

*a paranormal erotic novella*

# Trapped

**SHAE SANDERS**

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# AUTHORS NOTE

This is a novella, which means it's shorter than a traditional novel. Also, please be advised that this story contains profanity and very explicit sex. It is also not a romance (no HEA).

*Content Warning: murder, mild knife play, dark paranormal elements*

Love, Shae

“There is one spectacle grander than the sea, that is the sky;  
there is one spectacle grander than the sky, that is the interior  
of the soul.”- VICTOR HUGO

# CHAPTER ONE

*I HATE HALLOWEEN.*

Phoenix Brown shuffled along the sidewalk with a Starbucks cup of hot chocolate—with caramel drizzle—in one hand and three file folders in the other. Everywhere in the plaza she looked, there were pumpkins or paper ghosts or little black witch's hats.

Rayford, Texas took Halloween very seriously.

She rolled her eyes and upped her pace. If Halloween had a Grinch equivalent, it was Phoenix. The way she saw it, no good had ever come from this stupid holiday. Candy gives you cavities and scares give you anxiety.

No, thank you.

She was off today—her salon was closed on Mondays—and if she had her way, she'd have stayed in the house all day. But there was a pressing matter she had to attend to so she darted in to grab some paperwork from the office.

It was no fun playing catchup after missing the deadline to pay her quarterly taxes. It wasn't like her at all; she'd always

been organized and on top of her business. But it was quite fitting that her financial life mirrored that of her emotional life. Phoenix was in shambles.

As she headed toward the crowded parking lot her shop shared with the other tenants in the plaza, she mentally cycled through the papers she'd gathered to take to her accountant. She'd just lowered her gaze to the manila file folders when she ran right into someone.

"Ow!" she yelled as the top folder flew out of her hand. She immediately went to her knee to grab the loose papers but she came down harder than she anticipated. "Fuck!" she cried as pain coursed through her knee and up her leg.

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry, ma. Are you okay?"

She looked up and into the face of the most handsome man she'd ever seen. Suddenly, and predictably, she felt self-conscious of her appearance. The messy bun, wrinkled sweats, and Nike slides just weren't giving what she needed them to give at this moment. Not when this man looked like he'd just stepped off the set of a movie. A movie about *sex*.

Something she hadn't had lately.

"Can you help me get my stuff?" she asked from her crouched position on the sidewalk.

"Of course." He quickly knelt beside her and gathered her papers in his hands, giving her a close-up of all the fineness that was he. Smooth dark skin, sinewy muscles peeking out at her from under the collar of his t-shirt, and the darkest, most



piercing eyes she'd ever seen in her life. "That was my fault, sweetheart. I wasn't watching where I was going."

A chill shot through her at the word *sweetheart*. She quickly retorted, "Clearly."

He stood. "Here, grab my hand."

Phoenix looked at the handsome stranger's outstretched hand, then his face, before placing her hand in his. His skin felt rough to the touch, but something else caught her attention. Something strange.

His palm felt hot, as if there were embers burning just beneath his skin. Her curious stare provided no answers; veiny, slightly rough, big knuckles...it looked just as a hand should.

It was puzzling.

He pulled her to her feet in one smooth motion but once she was upright, he made no move to release her hand. She pulled slightly and he laughed before letting her go.

*This guy is weird.*

"Where you off to, pretty lady?" he asked.

Despite his strangeness, Phoenix made no move to get away from the man. In fact, she felt a strange pull *toward* him, a tickling in her belly that radiated in his direction.

"I...I'm going home to change. My best friend is dragging me to this Halloween thing."

*Why did I tell him that?*

He nodded, his dark eyes searching her face. “That’s what’s up. Why you say drag, though? You don’t wanna go?”

She swallowed hard and told herself to stop telling this stranger all her business. “I hate Halloween.”

He smiled. A knowing smile, as if she’d just confirmed something for him. Then he stood stone still and said nothing. Phoenix stared, because that was all she could do.

He was gorgeous. Unfairly so. But his beauty held a hint of danger, sucking her in like quicksand. The urge to run was strong but she didn’t move. Or *couldn’t* move. She wasn’t sure which.

He bit his lip and grinned like he was enjoying her discomfort. Like the spider to the fly...

“So you hate Halloween. Why, is that? You scary?”

She snapped out of her trance long enough to answer, “No I just...something bad happened to me last year and...anyway, I need to go. Have a...good one.”

“You need to go?”

It was a challenge. A dare. Which she was going to lose, because she still couldn’t make herself leave. Her feet literally would not budge from where she stood. But worse than that, her eyes were glued to his face. It was as if she were under a spell.

“I need to go,” she repeated quietly. “I have to...go.”

He didn't say a word and he didn't move, but after a few seconds, Phoenix physically felt the pulling stop. The sensation left her breathless and relieved, like she'd just stepped off a roller coaster.

“I—I'm going now. Happy Halloween.”

“Alright, yeah. You, too, beautiful.”

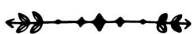
*Beautiful.* She hadn't heard that in a while. She smiled as she turned to walk away. What an odd encounter, she thought. But she'd enjoyed it. He was certainly nice to look at, but it was beyond that. He'd made her *feel* something, though she had no idea what it was or how he did it.

As she walked toward her car, she felt heat hitting her back. Like two laser beams were shining directly onto her shirt.

*That's not the sun,* she thought.

She shook the feeling off as best she could but her curiosity got the best of her. Just before she rounded the corner to get to her car, she looked back.

He was gone.



“Am I dressed okay?” Phoenix asked, pulling at the hem of her short black leather skirt.

Faye looked her over as they walked up the busy street toward their destination. “That depends. What are you supposed to be?”

“A witch, I guess.”

“Well, you didn’t need a costume for that.”

“Shut up,” Phoenix muttered, eyeing her best friend’s nurse costume. Faye didn’t even try to sex it up. Just the plain white uniform and cap with some white Crocs.

Faye had always been the pure one.

“What even *is* this?” Phoenix grouched. “First you said we’re going to a haunted mansion, then you said scavenger hunt, but the flyer you sent me said costume party. What’s the deal?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. But whatever it is, isn’t it better than sitting at home thinking about...him?”

Phoenix hated it when Faye was right. Which she usually was.

“Alright. I’m game, I guess,” she said begrudgingly. “And thank you for getting me out of the house.”

“You’re very welcome. I can’t believe you finally came with me. You never wanna hang out with me on Halloween.”

“No ma’am, you’re not about to lie on me. You never invite me!”

“The devil is a liar. I always ask you and you always say no.”

“Because I hate everything about this damn day. And why do people like being scared, anyway? That’s psychopath shit. Wanting to be scared.”

“It’s not that you *wanna* be, it’s just...I don’t know. It’s the thrill. Did you read any of the books I suggested?”

“No, because they’re scary.”

“Well, I just started reading this really interesting one. More creepy than scary. And it has black people in it.”

“I’m listening.”

“It’s about these people called soulsnatchers. They feed on the souls of their victims.” She laughed and tossed a handful of braids over her shoulder. “I’m not doing it justice, I know. But you might like it. There’s this one guy in it that—”

“Girl, bye. They eat people’s souls? And that’s not scary?”

But Faye was no longer paying attention. Instead, she was craning her neck to see over the hill on their right side. She was fidgeting, all excited and eager like a kid on, well, Halloween.

As soon as they rounded the corner, Phoenix understood why.

A mansion loomed large above them, ornate and grotesque. Its stately columns were trapped in the clutches of green moss. Twin spires stretched aggressively toward the sky while the windows stared out at them like eyes. Winking eyes leering at all the unsuspecting victims headed toward the house. To Phoenix, it was where Dracula, Frankenstein, Freddy, Jason, and all their murderous friends hung out. She shuddered and pulled at her skirt.

“That place looks creepy.”

“I know!” Faye said, clapping her hands together. “You ready to have some fun?”

Phoenix tossed her best friend a skeptical look. It wasn't that she didn't trust Faye—the two had been close for over ten years. Faye was the *only* person she trusted. It was just...she was uncomfortable. Uneasy.

Scared.

But she vowed to push through, because the alternative—sitting at home knee deep in Snickers wrappers, crying over her ex—was not the business.

“Okay, let's go. But bitch, if I die in there, I'ma come back and haunt the shit out of you.”

## CHAPTER TWO

A HANDSOME WHITE MAN in a tuxedo stood on a raised platform in the large foyer. He raised his hands to quiet the crowd. “I don’t know what you’ve heard but I can tell you that all of it is wrong,” the man said to laughter. “Or maybe it’s right.” He looked around like they were all part of a conspiracy. “That remains to be seen.”

Phoenix looked around her. “Um, Faye? Have you noticed there’s not many black folks in here?”

Faye scanned the crowd. “Not until you just said it.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

Faye shrugged. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

Phoenix wondered where the rest of her skinfolk were at. She vividly remembered crying her way through a haunted house when she was six or so, led by her big brother Patrick. There were plenty of black kids there that day. Did they grow up and lose the love of spooky things? Or did Faye just pick the wrong haunted mansion?

That was probably it.

A man passed by in the hallway—a *black* man, so he immediately caught Phoenix’s eye. She did a double-take; the man looked like her accidental run-in from that morning. But he was gone as quick as he came, leaving her unable to verify her hunch.

The tuxedoed man was speaking again.

“So yes, this is a haunted mansion. And you are tasked with navigating all the things that go bump in the night in order to find all the items on your list. Team up as you see fit, but only one team will win the prize. Ten thousand dollars. Go forth, my little ghouls, and search this house. But be careful; it’s big, it’s shadowy, and there are traps. Enter the wrong room and you may never get out.”

The word *out* echoed loudly, startling several people in the crowd. But Phoenix heard nothing. She was still stuck on the ten thousand dollar part. She looked at Faye and smiled. “Alright, I’m in. What’s our team name?”

Faye frowned as she read the paper. “This doesn’t look hard at all. Oh, and our name is... The Sexy Beasts.”

“Why are you so lame?”

“Shut up,” Faye said, laughing. “Ready to start?”

“Is there no bar in this place?”

“Yeah, next to the door when we came in. You didn’t see it?”

“No. I’m gonna go. You want anything?”



“Yeah, grab me a lemon drop.”

“You always copy me!” Phoenix joked as she walked away. Lemon drops were *her* drink. At least they *were*, until last Halloween when she threw hers in Dante’s face. Slapped him, too. But that was then. This was now, and right now, she was thirsty. She was gonna have her favorite drink for the first time in a year. Because fuck Dante.

After dodging the costumed partygoers in her path, Phoenix was just a few steps away from the bar when she saw him again. The man. This time, he was walking away. She could only see his back but that seemed to be enough. It was him. Had to be. And if it wasn’t, he had the most accurate doppelganger on this earth.

But why would he be *here*?

The bartenders, all dressed as storm troopers, for some reason, were efficient. With a lemon drop in each hand, Phoenix made her way through the crowded hall and back to her best friend. Faye was busy studying the scavenger hunt list.

“Here you go,” Phoenix said at the drink handoff. “Do you have a strategy yet?”

“Almost.”

She took a sip. “Something weird just happened to me.”

That got Faye’s attention. “What happened?”

“I saw this guy...I think it’s the same guy I bumped into this morning. When I was at the bar, it was the second time I’d

seen him here. I think.”

Faye’s eyebrows went up. “Is he cute?”

“The guy from this morning was, yeah. And *so sexy*.” She fanned her face dramatically. “He made me feel some things I ain’t felt in a minute.”

Faye’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, well I hope it *is* him. It’s way past time you got some dick. The inside of your pussy ain’t nothin’ but moss, dust, and cobwebs.”

