

Soul Cages
by Jeral Davis

Someone has to die.

Who will Ben choose? Protector? Virgin? Or Matron?

Joan Powers glared at the succinct note before she shoved it into the FedEx envelope. Her knees trembled as she exited the Gulfstream. She brushed past the attendant, who bid her a cheery farewell. Joan offered a weak smile then hurried down the aircraft stairs. A spirited wind whipped her blonde waves against her face and bare shoulders. She wished she had brought a jacket. Yet, there had been no time. During work that morning, the unseasonable Idahoan warmth invaded the mini loader as she hauled stone to the client's garden pond. Once the perspiration had rolled, she flung her denim covering aside. When the call came, the jacket became the least of her worries.

The driver opened the door and Joan glanced at the glimmering private jet reflected on his Aviator shades. After she climbed into the rear, the driver trailed the security grouping from the airport tarmac. When they reached West Century Boulevard, the cluster of white cars dispersed. Joan battled the urge to turn and view their disbanding. She wanted to rally every law enforcement unit, shout orders, direct their pursuit, and demand they bring the lunatic to her to extract justice.

She tugged her cell from her waistband and dialed Sheila. "I've just landed. How's Ben?"

"Stabilized. He's being prepped for surgery."

“How is Juliana holding up?”

Her niece sighed. “I wanted to tell you in person.”

Joan straightened. “What?”

“Juliana hasn’t arrived at the hospital.”

“That’s not like her.”

“Exactly,” Sheila sounded as if she’d aged well beyond her twenties since her initial call. “She also hasn’t responded to any of my voice messages or texts.”

Through the darkened windows, the L.A. traffic scuttled by – business as usual. Joan wanted time reversed so she could squash the evil that had abruptly invaded her world just hours ago.

Sheila said, “On the way here I called the FBI lead who handled Juliana’s threats from earlier this year.”

“Does he believe the events are related?”

“Wouldn’t say. Just assured he would arrive soon.”

“I’m on my way.”

She shut her cell then held it to her lips. It was maddening to maintain control and relinquish it all at once. She believed, and had taught her children, that nothing was coincidence. Everything happened for a purpose. God’s purpose.

Joan closed her eyes and the morning’s events tightened around her heart. Sheila’s frantic call replayed in her mind.

Ben. Viciously mauled. By some crazed fan. The poison embedded in the attacker’s nails surged through her son’s body deadening tissue and paralyzing muscle.

“Benny.”

Teams of paparazzi tracked her youngest son's every move. The actor's life had become a dizzying procession from one camera to the next - from film to television to those who chased him like prey. She remembered when Ben had once revered the limelight. Now, he despised it.

She stared at the FedEx package on her lap. It was mere cardboard adorned with the corporation's red and blue lettering. Yet, emotionally its contents bore the burden of stone.

Joan studied the sender's name.

Alpha and Omega Corporation.

The same Alpha and Omega that had earlier delivered menacing messages to Juliana. Had this Alpha and Omega tired of written threats and now advanced its terrorization into a horrifying game of cat and mouse?

Who will Ben choose? Protector? Virgin? Or Matron?

Joan dropped the cell on top of the envelope. Rubbed her forehead.

Protector. No doubt Bruce, Ben's bodyguard.

Virgin. Ben's fiancée, Juliana.

Matron.

Joan's fingers stilled.

Matron.

Me.

Joan opened her eyes and startled at her surroundings. The freeway signs stated they were traveling west instead of east toward Cedars Sinai.

“Driver, you're headed in the wrong –”

“No, ma’am.”

Joan leaned forward. “But, Cedar Sinai is –”

He signaled and steered to the side of the road.

“What are you doing?”

Driving fear hit her.

Something was terribly wrong.

Joan pressed 911 into her cell and skidded across the seat to the right. The Fed Ex envelope dropped to the floor. She reached for the door handle. There was none.

“Oh my God.”

The driver exited the car. Joan glanced down and saw the left side handle was intact. Yet, there was no time to beat him to the door and shove it open. Hopefully placing him in the path of a speeding semi.

