some of the gang members rushed towards me and surrounded me, aiming their guns at me. I feigned surrendering for a few seconds, hearing gasps all around, before stomping my foot. A wall of fire roared to life and heated the guns out of their hands. I thought they’d all dropped their guns until I heard a shot ring through the air and felt a horrible punch in my side. I looked down and saw blood. For a moment, it didn’t hurt too badly as my brain fuzzily tried to comprehend what just happened.

I looked up and dodged one of the gang members that came at me. Within seconds, most of them were lying on the ground. The wall of fire was still up when I knocked down the last one, sweating and collapsing as the world spun around me and the pain from my side came in a full blast. The fire wall suddenly lost a lot of life as my vision darkened. I heard sirens and saw ambulances parking around the area. I gritted my teeth as a rush of flame went to my wound, allowing me to stagger up to my feet. It wasn’t enough, though, as another wave of pain flared up my side and I collapsed. The fire hovered around the area, seeming to keep the bullet from causing more damage, but my consciousness faded in and out and the world tilted. I felt smoke engulf me and hands lifted me off the ground and carried me bridal-style out of the area right as people came out of the ambulances. They called out to us and rushed to us but whoever was carrying me only ran faster, quickly losing them in the alley. I lazily glanced down at the wound. Well, so much for being back before anyone would know I was gone.

Black swallowed my vision, and I dreamt of fire and cold hard eyes that seemed familiar, but I just couldn’t grasp where I knew them from. Right before the dream ended, the scene morphed to Mason. Dream me watched in pained horror as he transformed into

Black Thorn right in front of my eyes. It looked painful. As I turned to run away, I jolted awake and gasped at the flare of pain up my side. The world around me was blurry, but I could just barely make out white walls and machines. I blinked until my vision cleared. I was in a hospital room, laying on a bed, my shirt rolled up to expose a bandage wrapped around my stomach. My wallet laid on a chair next to the door. I heard a shaky sigh of relief and looked over to my other side. Ace sat anxiously in a chair next to my bed, watching me, his eyes red and watery like he'd just been crying or was about to.

"I'm not dead" was all I could think to say. My voice sounded tired and a little labored, but it carried well enough I figured I'd be okay. I sat up, gritting my teeth against the pain.

"How long have I been out?" I asked.

"About half an hour," he replied in a husky voice.

I nodded. How long did I have to stay at the hospital? I was pretty sure my parents knew I'd snuck out by now, so I was just waiting for when they'd either show up or when I'd be able to go home and they'd tighten the punishments. But I didn't regret what I'd done. If I hadn't been there, it would've taken longer to apprehend those gang members, and by then they'd have probably caused more damage.

"Who's gonna pay for this?" I wondered mostly to myself.

He shrugged. "We'll worry about that when it comes," he replied.

I nodded. The door opened and a nurse walked in.

"You're up!" she exclaimed, like that was the best news in the world. I just barely kept an eye roll back. I hated overly positive people or fake positivity. It just got on my nerves and didn't feel real.

"Yeah, I'm up. How long do I have to stay here?" I asked.

The nurse smiled. "Only a few hours—the wound may hurt, but it's not very deep. We just need to make sure the stitches stay in and that it's not infected—if it heals wrong, that's when it could become a problem," she replied.

I felt like I was being talked to like a child. There was definitely a hint of that in her voice.

“I don’t think I’ll be here that long if that’s all you’re doing. I heal fast,” I replied casually.

I had this sudden urge to knock that tone out of her voice. I wasn’t a child, and I didn’t want to be treated like one, no matter how much I missed my childhood. It was gone, so it was long past time people started treating me like that. The nurse shook her head, smiling a little.

“No one heals that fast. But we’ll do what we can.”

I sighed and glanced at Ace. He was watching the whole exchange with an obvious interest, like he was wondering what would happen next. I didn’t blame him—I would be too if I wasn’t actually part of the conversation. I rolled my eyes while she undid the bandages on me. As soon as she’d done so, she gasped. The wound was nearly closed, with the help of the stitches and medicine they’d given me.

“Are you Wolverine?” she asked.

I laughed. “That doesn’t exist. I told you, I heal relatively fast,” I replied, noticing the fire retract a little from the wound. I could even see it a little in the surrounding skin as the slight red around the wound faded away.

“Well, you’re . . . really lucky,” the nurse murmured. She stared at it for a moment before glancing up at me.

“You’re free to go, I guess?” she said.

I nodded, trying to swallow a laugh. Ace was obviously doing the same. I unrolled my shirt, and Ace helped me gather my stuff. We practically bolted out of the hospital, where we found Sims and Jane just getting out of a car to see us, both of them looking worried sick. Sims grinned once he saw us and ran to us, giving us an adorable little bear hug. Jane wiped away a few tears and embraced us both, giving Ace an extra unwanted kiss on the cheek. She ushered us into her car and within ten minutes we were back at their place. I’d just gotten out of the car when I checked the time on the living room clock and bit my lip. I was cutting it way too close.

“I’m sorry, but I really have to go if I’m gonna get home in time for dinner.” I winced.

Jane nodded and Ace gave me a quick side hug. I waved bye to them and sprinted back home, ignoring the pain in my side with some difficulty. If I was lucky, I’d be able to sneak back into my room without any of my family realizing I’d been gone, but at this point I wasn’t so sure I’d be able to pull off that stunt anymore—especially since I had a healing gunshot wound, which I definitely hadn’t accounted for when I’d made my plans to sneak out. I got back home as quickly as I could and stared up at my window. How was I going to get up there without anyone noticing? I hadn’t really thought this through.

I saw a little loop from the window’s handle sticking out from the slightly ajar window. I thought I’d closed it. That meant someone must’ve been in there. Cold fear crept in, but I burned it away with the fire. I hoped it was just Ada, and that she’d decided to give me a little visit and wouldn’t tell Dad. I quickly found some ropes we’d kept stashed near the cars and, using all my strength, threw it up towards the loop. It took a few tries before I finally got it. I didn’t think about how this was one of the more physically dangerous things I’d done as Brinley as I scaled the side of my house, hoping the window wouldn’t break off. Somehow it didn’t, and I climbed into my room as carefully and quietly as I could, despite getting my foot caught on the ledge and falling on my face when I was mostly in. I hid the rope in one of my drawers under my clothes, closed the window, and turned towards the door. The chair was sitting uselessly next to the door and Ada sat on my bed looking worried. I jumped in surprise.

“Where’d you go?” she asked.

Another thing I hadn’t accounted for. I really needed to work on my plan-making skills.

“How did you get in here?” I asked.

Maybe I could divert the conversation? Ada gave me a look. I changed the question.

“Are you going to tell Dad I snuck out?” I asked.

She seemed to think about it for a second before shaking her head.

“No.”

I nodded appreciatively.

“I went to see Ace and Sims. We hung out for a while.”

I let the silence stretch for a minute before smiling, a memory of something Sims said before we’d started playing video games resurfaced.

“He had me try to scare Sims as a prank. It was hilarious.” I grinned. “But the most interesting thing happened right before I revealed myself.”

I looked at Ada. I could see the anticipation in her gaze. I smiled sweetly.

“Sims asked Ace when he was going to tell me he loves me,” I said.

“What did he say?” she asked, grinning.

“He said he was gonna wait. He apparently doesn’t want to scare me away,” I replied, sighing.

He could never scare me away. If anything, I’d be the one scaring him away. I didn’t understand how he’d even started loving me in the first place. I just hoped he never saw me how I saw myself. I didn’t want it to end.

Ada smiled. “You found a great guy.”

I nodded. I really did, and I had no idea how the heck I’d managed it.

“Does mom know I was out?” I asked, getting straight to the point.

“She’s been too busy making dinner—which is almost ready, by the way,” she informed me.

I nodded, letting out a sigh of relief. If she’d known, Dad would’ve gotten suspicious and made her tell him. Then my punishment would be even worse, especially if he found out who I’d been with. Even if he found out who Ace was, I’d never let him get close to him. As long as I was Phoenix, I was supposed to protect people who needed it. I had no doubt Ace could handle

himself, but towards my father? I wasn't so sure about that. *I couldn't even face my dad.*

CHAPTER - 15

NIGHTMARE

The moonlight danced around my stuffy room. Sweat was clinging to me like a light blanket on my skin as I stared up at the ceiling, unable to sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about dinner. It was . . . I shook my head. I was trying to distract myself enough to fall asleep instead of reliving the feverish flashbacks haunting my every breath. Dinner had brought up buried memories of encounters with my dad, that I wished I did not remember. Dinner itself was good, like usual. Mom had made my favorite, and I figured by the look she gave me when she dished it out that it was supposed to be like some sort of apology. I appreciated it, but it didn't change anything. Dad still watched me carefully and commented on my eating habits, and on all of our postures—like it even mattered whether you were slouching in your chair around your family. I mean, I knew it was polite, but Mom had never pushed it, so no one but Dad even really cared. Just as long as no one slurped too loudly or chewed with their mouth open or made too big of a mess. The cold stare he'd given me when he asked if I'd gotten any homework done and how it grew even colder when I lied to him froze in my head. It scraped across my heart and shaped the shadows in my room into monstrous figures with long, slender arms or crooked heads or . . . tentacles. He'd asked what homework I'd done. I lied with ease, pretending not to be worried about it despite my shaking hands and pounding heart. I rolled over in bed to face the wall, hoping that

would hide the monsters in the room. I usually didn't care much about the dark—even forcing myself to get up out of bed and go towards whatever scared me if I did manage to get creeped out—but tonight I didn't feel like addressing it. I just felt like lying in bed forever and never facing what I had to go through. I wished . . .

I shoved the dangerous idea out of my head and built my walls up again, wondering where the fire was. I could feel it burning low, trying to attack the darkness, but it seemed dinner's trauma had muted it. Lucky me. I tried pulling the covers up over my head, like I used to when I was a kid, and closing my eyes, but flashes of horrors appeared and I opened my eyes, instantly regretting putting the covers over my head when the horrors were still there. I tried taking deep breaths, but the deeper the breath I took the more I felt like I needed air. So, I forced myself to take smaller, quieter breaths despite the suffocating feeling. Tears rose in my eyes and crept down my cheeks as Dad's words hit me like a pre-Civil War, slave owner's whip. I remembered learning about that in middle school. That didn't matter now. Most of the things I have learned in school has not prepared me even remotely for what I've gone through and for what I was currently facing. No school could teach you how to be a good superhero or how to survive a rich, egotistical, selfish rat of a dad.

Why doesn't Dad love me? A child's voice whispered through my mind as another buried memory resurfaced, making me gasp and choke on tears. I stared at the wall with wide eyes as my mom's sad and much younger face gazed down at me gently.

He does love you, he just . . . shows it differently than most people. She'd reassured me with a smile. Her voice echoed through my head, soothing but wrenching my heart to pieces. *No, he doesn't.* Even little me somehow knew that wasn't true.

Why doesn't he love you? Why does he leave? I'd asked with teary eyes. I'd been nearly yelling, hurt because he'd promised to show up to a play my elementary school had put on, but he never did—and it wasn't the first time. I'd played an actual role instead of being a background item for once, and I was so excited to make my dad proud, that I'd been crushed and run out crying when I hadn't seen

his face in the crowd. And I remembered darker nights where my parents had been fighting, not realizing I was on the other side of the door. How had things gotten so twisted? I shoved those memories out of the way before the sound of a smack could ring through my already tortured ears.

He does love me. He's really busy with work, Birdie. It's not his fault. She'd explained. I'd shaken my head.

Can't he just quit and get a new job? I'd asked tearfully. Mom had sighed and looked back at me, tears rolling down her face. At that moment, I'd known what she was going to say. I'd shaken my head slightly to try and stop her, but she'd continued anyway.

Because he believes he's on to something. And how else will we get bills paid? How else can we make you kids happy? But she wasn't happy, and I could see that, even in elementary school. We had a lot of things because of Dad's success. In elementary, I was considered the "spoiled rich kid" in some ways, but even at that age, I knew that money could never make anyone happy.

Everyone in the family knew something wasn't right, but no one dared to talk about it. It was because Dad would probably shut it down immediately with some sort of harsh punishment, which we also didn't talk about because that would ruin his reputation and overall image. Maybe even ruin his business. No one wanted to invest in a company that was run by a man who abused people, or who used people for his own gain. Dad would insist that the world would instantly turn on anyone who made even a small mistake or made someone else look bad in the slightest. That's what money and power does to people. It makes them think they are better than everyone else. A terrible idea surfaced in my mind, making me sick to the stomach. *Could the fire do that to me? Could I become evil from the power?* I didn't want to be. Deep down I knew that, despite all the anger and hurt, I'd never want to do that.

I couldn't change the past; it just gave me one more reason to try my best at being Phoenix. I tossed and turned a little more in bed before sitting up and glancing at the clock. I really hated missing sleep, but if I wasn't going to sleep tonight, I could at least entertain myself. I lit a fire in my hands and watched it dance before lifting it

into the air and playing with it, molding it into different shapes. The firelight encountered the moonlight, and together they created a circle of light around my bed, immediately revealing the truth behind some of the monsters that had been reaching towards me. I felt the fire warm up inside me a little at the use, gaining momentum and strength to chase some more of the shadows away.

The distraction from my thoughts helped ease the pain and calm my mind a little. The flashbacks slowed down and happier memories began to glimmer with little bits of light. Maybe I'd actually be able to sleep by five! I laid back down, but I continued to play with shapes, holding back a little bit of laughter at the sillier ones. I tried even doing people, and ended up making a blob that was supposed to be a caricature of my dad. It didn't look too horrible and even resembled him. My eyes grew heavy. I kept the fire going just in case as I drifted off, but I felt the stuff in the air fizzle out right before the nightmares came.



I was back at dinner, my dad staring me down with his hard, gray eyes while I tried to eat. The teenager in me wanted to retort, “would you stop looking like a rock? I’m trying to eat, and I don’t need my stomach to follow you,” but the child in me wanted to shrink and hide and never come out. I dreamt that I opened my mouth to speak, but his eyes turned red and he morphed into a shadow monster with horns. I ran away, yelling for Ace. When I found him, it was back in one of my old nightmares—he was on the ground, singed and dead, while the remnants of a huge fire devoured what was left of the grass and buildings nearby.

I fell onto my knees, sobbing at the damage I'd done, and pulled Ace's singed corpse onto my lap, not caring that his skin burned mine. I wished with all my heart that he was still alive. Then everything melted into a new scene—I was facing Black Thorn as Phoenix, and he had Sims as hostage. Ace, alive once again, stood

in the background, staring at me, his eyes full of hurt and . . . hate. So much hate. I couldn't look away despite my heart splintering into thousands of tiny shards from that one gaze. No words needed to be said. He just glared at me, jaw tight as tears rolled down his face and his fist balled in almost uncontrollable rage. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was, and tell him I hadn't meant for this to happen, but I knew no apology could fix the promise I'd broken. Suddenly, a warped, black tentacle shot like a dagger from Black Thorn towards Ace, aiming for his stomach. I didn't care that he hated me. With a scream, I hurled myself in front of Ace and took the hit, gritting my teeth to contain the pain but a groan still escaped my mouth. He just walked away without looking back as I died on the cold, hard, stone ground. And as I died, I jolted awake, shivering and sweating with tears rolling down my face again, all traces of the happiness I'd felt earlier completely erased. In its place was every feeling I'd hoped to avoid and every feeling I'd hoped I'd forgotten how to feel.

A flick of movement to my right caught my eye. My head snapped around and I surveyed the area. No light shone in the room now as clouds had floated over the disappearing moon. I sighed and took several deep breaths to try and calm my pounding heartbeat. I nearly fell out of bed when I heard a dragging sound somewhere in the dark. My mind raced and I forced myself out of bed, lighting a flame in my hand and wondering if I was hearing things or if monsters had just suddenly decided to exist in order to torment me after I'd spent a few hours walking through some of my worst nightmares. Not cool, monsters! Not cool! Or maybe I was going crazy? Wait, was it even possible to go crazy when you were already crazy? I tried not to get lost in that thought as I walked around my room, inspecting each of the shadows despite my shaking hands. I could hear my pounding heart and feel the pulse in my chest.

There was a slow scratching on the floor, like a sharp object being dragged.

I whipped towards the sound again, this time coming from my bedroom door. I crept towards it, which was now in the hall. I left my room, trying to keep up and also avoid the spots in the house

that creaked the most. I followed the noise down the stairs and to the front door. I could barely make out a tall shape in the darkness. As soon as the door opened, the shape exited and I hurried out to see who it was. I made the fire in my hand a little larger so I could see the figure. It was the figure of a man with vines coming out of his back. Black Thorn? He'd never dared come to my house before, although he'd probably known where I lived because of Mason.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered.

He looked at me over his shoulder. I immediately noticed something different. For a second, the darkness wasn't as present. He looked like Mason. At least, he did until his brows furrowed in concentration as his Mason-persona flickered. He turned away and melted into the night. I stared at where he'd been standing my hand now in a tight fist, my nails digging into my palm. I replayed what I'd just seen over and over again until I'd remembered every little detail and memorized the entire image. Had Mason managed to get some brief control? Was that why he was here? Or had Black Thorn managed to up his game and come to finish me off while I was sleeping, but Mason managed to get in control enough to stop him and get away? I had no idea. All I knew was I'd just seen Mason for the first time in a few months, and he was alive! Even if just barely. The memory of Mason looking at me over his shoulder pushed me to my knees, head bowed, with tears inching down my face in slow pain.

"I'll save you, Mason. No matter what," I promised the silence. But I was haunted with the thought that it was too late.

CHAPTER - 16

BRUSH WITH DEATH

I pulled Ace aside at school later that day when he came up to me at the lockers.

“Mason—Black Thorn—whoever he is,” I shook my head, “he visited me early this morning.”

Ace instantly leaned in, shoulders tensed. “What’d he do?” he asked.

I sighed. “Nothing, thank goodness. He was in my room. I heard dragging so I followed the noise down to my front door, and I found him there. He left before anything could happen,” I filled him in.

He nodded although that didn’t erase the concern from his face. I realized with a start that he often looked concerned around me. I rubbed my eyes in an attempt to clear my head. It was all foggy from lack of sleep.

“The worst part was . . . I think Mason’s still alive. I think . . .” I yawned. “I think he kept Black Thorn from killing me and got away before he lost control.” I let that sink in for a moment.