“Moss? The other two, I get, but why my pussy gotta have moss in it?”

“I don’t know. You know I just be sayin’ stuff.” Faye drank half of her cocktail. “But if you do get some, be careful. You know how you do.”

“Rude.”

Faye’s face immediately softened. “Sorry. I didn’t mean—I’m just saying, you get caught up too easily.”

Phoenix pulled at her skirt. “Let’s just win this money. What’s the first clue?”

Sensing the sex conversation was over, Faye glanced at the scavenger hunt handout. “Okay, the clues start off easy and get progressively harder. We should—.”

A low-budget Catwoman bumped into Faye from behind.

“Excuse me! So sorry!” the woman said. Faye, always polite, just nodded and waved her on her way before turning

her attention back to the paper in her hand. Phoenix always admired that about her friend. Always calm, always amenable.

Phoenix was the type to pop off.

“The first clue is: ‘I live in the kitchen and you can’t eat me up. But Witchie, our little black cat, just can’t get enough.’ Oh, that’s easy. Cat food.”

Phoenix shook her head in admiration. “See, this is why we’re a team.”

“Because I come up with the answers?”

“Exactly.” Phoenix downed the rest of her lemon drop and scrunched her nose up at the aftertaste. She hadn’t noticed it at first but now, after that last big gulp, it was there, coating the back of her throat. And it was pungent.

“Does your drink taste weird?” she asked.

Faye frowned and shook her head. “No. Why, yours does? What does it taste like?”

“I don’t know. Just...*off*. Shit. I hope nobody put something in it.”

“Were you watching it the whole time?”

“After the storm trooper mixed it. I didn’t watch what he was doing *while* he mixed it. I didn’t think I needed to.”

Faye looked over toward the bar, then back at Phoenix. “I’m sure it’s fine. But let me know if you start feeling woozy. Or sleepy. Or horny.”

“I hate you.”

“Same. Let’s go find this cat food.”

Phoenix followed behind, acutely aware of her every footstep. She was waiting to trip, or feel dizzy, or pass out, but there were no strange feelings, and the aftertaste had faded already. She felt silly for thinking there was something wrong with her drink.

There *was* something wrong with *her*, although she couldn’t figure out the cause. Ever since she left her office, she’d been feeling slightly fuzzy. Sluggish. Like she was moving underwater, but the feeling wasn’t severe enough to make her think she was ill. It was almost imperceptible; the kind of quiet oddity that makes you wonder if you’re imagining it.

Something was off.

A giant grizzly bear jumped out in front of her and roared.

“Ahhhhhh!” she screamed, her heart pounding as if it was trying to escape her chest. Faye whirled around and slapped the grizzly bear in the face/mask, so light it probably just made the person inside laugh.

“Don’t do that!” Faye yelled. “Run up on my friend again and see what happens!”

Once her heart returned to its resting rate and her fear subsided, Phoenix quietly giggled at Faye and the angry glare that lingered on her face as she watched the bear amble away to find another victim.

“Faye, you’re my ride or die.”

“That’s right.” She looked her friend over. “You okay? If I had known there would be jump scares, I would have warned you.”

“I’m good. It’s kind of funny now that I’m still alive.”

Faye chuckled. “Yeah. You should have seen your face.”

“Whatever. Let’s go win this money.”

Faye nodded. “Okay but first, let’s agree. Just cuz we’re around all these white folks doesn’t mean we have to move like them. Horror movie rule: we stick together. Splitting up means death. I mean, you know. Not *actual* death.”

“I got you,” Phoenix assured, laughing. “We stick together at all times.”

The two resumed their journey through the stately mansion, and just before they reached the kitchen, Phoenix saw the man again. This time from the front.

It was *definitely* him.

She was speechless. Her mouth felt tacky and fused as if someone had shoved a heaping spoonful of peanut butter inside. Her heart raced as she tried, and failed, to speak, and when the man locked eyes with her, a creepy smile spread across his face. It was as if he knew, and he seemed to be enjoying her discomfort.

But as quickly as he came, he was gone, and instantly, she was able to speak again.

“That was him,” she mumbled, but it was a useless endeavor. The man was a phantom. She was beginning to wonder if she was hallucinating his appearance.

Maybe there had been something in her drink after all.

“What’d you say?” Faye called over her shoulder.

She sighed. “Nothing.”

Team Sexy Beasts retrieved the cat food—just one morsel—from the giant pantry off the kitchen before moving on to the next clue. Phoenix barely heard Faye read it, she was so distracted.

“Snap a picture of me and you’ll see the light. But you can’t move quicker than me, try as you might.” Faye waited a beat. “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah.” Phoenix shook her head to clear the cobwebs. “Take a picture and see the light...um...the sun?”

Faye laughed. “Girl. I know you’re smart but damn.”

“Sorry. I’m distracted. I saw that guy again.”

“Why didn’t you point him out?” Faye’s eyes scanned the crowd.

“I tried, but...I couldn’t get the words out before he disappeared.”

“Well, we’ll probably run into him again.”

“Maybe. Something about him is weird, Faye. And I feel weird just being here.”

“It’s Halloween. It’s supposed to feel weird.” She took her bag off her shoulder and handed it to Phoenix. “Hold this, I need to find my phone.”

Phoenix put the bag on her shoulder. “Oh! I got it,” she said. “A mirror.”

“Mirror?” Faye asked as she bent down the rummage through the contents of her purse.

“Yeah. The flash from the camera is the light. And when you move around in the mirror, you can’t move faster than your reflection.”

“Wow.” Having found her phone, Faye stood upright. “Okay, so you *are* still smart.”

Smart or not, Phoenix’s heart was no longer in this game. Her larger, more pressing concern was the handsome stranger and his now frequent appearances. The idea that he could be following her was nagging at her because on the one hand, it was creepy. But on the other hand, he was So. Damn. *Fine*. And although she was deeply unsettled by him, somewhere in the darkest recesses of her mind, she was intrigued by the way he affected her. This handsome, creepy stranger actually *excited* her and set off a need inside of her. A need she wanted to explore. She’d tried to ignore it but the longing was palpable. She’d been wet ever since her run-in with him earlier in the day.

Something was definitely wrong.

“Oh! I see a mirror!” Faye said as she moved faster down the hallway. But there was a bottleneck ahead and the two soon found themselves at a standstill.

Determined to be helpful, and to distract herself, Phoenix surveyed her surroundings until she glimpsed something shiny down the other side of the hall. She moved toward it, but in her mind, she reminded herself not to leave Faye behind. ‘No splitting up’ was the rule. Black people don’t walk off alone in the haunted mansion, after all. But she proceeded down the hall anyway. Were her feet even moving? She wasn’t sure anymore.

Sometimes after leaving the shop after a long day, she’d be in the car thinking and daydreaming and then twenty minutes later, she’d be in her driveway with no memory of having driven home.

Tonight, she found herself alone in a room with Faye’s purse on her shoulder and no recollection of how she got there. She shook her head and turned around to make sure Faye was behind her. Sure enough, Faye was inching past someone dressed as Thriller Michael Jackson.

“You found a mirror?” she called, and Phoenix was opening her mouth to answer when the door slammed shut.



# CHAPTER THREE

IT BARELY REGISTERED AT first. It wasn't until Faye started pounding on the heavy wooden door that Phoenix actually understood the situation she was in.

She took three steps forward and put her hand on the dusty old knob. It was warm to the touch. Stubborn, too; it wouldn't budge when she tried to turn it.

It was stuck.

*She* was stuck.

“Really? What the fuck?” she said just before she rattled the knob so hard her teeth clicked together. “It’s stuck!”

“Okay, stop messing with the knob,” Faye said, her voice calm but muffled. “I’m gonna try it from my end.”

Phoenix took a step back and waited as Faye tried to open the door from the other side. With each jiggle of the knob, Phoenix’s anxiety grew. It was ridiculous, really, because the room she was in was the complete opposite of scary. Well-lit and decorated in pastels, it was actually sort of charming. Other than the dated furnishings, dust, and cobwebs—*just like my pussy*, she thought—it was just a regular living room in a house. Nothing scary about that.

Still, she was on edge.

“Okay, it’s not budging,” called Faye’s muffled voice. “I’m gonna go find somebody to help. Hang on, okay?”

“Okay.”

*Not like I have anything else to do.*

Phoenix plopped onto the small sofa in a huff and coughed at all the dust that had kicked up around her. Annoyed, she pulled out her phone and made an attempt to pull up Instagram.

No such luck.

She had no bars, and when she looked around for a window she could stand next to, she realized there were none. She was alone and closed off from the rest of the world. In a haunted mansion. On Halloween. It was the stuff of horror movies.

*I'm black. This isn't supposed to be happening to me.*

But maybe the lack of signal was for the best. Often, when she was bored and things were quiet, she would stalk Dante's socials. That's how she found out about Malina. Her replacement.

She didn't want to think about it.

With no internet and nothing to do but brood, she stood, walked over to the door, and kicked it as hard as she could. Her anger gave way, just for a moment, when the door didn't falter. Her eyebrows went up. She was impressed; that thing was sturdy as hell to be so old.

Her anger quickly returned and she stomped her foot on the floor this time. Her mother used to warn her about her temper. "You better figure out how to cope with life or that anger will get you put down like a rabid dog," she'd told Phoenix after a particularly nasty tantrum when she was in high school.

Sighing, Phoenix looked down at Faye's purse, a cute cream leather hobo. She'd asked to borrow it once and Faye refused. Rightfully so, because once, when Phoenix was mad at her bestie, she destroyed a hoodie Faye had let her borrow.

Phoenix put the bag on her shoulder and snickered, wishing her best friend could see her now. But her amusement was short-lived because she remembered she was still stuck here. Faye was free.

She opened the top of the purse and peered inside. Mints, a small planner, a wallet, a makeup bag, and a book. Curious, Phoenix picked up the small book and flipped it over to look at the cover. Blood red cursive letters greeted her.

A noise reached her ears just then...some kind of high-pitched whistling. She sat perfectly still and listened, her head cocked to the side like an animal. She finally concluded that it wasn't someone wailing. It was the wind. There must have been a crack in the foundation letting the air in.

But there was something else. Sounds that were noticeably absent. Her best friend's voice. Or *any* voices. With the book still in her hand, she walked slowly to the door and pressed her ear against the splintered wood.

There was nothing.

It was as if everyone had disappeared.

Her hands began to tremble. Surely Faye wouldn't have just...left her here. She'd gone to get help. Maybe she had to go outside to call the fire department or something. Or maybe

she and all the other guests had migrated to some other part of the house. That had to be it, because the only other explanation for the terrifying silence was that everybody else was dead.

With those thoughts swirling in her increasingly foggy mind, she absentmindedly flipped the cover of the book open. There was a title page, a copyright page, a table of contents... everything you'd expect from a paperback novel. But there was something bizarre about it, she could practically feel it on her fingertips. Still, she flipped another page.

Chapter 1.

She read the first line and froze.

*I hate Halloween.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE BOOK FELL FROM her shaking fingers and hit the wood floor with a heavy thud. Peculiar, since it couldn't have weighed more than a pound.

As Phoenix stared down at it, she felt a chill creep up her spine. She half expected the book to come alive and bite her. And on a night that had already been packed with weirdness, she wouldn't have been shocked if it did.

She backed away from it slowly as the hair on the back of her neck stood up. Her ears perked. The energy in the room changed as if the air molecules had reformed to accommodate a new presence.

She felt it immediately.

She was no longer alone.

Someone was behind her.