The door flung open and he leaned inside.

She tilted her back, pulled her legs toward her chin and prepared for battle.

He smirked and instant recognition flooded from her memory. She would never forget that smile which never seemed loving, genuine or secure.

“You.” The word caught in her throat. “It’s *you*?”

Before the 911 operator completed her greeting, Joan screamed into the receiver,

“This is Joan Powers! I’m being –”

The electric jolt exploded through her in a relentless surge.

The driver watched as she convulsed on the seat. He ached to stand and gawk at her. He found her erratic thrashing alluring, sensual, even intoxicating. He hadn’t given

year upon year to the scrupulous plan, transfixed by this delicious sight, only to be arrested roadside. He returned the Taser to his pocket, plucked the phone from beneath her, and flipped off the power. He slammed the door and crossed behind the black sedan, which shielded him from highway traffic. The phone crashed to the ground and he crushed it beneath his heel.

Pulling a plastic bottle from his inner breast pocket, he doused the contents onto the shattered bits. A potent kick propelled the bubbling remnants into the tall grasses along the roadside.

“Matron.” Matthias grinned. “You are exactly where I need you to be.”

Sheila glanced beyond the glass of Ben’s I.C.U room. Outside the sliding glass barrier, Eternity paced the tiled corridor. Back and forth she prowled, darting between the active hospital personnel. Occasionally, Ben’s ex-wife would peek at the distressing crimson streaks staining her silky blouse. Then she would resume her frenzied pace seemingly more agitated than before. Sheila walked to the door and motioned for her.

Eternity’s heels clacked as she closed in on Sheila. “Has the substance been determined?”

“Glutaraldehyde.”

Eternity glanced once more at the dark markings of Ben’s blood on her ivory fabric. She clasped her hands to her mouth and attempted to suppress shiver.

“Step inside.”

Eternity obeyed. Sheila quietly shut the door and tugged the curtains obscuring any peering eyes. Then she removed her sweat jacket. “Give me your blouse, then put this on.”

After Sheila had arrived, Eternity had shared that she and Ben were at a business lunch when the attack occurred. His ex-wife had driven him to the ER following an assembly of LAPD escorts.

“I’ve never heard of it.” Eternity wrapped the blouse inside out. Sheila removed two toxic waste bags from the cabinet and pulled on a pair of gloves.

“It’s commonly used to sterilize surgical instruments.”

“Will there be permanent damage to his face?”

Sheila struggled to compose her thoughts. Before she spoke, she dropped the blouse into the bag, rolled it tight, then shoved it into her backpack beside Ben’s bed. Then removed the gloves and deposited them into the other bag and added it to her backpack. No sense in leaving salacious material to be sold to the tabloids by unscrupulous medical personnel.

As she walked back toward Eternity, every step felt cemented in sludge. The trauma of the attack and the grave possibility of losing Ben were taxing every muscle. No amount of lectures or strenuous practicum she had mastered at the University of Washington Nursing School prepared her for this ordeal. Finally, she said, “The corrosive from the attacker’s nails has embedded into the nerves along his jaw. The doctor’s won’t know the full extent until after they’ve operated.”

Eternity steepled her fingers and pressed her thumbs to her ivory forehead. “On the ride here, when I glanced over at him – there was a bluish tinge to his skin.”

Sheila searched the room for an object that would lessen the ache. The elaborate stretches of tubing, austere heart and BP monitors, and stark bedding only elevated the strain. “That occurs as the chemical destroys tissue.”

“Oh, God.”

Sheila paused. She lightly tapped her fingers on the back of her neck and willed her professionalism to take charge. “Currently, there are two major concerns. The corrosive has accumulated into his bloodstream, which has caused pulmonary edema.”

Eternity bit her lip. “The last thing he needs is fluid buildup in his lungs. Pneumonia could...”

Sheila diverted her eyes. She surmised if she weren’t forced to meet Eternity’s sober gaze, maybe the nightmare would mercifully ebb away.

“You had to disclose –” Eternity asked.

