

4: Origins

After a successful four hours on the radio, and another two arranging tomorrow's music, filing paperwork and recording public service announcements, Flint and I finally push through the revolving doors and into the blinding late-morning sun.

"I love days like this," I say, pausing at the top of the steps and touching Flint's sleeve, "warm bright sun, cool crisp air..."

Flint squints and looks from me to the sky, then down at his scarf and wrist warmers, and purses his lips. I can't help but smile in return.

Flint grins back, and asks, "You wanna go get some lunch before you head back to um..." he trails off, pantomiming what I can only assume is his approximation of some kind of explosion.

"Before I head back to ... your place for sex?" I grin, purposely misinterpreting his gesture.

Flint goes pink and turns away, scratching his neck. "Jesus, Timber," he mutters, suppressing his own grin.

"I'm just messing with you, I'm sorry," I apologize with a chuckle. "But yes; I'm starving, and I'll do anything to delay going back to my room." I hook my arm in his and start down the stairs.

Flint follows, shoving his hands in his pockets and tightening his arm against mine for my body heat. "So, where..."

Flint stops and looks up at me. He's saying something, but I can't make it out. Something about me being okay. Am I okay? Fizz, hiss. My brain is filling with static, my vision tunneling. I'm only vaguely aware of my friend. He's released my arm and started to follow my gaze. I stand still on the stairs, my jaw repeatedly clenching in anger and slacking in disbelief.

There, in front of me, when I could have sworn I'd put all this behind. There, at the base of the stairs, looking up at us with one hand shading the eyes and the other on a hip, like someone scolding their first-middle-surname child who needs to get down from that tree this instant. There, with greying hair and loose cardigan, is my mother.

Flint shakes my arm, and I tear my eyes away to look at him instead. He gulps, and I blink hard, and shake my head, looking back at him. I can only imagine what kind of terror and rage I'm communicating with my wide, bloodshot, sleep-deprived eyes.

"Flint," I want to wail, but it just comes out like some kind of croak. "Flint, my mother is here."

Flint's pale skin turns white. "Here??" He looks over his shoulder.

"Don't fucking look," I hiss.

She waves.

"Sorry," Flint mutters, ducking his head again. At length, he adds, "How did she find you?"

Without answering, I snatch Flint's hand and lace my fingers into his, gripping them like a vice, and drag him down the rest of the stairs with me. My head is ringing, my entire face feels like it has tinnitus. Standing in front of her, I take a long, deep breath and avoid eye contact.

My mother comes two steps closer and holds her arms out to give me a hug. I don't respond. She gives me a condescending frown and lowers her arms only slightly.

"Sweetie," she says, with a bit of an edge to her saccharine voice, "are you really not going to hug me? Your mother?"

Gods, look at her, suddenly acting like nothing had ever happened, like she was such a good and kind person. Like I'm being so unreasonable. Like I don't know my mother when I see her. How could she do that? How was she so fractured, or delusional, that she could pretend like nothing had ever happened? And yet, the guilt settles in anyway, finds its old home, and thumbs its nose at two years of therapy. I am a fake, a phony, an unreasonable little child.

I take another deep breath, realizing that I've been holding it. Letting go of Flint's hand, I scowl and lean into her with my body, but don't extend my arms. I can smell her perfume, that same old perfume she wore when I was four and had gone into her room to try all of them on. Her arms, thinner and shorter than my own, wrap around me and manage to shrink me, make me less. She makes some kind of humming noise, and I can feel my body heat draining.

Always taking. Never giving. This is my inheritance.

"Um, hi, are you Miss Phoenix?" Flint asks.

I snort, leaning away from her, the mental fog suddenly gone. I watch her face wander from consternation to mirth, and wonder which is real; maybe both?

"Phoenix?" Mom asks, putting her hands on her hips in a way that says she's not in on the joke.

"Mom and I have different last names," I explain. Before she can jump in and protest, I reestablish my tangled death grip on Flint's hand and add, "Mom, this is Flint; we work together."

