Phoenix

“I must go,”

The words were warm on my face and I twisted in my thin sheets to face the man who leaned over me from the side of my bed. Even in the dark I could see his olive colored skin, black hair and short, trimmed beard. His dark brown eyes were alive with the sharp awareness that came with adrenaline and controlled fear. If I had learned anything from this man, it was how to appear aware, on guard. Even if I wasn’t.

“Please,” I pleaded, my whispered words thick with sleep. “Don’t.” This man wasn’t my lover. He was a friend, my only friend, and I couldn’t stand the thought of losing him.

“They are coming for me,” he said in his low voice, his eyes never leaving mine. “I could not bear knowing they took you too.”

“I don’t care,” I replied. And I meant it. Anything seemed easier than fighting the world on my own again.

“Promise me,” he whispered, taking my warm hand in his own. “When I’m gone and my sins have been forgotten, you will right my wrongs.”

“Please,” I whispered, holding tightly to his hand, tears beginning to fall in cascades.

“I cannot let them hurt you,” he said, his voice tight. I felt a pinch on my forearm as he slipped a needle under my skin and the slight pressure as he injected the clear substance into my veins. But I didn’t look at the syringe; I studied his eyes and watched as they glazed over with tears and guilt. “Maybe one day you can help reverse my mistakes. Maybe, one day you can forgive me for doing this to you.”

He caught me as I fell backwards, my eyes heavy with fabricated sleep.

“I love you,” he whispered into my ear. The three most dangerous words in the
world, he had once told me, were the ones he had just spoken.

   “Please,” I said once again, my voice barely more than a breath.
But he was already gone.

   *Three Months Later*

   “Miss Coffer!”

   I sat up with a start, banging my knee against the desk I sat in. I was seized with immense confusion. Why was there dry drool on the left side of my face? Why was I in a classroom?

   The brick walls around me were painted an off white, the black boards were streaked with chalk dust, and I was surrounded by at least twenty older students all of whom were wearing smirks and grins. The teacher at the front of the room caught my attention. Her face was red with anger and possible embarrassment.

   “I told you at the start of the year that sleeping would not be tolerated in this honors class! Go to the office!” Her short blond hair bobbed as she pointed to the door.

   My head, thick with sleep understood enough to realize I wasn’t welcome here, and I slowly gathered the books on the desk and put them into the ratty book bag at the foot of my desk. I got up slowly and walked for the door. I was almost to the door when a girl with big hair leaned over to her friend and whispered loud enough for me to hear, “Someone must have partied a little too hardy last night.” And then they giggled.

   I pushed through the door to an unfamiliar hallway, my mind reeling. Where was I? Why was I in this school with its shouting teachers and graffiti lined hallways? My head pounded and my feet moved unsteadily beneath me.

   The need to escape these scary hallways and go somewhere safe, somewhere familiar, overwhelmed me, and I shuffled along until I stumbled and fell against red lockers covered with sticker remains and words of wisdom written in permanent Sharpie. My legs shook as one word reverberated through my mind-

   “Move. Move. MOVE!”

   There was a sudden explosion of noise, a bell signaling the change of classes, and it felt like my head erupted with pain. A silent cry came from my mouth and I slid down the
rough front of the lockers. I covered my ears with my hands and watched through slit eyelids the many feet of this foreign school pass in front of me.

It seemed like eternity before the voices died, the feet stopped pounding, the doors slammed closed for good, and the echo of the second bell receded. I looked up through tear filled eyes to see two carefully pressed black pant legs in front of me. The black leather shoes seemed to shine.

“Jayleen Coffer?” The voice was deep, sure of itself.

I brought my head up, barely able to focus, and saw the blurry outline of a man with thick shoulders, blond hair, and flat chin. Another tear slipped down my stained face.

“Where…who are you?”

I watched through unfocused eyes as he turned to someone behind him and said, “Find Keller and tell him to grab his bag and get in here.”

The man squatted down so we were eye level and I felt myself shrink back into the solid wall of lockers. He stared at me, with ill-conceived impatience and curiosity that quickly turned to disgust. “Tell me where we are,” he ordered.

I stared back at him in fear, my weak body shaking.

“Damn it,” he said, standing back up. He pulled out a cell phone and dialed a number.

“He drugged her,” he said without as much as a ‘hello’, “wiped her memory clean.” There was silence, and I felt myself shivering, unable to stop.

“Yes, sir,” the man replied, his voice implying he disagreed with whatever orders he had been given. “I’ll get my men on it right away.” And then he hung up.