“His status. Yeah.” Sheila nodded, her heart fearing Ben’s reaction.

When the police had confiscated his clothing as evidence, she had no choice but to reveal his HIV status to the lead official. No matter, Ben probably wouldn’t be pleased. He had laboriously kept that detail concealed for years.

Sheila inhaled, sharply. “The surgeon stated he will attempt to reconstruct tissue to muscle and muscle to nerve once the antibiotics have combated the infection.”

Eternity captured a lengthy, dark strand and tucked it behind her ear. “I’m so sorry, Sheila. I should have done more.”

Sheila stiffened and internally seized the suppression of tears. “Nonsense. The blame is not yours to take.”

Suddenly, Eternity no longer seemed the confident, stunning actress that had taken the world by storm – Nor, the savvy executive producer whose film’s raked in millions. Sheila observed as Eternity twisted her fingers in incessant circles and how her dark green eyes were red and rimmed by swollen lids. Eternity’s garnet lipstick had somehow seeped beyond the perfected pouty lines of her lips. Standing there in Sheila’s collegiate jacket, shifting her slim frame back and forth, she seemed like the Eternity Sheila once knew. Before ego, fame and divorce had split their family.

Sheila embraced Eternity and held tight as her ex-in-law wept. They didn’t separate until a nurse entered and insisted Eternity had to depart.

“Vicki,” Sheila recognized the nurse from her residency at Cedar’s. “Can she at least be escorted to a private waiting area?”

Vicki readily agreed and Sheila promised to visit with periodic updates.

After they exited, she plopped in the sole chair. Ripping the ribbon from her hair, she ran rigid fingers through her auburn curls. Around and around she twirled the navy strip through her fingers. Feeling the maddening twitch of helplessness, she gathered her hair, replaced the ribbon, then re-dialed Juliana’s number. When it shifted to voice mail, she added yet another hasty message since the assault two hours ago.

She rested the phone on her lap and pressed Ben’s damp fingers against her mouth. Ben stirred and licked his desiccated lips. “Juliana?”

Sheila’s heart dipped. His jaw held the inflexibility of one wired shut. “Try not to talk.”

He stared at her. “Where is she?”

Sheila cleared her throat. "I'm not sure."

"You called?"

She kept her tone even. "I promised I would."

Ben whispered, hoarsely. "This ... isn't ... right."

She linked their hands. "Really, Ben, it's best to not speak."

"What time ... is ... it?"

"Two-thirty."

The rapidity of his breaths rattled within. "Her illness ... maybe ... James after all."

Sheila frowned. "Juliana's bodyguard? Why would he hurt her?"

"What else ... would stop her?"

She eyed the alabaster cloths sheathing his raw cheeks. "I'm sure everything is fine."

His words were a jumble of syllables. "James ... five hours ... before ... my attack."

"Ben," she leaned forward. "The F.B.I. have already incriminated your manager and assistant."

Ben stared silently at the ceiling for so long Sheila feared he had lapsed into a catatonic state. Finally, he said, "Juliana said Grace and Jessica's arrests... too ... ideal."

"What reason would she have to doubt?"

"Matthias."

Sheila straightened. "Matthias isn't due out of prison for another five years."

Ben's breathing grew shallower. "Early parole."

Bile rose to her throat. Years after Matthias Kingston's initial alliance to the Power's family and subsequent disassociation, the emotions were still powerful.

Sheila knew she had to say it as much as for Ben's sake as her own. "Listen, I'm sure Juliana's perfectly safe. It's futile for you to worry."

Ben weakly pounded the bedcovers with his fist. "She bit – her assailant. Kingston's DNA."

Sheila rubbed her forehead. Alpha and Omega had seemingly tired of merely transmitting written terror. In February, Juliana's and her previous bodyguard's departure from her office garage had been immobilized by gunfire. Her guardian's corpse had been driven from the blood-spattered scene while gratefully Juliana was only treated for minor lacerations. Although the assault occurred two months ago, Juliana still conveyed the story with a haunted and pitched quality.

Ben's question shifted her awareness to the present. "My suit?"