Except whoever it was, wasn't a *who* at all. She was facing the door straight on. No human had come through it. Whatever was behind her had either materialized out of thin air or

slithered in through the tiniest of cracks like the wind that had whistled through not ten minutes earlier.

Her stomach turned as she worked up the courage to turn around, and when she finally did, she was surprised by her lack of surprise at what she saw. As alarming as it was, somehow it made perfect sense.

It was him.

His face was expressionless. His body was still and his posture, straight. Confident. He simply stared, sizing her up, waiting for her to speak. If possible, he was even more handsome than he was earlier on the street. Same blue jeans, same black shirt, but his energy was different. Settled. Like he'd been on a long journey and finally reached his destination.

“Who *are* you?” she croaked. “You’ve been following me all day.”

He smiled and her heart quickened. The faintest tickle fluttered in her belly.

“Are you scared of me?”

“Of course! Now tell me who you are and how you got here before I start screaming.”

“I wouldn’t mind hearing you scream.”

She took a step back and wrapped her trembling arms around herself.

“Relax,” he said. “First of all, nobody would hear you. And second, you’re not asking the right questions.”

“What are the right questions?”

“The right question starts with ‘what.’”

She puzzled that out before saying, “*What* are you?”

He nodded his approval of her question but his answer gave her no such satisfaction. “I’m different.”

“How?”

“I see things. I know things.”

“Are you a ghost?” She felt silly for asking but it wasn’t an absurd question given the fact that he’d materialized his ass into the room out of thin air.

He laughed. “No ma’am. Not a ghost.”

“What do you mean you *know* things? Are you psychic?”

“It’s more than that.”

Frustrated now, she rolled her eyes. “Just *tell* me. Why are you making me guess?”

“Ah, ah, ah. Remember what I said about questions.”

“*What* are you making me guess?”

He smiled. “A better question might be what do I want you to learn.”

“Okay, that.”

He put a hand on his beard and rubbed. “I want you to learn about all the things I’m capable of. I can act in the



psychological realm. I can also act in the physical.”

“And why—I mean, what do you do there? And what does any of it have to do with me?”

“I do it all. And as for you, well, I saw you.” He looked her up and down with the lascivious gaze of a hungry animal who’d just happened upon some prey. “You excited me.”

She was ashamed of how good it felt to hear those words. And the *way* he said them; somehow that deep velvet voice caressed both her eardrums and her pussy at the same time.

“Excited you?” she repeated. Her throat felt like sandpaper.

He bit his lip and nodded. “You felt it too. I know you did.”

“Can you read minds?”

He stared impassively.

“What do you see when you look at me?”

“In the physical realm, I see a beautiful woman. A sexy woman. A woman who has her shit together. But in your mind, I see turmoil. Desperation. Torment. Rage.”

“Rage?”

“Intense rage.” He stared. “Someone betrayed you.”

She didn’t confirm that. She could barely think straight, much less delve into the mess that was her love life. “What do you want with me?”

A wicked grin spread across his face. “Many things.”

“But—”

“And there are many things I can do for you.”

“So you’re a...a genie?”

“Nah. Niggas ain’t genies. I’m more like a...conduit. I can help you reconcile thoughts and reality.”

“So you help me manifest?”

“Something like that.”

“But how?”

He took a step forward. “I can’t tell you that, sweetheart. I’m afraid I have a lot of secrets. Some, I’ll tell you. Some, you’ll learn along the way. But only if you let me.”

“So you can make my dreams come true?”

“Depends on the dream.”

“And what do *I* have to do? Pay you?” she asked, equal parts confused and captivated.

“I don’t deal in money, sweetheart. You just have to give yourself to me. Mentally, that is,” he said with a smirk.

“What does that even mean?”

He brushed a hand down his head. His waves remained undisturbed.

“You’ll find out.”

“I wish you would just tell me instead of talking in riddles. I’m confused. And scared. You just came through a fucking wall and now I know there’s ghosts and monsters for real. I’m *shook*.”

“I’m not a ghost or a monster. And I can tell you straight up that I won’t hurt you.”

Phoenix shook her head rapidly. “This is...I don’t understand.”

He took a few more steps forward, stopping when Phoenix shot a glare at him.

“Easy,” he said. “My name is Khalid. I’m twenty-nine. I’m a journalism student at Hayes University.”

“How did you get into this room?”

“That’s a secret.”

“Am I supposed to tell you *my* name, now?”

“I already know your name, Phoenix. I know your age, your shoe size, that your parents are deceased, that you own a salon. I even know what color your panties are. I know everything.” His gaze traveled south. “Well, almost everything.”

Defeated, she sighed and put a hand on her forehead as if that would help her make sense of all this.

“Are you gonna kill me?”

He laughed again, louder this time. “I just told you I’m not gonna hurt you. I’m here to help you.”

“How do I know this is for real? You could just be running game on me so you can murder me and suck my blood.”

“Damn, I’m a vampire, too? Ma, you gotta relax.”

“I just told you I’m shook. I *can’t* relax!”

He stared at her for a long time, his eyes searching hers.  
“Maybe I can put you at ease.”

“How would you do that?”

“I have ways.”

She believed him. Her fear was quickly ebbing in the face of the tidal wave of lust that was washing over her. It was *scary* how turned on she was. The man was giving off something, she realized. A smell...like sex. Semen. Sweat. It was intoxicating.

Her good sense was draining out of her like blood from a wound.

“Can I show you?” he asked.

“Yeah.” She didn’t even hesitate. She knew that didn’t bode well for her.

He gestured toward the chair in the corner. “You might wanna sit down for this.”

Phoenix walked over to the flowery grey chair. After brushing off several layers of dust, she sat.

Khalid approached her slowly. Kneeling in front of her, he placed his hands on her thighs. Her breath hitched in her throat as she felt the warmth of his touch. Just like he had earlier that day, he singed her.

Everything about this was wrong. Her mind was screaming at her to get out of there, to walk away and leave this man behind. He was a walking red flag and she knew it. Her

conscience, or maybe even God was telling her that if she stayed here with him, she was doomed.

“Look into my eyes.”

But she couldn't resist, so she did exactly as he said. Looking directly into his eyes was like looking at the sun. She couldn't make sense of it; his eyes were the same shade of brown as hers.

*Why are my eyes burning?*

“Don't think. Just feel.”

She breathed in deep and forced herself to hold his gaze. The room seemed to spin on its axis, making her dizzy. It was getting harder to breathe. Her muscles felt like jelly. Heat radiated through her veins as if her blood was beginning to boil. Her fear was overwhelming, but only for a moment, because a new feeling quickly washed over her.

Pleasure.

It started deep in her belly, a mild flutter that quickly morphed into a vibration. It crawled through her, and everywhere it touched, she tingled. Goose bumps erupted on her skin as the vibrations reached her core. It felt good. *Too* good. The fear returned as she began to lose control of her senses.

*What is happening to me?*

‘*Let it claim you,*’ Khalid said, only his mouth never opened and his lips never moved. Somehow, her mind heard it. He planted it there.

That wasn't good, she knew, but she didn't care because everything below her waist was throbbing. A quiet moan escaped her throat as her eyes rolled back. She wanted to give in but she was afraid. Scared to relinquish control to this beautiful, seductive stranger.

She wasn't sure if it was his hands or if she did it of her own volition but her thighs slowly parted as the throbbing grew more intense. Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the thick, pillowy arms of the chair. She realized, way too late, that she was about to have an orgasm.

“It's...I'm...what is...?”

*'Receive it,'* he ordered. And just before she unraveled, she imagined, maybe, that his eyes were glowing red. Like a demon. A *sex* demon. And then he smiled—but it was an uncanny expression, one she'd never seen before, almost animal in its alienness.

Her eyes widened as she realized he wasn't smiling. He was baring his teeth—fangs, and they sparkled so brightly she had to avert her eyes. They were made of diamonds.

For a brief moment, the world blurred and spun around her. Then she exploded. She threw her head back and moaned loudly as she came, her pussy throbbing so hard she shed tears from the pleasure. She wanted to grab him and hold him but her mind couldn't justify it. He was a stranger, and they hadn't made love. He'd made her cum, yes, but not in the normal way. Nothing about this was normal.

And that wasn't a bad thing. Because a full minute later, she was *still* cumming, so hard she thought she might die from it. Nobody felt that good for this long. It was unnatural.

"Please," she begged.

'*You love it,*' he said. Or thought. And again, she heard it clearly.

"Yessssss. Oh God, yessss."

Finally, she began to come down, her heart pounding over the buzzing in her ears. The thought of opening her eyes and seeing his face filled her with dread because he had just seen her at her most vulnerable. Then again, he was the one who put her in that position, so...he would understand.

"How did that feel?" he asked aloud, his deep voice rumbling in her chest.

When she finally opened her eyes, Khalid looked just as he had on the street that morning—normal. It was as if she'd imagined the last five minutes. But she hadn't, she knew. Maybe. The confusion that was swirling about in her head was making her delirious.

"It felt...I've never felt anything like that before. I don't have the words."

"Intense, right?"

"Yeah. How did you do that to me?"

"It's a gift."

She closed her legs and put her hands in her lap, her body shuddering as an aftershock hit her. She was stalling, searching for the right words to use to question this man in front of her, the words that would give her the answers she was looking for.

“Tell me the truth, Khalid,” she whispered to her shaking hands. “Are you a monster?”

He smiled. “I don’t know how to answer that. I guess you can say one part of me is.”

“That’s not funny. I’m trying to understand. This is weird and scary for me.”

“I know, baby.”

“So answer my question,” she demanded, trying desperately to ignore the butterflies he hatched in her belly when he called her ‘baby.’

“To be quite honest, I don’t know what I am.”

“How did you end up here? Were you looking for me?”

“No, I wasn’t looking for you. I knew where you’d be.”

She shrank back as far as she could in the chair. “Are you sure you’re not gonna kill me?”

“Relax, ma. I’m here to help you.”

“With what?”

“There’s something you want. Something you haven’t told anybody on this earth. I can help you get it. And coincidentally, you’d be helping me get something I need.”



Her eyes downcast, Phoenix shook her head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Alright. Listen, you can do whatever you want. Walk out that door over there if you want to. I won’t force you to stay. Or...” he trailed off. “You can come with me. I have something to show you.”

“I can’t get out. The door is stuck.”

“Is it?”

Phoenix was struck by the lighthearted amusement in his voice. He was toying with her, and having fun doing it.

She glanced at the door and sighed. Whatever magic this man had, he probably *could* open the door to let her out. Just like that, freedom.

And that was what she wanted, wasn’t it? To leave this room, and this house, and go home to her apartment. To forget this night ever happened. To wake up in the morning fresh and ready to make her clients beautiful. To never hear from this strange man again.

Wasn’t it?

She brought her eyes back to his and realized she wasn’t sure. Because what she’d just experienced was something she would never forget as long as she lived. The man had made her cum with his mind. Did she really want to walk out the door *now* and miss out on whatever else he had to show her?

He’d promised not to hurt her, and up to this point, he’d kept his word. He’d actually made her feel good on a night

when she fully expected to cry herself to sleep.

She wasn't ready to leave yet.

“Okay,” she said. “Show me.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“CLOSE YOUR EYES AND hold your breath.”

Phoenix’s body stiffened. “Why? What are you gonna do?”

“Relax and do what I say. I won’t hurt you, I told you that.”

Skeptical, Phoenix took a deep breath and closed her eyes, but when Khalid grabbed her hand, she let the breath out instead of holding it. A few moments later, she was sputtering and coughing up water like she’d just been rescued from the bottom of a swimming pool. Khalid rubbed her back gently until she was finally able to catch her breath. A nice gesture, she thought, especially coming from a monster. It was only after she’d recovered that she looked around and saw where she was.