“Sir?” Grey pants with wrinkles appeared beside the black ones.

“Pack her up and get her out of here,” the black pant man ordered his voice crisp and orderly once again. He strode away.

The man in the grey pants squatted down, and I saw round cheeks and brown hair.

“Jayleen?” the man asked, and that was all I heard, because I was out cold, fear and drugs having taken their toll.

*Minutes Later*
As my body was transferred, poked and prodded, my mind dreamt. The images were edged in a ragged black border, the colors dark and dull, grainy.

At first I was in a small room, playing with old dolls, when there was a loud crash from the other room. Abandoning my dolls, I went to see what had happened. A woman lay in the middle of a tiny kitchen, blood running from her forehead. A large man with a beer gut stood above her, fading anger on his face. He looked up to see me standing there and his face began to blur…

The images became tinted with yellow. Scenes ran together and flew by in quick succession. There were car rides and cheap hotel rooms, fast food bags and fear. Always fear.

Finally the running stopped and I found myself in a cramped apartment with the man who had a beer gut and smelled like alcohol. At night he would drink and yell, sometimes hit and sway drunkenly. The images turned red and stayed that way. I went to a school with teachers who didn’t care and students who did drugs in class. But they paid me no mind. Maybe because my wavy blond hair always hung in my face and I kept my head down wherever I went. Maybe because I didn’t care.

And then I was walking down a street in the night, turning into a corner convenience store. The man behind the counter with greasy hair and bad breath was arguing with a younger man, this one with dark hair and a tangled beard. I could tell by their shouted words that the manager thought the man with the beard had shoplifted. The younger man denied it. I watched their debate from the back of the store through the mirror hanging from behind the counter. I found myself captivated by the man with the beard. While the counterman yelled, the man with the beard talked in low tones and calmly.

Something about the bearded man’s calm words and limited arm movements, something about his eyes, told me he wasn’t lying. In a sudden act of determination and surprising compassion, I walked to the front, slipping the few dollars I had from my pocket, money that seemed extremely important to me, and slipped it to the man behind the counter. The images turned light blue. The bearded man and I left together. He told me his name. I went a step farther and offered him a place to sleep.
I came to know him like a brother. There was a smart, handsome man beneath that beard. I found myself smiling, laughing, debating, and learning from this man. For a moment the dreams were tinted with light pink, but it didn’t last. He told me his story, ravaged with death, twisted with hunger, and knotted with military training. But it wasn’t the good kind of military training. He hurt people, he killed. He was sorry. He was on the run.

I sheltered, fed, and listened to this man. The first man I had ever known to admit he was wrong. The first man I had known to regret and want to right his mistakes.

But circumstances changed. He caught word of men on his tail, hunting, searching for him. And he ran. And he left me.

The dream ended and the memories receded to wisps of smoke that drifted away, never to be remembered again.

*A Few Hours Later*

“Wake her up.” The command was pointless, because I was already working my way through a cloudy haze, back to painful reality. My body ached all over, like I had just gone through rigorous cross training. I tried to sit up.

But I couldn’t. My wrists and ankles were held down with padded restraints. My heart pounded as I twisted my head to try and figure out where I was. The lights were off, but I could tell that the walls were a light color and there was nothing in the room except the bed and machines. No flowers, no cards, no bright colors. There was a man in a white coat, retreating through a door across the room. Another man, the one who had given the order, was standing in the corner to my left, where my peripheral vision couldn’t see him and the shadows hid him.

“Your friend was a smart man,” the man said, remaining in the shadows. “He knew exactly how to exploit you. And then he wiped your memory clean and hopped a ride out of here. Too bad ignorance and memory wipes aren’t feasible in court. At least not in my court.”