The muscles in her back stiffened. "The police collected it as evidence."

"Did you...?"

"You are protected by the law against disclosure."

He held Sheila with a fractured gaze. "Ben, I know you're concerned about how many hands and departments your medical information may pass through. How your chart is transferred from one physician, nurse, or technician to the next. But, if I hadn't divulged ..." She paused to stroke the glossy surface of her cell. "You might be facing a civil lawsuit by some unethical opportunist."

After a few moments, he reached for her hand. Sheila grasped it along with his unexpected compassion.

“Bruce?” Ben asked.

“Nothing.”

“Try again.”

She did and again received Bruce’s voice mail. Sheila then retrieved Ben’s phone from her backpack and scrolled through his message list. She attempted to conceal her panic by flicking her fingers over the screen. Yet, Ben saw right through her failed scheme.

“What?” He asked.

“Juliana’s mother called.”

Ben swallowed, then coughed violently. Sheila dropped her backpack and their phones to the chair and gently raised him upright.

Her words rushed out. “Just rest. I’ll call her for you. Aunt Joan should arrive soon. I – ”

“They. Have. Juliana.”

“Ben.”

“Probably ... too late.”

Her phone rang and she answered it before the second ring.

“Hello.”

“It’s Special Agent Northern.”

“Agent Northern, any word from this Alpha and Omega Corporation?”

Incessant phones jangled from what Sheila assumed were Bureau workstations and several beepers alerted while he supposedly processed an answer.

“Nothing on the wires or Bureau alerts. How is Mr. Powers?”

“Stabilized.” Sheila added, “I spoke to Juliana’s bodyguard about Ben’s extensive injury. He promised to relay the message to Juliana, but neither have called back or arrived here.”

“You’d like for me to check it out?”

Sheila glanced at Ben who stared at the darkening April sky through the window. “Please.”

“Alright.” Agent Northern said. “I’ll call you once I have any information.”

“Thanks.”

She flipped her phone shut. “They’re on their way. Now, please, try to rest.”

His complexion had altered to the color of discarded ashes. Then another coughing fit struck. She moved in and held him upright once more. When it subsided, Ben gripped her arm. “Help me.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Pray.”

Sheila’s chest tightened. Before Juliana came into their lives and talked to her about God’s faithful character and unabashed sacrifice for mankind, Sheila’s prayers had been relegated within the consecrated walls of St. Mary’s Academy as a child. God had always been some Great Being in the heavens, far too distant to offer tenderness or love. Juliana’s devout convictions and quiet passion for Christ had stirred the buried inquisitiveness within Sheila that gradually led to her recent rebirth.

Sheila took his hand. Cleared her throat. Shut her eyes. “God, help us. Don’t allow our enemies to triumph over us. We trust You to protect and bring this ordeal to a swift, victorious end.”

When Sheila opened her eyes, she was relieved to see Ben's countenance had slightly relaxed.

He inhaled slowly and said, "Mom...should...get here...soon?"

Sheila glanced at her watch and forced a smile on her lips. Even with mid-day traffic, Joan should have already arrived.

"What? You're anxious for her to bust through the door barking orders?"

Sheila knew Ben's injured jaw muscles wouldn't permit a smile, but he leaned back, closed his eyes and gently squeezed her hand.

Chapter Three

Ben was dead.

Juliana was certain of it.

The stranger had told her so.

Ben's Bel Air mansion foyer pricked the foggy edges of her mind.

James lay immobile on the ivory marble.

The stranger stood above him.

Juliana discerned danger. The stranger chased her. They struggled on the staircase.

Then, blackness.

Behind her weighty lids, she imagined the horror of Ben's struggle – until the stranger had seized his last breath.

Juliana sighed. It was effortless to succumb to the doom.

“Get up!”

Juliana startled at the command, fervent and prevailing.

“Palesa!” The voice, potent and familiar, shouted her nickname.

A figure fluttered flowing closer and closer. Juliana's breath caught in her throat.

Tomorrow.

It was Tomorrow!