“He might not have much time left,” I whispered.

Ace hugged me. “We’re gonna save him, Brin. We’ve got this.”

I didn’t really want to dampen his hopeful mood, but we’d never done anything like this before. I nodded anyway, forcing myself to be somewhat positive.

“We’ll figure it out,” he reassured me, putting an arm around my shoulders and leading me down the hall when the bell chimed. The entire school day, I couldn’t stop thinking about how Mason, dressed as Black Thorn, had looked over his shoulder at me. How gone was he? How much pain was he in? I wanted to know so bad, yet I was so scared to find out. My pride wouldn’t let me admit it, though. A shiver ran down my spine at the memory. I rubbed my forearms with my hands to soothe the goosebumps and I looked at the clock. Time seemed to go against me in the last few minutes of school. They seemed to be some of the longest few minutes in my life. Finally, the bell rang and I practically shot out of my seat. I gathered my things and rushed out the door. That’s when it happened. The fire alarm went off and I heard yelling and screaming. Teachers began ushering kids to their buses and telling the bus drivers that, as soon as their kids were on, to step on it. The crowd of scared students pushed me further from the school, and I found myself herded onto one of the buses.

“It’ll all be okay, students. Phoenix will be here any minute,” a teacher tried to sooth the frenzied students.

Not if she can’t get off this dang bus! I thought, annoyed, as I gritted my teeth, shrugged off my backpack, and made my way towards the entrance of the bus.

“Woah where are you going?” the teacher asked me.

I tried to sell the part of a scared student. It wasn’t too hard, which I’ll never admit again.

“I’m on the wrong bus!” I replied, trying to sound panicked.

The teacher only smiled calmly. “I’m sure we can get you back home. What’s your address?” she asked.

Well, that backfired. I wanted to scream, “how the heck will Phoenix get here if she can’t get off this dang bus?” but I didn’t think that would be a great idea for either version of me, so I forced my mouth shut and shook my head. Another idea sprang up. As I made my way back to my seat, I pulled my phone (I had finally gotten back that morning) out of my pocket and slipped it onto the floor, in a place where people wouldn’t spot it instantly. For some reason, my dad just handed me back my phone at breakfast without

so much as a word. And now, I was risking losing it or breaking it with this stunt, but sometimes heroes have to make sacrifices. If I was lucky, I'd be able to find a way to get a new one. I already missed it, and my brain screamed at me to pick it up and put it back, but I just gritted my teeth and kept going. I sat down and pretended to reach for my phone before faking a panicked gasp.

"My phone!" I screamed in panic. Oh, heck yeah, I could make a scene. Everyone at school knew that. About half the bus turned, including the teacher, to stare at me.

"I think I left it in the school!" I faked a desperate look and aimed it at the teacher.

She shared a sympathetic look with some of the students. "You can get it tomorrow."

"No, I need to call my mom to tell her I'm okay!" I replied, making sure my voice was at least an octave above what it usually was. I was determined, especially because I could already see some smoke coming from a crumbled section of the school. If they didn't let me out soon, there might not be a school to go back to. The teacher nodded and pulled out her phone.

"What's her number?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know! That's what contacts are for!"

The teacher sighed and took out her walkie-talkie. I struggled up and towards the front of the bus.

"Brinley needs her mom's phone number," she said into the device.

I slipped by her and she tried to bar me. The bus driver started to close the doors to keep me from getting out, but I managed to just barely slip out, the rubber edges of the doors brushing my hand. I sprinted towards the school entrance, not daring to look back. I heard yelling and saw Ace running back to the school as well, teachers following him right as the police showed up. We burst through the doors and ran towards our classrooms, taking some detours to try and lose the adults. Ace knocked a few things over to try and slow them down. Finally, we lost them, and immediately we ran towards where all the commotion was happening in the almost

empty school. Stragglers were limping towards the buses while the police yelled to get the rest of the students out and find us.

“You know, when this is over, we’re gonna have to pretend we got knocked out or something,” I gasped when we were approaching the general area where Black Thorn was. We could hear him long before we could see him. As soon as he came into view down the hall Ace bit his lip.

“Looks like Mason’s had a bad day,” he remarked. Black Thorn turned towards us upon hearing Ace’s voice and grinned.

“Finally.” He smiled like he’d already won a victory.

“Hello again. Two times in one day? That’s a record for you!” I teased him.

I don’t care whether he’s a villain, a demon, a plant, or whatever—I wasn’t missing the chance to tease the heck out of this dude. It had been too long since I’d teased the Mason side of him anyway.

Black Thorn scowled. “I could kill you right now.”

I grinned and spread my arms out in a taunting gesture. “Then why haven’t you?” I asked. He growled and one of his vines shot towards me. I held his gaze as this happened.

“No!” Ace yelled, but I put fire between the two of us, being careful not to burn him. Just before the vine pierced my heart, it stopped like it had hit some sort of wall. An invisible barrier. I watched in satisfied wonder as Mason gained just enough control to keep Black Thorn from killing me. I smiled at him like how I used to when I knew he was going through a hard time. He managed to return the smile, although it seemed sad and apologetic more than anything, before grimacing and doubling over in pain as Black Thorn regained control. But I was ready. By the time he came back as Black Thorn, I was in my suit. I grabbed the vine and sent a flame up it as if it were a detonating cord on a stick of dynamite. He screamed in pain as he watched it turn into ash. Just before it got to his back, he slammed himself against the wall and a few other objects until he’d managed to beat out the fire. I couldn’t help but burst into laughter at the sight of him screaming and running into things, and I caught a hint of Mason in his eyes while he did this. I

still couldn't stop laughing, and Ace joined me. That's when I noticed that Ace was standing next to me. Black Thorn seemed to notice this as well.

"Ace! Get out of here!" I yelled, pushing him out of the way just as a vine brushed his shin. He yelled in pain and stumbled to the ground, blackness slowly beginning to climb up his leg. The blood drained from his skin, and it became shiny with sweat like he had a pretty decent fever. I helplessly watched him close his eyes in pain, trying to breathe. I was so lost in watching him suffer, I didn't realize how close another vine was.

The world upended itself and cold pain climbed up my leg. A vine had wrapped around my ankle. The fire instantly started attacking it ruthlessly, trying to keep some of the pain at bay. Black Thorn brought me dangling up to his face, staring into my eyes with a grin curled on his lips.

I glared at him. "Don't you know it's rude to manhandle a lady?" I asked, sweat dripping down my brow from the summer heat. "Some would even call it—"

I flew through the air when he flicked his vine and smacked against the opposite wall. The void swallowed me for a few seconds before the fire roared and woke me up. Black Thorn approached me with a triumphant air in his step. His mouth was moving, but all I heard was a ringing in my ears. My gaze trailed towards Ace, who wasn't moving much besides tossing his head back and forth in a feverish sleep. I looked back at Black Thorn as he raised one of his vines to issue the killing strike. I sighed, then winced. My ribs hurt. And my head . . .

My instincts took over and I just barely inched away before the first vine hit me, hitting the wall instead. My arms shook as I pushed myself up. My legs nearly collapsed when I did. Black Thorn aimed a few more vines at me in the process but my stumbling saved my life. Maybe being a little clumsy wasn't always such a bad thing? I stood up straight, stepped towards Black Thorn, and shot him with a ray of fire, putting the full force of my anger into it, while also using the force to numb the moaning of my battered body. It threw him across the hallway and into the wall, causing it to crumble. I

limped towards Ace, keeping Black Thorn in my sight. But I had to help Ace, so I raised a wall of fire around Black Thorn and looked away. Suddenly, my legs tensed and I rolled out of the way as a scorched vine pierced the floor where I'd just been kneeling, missing Ace by a few inches.

“Alright, that's enough!” I yelled, rushing at Black Thorn.

He seemed pleased as I unleashed my fury with a few searing tears running down my face. I gritted my teeth and glared at him, running at him and tackling him. We broke through another section of wall and somersaulted a few times before wrestling each other on the ground. He tried to pin me and strike me with his vines. I kicked him square in the chest, using the fire as leverage to get him a few feet away so I could stand up before kicking his feet from under him. I unsheathed one of my daggers, gripping it like a murderer about to strike. I jumped on him, dagger coming down towards his chest. His vines blasted me back, and somehow, I landed on my feet, skidding a little on the slippery tile floor of the classroom we'd just sprayed with rubble. I ran at him again and jumped at him with a vicious snarl, the fire egging me on. This time, Ace wasn't going to be able to stop me. I felt a weird change in the fire, like it was thinking of something . . . dangerous. I blasted Thorn to the wall and surrounded both of us in a straight up wall of flames. The feeling of the ravenous heat pressed into my skin, encasing me and filling me with a demonic pleasure as pictures of Black Thorn burning filled my mind, the edges of the images darkened and cooled, like a burned-out coal. I slammed my fist into one of his arms and let the flames lick it while I held the dagger point against his chest. He smiled.

“Go ahead. Kill me.”

Gladly. I pulled back the knife for the final strike when he leaned forward and whispered into my ear,

“But you'll be snuffing out Mason as well.”

The knife hovered in the air, my hand gripping it like a lifeline. I stared at him. My hand began to shake. No matter how much I didn't want to admit it, he was right. I glanced over at Ace, who I could barely see through the hole in the wall and some gaps in the

flames. He was conscious and looking at me through hazy eyes. He managed to scrunch his eyebrows together in worry and shake his head slightly before passing out. The blackness was up to his thigh now. I looked back at Black Thorn and saw a slight glimmer of Mason. The fire egged me on, snapping at me to just do it already, but I couldn't move my arm. I squeezed my eyes shut and my hand snapped open, dropping the knife and with it the flames. I spun aside as my instincts caught another vine shooting towards me. My eyes were still closed when I just straight up blow-torched him, putting a wall up between us, and ran towards Ace, finally opening my eyes. When I got to him his breaths came out in shudders. I closed my eyes briefly while the tears poured down my face. Then I forced my eyes open, picked up Ace, and ran out the nearest exit. I had no idea how to heal him. If I was going to figure it out, though, then I was going to need some space that wasn't being reduced to rubble or ash.

I found a building nearby that was completely empty, but I didn't know for how long, so I needed to figure this out fast. I laid him down on the ground and knelt beside him. The black was now above his waist and spreading, his chest was having a hard time rising and falling. How was I supposed to heal him? I would bring him to the hospital if it was a normal wound. I looked down at my own leg. It was clear of the black poison—the fire had won out. Was it possible that I could somehow do that on someone else? I'd never tried it before. I could save him or set him on fire. But he was running out of time, and if there was even the smallest chance I could heal him at all, I'd kick myself for the rest of my life if I didn't try. I'd blame myself either way, even if he did survive this. I took a deep breath and put my hand on his leg. It was ice cold. I had to do this before it reached his heart. I closed my eyes and tried to relax, letting the fire flow through my arm. I felt my hand warm up like it was about to burst into flames. No! I growled mentally. The fire instantly stopped and seemed to hover in my hand for a second. I put more pressure on his leg with my hand, trying to coax the fire to do what I wanted. Hesitantly, like a parent telling a child it was okay to eat the last cookie after getting in trouble, the fire flowed

into his leg and the black retracted slowly back down his leg. As it retracted, color returned to his skin and his breathing became deeper and steadier. Excited, I put both hands on his leg to speed it up. I was just glad I'd kept the fire from burning him. Then another horrifying idea came up. What if the fire, while healing him, fried him on the inside? Tears blurred the world and cascaded down my face. I instantly slowed it down. I'd rather be safe than sorry. After what felt like forever, he finally opened his eyes and wiped the sweat off of his forehead with his sleeve. I smiled and sighed in relief, barely able to keep a grin off my face as I held his hand. He sat up, looking a little disoriented. I hadn't killed him! Only almost!

"What happened?" he asked. I burned the tears away and swallowed the rest of them. He'd need me to be strong for what I was about to tell him, no matter how much I wanted to burst back into tears and let him hold me for the rest of eternity.

"You . . ." My voice left me. I looked away for a few seconds and cleared my throat, blinking back tears. He studied me in worry.

"You nearly . . ." I had to do it again. I took a deep breath.

"You almost died." The last word barely got out before I got choked up again.

His eyes widened. I expected him to freak out, ask me how I saved him, but the first thing he said was, "Are you okay?"

I realized a few tears had managed to seep through. I nodded and wiped them away quickly.

"How did you heal me?" he asked.

I sighed. "No idea. I just kinda . . . tried to do the same thing the fire does when it heals me, but on you? It's hard to explain." I shrugged.

He nodded and tried to stand up. I rushed to my feet and helped him, putting an arm under his shoulders to steady him.

Ace rubbed his temple. "Did a horse trample on me or something?" he remarked. I managed a weak laugh.

"Come on, let's get you to school. We need to pretend to be knocked out, otherwise they'll be wondering."

We made our way back to the partially ruined school. I wished we were headed for a hospital, but I needed to keep my identity

safe. Luckily, Ace understood that and let me carefully lay him down on the ground before doing the same thing to myself a few yards away. Not long afterwards, they found us and carried our limp, “unconscious” bodies to some ambulances that had arrived for any injured students. The entire time I had to force myself to stop cringing in order to be able to sell the act successfully. The ambulance ride seemed to take an eternity. Partway through the ride, I pretended to wake up, and pretended to be scared to death. What? I needed to sell the act. Go big or go home! I was put into a hospital room and they helped me onto the bed. That’s when the fire pulled away and the void revealed how my body actually felt. My ribs hurt and my skull felt like it was being stabbed with knives. My hands, arms, and face stung with cuts and bruises. An overwhelming exhaustion engulfed me like a soft, warm blanket, and I found myself dozing off in the hospital bed. I felt a jerk and found the nurse shaking me with an intensity in her eyes.

“Don’t fall asleep,” she instructed clearly, fidgeting with some instruments and getting out some bandages and a needle and thread, then pulling out some medicine.

“Why?” I asked. My voice was strangely tired and wispy, like I didn’t have enough air to ask the question and was too tired to get more breath support. She stared at me in worry.

“You hit your head really hard. Your ribs are broken, and you have very little electrical activity. Normally when something knocks you out, you would just break some bones and have a concussion, at the most brain damage or susceptibility to it. But, something’s off here,” she explained. I gave her a blank look. That hadn’t answered my question. She took out a pale, yellow pill, poured some water, and made me swallow it down.

“If you need more Ritalin because you feel yourself falling asleep, tell me,” she instructed.

“Why can’t I sleep?”

The nurse took a breath. “With the nature of your injuries and whatever else is going on, you might not wake up.”

It took a couple seconds for me to understand what she just said.

“So . . . I’ll die if I fall asleep?” I asked.

“It’s possible. I’d rather not risk it. I’ll be right back. Don’t. Move.”

I watched her walk out. As soon as I couldn’t hear her footsteps, I slid out of bed, opened the door, and walked down the hall. I found Ace’s room quickly and saw that his nurse was still with him, although she seemed less worried about him than mine was with me. He still had a bit of a feverish look, but that was the only physical thing I could see that was wrong besides a few cuts and bruises from the rubble. I smiled, happy he was safe, and quietly made my way back to my room. I slipped in bed just as the nurse got back. She nodded, satisfied that I “hadn’t moved” and set a plate of apples, crackers, cheese, and some chicken on my lap.

“Eat. It’ll help you heal faster,” she instructed.

I put some crackers and cheese in my mouth, chewing slowly to savor the flavor. The cheese wasn’t amazing, but my stomach didn’t care. My favorite part was definitely the flavorful chicken, although it was a bit dry. Once I finished the plate, I handed it back to her.

“Thanks. Do you have any potato chips?” I asked. I was ravenous. Whenever I got this hungry, I always craved the most random things. I would even try combining food together, mostly to see the others’ reactions. I loved the disgusted or awed looks on their faces whenever I tried anything out of the ordinary. The nurse nodded and went to get some. I sat there bored out of my mind. Normally, I’d distract myself with my phone, but I didn’t exactly know where it was—let alone if it was still in one piece after the stunt I’d pulled. That meant I couldn’t call my mom to tell her I was okay, or text anyone, or play video games to try and chase away the boredom. What was taking the nurse so long? All she had to do was go to the cafeteria or a vending machine. Or did they not have potato chips in hospitals? I wouldn’t know, I’d never really paid attention or asked for food in a hospital before. I wondered if they had chocolate milk or pickles? Hmm . . . what would a pickle dipped in milk taste like? I pictured my mom giving me a disgusted look at that idea. Sometimes I did do that out of curiosity, but I was addicted to the rush I got when I saw the look on peoples’ faces, whether they approved or not. But seriously, don’t knock it ‘til

you've tried it! I was just waiting for the day I was in some foreign place, and someone shoved a meal with worms or crickets or scorpions or whatever in front of me and used that line on me. To avoid hypocrisy, I'd have to try it. The thought made me shiver.

CHAPTER - 17

FIRST DECISION

“Some people are here for you,” the nurse said the next day.

I’d spent the whole night in the hospital room staying awake. The nurses and doctors had insisted. Apparently, I was that close to dying. I felt alright, though, but everyone here would rather be safe than sorry. They repeated that line a lot. The nurse stepped aside and let in Ada, Zach, my mom, and . . . Dad. Of course, he would come to visit me. Mom and Ada sat on opposite sides of the bed next to me, while Zach took the closest chair to me, watching me intently. Dad took the farthest chair and made himself comfortable, only looking at me as if to make sure I was at least awake, before opening a laptop I hadn’t noticed and pouring all of his attention into it. Probably work stuff.

“How are you feeling, Birdy?” Mom asked gently.

I shrugged.

I had no idea. Feeling really uncomfortable just being the same room as my dad, I just wanted to get out of bed and . . . *Do what?* a voice in my head asked. *No matter where you go right now, there will always be people who hate you. You did this to yourself, trying to be what you’re not. Who said you could be a hero? You should’ve listened to yourself.*

The voice had a point. I didn’t want to go home—Dad didn’t care if I was alive or dead. I couldn’t go over to Ace’s house, because he wasn’t there and I’d have to leave at some point. I couldn’t go to school, since they’d likely closed it for the next while to try and

salvage what they could and rebuild. Either way I couldn't go there. I was too tired to pretend anything, and most of the adults there hated me and fellow students feared me for my craziness—Crazy Connelly—or they adored me for the fake I showed them five days a week. I had nowhere to go. Neither of my parents would let me stay at any of my relatives' houses, and I didn't want to for several reasons anyway. Well, I did have one place I wouldn't mind going. But I hadn't been there really since around the time this all had started. I missed the fire. Where was it? Had I burned it out with my anger? Had it left because of my malicious intentions? Had it . . . changed? I had felt something different towards the end of the fight, but now I couldn't feel anything. Just an empty, cold void where the warm, powerful burning used to be. Was I no longer worthy to have it? Had it gone back to the phoenix? I didn't know.