He departed from his corner and strode slowly to stand at the end of my bed, and I saw it was the man from the school. The school seemed like such a distant dream. His eyes were piercing like a hawk’s.
“Tell me,” the man said, gripping the railing to my bed. “How old are you?”
I couldn’t say.
“Your birthday? Grade?”
With a sudden start, I realized the cold truth. I couldn’t remember a thing.
I couldn’t remember my past, my mom, my dad. I couldn’t remember who this man was talking about. I couldn’t remember anything since waking up in that school to a pounding head and an aching body.
My heart began beating heavily.
“What’s your name?”
“Jayleen,” I said, my voice thick with hesitation and fear. The one question I could answer. Because they had already told me.
The man nodded, smiling. I didn’t like that smile. “Do you know who I am? What I do?”
I shook my head.
“I’m the man who tracks down terrorists, assassins, and traitors. I’m the man who tracks them down and makes them pay. I’m the one who terminates the threat.” I felt my throat constrict.
“And I don’t make mistakes.” He removed a paper from the inside of his coat and turned it so I could see. There was a man, a man with olive skin and dark hair laying face first in a pool of blood. He had been kneeling. He had been shot in the back. I couldn’t tear my eyes from the gruesome picture until he did it for me and replaced the paper back into his jacket pocket. “I need to clean up loose ends and that means I need to know what you know.”
“I wouldn’t get too comfortable, Ms. Coffer. You’ve got a lot of remembering to do.”
And then he turned and strode from the room, the door closing quietly behind him.
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When the doctor came back, he brought with him a small syringe. He didn’t meet my eyes as he slipped the thin needle into the tubes that were attached to my arms. He checked
the screens that showed my vital signs, and scurried back out the door.

The burning sensation began shortly after, and soon it raced down my veins. I lay there, paralyzed, my mind screaming in agony, convinced I was burning from the inside out. Tears and sweat covered me as my body shook and my muscles clenched, the scream that had built in my throat unable to pass through my locked teeth and lips.

Through the pain, the bright red, searing pain, a face so familiar, so comforting appeared in my mind and looked at me with serious eyes and began to whisper in a hoarse voice, “I did so many things, so many bad things in the name of good. I was young; I had no choice other than the one they had put in front of me. Join or die.” His eyes turned sad as he looked at me. “I had seen too much death, been hungry for too long to turn away the offer. I was scared of death, then, and I was angry. I…I cannot explain how it happened, but I stumbled upon a book filled with such ideas, such things as forgiveness and love, hope and sacrifice. It changed me.” He shook his head, as if to clear his mind of all the bad things he had done and the thoughts he was thinking. “I began writing everything down as soon as the doubting began. The plans, the attacks, the assassinations, the people involved, and the money that was used. There are future attacks, past wrongs; all of it is in that book.” His eyes were intent once more. “You must find this book when I am gone. You have enough heart, and with enough skill, you can fix what I have helped ruin. You must.”

The image began to fade, and the words ‘You must.’ echoing in my mind as the pain intensified. But along with that pain came a feeling of such anger, longing to be free and desire to know why I was here. My teeth parted and I screamed with all I had, pain and fear and hate behind every second of the wordless scream. My arms and legs retaliated against the bonds and the pain intensified, but I didn’t stop. I sensed the door being thrown open, the doctor rushing through with a nurse on his heels. There was a shout and the bond around my left wrist was removed as they searched for a vein and the nurse attempted to hold me down, but I was a wild, untamable beast with a vendetta against these humans. I swung with precision, and hit the nurse on the temple and she fell to the ground with a shout. The doctor hesitated long enough for me to grab the front of his coat jacket and pull him close. Before he could pull away, I cracked his nose and he fell against the opposite wall. It gave me enough time to free my hands and legs from the bonds. I walked on shaky
legs to the doctor who was trying to stand. I pushed him back down, removed the syringe from his hand, bit the plastic tip off and then pushed the needle into the base of his neck. He flailed for a moment and then lay still.

I looked over to the bed with its rumpled sheets and the sweat stain I had left. I looked then to the open door and the well-lit corridor. Freedom was within reach. I took a step…

*A Month and A Half Later*

There was no denying it as I looked over my shoulder, I was paranoid. But I was also close. Close to answers, close to ending the headaches that plagued me, close to figuring it all out. So I walked a little faster, the wind rustling my hair as I joined the flow of people walking through the front doors of the large library. I allowed myself to stop and stare in wonder at the large room that branched out and rose up. There were people everywhere, scurrying to find this or that book. I eyed the section I was looking for and began climbing the stairs. I had to walk to the far back, and I ran my fingers across the binding of the old books as I went, looking closely for a certain leather bound journal.

And then I found it. It sat on the bottom shelf in between two of the oldest looking Bibles I had ever seen. I crouched down and pulled it slowly from between the two Bibles. Its cover was worn, and I held my breath as I opened it. The pages were filled with small letters and numbers and as I flipped through, a single piece of printer paper fell out. I picked it up and unfolded it.

Jayleen, if you take this book with you, there will be no going back. I realize now that I was demanding too much. I of all people should realize that we have free will and we have the right to choose. Choose what makes you happy, choose wisely, and over all, learn from my mistakes and choose what you will not regret.

I flipped the paper over and scrawled at the bottom was one word- Run.