“How did we get here?” she asked, her eyes wide and darting.

“We’re not actually...*here*. You can see it because I can see it. You holding my hand plugs you into me. Does that make sense?”

Without answering, Phoenix snatched her hand away and watched the world around her go completely dark. In a panic, she reached out and found Khalid's hand again, feeling his warmth at the same time she regained her sight. She was relieved to be out of the dark but she wasn't the least bit happy about what she saw.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“Where is ‘here’?”

“You already know that.”

“I know it's a place that means something to you.”

A sigh, then an eyeroll, before she finally gave up the ghost.

Of course it meant something to her. It had been her home, once. The home she'd picked out with the man she was supposed to marry. She'd picked the hardwood floors, the paint on the walls, the kitchen cabinets and appliances, even the bed his bitch ass slept on every night.

“This used to be my house. Well, it's Dante's house. We had it built and I lived in it with him before he...broke up with me.”

“Why'd he do a stupid thing like that?”

Why, indeed. Is there ever a ‘why’ good enough to satisfy the broken-hearted? They met when Dante brought his little sister to her shop for a hair appointment. The chemistry between them was explosive. She fucked him at his apartment later that night and they were inseparable ever since.

Until they weren't.

“He said he just wasn't feeling the relationship anymore. His exact words.” She looked down at the floor. “Right after I left, he moved *her* in.”

“Who is her?”

She breathed deep and let out a weary sigh. “Malina.”

Khalid looked her over. “I can't imagine Malina being a better choice than you.”

As hard as she tried not to, a smile crept across her face at his words. Flushed and flattered, she asked, “Why did you—I mean, what did you bring me here for?”

“Because you wanted to see him.”

“No I didn't.”

“Yes, you did. You haven't seen him in a year and you wanted to know how he looks. What he's been up to. You blocked him and tried to pretend like you moved on but you didn't. So let's just see his ass so you can *really* move on.”

“Is he here?”

“Yep.”

“Can he see us?”

Khalid shook his head.

“Alright,” she said, because what was the harm? It sure beat stalking his Insta. “One look and then we go back.”

“Whatever you want, beautiful.”

Just a few moments later, Dante rounded the corner and entered the living room. Phoenix stifled a gasp; he looked even better than she remembered. Tall and muscular with an athlete's frame, his light brown eyes shining in the sunlight that shone through the blinds. He seemed to be glowing, and his handsome face was relaxed. Like he was at peace.

He looked *happy*.

"You good?" Khalid asked.

The first tear betrayed her true feelings, crawling slowly down her face as she was nodding her head. Which he probably already knew anyway, him being a ghost and all. Or...whatever he was.

"It's okay to feel how you feel. I won't clown you for being upset."

"Gee, thanks."

"Nah, I'm serious, ma. That man don't deserve you."

Faye used to say that all the time. So did Phoenix's brother, Patrick. Apparently they saw things in Dante that she didn't. That she was blinded to. Blinded by the D. It was the story of her life and everyone who loved her knew it.

"Whatever. I saw him so...we can go," she said, sniffing.

"Are you sure? Right now?"

"Yeah. I can't deal with this anymore. It hurts too much."

Khalid stared at her as she stared at Dante; she could feel the blistering heat from the two beams blazing against the side

of her face. It was hotter than she could stand. Phoenix was about to turn away from Khalid when *she* walked in.

Malina.

And she was holding a little dog.

“It’s her,” Phoenix announced, but it was half whisper, half sob. Malina’s dog looked nothing like Cookie, the little brown poodle Dante had made Phoenix give away before he let her move in. He said he hated dogs, and when Phoenix protested, he escalated it—no, he was actually *allergic* to dogs. So in the interest of love and compromise, Phoenix found Cookie a good home. She cried for days, but Dante didn’t care.

Phoenix began to cry again, but it wasn’t pain that was forcing the tears out of her. It was anger.

“Aw, don’t do that. Come here.”

Khalid pulled her into him. He was too strong for her to fight against it, not that she wanted to. The warmth of his body was comforting, as was the touch of his hands on her back, and the gentle way he rubbed it. Up and down, slowly, tenderly. Soothing her. And then a sweet kiss to the top of her head.

“Fuck that nigga,” he gritted. “You fine as hell, ma. You can do better. You *will* do better.”

Phoenix pulled back slowly to see Khalid’s face. There was no grin, no smile to indicate that he was running game or trying to finesse. He looked genuinely concerned, and that

helped a little bit. Whoever or whatever he was, he knew how to make her feel good.

That's what she needed tonight. To feel good. She deserved it.

"Are you sure they can't see us?" she asked quietly.

"Positive."

Instinctively, she leaned in and pressed her lips against Khalid's. Just like his palms, his soft lips radiated heat. The sensation was new, and pleasant, but it was nothing compared to his tongue, which he gracefully slid between her lips. She moaned as her panties grew uncomfortably wet. The world seemed to fall away as she wrapped her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss.

It wasn't long before the vibrations began again. She pulled away and shook her head. "Not yet."

"That's not me, that's you. The kiss turned you on."

"No. I've been turned on before. This feels different. It's way more intense."

His arms coiled around her waist like two snakes. "And that's bad?"

"I...I don't know." She cleared her throat, oblivious to Dante and Malina. "What would happen if we...if I let you..."

"Let me, what?"

She averted her eyes. He brought a warm hand to her chin and turned her face toward his.



“Let me what, Phoenix? You wanna fuck?”

“What would happen if we did?”

He licked his full lips. “You would cum and you would enjoy it.”

“No, I mean...would it do something to me? Something bad? With you being a...whatever you are.”

“I mean, my dick is bomb but it ain’t powerful enough to kill you or turn you into a witch, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She searched his eyes for that red glow she thought she imagined before. It wasn’t there.

“So nothing bad will happen to me?”

“It won’t.”

She nodded as she reached down under her skirt to hook her thumbs under the waistband of her panties. Driven by a frenzied combination of pain, desperation, and arousal, she pulled them down quickly while holding Khalid’s piercing gaze. And there it was again, she could have sworn—the glow in his eyes, that same red, but very faint this time, like the smoldering of hot coals on a grill.

When his hands went to his buckle, she dropped her gaze, wanting to see the monster make his first appearance. And when he popped out, her eyes were like saucers.

Monster, indeed.

Long. Black. Thick. Standing straight up.

Her mouth watered.

Khalid walked her backwards until her back hit the wall— Dante and Malina kept watching tv, clearly heedless to it all— and once again, Khalid bared his fangs. This time, though, she clenched in anticipation rather than fear.

He stuck his hot fingers under her skirt, grazing her slit. They shared twin moans at the contact.

“That’s for me?” his voice boomed in her ear.

“Hurry up, I can’t take it.”

“I got you, ma. Hold onto me.”

Phoenix felt herself being lifted, then a sharp burning sensation, and then fullness. Not just in her pussy. She felt full all over. Possessed.

Alarm quickly set in when she realized Khalid hadn’t started moving his body yet because inside of her, his *dick* was moving, rotating and coiling independently, a rogue serpent hell-bent on bringing her pleasure. It teased her g-spot, bringing forth utterances that sounded alien to her ears. She clawed at Khalid’s back, raking ridges into his shirt as the monster twisted inside her. “Khalid...what are you doing?” she moaned, but if he heard her, he couldn’t be bothered to answer. Instead, he began to piston his hips, thrusting into her even as the monster danced deep inside of her. The combined sensations rendered her a babbling, unhinged mess.

An odd thought entered her sex-crazed mind just then.

*I’ll never be the same. He’s ruining me.*

His groan reached her ears and for the first time, she wondered how he felt. How sex felt to him given who, or *what* he was.

Dante and Melina laughed at something on the tv as Khalid ravaged Phoenix not ten feet away. Her soft cries became screams as the first orgasm tore through her trembling body. Malina's dog barked over and over but Khalid's voice drowned out the shrill noises. She heard him in her head again. His voice, projected straight to her brain.

*'You wanna know if it feels good to me.'*

“Yessssss.”

*Your pussy feels amazing, Phoenix. So fucking wet. So tight. So deep. That shit feels like it's made for me. Like it's mine...*

She sighed and let her head fall against his shoulder as her orgasm wore off. She was still just as aroused as she was before she came. It was astonishing.

*'Is this pussy mine, Phoenix?'*

“I...I don't know.”

*'The way she's squeezing and tugging on my dick, I think she already answered for you.'*

“That's just...just because it feels...” she struggled to breathe the words out.

*'I know. This is the dick you've been waiting for your whole life.'*

“It feels so good.”

*'Wait till the next one.'*

She'd barely lifted her head off his shoulder when she came again, with a whimper this time. She had the *urge* to scream but it was as if all of her energy, all of her breath and cognitive function had been siphoned off to power the orgasm. She went limp in his arms and tried to breathe. It was useless. She was useless. All she felt was the delicious pleasure of wave after wave of bliss.

*"Fuck,"* Khalid gritted. "You cum so hard. I love that shit."

"I...I can't take it anymore."

He chuckled in her ear. "Don't tap out, ma."

"I can't...it's too intense." She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed for it to stop. She couldn't go on like this without serious damage to her heart. Or her mind. Maybe even her soul.

"Aight, I got you." Khalid's thrusts went deeper, harder, faster. His face was tucked into her neck. She brought her hands to the back of his head and squeezed.

"Fuck!"

His yell startled her, then panic set in. He was close.

"Wait, wait, wait!" she cried, pushing his head away. "You have to pull out!"

*'Why?'*

"What happens if you cum inside me?"

*'It's just nut, Phoenix. Nothing to worry about. I can't get you pregnant.'*

She said nothing, not quite sure if she believed him. Her curiosity got the better of her as she fantasized about what it might feel like for him to cum inside her. And why not? She'd already fucked a ghost or something that wasn't fully human. What difference would it make if he—*it*—didn't pull out?

*'My thoughts exactly, beautiful.'*

It was so ridiculous, she had to laugh.

*'Look at me. Right now.'*

She knew exactly what she would see when she looked into his eyes but she did it anyway, facing her fear, which was rapidly waning the longer she was in Khalid's presence. His eyes glowed red as his tongue snaked out and grazed her bottom lip. She sighed as she caught it and sucked it into her mouth, her eyes never leaving the burning fires of his while he drove into her wetness over and over again.

He fucked her *good*. His stamina and control were a marvel. She came again. Again. Again. And then *again* before he finally showed her mercy. And in the end, there was nothing supernatural about his big finish; he nudded just like any other man, with a shudder, a groan, and one last push. Phoenix held him close as his body jerked, kissing his forehead like he was her man or something. It was tender. Intimate.

*'I can be your man if you want me to.'*

This time, she didn't laugh. She rolled her eyes. What would she want with a man who could read her every thought?

“Are you gonna put me down?”

Khalid smiled. “Not yet. Not til you tell me what you want.”

She sighed. “You already know, right?”

“You have to say it.”

She glanced over at Dante and Malina. So quiet. So comfortable. She wondered if they came home each day and sat there next to each other on the couch, watching tv until dinner was ready. Maybe they talked about their days, each pretending to listen to the other, before picking up their phones to scroll through social media. Did they make love every night? Probably. Dante never could get enough. Either way, they had a routine, she knew, because all couples have one.

They were settled.

They were at peace.

They were happy.