All I knew is that I had no way of chasing the darkness away now. I felt it surround me like a dark, living, writhing cloud. I could see the red eyes and feel the cold claws scraping across my heart, and I watched and listened as its incessant whispers brushed through my mind, tearing up my reality and distorting the sunny memories I'd managed to make with the fire. The familiar emptiness filled my whole being. What was I going to do? I heard something clatter and turned to find the nurse had put down a knife she'd been using. She glanced up at my family.

"Brinley needs some rest. You all can come back tomorrow," the nurse said, ushering them all out.

It then occurred to me that I'd never answered mom's question. She stared at me in intense worry as she was gently forced out by Ada. I stared at the wall. The nurse came back for a minute to finish up whatever she'd been doing. I watched her put the knife away in the bottom-most, right drawer in a filing cabinet she had a yard away from my bed. Then she left for what felt like forever, finally returning with a plate of food and some medicine.

I ate and took the medicine, although I felt like a hollow shell. I hadn't slept in almost forty-eight hours, because I was still too weak. I wondered how long it would be before I could sleep again. I'd heard them saying they had to get me better before day three, since

supposedly people started to doze off without meaning to despite taking medicine to prevent it. I wondered if the next time I dozed off, it would all be over. Half of me longed to be done. The other half craved adventure of living—it was the half that the fire had permanently marked, the half that always said with a nagging voice, “come on! You can’t give up! Look how far you’ve come!” I loved and despised that half. That half was the reason I wasn’t peacefully resting, done with all of my problems for good. That half was the reason I’d made it this far at all. Phoenix had already made an impact on people, despite how short of a time it had been since she first appeared. Brinley could never have done such amazing things. If I couldn’t die . . . then couldn’t I at least merge into Phoenix? Just be her for the rest of my life? Everyone loved her. Everyone trusted her. Everyone knew her goodness. She was all the best parts of me put together.

Brinley was every single mistake I ever made, every problem and pain I ever had. The only thing Brinley had ever done right was . . . was find Ace. And keep him. Ace was the only good thing I could see anymore. I longed for him more than I longed for the comforting heat of the loving fire, the fire that gave me a second chance when it was almost my time to go. That second chance seemed to be gone now. I swallowed the medicine, completely oblivious to the nurse talking to me and asking me things. She was just background noise at this point. I could nearly hear the whispers in my head, like they were all around me. Forever caging me like a bird. Birdie. Brinley. Birdie was mom’s nickname for me. Birdies got caged. Was I losing it? Probably. I’d already lost it, just after I’d managed to regain some of it back. All the good I had. All the light I’d found. I’d been making things better. Now my dad was back and in even more control than before. Phoenix was dead at the moment. Brinley was in chains. The bird was caged once again. At least the bird got to stretch its wings for a little bit. And now the bird would cry for all eternity in the darkness as the world shunned it for every little flaw, every little mistake, until the bird only wanted to be finally laid down and put to rest.

Could the bird ever fly again, now that its wings were broken and it was trapped in a cage? If it got the chance to, would it take it again? Would it jump at the chance or hesitate? Would it sing again or just stay silent? I'd been staring at the wall for so long without thinking, lost in my thoughts and the image of the bird that the solid color in the darkness began to play tricks on me. It showed me pictures playing from my own imagination. Monsters, shadows, claws, screaming people, eyes. Red eyes flashed through my mind. Then again. And again. When had the nurse left? I dragged my gaze over to the digital clock on the filing cabinet. Since when was it two in the morning? Hadn't it just been seven? Now even time hated me. My eyes itched for sleep but would not close. I wanted to yawn but I couldn't muster anything. I shifted positions and vaguely heard something clatter to the floor, as if from a distance. I didn't look down. I didn't care. Why had the fire left? It had been with me the day before. Well, a couple days ago. It had just fizzled out, like it had decided it was done fighting for me and left me to fend for myself. Before I knew it, the rising sun was streaming in through the window and the nurse burst in, full of energy and with a happy smile.

"Good morning! How was your night?" she asked.

I didn't answer. I noticed she had hesitated after the "good morning," stopping herself from asking how I'd slept, which was sensible of her, considering I couldn't sleep. She placed a plate of breakfast on my lap, but I stared at the wall. I'd lost my appetite sometime during the night. The nurse sighed and moved the food on top of the filing cabinet and left the room. I heard her conversation with the doctor. She didn't seem to realize the door was just barely open, and I had really good hearing despite having blared music into my ears through my earbuds for the last couple years when things got hard.

"She's not eating anything, and she won't stop staring at the wall."

"Is the medication working?" the doctor asked.

"Yes. But . . . something's off."

"Have you looked at her medical records?"

The nurse sighed. “Yes. But according to her family, she’s been doing much better recently.”

I heard someone tapping their foot, like they were trying to think.

“Do you think it’s possible the medicine’s brought back the depression?” The nurse asked.

I forced my head to move. My neck ached from being in the same position for hours. The doctor nodded.

“It’s possible. Or maybe the situation shocked her enough to undo some connections in her brain.”

The doctor gazed at me through the window, thoughtfully chewing on his lip.

“There’s too much we don’t know about,” he finally decided. He took a step towards the door, but the nurse put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

“She isn’t ready to talk about it. She won’t even speak at all,” she whispered, glancing at me.

My head automatically moved itself back to staring at the wall without my permission. I watched all sorts of images dance on the walls, a kaleidoscope of invisible shapes. Sometimes, if I concentrated hard enough with whatever bit of sanity I had left, I could almost hear the sounds the shapes made.

I knew this wasn’t healthy for me, but I didn’t care. I was tired. So tired. I wanted to go on an adventure. One that would take me far from this place, into some unknown area no one ever came back from. I wanted to see if Ace’s family was right, or if the younger version of my dad was just telling me made up stories about where we go when our time here is over. The nurse came in a few times, and finally the light went and another day had passed.

I wonder if any of my friends at school missed me. I wonder if anyone had noticed I was gone, or said anything. I wondered if Gracey had taken my spot over entirely, even after I’d saved her—as Phoenix, of course. No one would listen to Brinley, but everyone would listen to Phoenix. Phoenix was special. Brinley was just the crazy girl trying to be cool, but instead makes a mess and leaves it for someone else to try and clean up. The red eyes flashed again,

once, twice, three times. Then they came again, but this time, they seemed to stare right at me. I felt the last bit of light being sucked away and the only thing on my mind was the knife. The knife I'd watched the nurse put away. I stumbled out of bed, shuffled over to the drawer, and ripped it open, grasping the knife. It was sharp enough to make a decent cut, and the blade was okay. I could make this work. The pain would be worth it if it could send me somewhere else. As I leveled the blade to my heart and took a deep breath, I caught a glow from underneath something in the drawer.

Brow furrowed, I reached in and moved the cloth that had been covering the glowing thing. I took in a sharp breath when I saw it. The fire orb. The one I'd found at the phoenix statue, seemingly forever ago. How had it gotten to the hospital? The hospital was nowhere near where the phoenix statue was. Someone must've brought it in. But when? How? Why? And who? No one knew where the phoenix statue was beside me, and wouldn't I have noticed, even slightly, if anyone had come in? I mean, yes, I'd been very deep in my head, but even then, I'd vaguely been able to tell when people were in the room and trying to interact with me. And why had they brought it? No one cared about me besides Ace, and he didn't know where it was. Everyone else just seemed to pity me or take gain from what had happened. That's what you got when you tried to be the good guy for once. People would always hurt you if you let yourself be hurt. A spark of anger pricked my heart, sluggishly worming in through the cold numb pain. It told me to hurt someone else with the knife before I could do anything to myself. What if I did that? Nothing stopped me. What if I harmed other people before they could harm me? Then turning on myself would ensure they'd never be able to hurt me again. Simple. Revenge before rest. The glow dragged my eyes down and the swirling reds and oranges of the orb mesmerized me, just like the fire in the fireplace had always mesmerized me as a kid. Fire always seemed to dance around. I felt the darkness back off a little at the warmth of the fire orb. My arm slowly took the knife away from my heart inch by inch, like something was doing it for me. And

suddenly, a warmth washed over me, unlike any warmth I've ever felt before.

Choose wisely, the phoenix whispered in my mind.

Death or life? Easy or hard? Quit or try? I could go on and on. The part of me the fire had affected the most urged me to take it. It wanted me to make a difference. But was I ready? And was I worthy?

Everyone makes mistakes, the phoenix whispered empathetically. *What matters is the change of heart. The present.*

Suddenly, my mind lit up and the phoenix showed me what it had meant. It had chosen me, now it wanted to see what I would choose. It was my turn to do something. Would I finish what I'd started, or leave it where it was? It was up to me now. My school was in chaos, my family was being torn apart, Ace was hurt, and my community didn't like me, but that didn't mean I had to give up. This was proof that I still had the fire, and Ace. And Ada, and my mom, and Zach, and Sims, and Ace's foster parents. I still had to save Mason, and show Dad I wasn't just some disappointment or showcase to make him look better. I am Brinley Connely, the toughest girl in school, and I am Phoenix, the one that always gets back up. I felt a burning desire deep within, something that defrosted some of the ice and thawed out the love and empathy I'd managed to regain. I could do so much still with Phoenix. Phoenix was making me better, and I still had many things left to learn. Someday it would all be okay, but in the meantime, I had to make do with what I had. I let the knife clatter to the floor and I picked up the orb, staring into its depths. I smiled.

"It's time for the rise of Phoenix," I whispered.

The orb dissolved like it had the first time, burning the tattoo back into my shoulder (I hadn't noticed it was missing), and I felt the fire settle into my heart. To stay this time.

"I missed you, Phoenix," I whispered, closing my eyes in relief.

I could almost feel it smiling, and I somehow knew it had missed me too. Tears of relief fell down my cheeks as Phoenix pushed back the darkness. I lifted my hand and ignited a fire in it easily. I could feel the rush of the fire as it healed my head and my body, healing

something strange I can't put into words. Probably it was what would've killed me if I'd fallen asleep. And then I felt it burn away the medicine. My eyelids grew heavy as the fire in my hand blurred from my view. I extinguished the flame and collapsed onto my bed, fading into the warm, welcoming embrace of sleep while the fire fixed what had been broken in its absence.

CHAPTER - 18

ORIGINS

“Brinley!”

I didn’t move. I didn’t want to wake up from this blissful peace that I’d found after nearly three days straight of torment.

“Brinley?”

The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I snuggled more into my pillow and sighed happily.

“Brinley!” another voice yelled.

That voice I knew. My eyes snapped open. Instead of my normal vision, all I saw were heat signatures in the room. I blinked once and my normal vision was back. I sat up in bed quickly and stared at my dad. The fire fueled me like never before and I wasn’t going to waste it.

“What? What do you want?” I snapped.

His eyes widened in surprise before hardening in anger. “Don’t speak to me like that!” he growled.

I raised an eyebrow in a challenge. Anger bubbled viciously in my stomach while the fire held me together. I was going to let him see it.

“Why? Because you’re my dad?” I spat. “Well, you sure don’t act like it!” I was on a roll. “If you want me to show some respect, I better get some back,” I finished in a voice that was deadly calm.

For a second he looked . . . scared. He was scared of me. A cruel smile curled on my lips at the new power I had. I knew he’d bounce

back with the same ferocity I had, but I didn't care. I wanted a win, and I wanted it now. I swung my legs out of bed and walked out of the hospital room. I still hurt a little, but I felt much better. I heard hurried footsteps and found Mom running towards me with my shoes and . . . my phone! She smiled as she gave them to me.

"They found your phone on the bus yesterday. It still works, but it's almost dead. And you may need your shoes." Her smile was the happiest I'd seen it in years. I hadn't expected that.

I brushed back a tear at the sight of that smile and accepted the items. I smiled back to thank her, quickly pulled my shoes on, and practically ran out of the hospital. I didn't want to spend another minute in there than I had to. Nurses and other people who knew what I was doing there yelled at me to either slow down or come back, but I just sped up until I was sprinting. I burst through the hospital doors. I waited for mom to catch up before she showed me to the car. The rest of the family eventually caught up. Dad frowned when he saw I'd taken the front seat, forcing him to sit in the back. It took half an hour to get home because of traffic, but when we got there, I went straight up to my room so I could avoid a lecture from my dad, and locked myself in. I felt the fire coursing through my veins, thawing ice the darkness had left. It gave me a feeling of power I couldn't deny, and there was no way in heck I wasn't going to use it. I grabbed a portable phone charger and was about to flame away when I heard a bang on my door.

"Brinley Emma Connely, open the door!" Dad yelled.

I stalked towards my bathroom, got out my hair straightener, plugged it in the outlet next to the door, and placed it on the doorknob before flicking a little flame at it. The hair straightener would keep the knob hot while I was away, but I needed protection now. I blinked, activating the heat vision, and watched the flame travel through the doorknob and into my father's hand. He yelped, actually jumping away from the door, and cradled his hand. I could feel the flame on his skin. In a burst of anger, I kept it burning for a few extra seconds just to hear his whimpers. I knew it was wrong, but he deserved it. Besides I had things I needed to do and he'd try to stop me any way he could. This way he'd be more concerned

about his hand long enough that I could get out. I blinked to normal vision and walked to the center of the room. I closed my eyes and flamed to my school, feeling the fires that were still going. My only guess is that the phoenix kept those going for me so I'd be able to make it back to the scene. I wanted to see if I could find any clues as to what triggered Mason. Then I'd go to his house for the first time in a long time and do some snooping.

I kept the images of the fire burning vividly in my head until I arose from them. The flames licking my pants felt good. I surveyed the scene and found it hadn't really been touched. I heard voices and saw people sifting through some of the rubble. I rolled my eyes and picked my way through the chunks of wall and glass shards. One of the people investigating the scene was getting too close to the area I was looking in. I gritted my teeth and forced my arms out to my sides, horizontal to where the broken ceiling was hanging somehow intact, my palms facing where I wanted it blocked off. There was a rush of fire, and suddenly, all the openings to the area were blocked off. I heard a yelp as the worker jumped back from the wall of flame. I smiled in satisfaction. That was better. I didn't want to hurt the worker with the flame, but I also didn't need them running into me and asking too many questions or finding anything important before I did. I also didn't want to be disturbed. Even with how angry I was, I can still guarantee I was more merciful towards Black Thorn and Mason than the police or anyone else would be, despite how many times he tried to hurt or kill myself and people in my life, not to mention involving innocent civilians and damaging city and private property. Who knew what else he could do? The police wanted to get rid of Black Thorn and lock up Mason—or, as they said, “whoever is responsible for this dangerous being.” Whereas I just wanted to kill Thorn and save Mason.

As I walked through the area, flashes of memory from the fight ran through my head. Ace lying on the ground, almost dead. Black Thorn throwing me against the wall. The murderous fury that erupted and seemed to lace through my entire body. And the look Ace had given me right before he passed out, telling me not to do

what I so desperately wanted. I shook my head to try and rid myself from the memories.

My hands shook slightly as I made my way through the hallway and into one of the classrooms in the area. I was planning on starting where the fight began and making my way back down his path until I found where he'd come from. Where Thorn had been. Maybe I'd find some clues in the starting place as to what triggered it. If I couldn't, either way I'd take my investigation over to his house. The door to the room I was entering was just barely holding on by its hinges. Most of the door was scattered on the floor, hanging by a thread, or just fractured with some spidery cracks cutting through the material. It was a mess.

"Geez, Thorn, couldn't you have made a less destructive entrance?" I murmured, carefully avoiding the sharp bits of door.

Although, if he'd wanted a dramatic entrance this was definitely the way to do it. The next time I had a fight with him, I'd ask him, because it was annoying having to be paranoid of being stabbed in the foot whenever you stepped. I just got better, so I didn't have any desire to go straight back to the hospital. I stared at the chaos sprawled in front of me.

"You really had a temper tantrum, didn't you Thorn?"

I took a sharp breath at the sight in front of me. Chairs were flung everywhere, tables were broken in half, the teacher's desk was in splinters, papers and books were torn and scattered. It was a mess.

"Is that blood?" I asked in disbelief to no one in particular.

There was a splatter of some sort of red on the whiteboard. I spotted a tipped over, open bottle of Gatorade on one of the nearby desks, but somehow I doubted it was that. I stepped around the broken teacher's desk to find the source of the blood. There was a lifeless body lying sideways on the ground with a wound in her back, presumably from where one of Thorn's vines had found her. It wasn't the worst sight I'd ever seen, but I still shivered. Thorn hadn't killed anyone before. So why now? Why had he killed someone? And why Mrs. Comley? Had she been protecting someone, or had she accidentally gotten in the way? Or was it just

because he'd been angry? I wished I knew. I sighed and made my way around the room before going just outside to check the label. Geography. Mason did have that class, but not with the teacher assigned to this room. So, I would guess that the death was because Mrs. Comley got in the way, was accidentally hit when Thorn got especially angry, or was shielding someone else, and not because Thorn had a personal vendetta against her. Not knowing what to do, I stood there in silence and said a brief apology to Mrs. Comley. I also moved around some rubble so that she would be found more easily. Then, I made my rounds around the area to check for any other bodies before following the trail of destruction. I approached one of my flame walls. Just before I walked through, I heard noises.

"This flame wall just appeared out of nowhere when I got near the area—"

"It's Phoenix, you idiot! She's the only one who could put a flame wall up!"

It seemed it was time to turn into Phoenix for a bit. If these people expected Phoenix but found a teenage girl . . . there would be a lot of questions. I closed my eyes and called my suit on. To be completely honest, I was a little worried it wouldn't come since I'd lost the power. After a delay, I was starting to get really anxious. Did I have to find a new suit? Then I felt the familiar warm flames rush over my body and I was no longer Brinley. I grinned and looked at the suit, fingering the daggers. I forgot how much I loved this suit. Without another second of hesitation, I walked through the wall of flame and the workers jumped at least a foot.