I don't even remember the subway ride. Somehow the three of us end up together in a restaurant. I'm not entirely sure how she managed to wrangle herself into lunch with us, and I'm pretty sure she's going to pay for it too.

Between the stress of last night and today's big interview, I was not ready to be found by my mother. I guess it was only a matter of time. I'd moved across state lines, not left a forwarding address, changed my phone number, changed my name, and cut my hair. Once things settled down, I eventually told my Dad how to find me; my parents are divorced and don't talk, so it was a safe bet. Still, when I gave him the link so he could listen to our radio show from his house in Connecticut, he eventually gave that link to my younger brother, who let slip one day to mom that it was me. Well, at least Justin still thinks I'm cool.

My phone buzzes across the table and I snatch it up. Mom is talking to Flint about Kentucky. Are they getting along? Wild. I read the message from Stevie.

Hey you ok? Usually you're home by now, Stevie says.

No I'm not I'm having lunch at good beans with flint, I type back, adding another message, *and my mom*

There's a pause, and Stevie starts typing again.

WTF your mom? No. Come home I'm making you lunch

I look up at my lunch martini and the bread on the table, then at Flint.

"Everything ok?" Flint asks quietly, giving my thigh a squeeze under the table.

I don't want to be here, and I usually like being here. Good Beans is a queer hole-in-the-wall continental European-style café bistro with a full service bar. Honestly I didn't think mom would want to come with us when we told her about it, but here we are. Drinking with my mom, and things are going... well.

I don't trust it.

"Y...yeah, I mean maybe?" My mind races, firing through every possible response. "Sorry, Stevie's texting me." My mom tosses her hair and looks at the menu. Flint nods and turns to ask my mother about her job. I really appreciate what he's doing for me, talking to her so I don't have to.

I look back at my phone to watch the video that Stevie's just sent me: a close-up of a wooden spoon slowly, awkwardly stirring a pot of macaroni and cheese, then spanking the wet, sticky noodles like they've been naughty. I suppress a laugh.

Why did you make macaroni I have leftover farfalle alfredo in the fridge, I type.

Because this shit is the boxiest, Stevie replies, *Plus I already ate all your bowties for breakfast sorry*

I roll my eyes. Hey, at least Stevie likes the stuff I make.

Tell your mom you have to go, Stevie continues. *Tell your mom there's a hole in your apartment so you can come home and I will feed you*

I already tried that, I type back, then reach for another piece of bread to butter, take a bite, and then down the rest of my martini. It punches me in the nostrils, then the brain, then the throat. A wiggle works its way through my waist, making me grunt. This has the unpleasant side-effect of garnering my mother's attention.

"So -" she stops, bites her lip, and gestures at me just like Colonel Constitution had.

"Timber," I remind her, "My name is Timber."

"Ugh," she says, rolling her eyes and buttering her bread. "I'm never going to call you that. It's not your name."

My heart boils, threatening to cook its way out of my ribs. My jaw tenses so hard that I can hear the strain in my left ear.

"It's my legal name," I snarl through my teeth.

"Not the one I gave you," she drones, and then asks me about my 'little job' at our 'little public radio station.'

I can't. I just can't, I tried to and I can't.

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom," I blurt out, eating the olive out of my empty glass. "When our waiter gets back I want the lunch special and another one of these."

One foot in front of the other, Timber, you are in one of your favorite places with one of your best friends, it's going to be okay. The first all-gender bathroom is locked, so I try the other, and lock myself in, keeping the lights off. Thank the gods for single-occupant bathrooms. It's going to be okay. You're okay... Timber. I wait a minute for my eyes to adjust. Timber, your name is Timber Phoenix and that woman out there does not know you.

The dim light streaming in from under the door lights my way to the toilet.

It's not going to be okay, mom found me. there's a hole in my wall, I'm not safe, I'm not safe. Not safe.

I'm not safe, I scrawl over my phone to Stevie.

Stevie is typing.

I'm in the bathroom I've locked myself in, I'm not ok, I'm just sitting here I don't even have to go but I can't be with mom I can't have this conversation I don't want her here I did not invite her here, I type frantically.