*For now.*

It dawned on Phoenix that she was in her second haunted house of the day. Only this one wasn't beset with witches, sexy kittens, and storm troopers. This house was haunted by the ghosts of a once-loving relationship that had turned into a horror story. Everywhere she looked, she saw them. Bloody ghosts that had been murdered by lies and infidelity. Betrayal was her poltergeist, and it wasn't going away without a fight.

It was time for an exorcism.

“Okay, I’ll say it.” She took a deep breath and looked into Khalid’s fiery eyes. “I want them dead.”

## CHAPTER SIX

PHOENIX WATCHED SILENTLY AS Malina opened the door for the first tricker treaters of the evening. The sun hadn't yet made its final descent but it was close, and the way it lingered on the horizon was chilling...it was almost as if that big yellow star was dreading the darkness.

And why wouldn't it? Darkness is cover. Darkness hides the bad things.

Like Phoenix's true feelings, which she'd just laid bare. Sometimes the thought came to her when she was in the shower watching the water run down the drain, envisioning it as Dante's blood. Occasionally, when she was doing a client's hair, she imagined wrapping Malina's long sew-in around her fist and banging her face into a wall, over and over until it was an indistinguishable lump of bloody mush. She'd even pictured their deaths over dinner, spearing her chicken or fish with her fork like a knife stabs through flesh. But tonight, she'd actually said it out loud. And that made it real.

The happy couple was going to die tonight.



Khalid didn't seem fazed by her announcement. In fact, he was busy nibbling at her neck like a new puppy, getting the taste of her and satisfying the urge to nip, having not been taught yet that those playful bites can hurt.

But those fangs hurt so good.

*Everything* felt good because Phoenix was excited now. Aroused. Every nerve heightened. All pleasure centers activated.

Maybe *she* was the real monster.

She was still in Khalid's arms. His dick was still inside of her, its hardness at full peak despite his orgasm. She didn't understand it but she wasn't about to complain.

*'How would you want them to die?'*

"I don't know yet." She pushed him back so she could see his face. "You'd really do that for me?"

His dark eyes clouded over as he nodded.

"Put me down. I need to think."

Khalid obliged, and once her feet were back on solid ground, she felt energized. Now that she knew they were going to die, looking at Dante and his little bitch wasn't painful anymore.

*'It was never about pain.'*

She looked at Khalid in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"Do you remember when I told you I saw rage?"

"Yeah. So?"

“That’s what’s driving you. I know what pain looks like. You only have remnants of it. But the anger? It’s in your blood. It’s in your bones.”

“Is that what you’re attracted to? Rage?”

He grinned. “Very few people in this world have the ability to walk around with the anger you’re carrying and not have a nervous breakdown. There’s something about you, Phoenix. I felt it the first time I saw you.”

“Am I a bad person?”

“Nah. You’re special.”

She thought about that for a moment before saying, “Let’s go back. My friend is probably looking for me.”

He held out his hand, she grabbed it, and as quickly as she blinked, they were back in that room. Again, she forgot to hold her breath and again, she choked. Once her coughing fit subsided, she glanced down at Faye’s purse. It lay on the floor where she left it, right next to the book. Phoenix stared at that book as if under a spell, so enthralled she barely felt Khalid walk up behind her and wrap his arms around her.

“It’s hard for me to think when you’re this close to me,” she murmured, her eyes fluttering shut. “Tell me something, Khalid. What’s in *your* head?”

*‘You.’*

“I’m serious. And stop talking to me with your mind.”

His warm breath tickled her ear as he sighed. “Right now, I’m thinking about *you*, love. Wondering why you wanted to come back here instead of letting me give you what your heart desires.”

“Because...I wanted to think about it some more. Even though I hate them enough to want them dead, I’m not a murderer.”

“Neither am I, but I’m willing to kill for you.”

“Yeah, and why is that?” she asked, breaking his embrace. She turned around to face him, defiant. “You met me not even twelve hours ago. Something’s up with you besides you being a sexy, dick-slinging mutant or whatever.”

He chuckled. “Mutant. You funny.”

“Tell me the truth, Khalid. What’s in this for you?”

To her surprise, Khalid dropped his gaze to the book. “How much of that did you read?”

She looked down at it, then back at him. “Why do you ask?”

“You read the first sentence.”

Exasperated, she threw her arms up. “Why do you bother asking me shit when you already know the answer?”

“I don’t know *everything*. I can’t see every corner of your mind. But I do know that you only read page one. And that’s good.”

“Why is that good?”

“No reason.” He leaned forward to peck her lips. “Sit down and let me tell you a story.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

WITH PHOENIX BY HIS side on the couch, Khalid began to talk.

“I’m what you call a soul-snatcher. If you’d read the book, you would have seen the whole explanation of it.”

“So that’s a real thing? We’ve been joking about it for years —”

“Not the same thing.” He laughed. “Sex ain’t got nothin’ to do with this, at least not directly. We get souls another way.”

She contemplated that for a moment. “Why do you need them?”

“Because ours got snatched. And once your soul is gone, you can never get it back. We feed to fill that hole but it’s never enough because it’s not the right...fit. Like buying somebody else’s old kicks.”

“What happens if you don’t feed?”

He shrugged. “Let’s just say it’s not pretty. It’s mental and emotional torment. Picture the worst fear you’ve ever felt. The saddest you’ve ever been. The most insecure. The hungriest.

The most tired. It's like all that times a thousand." He shook his head. "It's rough."

"So you want my soul?"

His eyebrows inched upward. "You wanna give it to me?"

"Of course not."

"Then no. Willing souls last longer."

"Who *willingly* gives up their soul?"

"It's rare. The souls of the dead are usually eager to find a new home right after death. But they fit the worst. Some of us go that route because it's easier. Others finesse the souls out of the living." He smiled. "I hear those taste the best and last the longest."

"So when you said I could help you, you meant...what, killing for me? Why wouldn't you just kill someone on your own?"

"Because murderers kill the innocent. I don't do that. But if someone wronged you, and that wrong was catastrophic, then that person ain't innocent. And I can see plain as day that old boy wrecked you. So if he gotta go, it is what it is."

Phoenix studied his face. He wasn't telling her everything, that was obvious. "So you kill them for me and you get their souls?"

"*His* soul. I only need one."

"And what happens to me?"

“You go on about your business and be happy that your enemy is gone.” He put a hand on her thigh. She didn’t react; she was getting used to the heat. “Depending on how you feel after, you might could ride my dick before we part ways.”

She frowned as she thought about the implications. “So you’ll go back your regular life? As a student?”

“Yeah. But I wouldn’t mind adding you to my regular life. I feel like we vibe, you know what I mean?”

“I definitely know what you mean.”

“The chemistry.”

“I know. It’s crazy.”

“So you wanna see me again? After this?”

She nodded.

“Cool. Don’t let the extra shit fool you. I’m a regular nigga when I’m not doing this.”

She glanced down at his lap and the erection straining angrily against his jeans. The bulge excited her. “I don’t know that I’d call *that* regular.”

He bit his lip and angled his head to the left, a silent beckoning. She obliged, climbing onto his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck. His eyes captured hers once again, brown and deep.

*‘You’re wondering why the thought of killing them turns you on.’*

She nodded slowly.

*'Power is an aphrodisiac.'*

“But what power do I have?” she murmured against his warm, soft lips.

*'You're the decider of fates tonight, and it's got you wetter than the Nile.'* He caressed her bottom lip with his tongue. Just once. *'I wanna dive in it, and I wanna swim, and then I wanna drown.'*

His eager hands moved under her skirt and gripped her hips. The monster reemerged from his lair, and Phoenix wasn't quite sure how Khalid had managed to do that with no hands. More magic, she supposed, but it wasn't her lot to care. The yearning she felt at this moment was stronger than anything she'd ever experienced—like she would die if he wasn't inside her. She lifted up and waited, somehow knowing what would happen next. It scared and thrilled her to know, and when it started, she stifled a squeal.

Long and black, the snake slithered slowly between her thighs. It wriggled its head inside her and she squealed again, terrified and delighted. Deeper, deeper, the snake inched until it could go no further. Phoenix sat slowly, resting her full weight on Khalid's lap. He sucked in a slow breath through his teeth and squeezed the flesh at her hips before moving his hands to her ass.

*'Don't speak another word out of your mouth. Understand?'*

'Yes,' she thought, and he nodded. He'd heard her.

*'Go ahead,'* he ordered.



She moved her hips slowly, getting a feel for him in this position. It felt good. Deliciously strange. Her nectar dripped down the inside of her thighs as she rode him. She blinked, and they were naked. Another trick. She smiled and closed her eyes. She was starting to get used to this.

*'Wanna know a secret?'*

She opened her eyes and looked at him curiously.

*'I was looking for Faye, not you.'*

At that, she stopped moving. When she opened her mouth to speak, he brought a finger to her lips. It was hot, and it silenced her.

*'But you see, some people are more open than others. Faye has the light in her. You have the darkness.'*

Phoenix frowned at his words, but still, she didn't speak.

*'Don't be afraid, and don't be ashamed. Dark and light are companions. Someone taught you that one is better than the other but that's a lie. They have different functions, that's all.'*

His eyes glowed red. *'I have the darkness in me. It recognized the darkness in you.'*

She swallowed hard as the tremors began.

*'Don't fight it. That, what you're feeling? That's our dark energy joining together. They like to fuck just like we do.'*

It felt so good her body began to shake.

*'Yes. Let us in, phoenix.'*

Us? She was moving again, and not entirely sure it was of her own volition. His gaze lowered to her breasts, two hot beams fixed to her nipples. The sensation sent a jolt through her, forcing a moan from her lips. It was absolutely euphoric.

*'Give yourself to me, Phoenix. Let me have you.'*

*'You have me right now.'*

*'Not all of you.'*

*'What more is there?'*

The pressure didn't build this time; rather, it exploded suddenly, engulfing Phoenix before she had time to register it. But even as the orgasm overtook her...even as her desperate screams muted all other sound...even as Khalid sank his fangs into the flesh on top of her breast...a moment of clarity, as fleeting as the wind, blew through her mind and Phoenix thought she understood exactly what he wanted from her. But the knowing eluded her, fluttering by just out of her reach.

She didn't have the wherewithal to care, though. Khalid was talking to her again.

*'Cum on this dick, Phoenix. Surrender. Give us your mind. Your body. Your soul.'* He nipped her other breast, teasing, coaxing another moan from her lips. *'I know, angel. I know. My dark angel. You're so beautiful.'*

*'Why does it feel so good?'* Hot tears spilled down her cheeks.

*'Why do you breathe? Why does your heart beat?'*

*'What? I don't—'*

*'I'm giving you life, Phoenix. It's a gift. Receive it and don't ask why.'*

*'But—'*

*'Take it, Phoenix.'* He thrust upwards with great force. *'Take this dick. Let it nourish you. Let it make you whole.'*

Her body went limp as she surrendered herself to him. The letting go was invigorating, as was the thought that at this moment, with her guard down, he could *kill* her. Rip her in half. Impale her. Choke the life out of her. Men were dangerous like that but Khalid was even worse. He'd transcended basic manhood and become...whatever he was. *More*. With him, the danger was greater.

And so was the gratification.

She creamed all over him as he used her flaccid body like a toy, moving her, playing with her, guiding her, up, down, sliding her wet, slippery pussy on and off the monster until felt him throbbing powerfully inside her. His body went rigid. His moan came a few seconds later, loud and strong.

After, as they caught their breath, Khalid pushed Phoenix back to look into her eyes.

*'Can I do this for you?'*

In her euphoric state, she'd almost forgotten.

The happy couple.

The exorcism.