"See? I told you!" One of them yelled at the other.

I rolled my eyes. "Please excuse me, I'm just doing a little investigation. I'll be out of here soon." I explained briefly, moving around the two men. "I have unfortunately found a casualty. She is in that classroom." I pointed in the direction of the classroom. They both nodded, whispering to each other about how I'd talked to them, before going down the direction that I pointed.

As Phoenix, I followed the trail of destruction through about half the school before I found the place it originally started. I frowned. This was where his locker was, if I remembered correctly.

At least, this was where his original locker was. I heard he'd had it changed back after I rejected him. But why did it start here? I had a feeling I should find his locker, so I began opening each of them. I had to melt the locks off in order to open them. Finally, I found his original locker. His favorite sports jacket hung from one of the pegs and some of his books—covered in doodles and partially ripped—were haphazardly thrown on the shelf with some of the pages bent under other books and chewed pencils strewn across the bottom of the space. I wrinkled my nose. I forgot how messy Mason was. He hated school, but he was usually prepared for his classes. And why would he be triggered here of all places? He must have been triggered by either a person in the area or an item in his locker.

I pushed aside a few books, but I couldn't find anything. Finally, when I took out his papers and sweaters so I could organize them—I was getting sick of staring at the mess—a dark ball drew my gaze. Carefully I pulled it out. It was the same size as the fire and water orbs from the phoenix, which were basically as big as magical bowling balls. Whatever was inside the orb was a dark, almost glittery green. It looked like a mix between toxic waste and sludge, and it clearly didn't have all of its contents.

Careful! phoenix whispered urgently as the stuff started glowing.

I dropped it, noticing how it was starting to dissolve like how the fire orb had. It retracted once it sat alone on the ground and I was a few feet away. I unsheathed a dagger and approached it, ready to spring away and attack at the first sign of it moving. It crept me out how it hardly rolled and didn't make much noise when it had hit the ground.

“So, this is what you were triggered by . . .,” I whispered.

Could this be where Black Thorn came from? It reminded me far too much of the fire orb in the way it acted, just sneakier and colder. Where had Mason found it? Or had he just stumbled on it? If I could—No, Brinley. Okay . . . when I freed him, I'd ask him. Assuming I still remembered to ask. Who knew what would happen, honestly. Or maybe I'll figure it out before I do it. For now, I needed a safe place to hide the orb or find something good to carry it in. I wanted to bring it home with me in some sort of bag,

but first of all, I had no idea how that would work out—whether it could go through cloth or not. And second, no matter how messed up things were with them, I didn't want to put my family in even more danger than they were already in. It's my duty to protect not endanger or possibly hurt or kill. Were there even any bags around? Where would I even hide it anyway?

The only obvious option was back in his locker, but that would only allow Black Thorn more access to it. If I could find a way to carry it somewhere safe, he'd be stalled for a little while. Yes, he could always come after Phoenix or Brinley when he realizes it's gone and who took it, but both of them can handle themselves. Brinley is smart and tough, while Phoenix always gets back up and has the fire. Well, technically both have the fire, but you get what I mean. I went back into Mason's locker and ended up just taking out one of the jackets in there. I didn't take his favorite one. I took a different one, since I figured he'd be pissed if it was gone, and that would only make things worse.

I carefully wrapped the orb inside the cloth of Mason's jacket and tucked it under my arm like a football player. Then I bolted towards the nearest exit. I would flame to Mason's house, but I wasn't sure if orbs could come with me, and I really wasn't in the mood to risk it. So that left either running, stealing a car, or getting a taxi. I stopped beside a dumpster next to one of the entrances to the school cafeteria and quickly changed back into Brinley before walking casually into the parking lot. Getting a car would be faster. I just had to make sure it belonged to someone who knew me, that way the aftermath would be easier to deal with. Besides, it was only getting me to Mason's house. If I was lucky it wouldn't end up in smithereens. Of course, knowing my luck recently, I wouldn't have been surprised if it had decided to try and blow up while I was driving it. I'd been through a lot in the past few months.

I managed to locate Mason's car. It was still sitting in the parking lot from the last time he'd driven it, a few months before. Why hadn't anyone spoken up about it? Well, I was about to return it home anyway. I figured Mason wouldn't mind under normal circumstances. Besides, I had much more pressing things to do than

to worry about how mad people would be if I took someone's car. I tried the handle. It opened pretty easily. Why the heck had he left it unlocked? Someone could've stolen it, and then I wouldn't be able to use it! Besides, I wanted to pick the lock. There was a specific thing you had to do to get the lock open since it was a little broken, and I'd always enjoyed doing it. It made me feel cool. I found the keys buried under some of his junk—at least he hadn't left them in the ignition—I started the car and pulled out of the school parking lot.



The door opened and Mason's mother answered, looking like she hadn't slept in a few days. Knowing her, she probably hadn't. Her weary face grew into a happy smile.

"Brin! It's been too long!" she welcomed me inside. It really had been too long. I made my way to the kitchen out of habit with a small smile displayed on my lips.

"How are you?" Ms. MacDonald asked.

I pursed my lips while I thought for a moment.

"Very busy," I replied semi-confidently. It was technically true, just vague. "How've you been?" I asked.

She smiled wearily. "Oh, you know, busy with work," she replied just as vaguely.

I wondered if anyone in their family had bothered to check up on her or Mason recently. I nodded. Did being a superhero count as a job? If it did, I finally understood the stresses. Ms. MacDonald cleared her throat.

"Sorry, Mason isn't here. I actually don't know where he is," she apologized, frowning her brow in slight concern. I nodded.

"When was the last time you saw him?" I asked.

She pressed her lips in a thin line. "Three days ago, exactly."

That was the last time I'd fought Black Thorn. I furrowed my brow in "mock" concern.

“That’s weird. Does he disappear like this a lot?” I asked.

She nodded, and I could see the tears well up in her eyes.

“I’m probably doing something wrong. I just want Mason to be safe and happy. But when he disappears . . . I just don’t know what’s going on.”

Her voice sounded restrained as a few tears ran down her face. She choked on a sob and broke down right then and there. I got up and stood next to her, hugging her and rubbing her back.

“Hey, I’m sure he’s safe. He knows how to take care of himself. Remember the time his car broke down in the middle of nowhere a couple summers ago, and he found his way back home by himself?” I reassured her.

She nodded and squeezed me so tight I couldn’t breathe.

“Thank you for coming, Brinley. Mason hasn’t been the same since the last time you were here,” she whispered.

I nodded. I’m sure he wasn’t, but that wasn’t the point. His mom needed someone, and I was there. I let her cry on me for a little while, until finally she pulled away and wiped her tears on a napkin. She gave me an apologetic, watery smile.

“I’m sorry, it’s just been a lot. And you might have some snot on your shirt now.”

I shrugged. “It’s fine. Everyone needs a break at some point. And the shirt can be washed if it does,” I replied.

We let a minute of silence pass between us before she sighed.

“So, what brings you here?” Mrs. MacDonald asked.

I chewed on my lip, hating the lie I was about to tell her. It wasn’t my biggest lie I’ve ever told, but I still hated it. She was just one of those moms that could make you feel bad about something by just looking at you with tears in her eyes. She was gentle and hardworking, and Mason was lucky to have her, especially after his dad left when he was young. I knew I was being selfish and unfair, but I wished my mom was more like Mason’s. Ms. MacDonald is brave, kind, and compassionate. Mine was too scared to come up with a plan and leave my dad. Mine didn’t understand what being a teenager nowadays is like. Mine couldn’t even interpret her own emotions or go to therapy to get some help. My mom takes care of

us, yes, but that didn't take away the impression of helplessness and pettiness I get whenever I am around her—not to mention the sour smell of fear whenever Dad decided to come home or whenever Dad got upset. I shoved those thoughts out of my mind.

“Uhh, I just came here to get something I need for a project Mason and I are doing together,” I replied. She nodded, a small smile hovering on her lips.

“You know where to find that stuff. I'll leave you to it.”

She walked out of the room and closed the office door. Alright, now hopefully I had a little while before Mason got back. If he got back before I could leave, I could always flame back home or risk Ace's house. I'm sure Ace and Sims wouldn't mind a surprise visit from me. Was Ace even home yet? I hadn't talked to him since the fight, and I hadn't seen him since that first day in the hospital. I sighed and made my way up the narrow staircase and into Mason's room. If there were any more clues at all besides the orb, they'd be in his room. He almost never let people in there, and there were plenty of places he could hide something he didn't want other people finding. That realization made me wonder why the heck he didn't just hide the orb in his room instead of at school. I guess it was just easier to access at school, or maybe it was so he wouldn't have to come home to the creepy thing just laying around? I walked around his room trying to debate where to look first. If he ever found out I was snooping, he'd probably hate me for the rest of his life. I decided on his desk drawers first, and made my way around his room. I found a few journals, bits of trash, ripped paper, and forgotten homework. After a while, I checked under his bed to see if there was anything under there. I found a few socks and dust bunnies before I found something interesting. There was something lying flat against the floor in one of the most shaded parts under the bed.

I scooted towards the wall and reached my arm through the narrow space between the bed frame and the floor, just barely managing to pull out the thick notebook. I pushed myself off the floor and plopped down on his bed, opening the journal. The first

entry was from a few months before, around when Black Thorn started showing up.

February 3rd, 2032

Brinley asked to meet with me during school to talk. I really didn't want to, but I agreed. I missed her. Yes, in a platonic way. No, I'm not over her yet, but I don't want to be mad at her anymore. There's a part of me that's still hurt—it feels almost like she rejected me as a person. I know I'm not perfect, but I really thought we could make a good team. Apparently, she doesn't think so. I'm trying not to let it rule my life. But there's this . . . strange darkness I can feel, different from any I've experienced before. It's almost alive. It's like it's another being completely, instead of being a part of me I love and hate. I like the power it gives me, but it seems to come at a price.

There's been a few times where I've been really angry and in pain—thinking about Brinley again—and random blackness covers my vision, like I've fainted, but I can tell I'm still awake. When the blackness goes, I'm in a completely different place. The place is usually destroyed. What's going on? Do I sleep destroy??? Or do I have like a brain tumor or something? Or is it worse than that? Anyway, Brinley asked me about this new villain that's showed up. He calls himself "Black Thorn." Pretty pathetic name if you ask me. I think "Midnight Rose" or "Poison Death" or something would be better, depending on whether he's a dude or actually a girl. Midnight Rose would be a sick name for a superhero or a villain, though. She was wondering if I was Black Thorn. I was really offended when she asked, and I blew up at her. I'm still really pissed. Does she really think so little of me? I know I'm crazy and all, but I'm not that bonkers!

But what about the weird blackouts? I don't think I am, but that little bit of doubt makes me pause and think. What if I am? I told her I'd tell her if I was, but what if it doesn't work like that? What if I am and can't tell her?

February 5th, 2032

I've been having more blackouts, and each time I wake up in a different place, though thankfully, it's not always destroyed. I wake up in a puddle of strange black stuff, so I'm guessing these blackouts aren't good. I'd say they're hangovers, but I've been sober for a few months now, so I don't think so. Should I go to the hospital? I'm not even sure if these "symptoms," or whatever they are, are anything I know about. I'm not sure. I'm starting to get really nervous, though. I want to tell Brinley, but what if it's nothing? If it is, I'd be worrying her about some sort of weird new health problem, and neither of us need that right now, especially not after what's been going on. If it is something—what if she reports me to the police? How can I explain actions I don't even remember doing, if it's even me? If it is me though, I'm in really hot water. And this time, I don't think it's really my fault. Although, I did find that weird orb thing I mentioned in earlier entries. I wonder how that student got it. I'm starting to wonder if it was the best idea to steal it out of their locker. And each time I blackout, the orb thing seems more empty of whatever its contents are. What the heck is going on???

I had to stop reading. Mason seemed really scared, which wasn't like him. It was hard to watch him struggle so much, especially knowing I could do something about it. I couldn't then, but I could now. One thing was nagging me—who had the orb before Mason?

Where had that person found it? Did they know what it was? What were they using it for, or going to use it for? Did I even know what it was? My best guess at that point was that the orb was like the fire and water orbs from the phoenix. So, did that mean it was from the phoenix? Could the phoenix give someone something that evil? Did that make the phoenix my enemy? I didn't want to think that. Not after the many times it saved my life or helped me. But then, where had it come from? There were too many questions circling my mind. I couldn't keep track of them all. I could only hope Mason had found some of the answers to the questions buzzing around my head since he seemed to have some of the same questions as me at the beginning. I wanted to read more. I wanted to see what else I could discover, but just as I flipped the page to read the next entry, I heard the door slam. I felt a cold in the room, like a dangerous presence had just entered the house. Mason. The fire nudged at me to leave. Should I take the journal with me? What if he looked for it and found it gone? He'd know someone was in the room and knew his secret. But I needed to read more of the journal. I chewed on my lip while I tried to decide. I heard him coming up the stairs. I had to leave!

I shoved the journal under the bed, in the general area it had been in, hoping he didn't notice that it had moved from its spot. He might, but he would probably not think too much about it. Hopefully. He was almost to the door. I pictured the fireplace at Ace's house, praying it was still burning and that I didn't give his mom a heart attack. The warmth swallowed me and I was on my way by the time Mason opened his door.



“Oh, Brinley! You're here! I thought you were still in the hospital!” Jane asked.

I shook my head. “I just got out today. I'm feeling much better,” I replied.

Jane smiled. “That’s great! Ace is supposed to get out soon as well. I’m just about to head over there to pick him up.” Jane picked up her purse and turned back to me.

“Would you like to come?” she asked.

I would have loved to, but the thought of the nurses and doctors seeing me again after I’d literally sprinted out of the place (and having been on the verge of death the night before) was not enticing. It was probably safer for everyone if I didn’t.

I shook my head. “I think I’ll just be a nice surprise for him to find me here,” I replied.

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Jane left, and I climbed the stairs to Ace and Sims’s room to find Sims sitting cross-legged on the floor with his computer on his lap. I smiled a little.

“Hey Sims,” I greeted him quietly.

He looked up, his ashen face suddenly beaming. “Brin! You’re okay!” he exclaimed before running up to me and giving me the tightest hug a ten-year-old could possibly give. Which was surprisingly tight. By the time he let go my ribs were aching a bit and I was gasping for air. It was nice to be so missed.

CHAPTER - 19

FRENNEMY

I heard the door downstairs close and voices in the hallway about half an hour after Jane left to pick up Ace. I smiled at Sims.

“Sounds like your brother’s back.”

He shared my grin and we both rushed downstairs, trying to race each other, laughing all the way down as we playfully shoved each other around a bit. Ace didn’t get much farther than the coat rack at the front door before both Sims and I crushed him in a group hug. When we pulled away, he was grinning from ear to ear.

“It’s nice to see you guys too.”

Ace looked at both of us, looking happier than he had in a while. I suddenly felt terrible that I was about to ruin his mood. I wanted him to be happy for a little while, so I decided to stall telling him what I’d found. The world could wait an hour. We all sat down in the kitchen and ate a snack, talking and laughing and just having a good time. I ignored the nagging feeling to just tell Ace the bad news already. The feeling only persisted over time until I couldn’t even really smile. Finally, Ace pulled me aside and hugged me.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I took a few deep breaths before shaking my head. “No,” I said softly against his chest, my arms wrapped around his shoulders.

I felt him nod, place his chin on my head, and rub my back in calming circles. I felt the tension in my body I hadn’t known was holding leave, and I sort of sank further into the hug, feeling tears

pool in my eyes. I hadn't cried in a long time. In front of someone, that is. I decided I could cry in front of Ace, but, I didn't have the time. I pulled away before the tears could fall and took a breath.

"There's something I need to tell you," I said as firmly as I could.

He nodded, watching me expectantly. I bit my lip.

"Once I got out of the hospital I went back to school to investigate," I began, then proceeded to tell him what I'd found, both at school and at Mason's house. By the time I was done, he looked pale and sickly again. For a moment, I worried I'd stretched him too far too soon, but the color promptly returned and he took a breath. I caught a hint of fear in his eyes before it was swallowed out by trust. Trust in what?

"I need to go back and read more of that journal. He might've been able to figure something out and wrote it down." I was already forming a plan.

Ace shook his head. "You could try asking him in person. That way you won't be invading his privacy."

That was a good idea. He'd be less mad if I did that. But I also didn't want to trigger Black Thorn, and we hadn't talked in so long I wasn't sure how to approach him. I didn't even know if he wanted to talk to me, or if it was even safe in the first place.

"Maybe."

A sudden rush of exhaustion enveloped me and it was hard to stand. I realized then that the fire had been the one energizing me, as my body probably still needed time to recover. It seemed to be keeping me alive, trying to give me extra energy so I could get the job done. You only really noticed or missed something like that when it was gone. I staggered and he caught me, holding me close to him.

"I think you should go home and rest. It's been a long few days."

He had no idea how right he was about that. I braced myself, stepped away from him, and flamed back to my living room. Right when I'd straightened myself up, Ada and my mom appeared on the stairs. They seemed to be tense, like they'd just had an argument over something. Once they got off the staircase and looked up, they both seemed somewhere between relieved, confused, and

triumphant. Dad came down right behind them, looking extremely irritated, still clutching his now blistering palm. I bit down a satisfied smile. As soon as he saw me, I watched his face go from confused, to scared, then several shades of red. I gave him an innocent and confused look. His face turned purple. I wanted so badly to see what other shades I could make his face go, but I didn't have the energy for that. I expected him to come at me and make me cower for what I did. All he did was just stomp into the basement where my parents' wine cellar was and lock the door. The guy was going to get himself drunk because he couldn't handle a little bit of biting back from someone who actually had a backbone. I knew I'd probably regret it later, but it felt good. My first victory, and what I hoped wouldn't be my last. I calmly climbed the stairs on my wobbly legs and went to my bedroom, too tired and wrapped up in the euphoria of my victory to notice Ada trying to talk to me, following me up the stairs. I got to my door and turned the knob, grateful that the heat couldn't hurt me, and entered my room. The hair straightener fell off the knob as I entered, and I quickly picked it off the ground, checking to make sure the carpet wasn't singed. I was a few steps away from the door when I heard a very high-pitched yelp. I whipped around and blinked, seeing Ada's heat shape through the door. She was shaking her hand vigorously and sucking on her pointer finger to repress the pain. I bit my lip so hard I almost drew blood. Crap!