Stevie has stopped typing.

I feel like I am losing my sense of self. Growing up codependent made sitting across from her like looking at my worst self, my future self, and my hopeless childhood all at once. I spin through a sea of static, my toilet a chariot of the void.

Stevie what do I do, I continue frantically, *I should have said no I just didn't want her to follow me home*

Stevie is typing. *Ok. Take a deep breath. I'm here.*

I lock my phone and take a deep breath. I can hear the muffled noises of Good Beans, the high-pitched hiss of my phone's screen as it silently lights back up.

ok, I type at length.

Flint is there, Stevie continues. *You have people in your life that care about you. If your mom starts any shit Flint's got your back and if it gets nasty, Ocean will shut it down.*

ok, I reply again. Stevie's right; Ocean, the elder non-binary owner of the bar, probably commands elemental power with their hairstyle alone. I chuckle and type, *mom doesn't stand a chance.*

A few more encouraging texts from Stevie and I'm back at the table, downing my second lunch martini and slipping my hand back into Flint's. He squeezes my hand and I know that I've got this. We've got this. Mom is just a shade of my past, come to resolve itself.

Our food comes and I let go of Flint's hand so we can eat, keeping my thigh against his, as if I might fall over if I didn't physically keep in contact with him for support.

"So are you two dating?" Mom asks.

I cough, almost choking on a piece of linguine soaked in vodka sauce, which is threatening to worm its way down my breathing hole. Cough. Wrong hole, you stupid piece of delicious pasta, go down the eating hole. COUGH COUGH COUGH.

Success. I swallowed the bastard without dying. I look up at Mom and Flint through watery eyes.

Flint looks from his armpit to me, running his hand through his hair. His face is the color of a red cabbage.

"No, mom, it's not like that," I say through clenched teeth, breathing in deeply.

"What's it like then," Mom asks, "I mean is one of you the boy and the other is the girl?"

Flint shudders and I wrap my arm around his, lace his fingers in mine, and hold his hand tight in my lap.

"How's everything taste over here, babe?" our server asks, appearing out of fucking nowhere. I start, and look up at his familiar face and try to convey some manner of what I'm currently dealing with. He apparently knows us--and that look--well enough, because his eyes go wide and dart from Mom to me.

I nod, blinking rapidly. "It's so great that I want to eat the rest at home." My voice sounds saccharine on the back-end, like the aftertaste in a diet soda. I lick my lips and draw them tight.

"I'll bring y'all some boxes and the check. Three separate?" He points at all of us with his pen, as if drawing a circle with three dots in it, then chews on it.

"I'll handle the bill," Mom says, before anyone else can respond.

"Then I'll get one of these for the road," I say, holding up my empty martini glass.

"We don't do drinks to go anymore, city ordinance..."

"Fine," I say, smiling, "Can you bring me one more when you bring us boxes?"

He nods and flits off.

Mom frowns. "It's lunchtime, isn't that a lot?"

"I'm not driving anywhere," I respond, dipping my toothpick of gin-soaked olives in a smear of vodka sauce with my free hand, "and it's been one of those days. I should be getting to bed." I imagine that I'm a Nova with eye-lasers, and I'm boring a hole straight through hers out the back of her head.

Mom breaks eye contact. "Your little um... Your Flint here, was telling me about what happened last night while you were in the bathroom."

I squeeze Flint's hand. My phone vibrates.

"And the drinks here are expensive," Mom says, holding up her water, "that's why I got the water."

"Maybe you'll let me pay my own bill once in a while," I mutter.

Our server returns, and I let go of Flint's hand to slam the martini back, convulse, and then dump my pasta and untouched brussels sprouts into a styrofoam box. I stand, and motion for Flint to follow.

"Thanks for lunch, mom."

"Wait," she says, fumbling with her purse, "I haven't paid for it yet."

"We have to go, mom," I retort, feeling my sudden resolve disintegrating.

"Yeah," Flint adds, "we have to catch the bus."

"I thought we were taking the subway?" Mom says, pulling out a few large bills and putting them on the table and rushing to follow us out.