It was a watershed moment. She could give Khalid the green light and punish them for all the pain they caused her. Or—and this was really the heart of it—she could start letting go of her anger. Move on. Resist the urge to give in to her basest impulses. Maybe even start up something real with Khalid.

The answer was simple.

“Yeah,” she said. “Let’s kill them.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT

MALINA WAS WORRIED.

She couldn't quite put her finger on the why of it, though. She'd had a shitty day at work—a customer bumped into her and she spilled an entire tray of food all over herself—and when she came home and stepped into the shower, she nearly slipped and broke her neck.

Worse yet, Dante was tap-dancing on her last nerve. He'd beaten her home but, per usual, he'd forgotten to do the one thing she'd asked him to do—get candy for the trick or treaters. She had to fight traffic just to get to the grocery store and by the time she got back home, she was ready to call it a night.

If those were the only issues, the day might have been salvageable.

But something else was wrong. Something felt strange. So strange, she didn't say anything to Dante about it. Not at first. She felt it when she joined him in the living room to watch tv. She felt it acutely when her dog, Princess, started acting up.

She had the distinct feeling that someone was watching her.

Malina had always been tough. She had firearms training and a license to carry. She'd been an athlete in college—basketball, then volleyball. She ran every morning and lifted pretty heavy in the gym. She could handle anybody who tried her. Never had any fears about that.

But this was something else.

She tried to ignore it as best she could but the thought nagged at her, boring its way into her brain. *Someone's watching.* The first trick or treaters—a Black Panther, a unicorn, and a cheerleader—did nothing to distract her from it.

She was supposed to be dieting but she woofed down three miniature Snickers and two Reese's cups anyway. No such luck. The thought still lingered.

*Someone's watching.*

Not even Dante's gentle touch on her thigh was enough to distract her tonight. And a few moments later, while they watched the Detroit/Brooklyn game, his hand in her panties didn't get the job done, either. It felt good, but the thought still festered in the darkest corner of her mind.

*Something bad is going to happen.*

She knew it as sure as she knew her own name.

Dante finally stopped what he was doing and looked at her curiously. "You good?"

She shrugged.

His chuckle warmed her. “Alright,” he said as he extracted his hand. “I get it.” He went to his knees in front of her and grabbed the waistband of her yoga pants.

“No, it’s not that.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ve had a weird feeling ever since I got home.”

His brow furrowed. “Weird how?”

“I don’t know. It’s...” she trailed off, embarrassed because she *did* know. She just didn’t want to say it. He would probably think it was silly. He might even make fun of her. Good-naturedly of course. Dante always had jokes.

“Baby, talk to me.”

Staring into his concerned eyes, Malina quickly folded. “Okay. I feel like...it...I’ve been feeling like somebody is... watching me.”

Dante’s head swiveled reflexively toward the living room windows, then back to her. “The blinds are closed.”

“I know, I know. That’s not what I mean. It felt like somebody was...in the house.”

“Ain’t nobody been in here since I been here,” he defended. “Alarm was still set when I came in.”

He didn’t get it. And that was fine, because neither did she. Not well enough to explain it, anyway. So she glanced over at Princess, who was sniffing around in that same spot. She’d been there all evening. “It was more like a...presence, not a person.”

This time, he grinned. “So like a ghost? Yo, are you trying to scare me cuz it’s Halloween? You know I don’t scare.”

“I’m not!” she insisted. “I’m dead serious, Dante.”

*Dead.*

*Don’t say that again,* she admonished herself.

He took note of her trembling lips and wide eyes and sighed. “Alright. I’ll walk around and check the house.”

She nodded even though she knew that wouldn’t help. Whoever, or *whatever* it was wouldn’t give itself up that easily.

The last trick-or-treaters left at just after nine pm. Dante seemed relieved but Malina’s sense of dread intensified. Now it would just be the two of them. No one else around. No witnesses. No one to hear them screaming.

*Stop it!* she chided herself as she watched Princess sniff around. Same spot. Same queasiness in her stomach. Same fear.

*Someone’s watching.*

Dante stood and stretched. “I’mma hit the shower and then I’m going to bed. I’m tired as hell.”

She barely heard her fiancé, she was so distracted.

“Baby. You listening to me?”

“Yeah. Sorry. I’m just...um—”

“I looked all over the house,” he said, his face softening. “Nobody’s here and nobody could have been here. Alright?”



“Okay.”

He stared down at her, his face a mask of curiosity. He had questions, lots of questions, she knew, but he wouldn't ask because he didn't like a whole lot of talking. It just wasn't his way. So he did what he always does.

“Why don't you come to bed. Let me take your mind off it.”

In spite of everything, she smiled. If Dante couldn't do anything else, he could definitely take her mind off her problems. In fact, he was almost *too* good at *that* particular skill. Good enough to make the world disappear for a little while. Good enough to make her late for work sometimes.

Good enough to make her forget that she was once the side chick. Second best.

*Well, I'm here now*, she thought as he pulled her to her feet. She let out a squeal when he threw her over his shoulder and jogged down the hallway toward the bedroom. Princess watched curiously but didn't follow. She always gave them their privacy. She knew how they got down.

Dante peeled her out of her clothes and had her on her back in short order. His large, rough hands forcefully parted her thighs. She shivered in anticipation, closing her eyes and letting her weary body sink into the softness of the mattress. Her heart slowed to an easy pace. Everything was fine.

Dante began to feast on her, skillfully bringing her right to the edge of climaxing before pulling back, slowing down, easing up. It was his thing, and she'd grown to love it. A

sleepy smile spread across her face as she rode the waves of pleasure...the orgasm rushed toward her, then retreated, closer, then back again. Her hands found the top of his head, bald and smooth. Her hips ground upward, begging for more. Somewhere in the back of her consciousness, she thought she heard Princess growling but she wasn't in any condition to care about that damn dog right now.

“You taste so sweet,” Dante groaned, expelling a puff of warm air onto her pussy, making her shiver again. He loved it down there. Probably because he was good at it. Men who fear it or struggle with it tend to be far less enthusiastic.

She loved that about him.

She also loved when he nuzzled her clit with his nose—like now. She moaned softly and smiled at the intimacy of the moment. Maybe he was just really into it but to Malina, it always felt like true love. And that's all she'd ever wanted. She never meant to steal him from his ex—as much as you can steal a person from another person. She just wanted to be loved and wanted and Dante gave her that. How could she give that up?

It was her weakness, really. Love. *Puppy love*, to be exact. The sweet, innocent, adoring kind of love. Her mother used to say, “Malina, you're liable to chase them butterflies right off a cliff!” because every other week, she was crushing on a new boy.

But Dante was it for her.

Malina's moans grew more urgent. Dante slowed down his assault and took his time, tongue kissing her clit, slurping, sucking, flicking her gently with the tip of his tongue. She shuddered, her thighs hugging his head as she came. It was the last hurrah, really, before all hell broke loose.

“What the...? Mal...”

Those were the last words she ever heard out of Dante's mouth.

Her scream was the last sound he ever heard.

## CHAPTER NINE

PHOENIX WATCHED AS THE blood flowed steadily from Dante's neck. She was surprised to see that it wasn't like the movies where the blood spurted in all directions. It just leaked out lazily as if it wasn't in any hurry to get anywhere. Not at all cinematic.

Still, it was beautiful. In the dim light of the bedroom, it almost looked black. Shiny and black. Phoenix was so transfixed she barely even registered Malina's screams. Khalid had made a single clean cut, one ear to the other. He was so efficient with the knife, Phoenix wondered if he'd done it before.

*'Sexy, ain't it?'*

A maniacal life burst out of Phoenix. She didn't even recognize the sound. Why would she laugh at that?

Khalid smiled. *'It's okay, you can say.'*

*'It's very sexy,'* she thought as she watched Dante choke and gurgle, his hands desperately clutching his mutilated neck. *'I feel so bad for thinking it's hot.'*

*'No you don't.'*

She didn't bother responding. It was true. She didn't feel bad at all. She was enjoying it.

That was frightening.

*'Same deal with her?'* Khalid asked, his blade pointing at the screaming Malina.

Phoenix finally heard the distraught woman's cries. As she stared at Malina, she felt the tiniest prick. Conscience, maybe. Phoenix couldn't call it, but it made her uncomfortable. Fucked up her buzz, too.

Malina would never know this, but it was that yappy little dog that saved her life. Phoenix glanced down at the nosy pooch who was sniffing around her feet and sighed. The thought of harming the dog, even emotionally, was too much.

*'Let her live. You only want his soul anyway, right?'*

*'Yeah. Are you sure?'*

Phoenix nodded.

They only stayed a few more minutes. That was all they needed to admire Khalid's handiwork. But it was Phoenix's work, too, she decided. Without her, Dante wouldn't be on the floor bleeding out, and Malina wouldn't be on her knees crying and begging him to wake up.

*You just lost the man you love. How does it feel, bitch?*

Khalid grinned at that.

After one last gleeful look at the bloody scene, Phoenix grabbed his hand and they were back in the room at the mansion. She remembered to hold her breath this time so she came out of it just fine. And when she did, she practically attacked Khalid. With the bloody knife still in his hand, he seemed happy to let her.

She went straight to her knees, yanking his jeans and underwear down. Staring at him up close, she only had one thought:

*I'm gonna suck this demon dick until he begs me to stop.*

Khalid threw his head back and laughed. "Go ahead, ma. Do what you feel. I ain't gon' beg you, though. Not my style."

"What *is* your style?"

With his free hand, he gripped her chin roughly, smearing it with Dante's blood. "My style is to shoot all this demon nut down your fucking throat."

Her eyes narrowed as blood rushed to her nether regions, her mind slipping in and out of lucidity. "Will it burn?"

Khalid shook his head slowly. She wasn't sure she believed him but at this point, it didn't matter. She was locked in, ready to do anything he wanted her to do. It felt to her as if this was the reason she was on this earth. The sole reason.

Nothing even mattered anymore.

She sucked him in and got to work, giving it her all. Despite all its earlier trickery, Khalid's dick felt ordinary in her mouth. Big, but normal. He bit his lip and grabbed her hair, watching

her head bob back and forth. Two heated beams hit the top of her scalp.

*'You know what? You're good at that.'*

She chuckled and tried her best to inhale his dick. She gagged. Her tongue burned. Her jaws ached. Her pussy throbbed. Khalid began to whisper. She recognized a few curse words but the rest were indecipherable. No matter, because she tasted something. Chocolate. Caramel. Her eyes widened.

*'You ready?'*

She brought her eyes up to meet his. Her moan was the only answer.

His eyes glowed red. His fangs gleamed in the waning sunlight. He'd never looked sexier to her. With a hushed groan, he busted in her mouth and she greedily received it. Hot chocolate with a hint of caramel. Her mind was blown.

*Gulp, gulp, gulp.* She swallowed as fast as she could. Just when she thought he was done, there was more. Delicious. She spilled a bit, felt it dripping down her chin.

No matter. As soon as he finished, Khalid lifted her to her feet. With one hand clutching his knife and the other at her neck, he licked from her chin to her lips, cleaning her, tasting him, before arriving at her mouth, his final destination. Their tongues battled for domination. Khalid won. She let him.

She blinked and they were on the floor naked. He was on top, already inside her. She looked to her left and stared at the

blade of the knife. It glinted slightly. The twinkle hit her eye and she squinted against it.

When their eyes met again, something unspoken passed between them. Khalid raised the knife and pressed the point into her neck. The pressure was just right; light enough not to break her skin but hard enough that she knew she was in danger. Her entire body tingle with excruciating desire.