I watched as Ada just stared at the doorknob for a minute. I could picture the puzzled gaze she probably had fixed on it before I watched her walk away. I doubt she'd forget that. I could only hope time would dull the memory.



We were back in school in two weeks' time. There had been major clean-up efforts and a lot of people came together to somehow enclose the building. There would be major renovations done during summer break, but until then, the school was using every

room the whole day and they had compartmentalized the gym into make-shift classrooms. The city also rented a couple of nearby offices to serve as classrooms for things like Study Hall or Independent Study. They also transferred a number of students who lived close enough to other schools—at least that is what they said—but honestly, I think a lot of students asked to be transferred. My mom probably would have wanted to have me and Ada transferred, but since she had to drive Zach to his school, she wouldn't be able to get us all to school on time. That or she would have to get me a car, and Dad made that completely out of the question. So, Ada and I went back to Glacey High. The first day back, they held a memorial service for Mrs. Comley, and I couldn't help but feel guilty since it was my fault that Black Thorn kept attacking this school.

After lunch, I closed my locker door and heard footsteps approaching.

Ace looked over my shoulder and nudged me. "There he is," he warned me under his breath.

I turned around and saw Mason walking towards us for the first time in a while. He stopped a few feet away from us and gave me a confused look.

"Mom said you came over yesterday. But I never saw you," he said.

I nodded. "I wanted to see how your mom was doing. I wasn't there for long once she was done talking," I replied.

He nodded slowly, eyeing me. "I didn't know you cared about my mom so much," he remarked, still giving me a suspicious look.

"There's a lot of things you don't know," I replied. "Besides, it's not really a big deal."

I brushed the issue off. I could see it bothered him a bit, but I didn't dare drag it out. I didn't know how much I could lie about this. Mason knew me even better than Ace did—or, well, he used to. I was pretty sure he'd still be able to tell whether or not I was lying, even after so many months of hardly talking. And the look he'd given me proved me right. Mason nodded slowly and walked

away. I turned back to Ace, who was watching Mason leave with his mouth scrunched and to the side. He lowered his eyes to mine.

“You need to talk to him.”

I sighed. Ace was right, especially considering what I’d already read of his journal entries about being Black Thorn. He was scared and needed someone. Who knew what he was going through after so long? The bell rang and just before we parted to go to our classes, Ace leaned over and kissed my cheek, smiling sweetly.

“See you soon. Try not to worry too much.”

Then he was gone.



Me

Hey, can we talk?

My finger hovered over the arrow to send it. It had been too long since I’d texted him, so it felt weird to ask to meet so out of the blue. But, I had to do this. I took a deep breath and pressed my finger firmly onto the smooth, cold screen and lifted it before I could mess it up. It took a few minutes, but soon the text said he’d read it. The bubble with the ellipsis showed up and seemed to take forever to send the message.

Mason

Sure. When and where?

I felt extremely uncomfortable asking this.

Me

Uhh, your place, after school today. How about 3?

He left me on read. I waited for him to reply. After what I swore was an eternity, he responded.

Mason

Ok.

I cringed visibly during the whole exchange. Well, that's the life of a superhero? I glanced up at the time display at the top of my screen. Only a few more minutes before school was out. Why do I always leave things to the last minute? Seriously, I should probably get rid of that habit.

As soon as the bell rang, I bolted out of my seat and out the door, meeting Ace.

"I did it. I'm meeting Mason at his house at three," I informed him.

Ace nodded. "We won't have much time then."

We were at Ace's house before I knew it. We sat at the kitchen island eating snacks when Sims came in the front door. While he was sitting down, I threw some goldfish at him and he caught every single one. We just goofed around for a while before I checked my phone.

"Alright, it's time for me to go meet Mason," I announced. Ace nodded. Sims gave me a questioning look.

"We can walk there. We're not too far away, I don't think," Ace suggested.

I nodded. "We might have to jog. There's not much time left before I have to be there."

We quickly cleaned up the mess we'd made and ran out the door. We made it just in time. Ace walked me up to the door.

"I'll be waiting nearby in case it goes wrong," he assured me.

I nodded and he walked back onto the street, leaned against one of the streetlights, and pulled out his phone. I turned back towards the door, took a deep breath, and pushed in the button for the doorbell. After a minute, the door opened and Mason appeared in the doorway. He stepped aside and let me in without a word. I used to feel like this place was home. Now it just felt awkward and foreign, and I no longer knew what the rules were. Memories came flooding back and seemed to fill the area. I finished taking my shoes

off and turned to face him. He took a deep breath, looked away, and rubbed the back of his head. He blew out the air and looked back at me, putting his hand down.

“So . . . what did you wanna talk about?” he asked hesitantly.

I chewed on my lip. “Can we talk somewhere we won’t be overheard?” I asked.

He thought for a minute. “We could try the basement, the roof, or my room,” Mason listed off. “My mom isn’t here for another hour, so any would work,” he explained.

I nodded slowly. The roof was off limits, obviously. If he turned into Black Thorn while we were talking, he’d easily throw me off the roof, and I’d be dead when I hit the ground since, as far as I knew, I couldn’t fly. Or I’d be close to dead, and I wanted a break from hospitals for a while. I’d hardly ever been to their basement, so I wasn’t sure how good of a place to talk that was. And his room . . . I wasn’t too sure about that, but the fact that he was willing to offer his room was definitely strange. He never offered up his room for anything, which made me wonder if he had an idea why I wanted to talk to him. Or maybe he thought it would be easier for him to talk to me if we were in a controlled environment he knew well. Besides, his journal was in his room, so that would make it quick and easy to access. And if worse came to worst, I could easily just turn into Phoenix, grab the journal, and get the heck out of there before things could escalate too much. If him being comfortable would help the situation—I had a feeling it would—then . . . his room seemed the best option.

“We can use your room,” I decided quietly.

He nodded and led me there. He didn’t close the door, which I was grateful for. There was no need since no one else was in the house anyway. I pulled up one of his chairs and he sat on the bed, folding his hands in a slightly stiff posture.

“Now will you tell me what we’re talking about?” he asked wearily. I wrung my hands together. This already felt very fragile. How could I even start? No matter how I worded it, it sounded more like an accusation than anything. I didn’t want him to get offended and end the conversation before we could even get

anywhere. Instability makes people dangerous. I should know, I'd been pretty unstable for way too long. I was still unstable without the fire, but at least the fire helped me to control it. Black Thorn only hurt Mason from what I could see so far. We sat there awkwardly for a time while I tried to figure out how to word what I wanted to say. It got to the point where I literally opened and closed my mouth several times, probably looking like a mix between a fish and an idiot. Mason sighed.

"You know I'm Black Thorn," he said bluntly.

I nodded, speechless. Had I been that obvious? Apparently.

"I need to talk to you about that. I have some questions," I finally managed.

Mason took a deep breath and nodded. "Hit me, I guess," he invited.

Alright then. I tried to slow my slightly scrambled mind and pick the first question I wanted to ask—something I could use to ease into the conversation, preferably, although I didn't know how well that would work.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

He looked perplexed. "What? In what way?" he asked.

I could see the questions my one sentence had set off in his mind. I took a breath to try and steady my voice.

"Being Black Thorn. Does it hurt?" I rephrased the question.

I figured that was general enough to get him to start talking, maybe even lead to a good conversation. It could even spark some new questions or put them in an order I could use to access them easier. Mason didn't meet my eyes for a moment. I could see pain shining through his eyes, like a sharp, pointy dagger slowly sinking into his flesh, inching deeper and deeper, closer and closer to his heart. With some difficulty, he forced his encumbered gaze to meet my anxious, attentive one. He nodded and whispered something. Then cleared his throat and repeated it.

"Yes." His voice suddenly grew hoarse, like he'd been yelling for a while and was about to lose it. "Yes," he added, "every day."

I got ready to ask where it hurt when he continued, obviously not done with his answer. He seemed to feel the need to explain

himself, and he knew how to use the time I'd given him to finally say something, after months having to deal with it all on his own. He'd lost so much. Too much.

"It hurts a little worse every day, like there's some sort of heavy dark poison creeping into my heart and the back of my mind, so cold it burns." He sounded nearly strangled.

"It burns everything . . . everything good," he choked out, barely keeping back tears.

I didn't care how dangerous this was, Mason needed me, and I was determined to be there for him. I threw caution to the wind, stood up, and moved to sit next to him on his bed, putting an arm around him. He leaned into me and cried onto my shoulder. The old Mason would never have cried more than a few heavy sobs before stuffing it back down. This Mason cried and cried and cried, seeming to not have any control over himself anymore. By the time he finally pulled away, my shirt was visibly stained with tears and snot. I didn't really care; it could be washed. The important thing was how my friend was doing, and finally getting some much needed answers. Hopefully those answers would be something I could use against Black Thorn to defeat him sooner rather than later. The longer I delayed that, the more Mason suffered and the closer to death he was. Not to mention it would also delay the safety of the citizens of New York. He wiped his nose on his sleeve before continuing with what he was saying.

Taking a deep breath to try and steady himself, he said in a very thick voice, "I can feel him killing me, little by little, day by day. Taking small pieces of me as he goes. Every time he comes out, it's more and more like he's in control, and I'm just watching. Like I've been possessed."

"That must be terrifying," I whispered.

He nodded. I couldn't even begin to imagine what that would feel like. Even the thought scared me, and I despised being scared.

"Yet the more he comes out," Mason continued, his voice slowly becoming a little stronger, "it seems the more we're also joined together, like we're one. The same person, even."

I nodded, absolutely fascinated.

“I use that sometimes to keep him from going too far. You’ve seen me do it—I know you have. And Phoenix has too.”

Yeah, I had. I was proud of him for finding a way to have some control over what was happening to him. Another question bobbed in my mind, but I really didn’t want to ask it. I forced myself anyway. Better to get all the answers I could now than wait for another time. Who knew how much of that was left?

“Do you hate Phoenix?” I asked.

Mason snorted, then hiccupped another sob. Black Thorn must have really weakened him if crying affected him this much.

“For what? For keeping people safe from the monster I released? For burning Black Thorn and keeping me alive for slightly longer? I don’t care if the burns hurt—they do help. I have her to thank for my life,” he replied.

That was better than I expected. I’d honestly expected him to resent Phoenix. I let out a relieved sigh and instantly regretted it. He raised an eyebrow.

“Why? That shouldn’t affect you, unless you’re her.” He smirked and kept his eyebrow raised, forming an old expression I knew well.

I laughed, planting a false smile on my lips. “Heck no, I’m not her. But I wish! She’s awesome!” I gushed.

It felt extremely weird to gush over myself, but I didn’t want Mason finding out about my alter ego quite yet. I mean, Black Thorn knew, yeah, but I hoped Mason didn’t yet. That would keep him a little safer for the time being. Well, safe as in not having as much pressure to also keep that secret. He was already in immense danger by just being Black Thorn—Phoenix would only make it worse.

He nodded slowly, not taking his eyes off me.

“What she’s doing is really good,” he said softly, dropping his head to stare at his now clasped hands. “Even if it hurts me. Even if it kills me. At least Black Thorn will no longer be a threat to everyone,” he whispered.

After a moment, he lifted his head and met my gaze, tears pooling in his eyes. “Then you’ll be safe, too.”

I could see it in his eyes—he still cared for me. I wasn't sure whether it was romantically or platonically yet, but at least he didn't hold anything against me. I didn't wish any pain on him, no matter what had happened. Even though we'd only known each other for a couple years really, it still felt like I'd known him for a lifetime. And those bonds were typically some of the strongest ones, the ones that stayed long after everything else went, no matter how the people changed or what crap they went through. I knew we were meant to be friends. It just didn't feel right to be anything more. Besides, in my experience, most friendships tend to last longer if they don't turn romantic. Well, unless you marry the person and make it work.

“I can handle myself,” I reassured him.

He shrugged, wiping at his eyes. “I know, and Phoenix has our backs. But I just want to make sure.” He sighed. “Being friends with you is one of the few things I've done right so far in my life. I don't wanna mess it up even more than I have. It's been hard here without you, and all I've wanted to do is tell you what's going on. But Thorn won't let me say much. He barely even lets me write in my journal anymore.” He clutched his head.

“It's like he's all the bad parts of me. The angry, the bitter, the cold, the heartless . . . an imposter trying to steal my voice and my eyes. Trying to take my life from me and claim it as his own—shove me behind prison bars forever.”

Mason sighed again and looked up, this time apologetically.

“Sorry, I've thought about this a lot over the past few months. It's like your monsters, except mine can literally cause mass destruction, and not just on the inside.”

Yeah, I knew how that felt. A new question suddenly struck my brain like lightning.

“How do you come back each time if he's getting stronger?” I asked.

Mason laid back on his bed and stared at the ceiling for a few seconds before responding.

“I fight. I remember why I want to live, and I work on regaining a little bit of control at a time. Once I do, I try to calm down and stay as calm as I can for as long as I can.”

That made sense. But . . .

“I wonder if there’s a better way to do it,” I whispered.

He sat up like he’d just been shocked by electricity.

“What?” he asked. I could hear the hope in his voice. I flinched a little. I didn’t want to get his hopes up in case this didn’t work.

“What if,” I began, “we could somehow contain Thorn, or neutralize him. Or since he’s plant-like, maybe we could use something that could work like weed killer?” I began to think out loud. “If we could somehow find a way to do that, maybe we could burn him to death.”

Plants and fire didn’t mix, especially if the plants were dry. The fire would eat it up. Big enough plants could smother a small enough flame, cutting it off from its source of oxygen and suffocating it. It could go either way.

“We’d need a big enough blaze to burn him, though, because of how his vines are.”

I got up and began to pace. Mason watched me in complete silence. I hardly noticed his eyes widen with shock and the tense spring of his muscles right before he gracefully got up from his bed and put his hands on my forearms to stop me from pacing.

“Woah, one thing at a time, Brin!” he cautioned.

I nodded, giving a sheepish smile. “Sorry. This is the best idea I’ve had since—” I cut myself off.

I kept forgetting Mason didn’t know. I was so used to him already knowing everything about me, it was hard remembering there were things about me now that he had no clue about. He narrowed his eyes at me but said nothing, only waiting for me to continue. I shook my head.

“You’re right—we need to think of a good way to contain Thorn first before we plan to burn him or anything.” I nodded. “First thing’s first, how do we do that in the first place?” I wondered.

I was about to say *I’ve already tried a million times*, but I stopped myself just in time.

“Phoenix has already tried a million times, but almost nothing seemed to work,” I chewed on my lip.

Mason let go of me and backed away a few feet.

“Didn’t she burn him pretty bad and then trap him in a literal wall of flames?” he asked.

I snapped my fingers and pointed at him like he was on to something, just when my phone buzzed. I pulled out my cracked phone and found that Ace had texted me, telling me Sims had detected a pretty good crime somewhere in Manhattan.

I pursed my lips. “Can we pick this up some other time? I really need to go.” I honestly felt really bad for leaving so suddenly, but crimes wouldn’t wait. Mason nodded.

“Can you come back here this time, tomorrow?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, I have some family stuff my mom just sprung on me while I was at school, and then I have to work on homework,” I replied.

Mason bit his lip. “Okay. How about . . . Friday night?” he suggested.

“That should work,” I agreed.

He smiled a little. “Okay. Meet me here at six. We can get some pizza and talk,” he decided.

I gave a thumbs up before turning around and leaving. Just before I walked out the front door, I heard him laugh.

“Just like old times!”

Yep. Like old times.

CHAPTER - 20

BEST OF BOTH

I got home late that night. There had been crime after crime after crime, and I was ready to collapse into bed and sleep for a few days straight. It turned out there were lots more ways I could overextend myself than there are for a normal human being. Was I even human, though? Humans didn't have powers, but there was also a time when I didn't. I still looked human. The only thing physically weird about me—besides the usual stuff—was the phoenix tattoo. I was pretty sure no one else in the city had a tattoo like that, but I could always be wrong. Tattoos were easy to hide. Was it even a tattoo, though? It looked like one, but I'd never gone to a tattoo place and observed what happened. I wasn't old enough for a tattoo, so how could I? I knew my mom had one of a rose on her ankle, and one of my aunts had one of a vine wrapping around her arm and ending at her shoulder, but that was all I knew about that. Mason wanted to get one of a skull since he thought it would make him look cool. He'd even tried to get one earlier this year using a fake I.D he'd made, but it hadn't worked. He'd been grounded for about a month after that incident and he hasn't tried since. I wasn't sure about most of the other people I knew, though. I sort of wanted one. I'd found designs that I liked. But I was never really sure how much I wanted it. I heard it hurt a lot, it could cost a lot, and you had to make sure it would still look good after you got old.

I entered my room and once I got to the mirror, I just stared at myself. Shadows clung to my eyes, my hair was messy from all the running, and I had a few scrapes and bruises from the fights I had to engage in. My clothes weren't too bad since I'd been in my suit, thankfully, but I still had some sand from the beach on me. I had to stop someone from illegal fishing, which had been a new one. I had to get there quick to keep the guy from setting sail and I'd nearly fallen in the water. There were even a few bits of shell stuck to me here and there. I scrunched my face and picked some of the shell out of my hair. I really needed a shower. It occurred to me that the number of showers I normally take had drastically reduced since I'd gotten my powers. I'd just always seemed to be clean enough. I wondered if that had something to do with the fire. I could feel it flowing like energy through me now, and I stared in awe as it disintegrated the grime off of me and burnt the shells. I hadn't gotten too dirty before, which was probably why I hadn't noticed. It flowed into every inch of my body until there was no grime left, not even in my hair. I still needed to comb it, though.

I walked to my closet, got out my Pj's, and made my way into my bathroom. I combed my hair really quick and slipped into my Pj's. Before I left the bathroom, I slipped the shoulder down and stared at the tattoo. It looked like a real tattoo. It wasn't a design I'd ever seen on anyone before. It also wasn't too big, either. I rubbed the skin over it, tracing the lines. It felt weird to have my skin marked, yet at the same time I couldn't deny how cool it felt. I liked the design on my arm.