We, she said. She calls for us to slow down, but she's asking someone else to do it. Certainly not my name, must not be anyone who knows me. My heart is racing, adrenaline trying to melt my face off and burn my chest up. I can't stand hearing her call me that.

"Just ignore her," Flint whispers.

She catches up to us at the bus stop. "Why didn't you slow down? Didn't you hear me calling?"

I check the bus schedule, and wouldn't you know it, I have to wait fifteen entire minutes for a bus with this woman. See, here would be a great time to throw a car at me; Ultras should take notes. Just make me a skin-crayon on the pavement so I don't have to deal with any of this anymore.

"Hello??" she insists, cutting through my fantasy.

I take a deep breath, feeling the third martini really hit. I am a seething vortex of magma, the anger and heat of a dying planet.

"Look, mother," I growl, whipping around to face her, "I left everything behind, *everything!*"

"I know, sweetie," Mom interrupts, not even trying to listen, "and I'm just--"

I am green and ten feet tall. I will be heard.

"YOU'RE JUST. YOU'RE ALWAYS *JUST*," I scream, wringing my hands in the air violently. The stranger behind mom inches away and out from under the bus shelter.

My mother just stands there, as if staring through me. Maybe X-ray vision runs in the family because I can see right through her, too. I can see she's full of shit. I can see that even though she's shut up, she's just pretending. I can see she already knows the next thing she's going to say.

I know this because she is me. No matter how hard I try, she is the worst in everything I hate about myself.

"I left because you won't even try to show me basic human decency. I disappeared because you couldn't take my side in *anything!*"

Mom opens her mouth.

"No," I insist, lowering my voice to a growl, "when you see someone's *child*, you ask their name and pronouns. When you see someone's *dog*, you ask their name and pronouns."

"That's different," Mom begins.

"No, it's not. You've never supported me! You've never stood up for me! I'm your child, and you can't even treat me better than a dog, no matter how much I *bitch* about it!"

Mom huffs and shakes her head. "*Timber Phoenix* sounds like you're a character in one of those edgy teen romance dramas on TV."

She said my name. Out loud. In a shitty context, but out loud.

"I like it," I say quietly, "It's my name." I avoid her gaze, my eyes wandering across the street, over the dirty businesses and peeling billboards. She always manages to get under my skin and make me doubt myself. It's garbage, but again, she's my mom, and it's the flavor of sick, twisted love I grew up with. I scratch my nails idly against my to-go box.

"And look at you," she says, seeming to take my small, shrinking body language, and even smaller voice, as license to continue, "with your clothes, and your, your hair, and your earrings, you look like a... a..."

"Timber is a tall and powerful being with sunshine in their eyes and the ocean in their voice," Flint says, stepping between us, "you'd know that if you took the time to get to know them."

I'm blown away. I've never heard him be so forceful like this. My cheeks get hot and I lean my shoulder into his back in silent thanks. My phone vibrates.

"Fine," Mom says, raising her eyebrows and holding up her hands and letting them flop to her sides.

There is a long pause. My phone vibrates again.

"I'll be back this way next month," she adds, bending low and tilting her head around Flint to meet my downward gaze, "on my way to the convention in Maryland."

She pauses, and I don't respond, just keep scratching the styrofoam and thinking about how good it feels under my nails, how the hollow scritch scritch sounds, how good it's going to taste reheated at home. Timber's not home right now, but if you'd like to give a shit, please deposit your pile after the beep.

"...if you want to see me, that is," she says, as if it's ridiculous to think otherwise.

BEEP BEEP! A black car with tinted windows pulls up into the bus lane.

"Get in, losers," Stevie shouts, leaning out of the passenger window and slapping the freshly-waxed exterior.

Stevie, thank fuck. My hand is on the door handle, already opening it, when my brain catches up with my actions. I pause, looking over my shoulder at Mom as Flint slides along the black rear seats.

If only she knew how much I actually needed her.

"You'll have to talk to Pop if you want my phone number," I shout out the window.

And then we're gone.