Khalid served her sublime strokes while he teased her with the knife. Two tiny droplets of blood dripped onto her breasts. He stared at them, then at her, before dipping his head to lick them off. His tongue found her right nipple, then her left, and after, so did the knife.

Her eyes widened but Khalid didn't stay there long. The tip of the blade was at her lips now, and just before the orgasm claimed her, she licked it. Khalid groaned loudly and came right after she did, dropping the knife in the process. Trembling together, they ascended to the pinnacle of sensual pleasure.

With their limbs still entwined, Khalid and Phoenix stayed right where they were on the floor. She felt satisfied but depleted. Drained.

“Why did you save her? Because of the dog?”

She wondered if that had been bothering him.

“Yeah,” she answered. “Did you get his soul? I didn't see anything happen.”

“You wouldn't. But yeah, I got it.”



She sighed. "So I guess our transaction is done."

"Yeah."

She breathed deep. Memorizing his scent. "Why do your eyes glow red?"

"Don't know."

"Why do you have diamond fangs?"

He chuckled. "I don't know why I have fangs but the diamonds is just because a nigga gotta drip."

She smiled. "Am I gonna see you again?"

He was quiet for a moment. His grip around her tightened. "Probably not."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "But you said you wouldn't mind having me in your life. Now, after everything, it feels like you're playing me off."

"I'm not playing you off, beautiful. You just can't come with me, that's all."

"To school?"

"Nah. To where me and the others live."

Her ears perked up. "How many others?"

"Can't say for sure."

She sat up. "Where do y'all live?"

"Under."

"Under what?"

“Under this world. It’s hard to explain. But you’d have to become one of us. And I can’t ask you to do that. The cost is too high.”

“What if I was willing to pay it?”

“You’re not. You already told me. And it’s all good, sweetheart. You got what you wanted, I got what I wanted. You’ll be happy after I’m gone. I promise.”

“I’ll never feel good like I did with you. No man—no human man can compare.”

“You never know.”

“I *do* know.” She felt herself slipping into an uncomfortable state of mind. One where she saw happiness slipping away from her until it was just out of her reach.

One where she wasn’t above begging for just one more time.

One where she wasn’t opposed to dying for it.

“This is where I leave you, angel.” Khalid pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “I enjoyed tonight.”

He stood, then reached out a hand to pull her to her feet. The warmth of his palm brought another tear to her eye.

“What am I gonna do without you?”

He smiled and brushed a lock of her hair off of her forehead. He kissed her there. “You’ll live, Phoenix. You’ll have a good life.”

She went to speak but couldn't. His lips covered hers. When she tried to wrap her arms around his neck, they wouldn't budge. Invisible restraints seemed to be holding them in place. She opened her eyes to look and found that she was alone.

The door was open.

## CHAPTER TEN

“HOW LONG DO I have to sit under this dryer? And tell me the truth, Phoenix. You know I get hot under there.” Tay snapped her fingers in Phoenix’s face. “Hello? Are you in there?”

“Sorry.” Phoenix shook her head as if that would put her in her right mind again. “Thirty minutes.”

“So that means forty-five.”

“Thirty minutes, Tay. I promise.”

An empty promise, to be sure. This was officially day three of Phoenix not giving a shit about anything. Each day was a thick fog of routine; her left brain was doing all the living for her. Coffee didn’t help, edibles made it way worse, and even the article about Dante’s death in the Rayford Gazette didn’t cheer her up. She felt nothing, and for her, that was worse than pain.

Faye called just when she got Tay under the dryer. She’d been checking on her since Halloween. Phoenix didn’t tell her anything about her time in that room or the aftermath. She

wasn't ready to come clean just yet. Truthfully she wasn't even sure all of it was real.

Phoenix grabbed her phone and walked into the back office, shutting the door behind her.

"Hey, girl."

"Hey," Faye said cautiously. "Just checking on you again."

"I'm good."

"You still sound weird." Faye paused. "Are you sure you're okay? You're not sick, are you?"

Phoenix sighed. "No. Not sick. Just...off."

"What happened in that room? Something must have happened. You don't sound like yourself."

"What do I sound like?"

"I don't know...a zombie."

*Maybe I am*, she thought.

"Hey, did you ever finish that book? About the soulsnatchers. I forgot the title," Phoenix said, even though she knew exactly what the book's title was. She'd been obsessing over it for three days.

Nobody carried it. Not Amazon, not Barnes & Noble, not any other repository or library in the entire country. It was as if the book appeared from nowhere.

Just like Khalid.

“No, I haven’t picked it back up since Halloween. I only got to page forty or so.”

“Where did you say you got it from?”

“I didn’t say. Somebody at work gave it to me. You remember John?”

Phoenix couldn’t have cared less about John. John could die right now for all she cared. But what she said was, “Yes, I remember. How’s he doing?”

“Good,” was Faye’s answer. “Well actually, he’s been sick. Nobody knows what’s wrong with him.”

“Hmm. Sad. So can I borrow it? The book?”

“Uh, sure. I thought you hated—”

“I do. But I think I need to read it. I don’t know why.” She took a deep breath. “There’s something I didn’t tell you about that night.”

“You didn’t tell me *anything* about that night.”

“I had sex with him.”

“Him?” Faye asked in a voice three octaves higher than usual. “Him, who?”

“The guy. Remember the man I kept seeing? I slept with him.”

“In the room? How’d he get in?”

“Long story. But...I think he did something to me. I haven’t been the same since.”

“Ohhhhhh. You’re dickmatized! Now it all makes sense.”

Three days ago, Phoenix would have defended herself. But not today. Today, she didn’t feel defensive. She didn’t feel anything, really.

“Can you drop it in my mailbox on your way home?”

“Phoenix. Please tell me you didn’t get caught up again. You were doing so good.”

“Just...can you bring me the book?”

Faye sighed. When she spoke again, she sounded defeated. “Yeah, I’ll bring it. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I hope so.”

The real answer was an emphatic no. Because despite her numbness to the world, there was one feeling that still held Phoenix in its clutches: desire. Yearning, want, need...all were appropriate yet inadequate descriptions for what was ailing her. Seventy-two hours after her last encounter with Khalid, Phoenix was convinced she was in withdrawal.

Something had to give.

Sherelle was her last head of the day. Normally, the woman’s constant chatter about this or that drove Phoenix crazy. But not tonight. She simply smiled blankly and nodded along as she finished the silk press and sent her on her way.

The book was right where Faye said it would be, sitting in the mailbox atop a stack of bills, junk mail, and a coupon for Meka’s, a hair salon a couple of miles from Phoenix’s shop.

She narrowed her eyes as she read it, and then a tiny seed sprouted in her mind and became a thought.

*Maybe I'll kill her, too.*

Laughing, she crumpled the card and threw it away as soon as she got inside.

It was almost nine o'clock but she wasn't hungry. Not for dinner. Not for anything other than Khalid. She was *starving* for him, and she let out a heavy sigh of relief when she finally admitted it to herself. She also understood that this was not a natural state of being. She'd had good sex before. Dante was amazing.

This was beyond that.

And somehow, some way, she knew the key to her relief was in that book.

She grabbed it and sat on her purple velvet couch, one of her most prized furnishings in the condo. Used to be, anyway. She spilled red wine on it last night and barely even managed to do a half-ass job of cleaning it up.

She opened the cover.

*Please be in here, Khalid. I need you.*

*It all started with the Trickster. A myth. A legend. He exists in the lore of cultures all over the world. Here in America, we black folks had our own version. Several iterations of the trickster remain in our collective consciousness.*



*As the story goes, one trickster—who went by the name of Yincy—tricked his beautiful, unsuspecting wife into having ten babies she didn't want. It's not clear how he tricked her but when she found out, she made him pay. It's been said that Yincy's wife came from a long line of conjure women, and when she found out what he had done, she cursed him. Apparently, the curse killed his soul and he wandered the country for years looking for a new one.*

*The soul does a great many things but it's fragile. It can be bruised. It can die inside you. And worst of all, it can be snatched. Yincy snatched many souls, and that created an army of other soulsnatchers. They roam the earth. They're all around us. But they only feed at certain times. Many of them choose Halloween because it's easier to disguise themselves.*

*Not all soulsnatchers are tricksters but those that are employ many strategies. They study you. Read your mind. Find your weaknesses. Exploit them.*

*Bruises can't hurt you as long as you let them heal. It takes time but if you leave them alone, they always heal.*

*When your soul has been snatched, you know unequivocally. You feel it. It's torture. Young or old, living or dead, all soulsnatchers must feed.*

Phoenix set the book face down on the couch next to her. Bruised. That's what had been wrong with her all year. Dante had bruised her, and rather than letting herself heal, she let her anger overcome her. And now, there was no going back. Khalid had done something to her soul.

A single tear rolled hastily down her cheek.

She knew what she had to do.



The next morning, promptly at eight am, Phoenix pulled into a parking space on the sprawling campus of Hayes University. Her mission was clear: find Khalid, get the dick, get her soul back. Simple.

The campus was beautiful but its charms were lost on Phoenix. For four hours, she sat and angrily watched students come and go. No Khalid.

The more time passed, the more agitated she grew. Agitated enough that she felt she could kill someone.

She finally saw someone she recognized. Journalism professor Mindy Wilburn. She looked exactly like her headshot on Hayes U's website.

Phoenix exited her car and walked up the sidewalk until she was a few feet from the professor. Moving into her path, Phoenix waited.

Mindy had her face in her phone like everyone else on campus but she looked up just before she ran into Phoenix.

“Excuse me!” she said.

“I’m looking for somebody,” Phoenix said flatly. “A journalism student.”

The strap on the professor’s messenger bag had fallen down her shoulder. She put it back in its place as she regarded Phoenix. “I’m not sure I can help you. I have, like, a hundred and fifty students.” Friendly but cautious.

“His name is…” she trailed off, realizing she didn’t know his last name. “His name is Khalid. He’s dark-skinned, very handsome.”

The professor’s face fell. “Why are you looking for him?”

That was odd. “I, um, met him in a bar,” Phoenix said, pressing on. “We got to talking and he told me he goes here. Anyway, he left his phone. I’m just trying to return it.”

Mindy’s brows knitted together as she processed the information. “When was this?” she finally asked.

Phoenix hesitated. “A few days ago.”

“Okay, well whoever you’re talking about isn’t my student.”

“How do you know that?”

“My student passed away. Last year.”

Phoenix swallowed thickly. “I’m so sorry. What happened to him?”

“He drowned. Anyway, I suggest you drop the phone off at lost and found. It’s in that building,” she said, pointing. Phoenix didn’t bother to look.

“Thanks,” she said as she whirled around, tears already streaming down her face.

She made it home in a haze of confusion and ran straight for her laptop. The first page results of her Google search gave her the information she needed.

### ***Hayes University Student Drowns in Lake Hoover***

The brief article went on to say Khalid was out on a party boat with some friends when he went into the water. He wasn’t wearing a life jacket and was unable to escape the undercurrent.

His body was never found.

Phoenix only slept a few hours that night. All of them fraught, none of them restful. She dreamed of Khalid’s face. It was comforting at first, a happy dream, but by the end of it, his face was a blur. Like he was being erased. The thought terrified her, even in her sleep.

When the sun rose again, she sat up in her bed and looked around her room.

*This is reality, Phoenix. Khalid is gone. Get over it.*

It was a painful realization. Two lovers in one year.

She would never see Khalid again, she knew. And whatever had happened to her soul—she still wasn't sure—there was no going back. This was the new normal.

Her feet hit the floor. She stood, stretched, and went into the bathroom to get her day started, thinking to herself that it wasn't a total wash.

At least Dante was still dead.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

*One year later*

“SO YOU’RE NOT COMING?”