My dad never wanted me to ever get a tattoo, saying my body was a temple and a few other things. Although, that had been when I was young. After he got rich, he just kind of stopped practicing any religion. Maybe that's why he was a jerk. He let the money get to his heart instead of letting his beliefs win out. Not every rich person is like that, but my dad is. Some people said I had his eyes and I act like him. Even so, I knew from a young age I didn't want to be like him at all. I wanted to be better, and that was another reason why I had to do this. To prove I am not my father's daughter. To prove I'm not as unstable and defenseless and weak as my

beautiful mother. To prove I am my own person, capable of doing what I can to take a stand and make myself a name despite how things have been. To make things better. I heard a slight squeal as my door opened and someone walked into my room. I had just enough time to pull the shoulder of my baggy Pj's back up before the figure was in sight. I couldn't really tell who it was at first because of how dark it was. Curious, I squinted and the figure approached me. I wanted to light a flame, but if this was my mom or Ada or even my dad, I couldn't really take that chance.

"Where were you? I was worried sick!" Mom whispered, her voice shaky like she was holding back tears.

The reality of that hit me like a shockwave, causing me to take a step backwards in order to keep my balance. She missed me? No one here ever told me they missed me.

"I-I didn't mean to worry you. Sorry," I replied in my shock.

I could just barely make out her head bobbing before she came into the bathroom and gave me a crushing hug.

"I'm so sorry about all of this . . .," she whispered in my ear.

Her breath smelled fruity and her words were slightly slurred. She was drunk! Of course, that was why she admitted to worrying about me. She didn't sound incredibly drunk, but obviously she was just enough to allow that to slip through. She'd always believed that if you want your kids to be tough, you'd have to be tough as well. That unfortunately led her to believe in tough love a bit. I was grateful for that, but I also wouldn't have minded some more "I love you's" here and there. She did give them out, but I worried she was too preoccupied with her own problems to give them out as much as the rest of us needed or wanted. But we never said anything. No one wanted to be a burden or feel like one. I rubbed her back a little.

"It's alright. It'll all be okay," I whispered back.

I wished I could say I didn't think any of it was her fault because I really did. I didn't want to make her feel worse than she already did, especially because she was in a slightly better mood it seemed from the wine. For once I wanted to be the good daughter—which normally was Ada's job. I was the fun, complicated one—and let

her be happier than she had been in a long time. We stayed in that hug for longer than I felt comfortable, but I didn't dare break it. When I tried, she only tightened her grip anyway. Eventually, my eyelids drooped and I wiggled out of her grip and led her to her room despite her complaining. Dad was fast asleep when I tucked Mom in. I stared at Dad's furrowed brows and stuffy frown. Even in his sleep he looked disappointed. That must take a lot of energy. Mom passed out quickly and I stumbled to my room, closed the door, and collapsed on my bed, falling asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.



I woke up to Mom tapping my shoulder.

“Birdie, wake up.”

She tapped my shoulder more urgently. I groaned and rolled over, facing her. I squinted at her through the sunlight streaming through the windows.

“I got time . . .,” I grumbled.

She shook her head and pointed to my clock on my nightstand. It took me a minute to register what it said. I bolted out of bed suddenly wide awake.

“Holy crap!” I exclaimed, rushing to my closet, throwing on some clothes. Unfortunately, my outfit comprised of green sweatpants I almost never wear and a purple tank top Mom got me last summer that I never wear and did not match, so I pulled on a white jacket to try and help it. I bolted to the kitchen to inhale a Poptart, back up to my bathroom to brush my teeth and hastily get some makeup on, flung my books in my bag—I think I broke my binder and bent the pages in my books . . . OOPS!—and ran out the door. I heard Mom laughing behind me, holding her keys in one hand and my shoes in the other. I cringed, taking my shoes from her before she unlocked the car and I climbed in. Once we were going, I shoved my shoes on my feet and willed Mom to drive faster,

even though she was driving as fast as legally possible. Upon arrival, I hopped out of the car as she was slowing down and sprinted as fast as I could to the front doors. I was half an hour late! I realized once I sat down in class gasping that I'd cut off Mom saying goodbye to me for the first time in months. I hoped she would forgive me. Classes for the first half of the day seemed short, but after lunch, I swear, they lasted for an eternity. Finally, I was meeting up with Ace when Mom texted me.

Mom

Don't forget Dad wants you to come straight home today. He has plans for us for the rest of the afternoon.

I swallowed back the tears that rose in my eyes. I'd forgotten about that.

"I can't come over today. My dad has plans for us," I informed him hollowly.

"Is there a way I could come with you? For backup?" he asked. That was a great idea. I asked Mom and smiled.

"She says she doesn't see why not."

Ace nodded. "I'll ask Jane then."

About ten minutes later, Ace followed me through the house and we put our things down in my room before Mom called us down. When we got to the living room I found Mom, Ada, Dad, and Zach waiting. Dad glared at Ace as soon as he saw us.

"I thought these were family plans," Dad hissed at Mom.

She only smiled sweetly, although I could see the anxious tension in her eyes.

"It is. Brinley's boyfriend is as good as family," she replied cheerfully.

I hadn't told Dad I had a boyfriend yet. My eyes widened as Dad turned towards Ace and I. It took a second for Mom to realize what had just happened. She seemed to have assumed I'd told Dad already. She shot me an apologetic look before Dad stalked up to Ace, looking him over. I don't know why he cared so much. Maybe

he considered Ace an outsider, and therefore a threat to what he'd worked on for years: a perfect image. I wasn't sure if he thought Ace would tear that image down, or maybe he didn't appreciate the fact that I'd been successful at something like this at all. Dad looked Ace up and down like he was making a final judgment right then and there. Almost like a normal dad. Almost. He sniffed slightly, his eyes narrow.

"So, you're the boyfriend?" Dad said it like an accusation.

I couldn't help but be proud when Ace straightened up a little, looked my dad in the eye, and said in an unwavering voice, "Yes, I'm her boyfriend."

Even my dad seemed a little impressed, although he kept it hidden well. I wasn't sure if Ace had spotted it. If he did, he didn't give any sign that he did. After what felt like forever of neither of them moving, Dad finally nodded and backed away, resigned to his defeat. I had no doubt he'd find other ways to make Ace and I miserable, though. I just had to wait and see what he had planned and grit through it—though I was not feeling discouraged from biting back.

"Everyone get changed into something nice. We'll be leaving in a few minutes."

A sinking feeling settled in my stomach as I made my way up to my room and dug through my closet. The only dress I owned was a tight, purple dress with a fashionable rip in the skirt and spaghetti straps. There was no way I could wear that! I hated super tight things. It was something my dad would like me to wear, but my tattoo would show. I looked around for anything else, but all my other dresses were long gone. I sighed and visited Ada.

"Do you have a dress I can borrow?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Don't you have that really cute, purple one in your closet?" she asked.

I nodded. Ada rolled her eyes.

"Why don't you wear that one then?" she asked, setting a dress she'd chosen down on the bed.

I chewed my lip. “You know I don’t like those kinds of dresses!” I half-wined, half-pleaded. My patience was thinning already. I didn’t even have a jacket that matched it.

Ada shook her head. “No, you wouldn’t really like most of mine either. Besides, I don’t need you stretching out my clothes.”

Now I rolled my eyes.

“I’m not that much bigger than you,” I shot back.

Ada wrinkled her nose slightly. “You’re big enough that you might have a little trouble fitting into my things. You’re like mom, I’m like dad,” she said it like that explained everything and finished the conversation.

I let out an annoyed breath from my nose and gave her closet a side glance.

“Do you at least have any jackets I can borrow that would go with the dress?” I asked as nicely as I could.

Ada thought for a moment before nodding and pulling out a cropped, long-sleeved jacket that was a very similar purple to my dress. I smiled gratefully when she handed it to me.

“Thanks sis, I owe you one.”

“Yeah, you do. Now get out!”

She pushed me through her doorway and closed it behind me. I sighed and walked into my own room to change. I was grateful the dress wasn’t incredibly short, but it was still shorter than I would have preferred. I found some purple heels in my mom’s closet that I stuffed my feet into—Mom had smaller feet than me, unfortunately—and I wobbled down the stairs, clutching the railing.

Dad surveyed us before nodding. Ace was the only one in normal clothes. He stared at me for a few moments before blushing a little. I glared at him, feeling incredibly self-conscious. Alright, it was official. I hated my dad.

“What are we even doing?” Ada whispered to me, playing with the sash on her dress.

“No idea,” I admitted, “maybe some sort of fancy event?”

Ada nodded and stuck close to me so I was sandwiched between her and Ace as we walked out the door and loaded into dad’s Lincoln Navigator. There was barely enough room for all of us.

Zach always seemed to stick in the back away from everyone. Dad always seemed to forget he even existed, and I figured that was one way to survive. I preferred the more . . . interesting way, although one of these days I was sure it would get me killed. Still, I'd rather die standing up than sitting down. It took about an hour or so to get wherever Dad was taking us because of traffic. The entire time I couldn't stop fidgeting and picking at my skirt, continuously irritated with how restricted I felt in it. About halfway through the trip my feet began throbbing and I had to bite my lip to keep from grimacing. I wiggled forward and took my shoes off to relieve some of the pain. I sighed in relief when the pain subsided.

Finally, we arrived at a big building. Dad parked the car and led us to the entrance where there were guards. I recognized the place immediately as Dad's office building. Although it was heavily decorated and seemed very inviting, the cool air of the building seeped through my dress and settled into my heart. I felt the fire push back against it and warm my body against the almost overwhelming stiffness attempting to engulf me. Dad led us to the elevator and pushed the floor he wanted. Before I was ready, he led us down another hallway and opened a door.

The room erupted into cheers once he entered. No one seemed to care much about his family trailing gloomily behind him while he basked in his glory. I got the feeling this was why he did everything he did, just so he could get the approval and cheers from the world he now loved more than his God. We obediently sat down at the table he indicated, full of fancy plates of food. I wasn't hungry anyway. A man at a podium said something into a microphone before welcoming Dad onto the stage. Apparently, he'd decided to take his trophy family to some celebration or reward ceremony. I had a hard time keeping my rage down, and I could feel faint flames licking at my legs. I couldn't set anything on fire, though. Not here. My clothes weren't even fireproof either, meaning if I had an accident, the dress, shoes, and Ada's jacket would probably be incinerated. I was having a hard time regaining control. Somehow, it felt like Dad had managed to trap me even worse than usual. Ace shot me a worried look from a few seats down. Mom and Ada didn't

seem to notice the growing smell of smoke coming from me while we all watched Dad smiling and giving a speech about how he had worked so hard and how we had been a great support to him. I was hoping he was nearly finished, when what came out of his mouth next punched me in the gut.

“Phoenix has done an amazing job keeping this beautiful city safe. To honor her, we have decided to put her symbol on all our buildings.” A picture of my symbol popped up behind him on a cropped picture of me from last night for reference.

It was hard to hide my fury. Didn’t anyone understand that even a superhero deserves a little privacy? That was the whole point of the “secret identity” thing; you get personal privacy as well as protecting people you care about.

Everyone stared at him in awe or fear. I looked like I wanted to murder him. I could feel faint flames licking my palms now, and when we all finally started eating, I risked a glance down at my dress. The hem of the skirt was singeing. I took a deep breath and shoveled down some food to calm myself, forcing the flames to back away from the dress before it caught on fire. It was building up too much, though. I took a spoonful of some of the soup. It was cold because of how long Dad had talked. I glanced around, placed my hand on the bowl, and pretended to move it a little closer to me while I used the fire to gently warm it up, relieving some of the burning pressure in me.

I had just managed to calm down enough to get rid of the light flames that had been dancing on my legs, when suddenly, the air grew frigid and the area seemed to darken. Not even the bright fancy lights hanging from the ceiling could pierce through the gloom. A dark figure strode forward slowly. Thorn seemed like he was gliding, although he was definitely walking. He took his time like he knew he had all the time in the world. A hideous grin warped his face. Immediately, people began getting out of their seats and rushing around, trying to find a way out the door without getting too close to Thorn. Ace and I glanced at each other before following my family around. Some people in the company got my dad, who was just goggling at Thorn, out of the way just in time for

Thorn to throw one of his tentacles at him. I heard murmurs and cries for Phoenix. Thorn cackled.

“Phoenix! Phoenix, where are you hiding?” he called in a sing-songy voice.

I choked down a sob when I got a better look at Thorn. Thorn seemed in even more control this time, the light in his eyes I recognized as Mason was almost gone, and Thorn seemed happier than he’d ever been. We were running out of time! Ace and I blended in with the crowd trying to get out of the room.

“What are we going to do?” I whispered. I was trying to think of something, but I wasn’t sure how this would turn out. If Phoenix didn’t show up there would be catastrophic results from Thorn’s attack. But if she did there could be questions asked if I didn’t enter from outside the room. Even if I did manage to turn into Phoenix, people would wonder where Brinley was and how she changed her clothes, since I’d have to go home really quick to get some clothes after burning up my fancy ones. It would mean more excuses than I was ready to give out tonight. But . . . if it meant saving people, wouldn’t it be worth it? I didn’t have much more time to decide. Thorn was calling for Phoenix and I could hear people asking where she was. If I didn’t do something soon things would get worse. Finally, Thorn moved just enough out of the way that people managed to stumble through the doorway and out of harm’s way. The crowd I was in rushed out, pushing Ace and I with them. At this point, I had no idea where my family was, and I couldn’t help wondering if they’d made it out yet. I wove between people as best as I could and ended up in one of the many business rooms. It was empty, thank goodness. I sighed and paced a little. I could just become Phoenix, but I would have to come up with some sort of really good excuse. I glanced at the people rushing past the empty room in terror. I knew there was only one choice if I was going to go home like I came and avoid suspicion, but I wasn’t happy about it. Still, compared to people dying it was a petty reasonable choice. I turned to Ace.

“Cover for me and make sure everyone gets out safely,” I directed.

He nodded and was gone before I could regret my decision. There were less people going by at the moment, so I closed the door, locked it, and went to the nearest filing cabinet. I dumped out all the files and began putting my clothes in there. I hated every second of it. I closed my eyes, feeling the fire engulf my body and the fabric of the suit form on my skin. Time for Phoenix to show up. I made sure I couldn't hear any footsteps before I unlocked the door, went back down the hall, and found Thorn turning over tables full of half-eaten food.

I cleared my throat. He looked up from the destruction and laughed. A cold shiver shot up my spine at the sound. I wondered what triggered Mason this time, but Thorn didn't leave me much time to wonder. He threw one of his vines at me. On pure reflex, I twisted away and shot a fireball at him. He dodged, and it exploded against the far wall, creating a huge scar. I twirled to dodge more inky balls and made a cupping motion with my arms, using that momentum to throw the flames I'd been gathering down my arms and throwing them like big bullets through the air, although in the back of my mind it would've made more sense for them to be more like badly thrown frisbees. Whatever, I guess. One of them clipped one of his vines. Thorn howled in pain and snuffed out the flame. I ran around the rim of the room as he pivoted to keep me in view, jumping over toppled chairs and tables until his back was to the door. That way if he threw anything at me it couldn't hurt any stragglers nearby or anyone who might be stupid enough to watch or record the fight. There seemed to almost always be someone who did that, so I had to be careful.

"You can't do anything to me—I still have Mason!" Thorn yelled, throwing a huge, black, inky ball at me. It was so fast, all I had time to do was to throw up a fire shield to deflect it, staggering back at the force of the blow. He threw round after round. I barely had enough time to breathe between them, throwing up shield after shield. My shields soon began dissolving as soon as the ink balls hit them, although, thankfully, it also took the balls with them. I wasn't sure how long that would be the case. Soon I'd backed up so much I was against the wall, sweat beading on my brow from the effort

of throwing up so many shields so quickly. Thorn kept throwing them as he strode confidently towards me until he was right in front of me. I tried pushing him away with a blast of fire but he only dodged, and I watched in horror as the fire shot forward towards a few idiots I could see trying to record the fight. They screamed and tried to hide but the fire was too fast.

My heart jumped into my throat as I slashed my arm through the air, getting rid of the fire . . . just in time. They looked a little sweaty but otherwise fine. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding and turned to face Thorn again when his hand clamped around my throat. He raised me off the ground, grinning in satisfaction. I kicked and gasped for air, putting my hands around his wrist in order to at least try to free up some room. The fire blazed through my skin to burn away the black trying to crawl onto my skin. I closed my eyes and concentrated the fire on my hands. The fire struggled to come, and it retreated as the black crawled onto my skin. Thorn grinned in merriment, not seeming to notice my now smoking hands. I choked, praying the fire would hurry up already! My lungs burned. Finally, the fire came. I thrust my hand up his forearm and pushed the flame into his skin. He screamed in pain, yanking his arm away to put out the flame and cradle it. I crashed onto the ground in a heap, gagging and grabbing my neck. The fire burned away the cold black, and soon I was gasping and struggling back onto my feet. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I ducked just in time as an inky beam drilled into the wall right where my head had been. I coughed and lowered my mask, tasting blood. As he shot another one, I dived behind a nearby table and staggered up, trying to get my balance back before lobbing a fireball at him.

Thorn knocked me over with an inky ball I failed to dodge. My head smacked against the wall, and I pulled down my hood to rub the area. My ears rung and the edges of the world faded. Thorn raised his hand to issue the final strike. So . . . this was it. I would finally die. At least I could say that I tried. Maybe with me dead, people would be in less danger. I watched the blackness gather around his hand and closed my eyes to await the blow. I waited.

And waited. Cautiously I opened my eyes and found Thorn staring at me, but it wasn't Thorn anymore. Mason stared at me with wide eyes and lowered his arm. He was still dressed as Black Thorn but he'd somehow managed to take control. Then he smirked.

"I should've known you were Phoenix, Brin." He chuckled and motioned for me to get up.

I smiled a little and wobbled to my feet.

"I would help you, but I'd only poison you." Mason held up his blackened hands for emphasis.

I nodded. "It's good to have you back, though," I replied.

Mason smiled. "Good to be back," he agreed.

I quickly scanned the room and the doorways for any lingering filmers or photographers. Apparently, my fireball did the trick. We were alone, and we could safely talk. We walked around and picked up the upended tables and chairs, cleaning up the mess Black Thorn had made as best as we could.

"So, what brought you back this time? And what triggered it in the first place?" I asked as we finished cleaning.

Mason twisted his lips. "Well, all I remember is watching TV and coming across whatever your dad was broadcasting, and I got really angry. The rest is a blur," Mason recollected.

I listened intently.

"The next clear thing I remember is seeing your face and feeling a nagging in the back of my mind, like I knew you and was supposed to be protecting you," Mason continued, his brows furrowed. "Then once Thorn threw you against the wall and you put your hood down, I remembered and started wrestling for control."

Huh.

"I barely regained it in time, as you know. If I'd been a second later, you'd be dead." Mason took a deep breath. "I could never forgive myself if that happened," he whispered.

The silence stretched for a few minutes while we both imagined what would have happened if Mason hadn't been able to get back in control. I shook my head to clear it.

"Is your memory getting better?" I asked. I worded that question terribly but he seemed to understand.

He shrugged. “I think so. The more we . . . merge,” he said, visibly cringed at the word, “the more I remember. Unfortunately, that also makes it both easier and harder for me to regain control after he’s had it for a bit. I have to fight harder each time, but I know what I’m looking for or what I have to do to get it back.”

I nodded and pulled my mask and hood back up before striding out the door. I walked down the hall and looked back to make sure Mason was behind me. He was still in the room watching me walk away with a wistful look in his eyes. I motioned for him to come, but he shook his head.

“I can’t while I’m dressed as Thorn.”

True. People would either run away screaming, the police would come and arrest him, or the media would make a huge deal out of it. I sighed.

“You should probably go then,” I replied.

Mason nodded. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He waved. Just before he disappeared in a puddle of black, he smirked, in a knowing but proud way, “Phoenix.”

CHAPTER - 21

SQUAD

Mason opened the door and led me straight to his bedroom. His mom was somewhere in their basement, so I wasn't too worried about whether or not she would overhear us. From all the times I'd been over there, whenever she went in the basement it took her hours to fix or do whatever task she was trying to do. I plopped down on the chair in his room, and he practically collapsed onto his bed, spreading his arms out and staring at the ceiling, his chest rising and falling steadily for a few minutes while we both collected our thoughts. It had been almost twenty-four hours since Black Thorn had crashed my dad's ceremony. Honestly though, I couldn't blame him. My dad deserved it. He deserved much worse than that, but it was still my job to make sure that it didn't happen again. Or at least downgrade the end results if I couldn't pre-emptively stop the crime or disaster from happening in the first place. Man, I should really get paid for this, or at least get a trophy!

"I'm still trying to get over the fact that you're Phoenix! And you didn't tell me!" Mason sat up and looked at me with wide eyes.

I shrugged helplessly. "Well, what was I supposed to do? Walk up to you while we weren't talking and say, 'hey by the way, I'm Phoenix, and I'm currently in a huge fight with your alter ego that's trying to destroy the city and me, sorry for how random this was but I thought you should know?'" I asked.

He laughed self-consciously. "Good point."

I nodded vigorously. “Uh huh!”

Mason only laughed, his cheeks flushing slightly. He laid back again and sighed.

“So . . . what’s the plan?” he asked.

“No idea. We need to come up with one,” I replied.

“Oh, come on! Doesn’t Crazy Connely have some sort of brilliant plan?” he asked.

I cringed. I never really liked that name. There was a time when I thought it made me sound cool and unpredictable, but that phase hadn’t lasted very long.

I pressed my lips into a hard line. “Not this time. We’re coming up with one together.” I got up and paced. Mason sat up again and gave me his attention.

“First of all, have you managed to prevent or stall Thorn whenever you’ve gotten upset enough? Maybe we can find a way to stall him until we can get something more permanent,” I asked.

Mason shook his head. “You know how I am with that.”

I did.

“Okay, so the only thing we really have is trapping him in a wall of fire, but then what?” I asked. “I can’t hold one of those up forever. And the last time I did, I lost the fire for too long.”

I leaned against the wall and put my fingers to my lips and crossed the other arm around my waist so my right arm sat on top of my left one.

“I think we should have a Plan B since we both know Thorn doesn’t always follow the script.”

I chewed on my lip while I thought. Mason fingered a little toy car he’d had on his desk while we both thought about what we could do if things went wrong.

“You could just blast fire at me to try and neutralize him?” He offered.

I shook my head. “I’m not doing that. That would seriously wound or kill you.”

It wasn’t an option. He rubbed his eyes and gave me a meaningful look.

“But if that’s the only option left, killing me is better than letting more people die. One sacrifice to save millions.”

No.

“Out of the question. I haven’t tried this hard to save you only to lose you,” I stated firmly.

Mason shook his head, chuckling. “It might not be your choice to make. I know you don’t want to lose me again, but isn’t one life for millions more worth it than millions for one?”

I didn’t want to admit it, but he was right. After a minute, I spoke up.

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that,” my voice shook slightly.

Mason nodded and didn’t say anything for a while.

“I can’t think of anything else at the moment,” I eventually admitted.

He shook his head in defeat.

“So, it’s either I risk losing my powers again or I kill you,” I stated bluntly.

Mason nodded. “Looks like it.”

We both let that sink in for a moment.

“Well then.” I tried to break the silence. “We’d better not let the second thing happen,” I declared.

I would much rather lose my powers if it meant the people, I cared about the most would be okay. I didn’t need to make fire balls to feel worthy anymore. Now that I knew what I needed to do, I couldn’t fail. Of course, I wasn’t going to let myself fail since I’d come too far to give up. And if I lost my powers completely, I knew I’d still be happy with myself . . . as long as I managed to save the people I was supposed to save. My phone buzzed with a text from Ace, telling me about another crime. I smiled and looked back up at Mason.

“There's some crime. Do you wanna come?” I asked.

He grinned.



“Oh, hey Mason, I didn’t know you were coming,” Ace greeted us when we got to his house. Mason looked around in awe, and I thought I caught a twinge of jealousy as well.

He shrugged. “Brin invited me, so I figured I’d come.” Then he grinned. “It’s not everyday someone like me gets to see a freaking superhero up close in action.”

I smiled. I was glad Mason was so excited about this. I walked into the kitchen and got us some snacks to eat on the way downtown. We managed to catch the bus just as it was leaving, and it seemed like no time at all that we were downtown and running towards the area Sims had told us to go. Mason was gasping when we finally got there. At first I didn’t see anything, but then a city bus appeared and narrowly missed a group of tourists. Everyone screamed and got out of the way as the bus driver scrambled at the wheel. I had no idea how this had happened, but somehow the bus driver lost control of the bus. It couldn’t have been Black Thorn since, technically, he was right next to me . . . maybe the bus was just old and had decided it was done? Either way, I had to slow it down. I ducked behind an alley dumpster, and when I came out, I was Phoenix.

“You two,” I said, pointing at both Mason and Ace, “get the people out of the way so I can get something done.”

I ran off before I could get their replies. I trusted Ace would think of something while I tried to deescalate the situation just enough so people weren’t in as much immediate danger, at least until someone actually certified could arrive and finish things. I ran ahead of the bus and mimed for the driver to open the doors. If I was going to stop this thing it had to be from the inside—unlike Spiderman or Superman I don’t exactly have super strength, which put me at a disadvantage for certain disasters, although it did force me to think creatively in a time crunch. That was a useful everyday skill anyway, superhero or not.

At first the driver didn't see me and continued frantically turning the wheel and shifting gears in an attempt to stop the bus, but when he finally did, he opened the doors and I rushed to the other side of the road, my legs poised to jump through the narrow opening. This could either be one of the coolest things I'd ever done, or the thing that got me run over by a bus and finally killed. Either way I was going to try, right?

As the bus sped towards me, I jumped and just barely managed to get a hand onto the railing at the stairs before being whisked back out the door. The wind tugged on my suit and I clung onto the railing while trying to climb the stairs. Once I made it safely in, I saw the bus driver had his foot pressing hard on the break, but it did nothing. I took the wheel and drove us down another street, hoping to get rid of some of the speed with some sharp turns, but the street I'd chosen went downhill and only made it worse. I could barely hear anything over the passengers' screams. Having enough, the bus driver got up and moved to one of the seats just behind the driver's seat and I plopped right into his spot, taking the wheel fully. I focused on the road and furrowed my brow, trying to remember what I'd been taught in drivers ed about this exact situation. Of course, I hadn't really paid much attention, since I figured I would never be in this situation in the first place, and yet here I was. I vowed in this moment never to brush anything like that off again. After racking my brain, I remembered how to stop a car going that fast with no brakes, and I seriously hoped it would work on a bus, which is at least twice as big as a car. I found the signal, honked the horn to warn pedestrians that I was coming, drove onto the sidewalk, and proceeded to pump the brakes. After several tries, I felt the bus start jerking and slowing, so I continued to pump them until the bus finally stopped.

The passengers continued screaming and rushed out of the bus, even going so far as to straight up run away or make a beeline for a taxi or whatever else they could find to get them anywhere else. The bus driver was the last person to get up. He stood beside the seat on shaky legs.

“Thank you, Phoenix. I don’t know what would’ve happened if you weren’t here.” He breathed heavily.

“You should probably go back over what you should do in emergency situations like this. All you had to do was pull over and pump the brakes.”

He nodded and I got up, following him off the bus. He got out his phone and made a call, asking for someone to tow his bus to get the brakes fixed. While he did that, I worked on trying to calm the remaining passengers, helping them locate places to find taxis, or call people to pick them up, or even find somewhere to spend the time while they waited for another bus. Soon Mason and Ace jogged towards the crowd of finally calming citizens, gasping.

“I see it . . . turned out okay,” Mason huffed.

I nodded. “It was easier than I thought, to be honest.” I shrugged. “I’m just glad I listened at all during driver’s ed.”

Mason snorted. “Leave it to you to find some extreme way to prove that stuff is actually worth learning in the first place.”

Ace laughed and looked around.

“How about you change and we get something to eat. All that running burned through the snack we had on the way down,” Ace suggested, motioning with his head towards a nice little restaurant.

I nodded and jogged towards the closest alleyway before meeting them as Brinley at the front of the restaurant. When we walked in a bell dinged and we ordered some food to go, that way we wouldn’t miss out on our meal if any crimes popped up. At least hopefully. I walked out with some chicken tenders and fries, and we walked along the sidewalk chatting happily while we waited for Sims to text us the next location.

“So, how long have you known Brin, Mason?” Ace asked politely.

Mason chewed on his fries thoughtfully.

“Ohh, just a couple years or so, but it feels like I’ve known her all my life,” he replied.

Ace nodded. “So, you two have a special bond then,” he realized.

Mason and I nodded.

“So how long have you two been together?” Mason asked.

Ace and I grinned.

“Uhh, a bit over a month now? It’s hard to tell since so much has been happening.” Ace stared ahead as if he was trying to remember exactly how long it had been.

“I’m glad you two found each other. You seem to work really well together,” Mason noticed.

We both nodded, smiling.

“We’re a pretty good team,” I agreed.

Ace got out his phone and nodded. “Sims got a new crime, but it’s a little way down, by the ocean.”

We took off running, and for a minute I marveled at how a crime could be happening in one place, and in another, it was perfectly peaceful and normal. You could barely tell anything interesting was happening until we reached the crime scene. There, we could clearly see a dock that was in chaos. Men and women were yelling, people were trying to take off on their boats, and one boat seemed to be attempting to sneak away from the scene. I could just see a few cruel-looking faces and some other weird behavior from the men on board. I ducked behind one of the nearest buildings and changed really quick. As soon as one of bystanders saw me running towards the dock, she pointed at me out to the others.

“Phoenix is here! Maybe she can help solve this, since no one else here is willing to make any compromises.” I arrived at the dock, and the woman grabbed my wrist and tugged me towards the large crowd. I wasn’t sure whether to be flattered that they valued my opinion, or a little scared because they were using it as a sort of weapon. She let go of me soon and folded her arms.

“What’s the problem?” I asked with as much confidence as I could muster. I could handle an argument with fist and fire, but diplomacy had never really been my strong suit. My family never really practiced it, so I never did either. I guess what you practice in the house is some of your strongest skills?

“Well,” one of the other women huffed loudly, giving a colder glare than even my dad could muster up to one of the men. I made a quick mental note to be careful with this one.

“Leroy over here thinks that since he found the fishing spot we went to, he should have fifty percent of the catch. But since Myra and I caught it during a storm, we think we should keep the catch and give him fifteen percent of the profit.”

The man I took as Leroy shook his head.

“I told you there was a storm coming! You wouldn’t listen! I told you to wait a few days, but no!” he yelled.

The woman who pulled me over turned as red as a tomato.

“The catches are best right before a storm! They’re all in one place, and highly demanded! If I waited a few days there would be no fish left! Besides, Myra and I anticipated being out of there before the storm came, but it just jumped on us!” she argued.

I groaned and rested my head in my palm for a moment before looking up at them.

“How about you just share your catches and the profits? That should be more than enough for all three of you if the catches are so highly demanded,” I replied, already sick of this conversation. And the suspicious boat was getting away!

The three of them shook their heads before beginning to yell at each other.

“I’m not sharing my catch with a filthy warthog like him!”

“She’ll just steal it all for herself!”

“We don’t have enough for that because of the storm!”

Helplessly, I turned to Mason and Ace.

“Can you handle these imbeciles while I check out that boat over there?” I asked, pointing at the boat that was slowly getting farther and farther away.

They both nodded, although Mason a little reluctantly. I smiled at the people politely.

“I have to go do something really quick, but bounce your ideas off . . . these guys.”

I gave them a little salute because I didn’t know what the heck else to do and ran towards the boat. I didn’t look back to see how well the exchange was going, but I still felt kind of bad for just saying “here ya go,” and dropping it on Mason and Ace like that, but I really had to go. If the boat got much farther, I wouldn’t be

able to catch it or get back. And hey, maybe it was a false alarm? That would make my life easier, but I didn't count on it. The way my luck worked, I might as well just always expect the worst, so then I'd always be prepared.

Once I reached the end of the dock, I jumped and barely scrambled onto the deck before losing my balance and falling—I'm not proud to say, with my limbs flailing—on my face. I got up quickly and brushed myself off before sneaking towards the crewmates, some of whom were having a pretty lively conversation based on their facial expressions and hand gestures. I hid behind one of the machines on the boat and strained to hear them over the noise of the ocean. We were far enough from the dock now that the boat could go at normal speeds.

“We gotta be ready for the cap'n's catch.”

“Why here, though? We're not supposed to be fishing here!”

“Because the cap'n said so. Now, get the machines ready!”

The man who seemed the most sensible out of all of them grumbled something incoherent before grudgingly moving to a machine near me and doing something with a lever and a button. It came to life within a few seconds and he moved to the next one. I kept having to adjust my position to make sure he didn't see me. If I had to, I would use the heat from the motors on the boat to camouflage, but I would rather do that only under extreme circumstances. It was freaky to accidentally walk by a mirror or a reflective object while doing it and not see anything where your reflection should be. It felt unnatural and made me feel too much like a vampire. While other kids hated zombies and witches and ghosts, I couldn't stand vampires for some reason. Ghosts I could handle with some self-control, but if I ever saw anyone dressed up as a vampire near me, I'd be gone in a cold rush of fear-filled adrenaline, and before I knew it, the kid had a black eye or bruised jaw and my mom had a lot of apologizing to do, and every once in a while, the occasional lawsuit. What? I couldn't help it!

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and bring myself back to the present. Now was not the time to go trailing off. As the man drew closer, I continued moving accordingly until I wasn't behind

the machines anymore. All the others had to do was turn around to see me. I tiptoed towards the room where the captain would be steering the ship. Maybe if I could take the wheel and point it back towards the harbor, I could stop them from going out, or at least get some backup. There was something about being on the water that made me feel sickly and a little weak. On solid ground, I could probably take most of the guys on the boat—although I'd get several scrapes in the process, no doubt. I'm not invincible—but I barely felt like I could take on a few. I nimbly climbed up a ladder that led to one of the higher decks and quickly found the captain.

The door was already open. I slipped in and immediately found out why. It was so stuffy in there it was hard to breathe. How the heck had they managed to make the room so unbearable? Had they left it baking with the door closed for a few weeks? Even I felt uncomfortable in this heat, although probably less so than most people. I could feel a thin blanket of sweat forming on my brow, and I had the beginnings of an urge to tear off my suit. I continued forward until I was right behind the captain. I unsheathed one of my daggers carefully and slowly raised it to his head. I watched his body stiffen right before I slammed the handle of the dagger sideways onto his head. His body went limp, and I dragged him to the side of the room so he wouldn't be in the way. He was a fairly skinny man so I wasn't surprised it had been so easy to knock him out, but I was still expecting a little more fight. At least that meant I got to save my energy?

I took the wheel and carefully turned the boat back towards the harbor. My nerves were in knots and my hair stood on end in high alert. This was too easy. There was no way my luck was this good for once. There had to be something I was missing. I heard loud, angry steps on the ladder and glanced behind me to find a burly, sunburned man climbing onto the landing.

He scowled at me. "What do you think you're doing?" he growled, stalking towards me. He glanced at the captain on the floor.

"And what did you do with my first mate?" the man asked incredulously. Wait a second . . .

I gulped. “Are you by any chance . . . the captain of this ship?” I asked hesitantly. My voice shook slightly.

He grunted. “If I’m not the captain of this ship, you’re not Phoenix.”

Well, CRAP!

My legs bent underneath me on instinct when the man tried to punch me. I stepped to the side and threw a punch aimed at his face, but he blocked me and got me in the gut. I felt like I was going to vomit. I clenched my jaw and took a few breaths. I put my arm over my gut and he struck my face. I fell on my butt and the world spun a little. I felt like a feeble child. The man grunted.

“I expected more of a fight from the one and only Phoenix. Guess you aren’t all they talked you up to be.” He crouched in front of me so our eyes were level.

“You’re just a skinny girl. And not that old either, pushing your nose into people’s business and trying to fix things that don’t need fixing. People can figure it out by themselves.”

The captain got on his feet and started to steer the ship back towards its original route. I closed my eyes and pulled some heat from the air. I grimaced and felt the energy draining from me, but I didn’t stop. Some hollow place inside me ached. I stored the flame in there and only drew on small parts of it, looking around the room while making a plan. My eyes settled on the wheel. I pretended to lunge at the man and touched the wheel for a few seconds before he pushed me off and back against the wall. I smiled in satisfaction when he tried to touch the wheel and jerked his hand back, grimacing. He turned to me.

“What did you do with my wheel?” He asked harshly.

“I’m just a skinny, little girl. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I shrugged, making sure my voice sounded as calm and steady as I could make it.

He stalked towards me and lifted me off the ground by my throat. Flashes of my last battle with Black Thorn flashed before my eyes before I shoved them away. Focus, Brinley!