Phoenix looked at her best friend’s disappointed face and shook her head.

“So what are you doing tonight? It’s been a year. Not trying to rush you or anything but I need you out of your funk. Dante hurt you. I know your feelings for him were confusing but it’s okay to move on. You know?”

“I know.”

Faye pouted. “I want my old Phoenix back.”

Phoenix smiled. “I have a feeling I’ll be back very soon.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Just a hunch,” she said, shrugging a shoulder.

“When am I getting my book back, by the way? I was looking for it this morning because I’m reading back through my creepy books.”

“You’re not getting it back,” Phoenix said without even a hint of contrition.

“You lost it?”

“Not exactly.” The truth was she didn’t want Faye to read it. Whatever it was that brought Khalid to her, whatever spirits or powers the book had, she didn’t want her best friend catching it. After ruminating on it for a year, she thought she’d figured out what happened. When she took the book, she opened herself up. Khalid didn’t bypass Faye because of her light. He came to Phoenix because she had the book.

Faye would never see that book again. It was Phoenix’s way of protecting her.

Besides...she had other plans for it.

“Faye, I just wanted to tell you how much I love and appreciate you. You’ve been such a good friend to me over the years. I just wanted you to know that.”

Faye quirked an eyebrow. “You going somewhere?”

“I wanted to give you your flowers, that’s all. You deserve.” Phoenix smiled as best she could given the situation.

“Well, back at you.”

They finished lunch. Phoenix pretended to enjoy it. In reality, she tasted nothing. She enjoyed nothing. She still felt nothing, and it was probably for the best. If she was in her right mind, she’d be a blubbering mess.

She would never see Faye again.



Phoenix donned her favorite black dress, the V-neck bodycon she bought at Macy's a few years ago. On her feet, flat sandals. Too casual for the dress, but perfect for where she was going.

She'd gotten all of her affairs in order. The shop had been sold to Alicia and Tara, two of her stylists. They'd gotten a loan to buy her out, for all the good it did Phoenix. She didn't need the money at all. Still, she went through the motions, telling no one else, not even Faye.

She talked to her brother that morning. All was well. She told him she loved him. He said the same.

And now? It was time to go.

After her stop at the post office, Phoenix got back in her car and headed west on I-92. GPS put her at destination within twenty minutes.

She could scarcely believe she was so close to being with Khalid again. He was all she thought about for an entire year—she woke up with him on her mind, slogged her way through every day with thoughts of him, and every time she touched herself, she replayed their lovemaking in her head. The satisfaction she got was always short-lived and it paled in comparison to the way Khalid made her feel. But it didn't matter now. She would see him again soon enough.

She parked across the street from the clubhouse. There were only three other cars there. Made sense. Most people were out



trick or treating or apple picking or hay riding. Halloween in Rayford. She wouldn't miss it.

Phoenix made her way across the parking lot and entered the quiet clubhouse. She went right to the front desk and signed in.

Kenneth, the young man behind the desk, checked her in with a smile.

“Here you go, Ms. Brown,” he said. “Make sure you put on your life jacket before you leave the dock.”

She flashed a wan smile. “Thank you. Have a good evening.”

She wondered if he would be the one to deal with the aftermath. He seemed nice; she hoped it wouldn't be too traumatic for him. There would probably be a lot of paperwork.

Oh, well.

The dock was only about fifty feet from the back of the clubhouse. The walk was easy, thanks to her flat shoes, and once she reached the lockers, she used her key to open locker 1021. In it, she found a yellow life jacket and a small box. Inside, two flares greeted her, along with a horn of some sort and a whistle. She didn't need any of it so she left the box in its place. She debated with herself for a full minute before taking the life jacket. Might as well.

The small boat was right where Kenneth said it would be. She took two oars from the stand next to her boat before

unraveling the rope that held the vessel in place. She climbed in, sat on the wooden seat, and looked around. With nothing left to do on land, she used the oars to paddle away from the dock.

After about three minutes, she realized why rowing is considered a sport. Her feeble arms were screaming for relief but she kept going until she was far enough away from the shore that she couldn't swim back. Not that she'd want to. She was resolved.

The sun was making its final descent. All over the city, kids were putting on their costumes preparing to go door-to-door looking for sweet treats. It was the perfect night for it, a balmy sixty-five degrees or so. Perfect night for swimming, too, assuming Lake Hoover wasn't too cold.

Finally, she reached a spot that felt right. After one long look back at the shore, she dropped the oars into the water. Everything seemed to go still around her as if in reverence; the wind quieted to a whisper, the trees slowed their sways, and the birds sat silent on their perches. Watching. Waiting.

Phoenix took a deep breath and looked over the side of the small boat and into the water. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, and the water wasn't clear enough to see into it anyway. But she stared. A school of small fish swam close to the surface. Bubbles drifted up and popped. And then she heard something.

A whisper.

*'Come to me.'*

She blinked rapidly, to clear her vision perhaps. Something had called to her from the water. Hadn't it? She wasn't entirely certain.

*'Come to me, angel.'*

Phoenix's eyes went wide. That time, she knew for certain. Someone was in the water calling to her, and it had to be Khalid. He was the only one who had ever called her that.

Smiling, she leaned over the right side of the boat and held her hand out over the water. More bubbles rose and popped on the surface. Was he down there waiting for her? Had he been waiting for her for three-hundred sixty-five days like she'd been waiting for him?

Her smile faded as her eyes adjusted to the rapidly fading light. She narrowed them, leaned a few inches closer, and peered into the abyss. Something was down there for sure... glowing.

Glowing red.

Her heart thundered in her chest. Was that him? It had to be. She lowered her hand until it was right above the surface of the lake. Could she really do this? If Khalid was waiting for her, she would. If not, she would never have any relief, she knew.

But something nagged at her. A feeling. An intuition.

She pulled her hand back.

Khalid had died in this lake. The article said so. But she'd *met* him. She'd *made love* to him. It hadn't been a dream; it

was too real. All of it. Dante's death. Malina's screams. She hadn't imagined any of it.

So why was she hesitating?

"Khalid?" she whispered. "Is that you?"

The red glowing intensified. Two beams.

It was him.

"I missed you so much." She stuck out her hand again. An offering. "I'm ready, Khalid. I'm ready."

Phoenix took a deep breath and placed her fingertips on the water. It was warm. Inviting. It reassured her.

More bubbles. He was coming!

She pushed her fingers deeper until the water covered her wrist. This was it. She was about to be reunited with her lover. It was now or never.

*What the hell?*

A third red beam appeared. Then a fourth. More. So many she couldn't count. And just when she was about to pull her hand out of the water, icy fingers wrapped around her wrist. She opened her mouth to scream but the sound died in her throat as the world flipped upside down.

Darkness surrounded her. Water filled her eyes, nose, and mouth. She kicked and kicked but its grip was too strong. Down she went, head first. Her lungs burned. She was sure they would explode at any moment. She knew she couldn't fight it so she allowed her body to go limp.

Her heart stopped, but she never felt it.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

PHOENIX OPENED HER EYES. The light, which seemed to be coming from a nebulous source, was dim. Too dim to make out her surroundings. She knew she was naked, and she was lying supine on a table of some sort, her hands bound at the wrists. She pulled at her restraints and found no purchase.

Something was wrong.

*'I knew you'd come back to me, angel.'*

*'Khalid!'* Her eyes darted wildly.

He appeared out of the darkness looking exactly the same as the day she'd seen him last. Her eyes widened. Her pussy moistened. Finally, *finally*, some relief. She wanted to cry.

*'Where are we?'*

*'Under.'* His eyes glowed red. His muscles were taut. He seemed to be barely restraining himself. *'And now you're mine.'*

*'Why am I restrained?'*

*'Because I'm about to please you and I don't want you running from me. Is that alright?'*

*'Yes. Please. I've been waiting for this.'*

*'I know.'*

He stared at her, his eyes caressing every inch of her naked body. She grimaced at the burning sensation on her skin. It hurt so good.

Khalid came closer and bared his fangs. *'Are you mine, angel?'*

*'I'm yours, Khalid. Forever.'* She thought about what she'd just said. *'Do we live forever?'*

*'We don't live at all.'*

His fingers found her clit and stroked her. His touch was light. Toying. She moaned and lifted her hips, grinding against his fingers, needing more pressure, more weight. But Khalid just teased her, staring into her eyes as he brought her right to the brink and back, over and over again.

*'Please.'*

*'Please, what?'*

*'Fuck me, Khalid. Please. I need you.'*

He was between her legs now. She panted and squirmed when the heat of his gaze singed the insides of her thighs. Her every breath escaped her when his tongue found her clit. He lapped at the sensitive bundle of nerves with fevered abandon. She was his meal tonight. Maybe every night. Phoenix wasn't

sure how things worked down here but she figured she'd learn eventually.

For now, only bliss.

She orgasmed three times back to back before he stopped. She went to reach for him, forgetting she was captive.

*'Come here,' she demanded.*

He licked his lips. *'Soon.'*

*'Please. I'm yours, Khalid.'*

*'Actually, you're ours.'*

*'Ours? What do you mean?'*

His sinister grin filled her with dread. *'Look around, angel.'*

She didn't want to look. She didn't need to. She felt them all around her. But she looked away from Khalid, her lover, and shuddered at the sight. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of glowing red eyes were suddenly visible to her. She wanted to scream, to run, to cry, but she was frozen. And ensnared.

*'Who are they?'*

*'They're just like me.'*

*'What do they want?'*

*'Your soul.'*

*'Why?'*

*'It's been marinating for a whole year, angel.'*

*'But I didn't give it to you. I said no.'*



*'You did. Yet here you are.'*

She blinked rapidly as she stared at his face. He looked different. Less human. And it slowly dawned on her. *'You tricked me?'* she asked bitterly.

*'I finessed you. You tricked yourself.'*

*'How?'*

*'You let your anger kill your soul and then you let yourself get so hungry for my dick you were willing to give up everything to have it. That's always been your problem, Phoenix. You made it so easy.'*

*'Let me go.'* She pulled at her restraints again to no avail.  
*'Please, Khalid. Set me free.'*

*'I can't do that, angel.'*

She kicked her feet and thrashed her head from side-to-side.  
*'Khalid, please!'*

*'Don't worry, angel. This won't hurt at all.'*

In the end, Khalid kept his word. As they all descended on her to feed, Phoenix didn't feel a thing.

# EPILIQUE

MALINA WAVED TO MR. Johnson on her way past his house. With Princess all tired out from her walk, Malina decided to go back home instead of taking one more trip around the block. The trick or treaters would be coming soon.

*I hate Halloween*, she thought. Nothing but bad memories and bad juju. Dante had died on this day last year. She'd never enjoy Halloween again.

But she liked kids. No reason they shouldn't have candy just because she was in a mood.

She stopped by the mailbox before making her way up the driveway. Once she got Princess inside and off the leash, she flipped through the mail. Bills, bills, coupons, a circular, and a thin package. No return address. Curious, she set down the other mail and opened the envelope, peering inside.

It was a book.

# THANK You

Thank you for reading this weird book! It was a bit different for me but I hope you still enjoyed it. If so, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads so other readers can enjoy it, too!

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHAE SANDERS GREW UP sneaking her sister's Jackie Collins novels when she really didn't have any business reading them. But they stoked a love of edgy and steamy romance against the backdrop of business and power. Now, she writes about black love, lust, and relationships with a side of social stuff thrown in for a little razzle dazzle. In her spare time, Shae spends time with her husband and kids, watches her favorite shows over and over again, and teaches as an adjunct professor.

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