“Don’t you give me attitude, girly. Or I might just remove that hood and that mask and put you in your place.”

He left me dangling for a few seconds before he let me go. By then my face had turned purple. I gasped and gagged. I managed a raspy cough before trying again, keeping my hands on the floor as if I was still recovering from the choking. I let the flame seep into the floor and watched the flame proceed on a path towards the captain's feet. Once it got there, his shoes sizzled and smoked until he jumped and shoved his shoes off, which only made the burning worse on his now bare feet. I was trying not to hurt him too badly since he was still a human, but I was getting to the point where I realized the only way I'd be able to get off this boat was if I burned him.

He came at me again so I flicked a small flame at him and continued to do so while he flinched and swatted at different places on his clothes. I allowed him to have a small break while I moved away from the wall. He ran towards me and I flicked again a few times, rapidly moving away. I was having to use a little more flame each time, but that was fine. Just so long as I got out of there soon.

I gave him another break when I was finally in front of the door. His face was nearly purple as he ran at me. I rolled out of the way, and he barreled out the door, falling off the platform. I struggled up on shaking legs and groaned as I closed the heavy door. I melted the locks together and pulled the flame away just in time for him to have climbed back up the ladder and start slamming his fist into the door, yelling at me and using words that even I wouldn't repeat. What a captain.

I whipped towards the wheel and turned the boat back. The harbor was almost out of sight. I pushed one of the levers once the boat was facing the right direction and I felt it pick up speed. The captain wouldn't stop trying to use brute force to open the door. I heard some metal clang against the floor. I glanced back and rushed towards the door to remelt the piece that had broken before returning to the wheel. I wanted to make the boat go faster, but it was already speeding. The harbor steadily approached. We were almost within reach of the harbor when the engine turned off. I turned the key a few times but nothing happened. The boat drifted slowly towards the harbor and I could see Ace and Mason pointing

people at different things, telling them what to do. They knotted a rope together and threw it at a post on the deck. They pulled and I watched as the boat bumped into the dock. It nearly jarred me off my feet, but that was okay.

I raced towards the door and melted the bits so I could get out. I slid down the ladder and ran to the edge of the boat. I heard a grunt behind me right when I jumped off. I already felt a little better. In mid-air, I spun to face the man, and in the midst of panic-filled adrenaline, sucked in a breath and blew out fire. The captain yelled and backed away. I somehow landed on the dock, whipped around, grabbed my friends, and ran while some of the people in the arguing group called the police. As soon as we were a few streets over and in an alley, I let myself breathe. I leaned against the wall and felt my heart pound.

My mouth ached from the flamethrower move, and I could barely swallow. I closed my eyes and changed from my suit before turning to Mason and Ace.

“Let's go get something to drink,” I croaked.

Ace nodded and we followed him to a small store where he bought us some water. I chugged the whole bottle in a matter of seconds. That was the best water I've ever had. I felt a little sick again briefly before it passed. Why did I keep feeling sick? It only happened when I was near or drinking water. Maybe it had something to do with the fire, since I hadn't been like this before the fire. Everyone knows fire and water doesn't mix, so maybe that had something to do with it. As far as I knew the fire couldn't be quenched, so why was it uneasy around water? It was natural for fire to make water evaporate or for water to put out fire, but the fire in me wasn't exactly natural as far as I knew. Who knew, maybe it was? I had no idea of the origins of the power of which I'd managed to be worthy. I heaved a long sigh.

“I think that's enough crime for one day.”

My body agreed with that sentiment. The fire in the empty area was burning out, taking my strength with it. I could barely stand.

“We should hurry if we want to catch the next bus,” Ace replied.

Mason sighed. “As soon as I get back home, I’m taking a nap. Arguing with those people for half an hour left my brain mush. You might have to elbow me to keep me awake on the bus.”

I elbowed him hard and he winced.

“Still with the sharp elbows!” he exclaimed in a mockingly high voice.

I raised an eyebrow. “You asked for it!”

“Yeah—on the bus!” Mason replied, although a second later all three of us burst into laughter. And for a moment it was as if we’d all been best friends our entire lives. I felt a sudden wave of affection for both of them. I could never express how eternally grateful I was for them both despite all the hard things we’d been through together. I filled with a desperate hope that we would continue to go through the ups and downs of life together, as a trio.

CHAPTER - 22

NOW OR NEVER

I let out an audible sigh of relief while I watched my dad walk into security at the airport with his bags and suitcase. He'd be gone for a while again, so no more torture. That had felt like the longest week of my entire life, and I've had a lot of long weeks. As soon as we exited the doors, we all practically jumped back in the car and drove right away. Mom's face was as white as her knuckles as she gripped the wheel, while Ada texted furiously to hide the fact that her hands were shaking. I could tell because she never texted that much at once, and also, whenever she had to pause, her phone shook visibly. Zach was slumped in the back and barely noticeable, while an angry fire ate up at my insides. It had seemed like he would never leave, and he just yammered on about French "high society" where he was going to spend at least several months doing work and enjoying his life without us.

When Mom dropped us off at school, Ada and I stopped at the office to get late slips before heading off to class. I was just down the hall from my classroom when I heard a huge bang somewhere nearby, and within seconds, kids were being evacuated from the school. I found Ace and we both snuck out of the crowd and into an empty classroom.

"We need to get there, now!" I closed my eyes and became Phoenix. I had a feeling deep down that I had to save him today or it would be too late. I wouldn't let that happen, even if it killed me.

Once I heard the last people exit the school, I sprinted out of the classroom. Ace raced beside me, looking just as agitated as I felt. We found him in seconds, panting a bit. Thorn had the whole hallway flooded in gray and black fog. His tentacles dragged behind him, and I could barely see any of Mason in his eyes. I watched as Mason flickered in and out of view.

“Keep fighting, Mason! For me!” I yelled.

Thorn laughed. “He’s almost dead. There’s nothing you can do about it. Once he’s gone, I have full control, and you will cease to exist. Along with your boyfriend there.”

Even his voice sounded deeper, and it seemed to echo through the hallway. Definitely not Mason’s voice. I took a firm stance, threw my arms up towards him and flame-threwed him hard.

Thorn blocked the fire with a raise of his arms as shadows came to his command and ran at me. I shoved Ace out of the way as hard as I could and just barely managed to dodge Thorn in time. He stumbled down the hallway and turned on his heel to face me. I heard Ace hit the wall, but I didn’t dare check on him. Thorn rushed at me again. I twirled to the side, planted my feet, and shot a fireball at him. It hit his back and he yelled, turning to face me again. I raised an eyebrow.

“Are we bullfighting or what? Do I need to get a red cloth or something?” I asked with a smirk.

Thorn growled and sent an inky ball at me. I twisted out of the way just in time. It hit the wall behind me and left a black scar. I stared at the wall for slightly too long. Thorn lunged at me and knocked me onto the ground with a savage growl. He punched me in the face and I saw stars. I moved my head when he shot another punch, and again and again until I finally got a punch in, nailing him in the nose and the jaw. That gave me just enough freedom to wiggle a little room for myself, raising my feet to his chest, and in a swift movement, I kicked him off me and launched myself off the ground.

I landed standing on his chest. With a grunt I sent a bolt of flame down to my foot and stamped as hard as I could on his chest. He gritted his teeth at the smell of burning flesh and the pain I imagined

he was feeling before pulling on my leg and yanking me back to the ground. He sent some black up my leg which the fire promptly burned off.

I rolled to my feet right when Thorn twisted back onto his, and I punched him with a flaming fist. The first hit, I nailed him in the gut; the second hit, the neck; but the third hit, he caught my fist. I watched him grow shadowy vines around his wrist to protect his—Mason's—skin from my burning flesh. We glared at each other, both pushing against the other in a test of strength. I shot another punch at him and nailed him hard in the gut with the flames. He doubled over, and I kned him as hard as I could, then kicked him in the face.

Black blood trailed down his skin from wounds on his face. He tried to melt into the ground, but I stomped my foot and mercilessly shot a column of flame right where he was and blasted his burning body at the ceiling. When he crashed down, he laboriously got to his feet and shot a geyser of ink at me. I watched at that moment as Mason's light went out completely and didn't come back. My eyes widened as tears pooled in my eyes and cascaded down my cheeks. The ink seemed to come in slow motion as the bubbling ferocity of anger took over. I gave him my coldest glare and sent a geyser of flame back at him, my arms shaking but holding the flame steady, keeping the ink at bay. I pushed harder and harder, putting my anger into it, making the flame so hot it seared the objects around it. We both screamed, putting our whole bodies into it. I physically pushed forward, walking slowly towards him, and the flame consumed the black, nipping at his hands. He gave an agonized, guttural scream, and he pulled his hands back, cradling them. He fell to the floor. They were . . . I forced my focus away from his hands to keep the image out of my mind. I let my own hands drop, gasped for air, and then lifted my arms to form an impenetrable cage of fire that surrounded us. I stalked towards him. My sight edged with blazing red as I began to lose control.

Thorn didn't get up, just watched me approach him, although he glared at me. The tears continued to cascade down my face, but in the rush of the fire, I barely noticed them. I hardly noticed the

scratches and bruises and how cold my body was despite the fire in my blood. Nothing mattered. I stared down at Black Thorn, completely numb, as I raised my hand over him and tugged heat from the ground where he lay. I covered him in it like a blanket. I was deaf to his screams. After a few seconds, they stopped, and I got rid of the blanket of fire. Mason laid lifeless before me, burned bad enough it took me a moment to recognize him. The fire instantly drew back as I regained control. The cage of flames swished away along with my suit, and as Brinley, I fell to my knees uselessly as I stared at his body. I heard heartbreaking wailing and realized from the harsh contractions in my chest and opened mouth that they came from me. Hysteria soon took over, and I laid on the ground sobbing, my body wracking from the pain of the sobs. Steam came off of me and the fire stayed tucked in my core, where it belonged. I couldn't access it. Black fringed my vision, but I managed to breathe long enough to stumble away from the scene and call 9-1-1. Halfway through their questioning, I blacked out.



I woke up groaning and in a daze. Mom, Zach and Ada stood around me and talked worriedly. Once they saw I was awake, they all grinned. Zach took my hand and Ada pushed aside a stray hair from my face. I sat up and winced. My entire body felt a little burnt on the inside. It took a moment for the memories to come back. I stared wide-eyed into nothing as they seemed to play before me like a movie, vivid and unmistakable. I shivered and my gut tugged at the memory of Mason's burned body. I had just enough time to lean over the bed before I wretched. I groaned and laid back down for a moment before bolting back up.

"Where's Mason?" I asked. I didn't care how hoarse my voice was or how disgusting I felt—I needed to see him.

"Mason's in the hospital in urgent care. They won't let anyone in—"

“We’ll see about that!” I grumbled, feeling a burst of fire through my veins. It gave me the strength I needed to get out of bed, throw some shoes on, grab my cracked phone, and walk steadily down the stairs and out the door. I got into Mom’s car and was just driving away with it when she yelled for me to come back. I would probably be grounded for a few months because of this, but right now, I was much more worried about more pressing things than stealing my mom’s car to go to the hospital. I sped all the way there, and somehow, I didn’t run into any cops, which was strange. They must have all been at the school to try and help clean up the mess Thorn left. They didn’t know yet that he was dead, so they would probably put up more precautions in case of another attack. Well, that was probably a good idea since this was New York City and you apparently never knew what would happen, but still.

As soon as I got to the hospital, I parked and ran straight in and up to the receptionist's desk. I slammed my hand down as hard as I could to get her attention.

“What room is Mason MacDonald in?” I asked.

The receptionist scrolled through something on her computer.

“Uhh, room two hundred forty-six, but you can’t—”

“Okay, thanks!” I sprinted away from the desk before anyone could stop me and vaulted up the stairs two at a time. I knew I was pushing it considering I’d just been puking and stuck in bed, but I knew what I needed to do and where I needed to be, and I knew there was no one on earth who could possibly stop me. I was even prepared to use the fire if it came down to that, but I didn’t think it would.

I found the room and burst in, breaking the lock on the door and allowing the warm summer air to cascade in with me. They were shocking Mason with an AED and applying CPR while his heart failed. I ran to the bed.

“What? How did she get in here?” one of the doctors asked.

Another shrugged. “I don’t know. Get her out!”

A few other doctors tried to get a grip on me but I twisted out of their grasp and turned on my heel to face them, arms crossed. I wore a mad glint in my eye.

“No one—” I gasped and swallowed before continuing. “No one is taking me from his side.” I pointed a shaking arm at Mason.

The doctors sighed after a minute. “Fine. You can stay,” one of them relented. “But you have to stay in that seat right there and be quiet until we’re done.”

I nodded and plopped down on the indicated seat. I was grateful they’d made me sit anyway. I wasn’t sure how much longer my legs would have been able to keep me up, considering how hard they were shaking now that I’d sat down. The fire-fueled adrenaline that had coursed through me moments before backed off and faded, leaving me weak and cold on the chair as I watched helplessly while the doctors desperately tried to save Mason from the death I’d forced onto him. I heard Mason’s voice in my head. *Better to sacrifice one for millions than millions for one.* I shook my head. It may be selfish and a desire unworthy of Phoenix entirely, but I’d honestly rather sacrifice millions if it meant having Mason back. But one look at all the innocent faces I’d seen as Phoenix over the past few months, and I knew Mason was right. The part of me that would do anything for my city over myself was far more powerful, no matter how much it killed me on the inside. I only hoped I could be forgiven for what I’d done. If the police found out—despite the fact that Mason was Black Thorn and I am Phoenix—there was a chance I’d go to juvie or prison or something for murder. I knew I didn’t really have to worry too much about that since there wasn’t any evidence, and it had been either me or Black Thorn, but there is always a chance. I also knew Mason had wanted me to choose me over him, so that’s what I’d done in a moment of desperation.

I couldn’t keep some of the tears back as the doctors tried CPR and the AED a few more times before giving up. One of them turned to me with a grave and sorrowful expression.

“I’m so sorry. You’re friend . . . he’s dead.”

The news slowed down the entire world and dropped heavily into my chest, burying into the numbness. I stared at Mason’s body as if in a trance. I slumped on the chair, but I couldn’t look away. I knew the image of his dead body was imprinting itself into my brain, ready to haunt me for the rest of my life. I’d done my job, but at

what cost? I never want to wear that suit again. It gave me power I no longer felt ready for. I knew this was a possibility, but that hadn't been able to prepare me for the shock or the grief of watching it happen. I just hoped that wherever Mason was now, that he was happier than he'd ever managed to be here with me.

"We'll leave you alone to say your goodbyes," a doctor said quietly.

He waved a hand and everyone followed him out. The last one closed the door and left me in an empty, silent room with the dead body of my best friend. Woodenly, I walked over to Mason and sat on the side of his bed. I laid against his side, still warm and almost like he was still alive and ready to wake up and tease me for crying over him. I let my sobs go. The doctors came back all too soon. In my desperation, I flung my hand and melted the locks closed. The doctors banged against the door but couldn't get in. I scalded the handle and heard them walk away, probably to get some help with the door, but I'd make sure they couldn't get in. I needed more time.

They tried for hours to get it, but I would weld it back together whenever they got close to breaking in. Finally, they seemed to give up for the night. I fell asleep sobbing at Mason's side.



I emerged from my dreamless, black sleep wondering what woke me up. Then I heard it . . . soft footsteps. I saw the door slightly ajar. Had the doctors decided to try again so late?

No, it was someone else. I could barely see a shape of someone a little taller than me through the darkness. I would have lit a fire in my hand to see better, but I was too tired. I felt the fire flowing from me into Mason's body to keep it warm. Why . . .?

The figure approached Mason. I still couldn't see who it was even when they were right in front of me. Something about them was . . . familiar. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but for some reason, I felt like I knew them.

They placed their hands over Mason's heart and I watched in rapture as water appeared and spread over Mason. My body instinctively edged back from it as cold terror clung to my tired frame. It glowed slightly for a few seconds. I heard the person grunt before Mason gasped and began breathing. He didn't open his eyes, but he was breathing! And the burns were somehow gone, mostly. I was torn between thanking the stranger and yelling at them when they suddenly disappeared. I was alone with Mason again. I fell back to sleep moments later, and when I woke up again, doctors surrounded us, baffled by how alive Mason was. He was sitting up and smiling down at me.

“Good morning, sleepyhead.”

I threw myself on him and hugged him so tight I was worried I'd kill him again.

“Okay you can let go—I can't breathe!” he rasped.

I did and he panted a little.

He smiled once he'd caught his breath. “It's good to see you too.”

EPILOGUE

The water spit me out beside a lake I'd known as a child. The lake had been one my parents used to take me to before we'd moved away. Maybe if we hadn't moved . . .

I shook my head to clear those thoughts. No. Thinking like that, winding myself round and round, would lead me to near insanity. I couldn't afford to do that now.

I stayed on my back where the water had left me for a while, just looking up at the stars. I hadn't stopped to look at them in years. New York was too much of a busy place to do that without traveling out of the city a ways, and still, it would be hard to see them because of all the garbage and pollution in the area. I could feel the water hated that. It longed to flow free and clean again, like it had long ago. I had no idea why it had chosen me. I'd been drawn to the orb when I'd found the place, and the water had told me what to do instantly. Save Mason. It had directed me from there, but now I had nowhere else to go. I didn't feel like going home. I just wanted to relax somewhere comforting for a while.

Warm memories of my family playing in the lake on hot summer days filled my mind and lulled me to the edge of sleep. I wondered if I could just stay here forever. But no. The water tugged at me to get up.

I stumbled onto my feet with a groan and looked out over the lake again. I flexed my hands and felt the waves going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth according to my movements.

I felt strangely calm and at ease in the pleasant night air despite the chaotic day I'd had.

“Can I go back home now?” I whispered into the night.

No. You need to practice. Get more control and stamina, a voice directed.

I groaned. Exhaustion clawed at my brain, but I kept going, practicing relentlessly until the sun rose and I felt much more in control despite the exhaustion. It was then that the voice of the water finally introduced itself.

Now you may go home, the phoenix allowed. I knew why it had done that. If I didn't have control . . .

The water tugged me into the ground and I landed in my bathtub at home. I staggered out of the room and into bed, falling asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I was playing on dangerous ground by just existing . . . especially, right beside Phoenix.