Juliana had held Tomorrow's broken and beaten body, her blood shadowing the earth. Long ago in South Africa. In the fields outside of Boptang.

“Breathe, Palesa, for it is not your time.”

Tomorrow's frame was now whole, her features beautiful and intact, her clothing unblemished.

Had the men not battered her to death after all?

"You must fight."

Juliana groaned.

But Ben's dead. I don't want to live without him.

Tomorrow's figure drew closer. Her eyes were a tonic of assurance and promise.

Just as Juliana was about to protest, she heard the laughter.

The sweet, encompassing laughter of Kendrick, Hannah, and Lorato.

"Do you hear my children, Palesa? My children need you."

"Tomorrow."

"Though they plot evil against you and devise wicked schemes, they cannot succeed."

"But, Ben is –"

"Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies; your right hand will seize your foes."

Then, Tomorrow began to turn and Juliana cried out.

"Be exalted, O LORD, in your strength we will sing and praise your might."

Then, Tomorrow faded.

The words surged in Juliana's mind like turbulent waters over prodigious boulders.

She opened her eyes.

The interior was gloomy. Stray patches of luminosity stabbed through stark

windows. Above, steel beams crisscrossed the ceiling in intricate patterns. Water pooled at the edges of the concrete floor in darkened corners. A musty funk penetrated her nostrils. Nausea rose to the back of her throat.

Something concealed her mouth and was tied so tight the material bit into the sides. The concrete floor beneath her scraped against her right cheek and soiled her t-shirt as she attempted to wiggle within the taunt constraints. Her wrists were tied behind her with thick rope and the same unrelenting cord connected and constricted her ankles.

She tilted her head up and instantly ceased movement. A surge of pain rippled through her head. It seemed as if someone had suddenly slammed a hammer at the base of her skull. Sweat dripped from her forehead to her neck. Like a languid tide, the pain progressively withdrew. The crashing pain had amplified her nausea and Juliana didn't move until it also subsided.

Something to Juliana's left shifted. A man dressed in dark coveralls squatted with his back to her – his attention locked on the small television. He suddenly glanced from the small TV toward her direction. Then, he switched the channel.

“Investigators are scouring the area for clues. It may take days before we have anything definitive.”

From Juliana's vantage point, she could only see the border of the screen. This time, she slowly lifted her head. The man's torso, arms and legs seemed to stretch endlessly and blocked the majority of the miniature monitor. “Hospital officials are only confirming that Benjamin Powers arrived yesterday afternoon. There has been no word if the life-threatening injuries sustained after his brutal attack –”

Juliana strained her neck to obtain a better view and winced. Something tugged at

the back of her neck as if scabbing had attempted to adhere.

He changed the channel once more. "...apparently his injuries were severe enough to warrant clergy."

Then, he switched off the set. He stood for a few moments studying the silent monitor as it shifted from blueberry to gray. A toolbox was positioned in front of his right foot. There were several hypodermic needles lined neatly beside vials of clear liquid.

"Juliana!" The man hollered. "It's that time again."

He reached into the box, plunged a needle into one of the numerous vials and stood. Then, he shifted out of sight behind a half wall. Juliana heard the thud of metal landing on wood as he reappeared and placed a portable stereo on an unfinished counter.

If the space had been an arena designed to accommodate the writhing bodies of fans screaming themselves hoarse, his passionate performance of strutting, hip thrusts and crooning wouldn't have been so repulsive. Juliana stared at his mesmerizing rendition of Pat Benatar's "You Better Run." Not out of interest, but in careful study of his mannerisms and face.

He was the stranger.

Matthias. His name seeped like dread throughout her limbs.

During her first L.A. visit, Ben revealed a snapshot of his former roommate. If Juliana believed in reincarnation, Matthias Kingston would have been James Dean reborn. Matthias had caught Ben's eye, for he possessed theatrical talent far more seasoned than someone in his late teens. The relationship had grown until the young man's lunacy led him to strap a detonator to Ben's sports car.

Juliana shivered. The images flooded her mind now.

The persistent photographer in a L.A. Safeway parking lot.

The man in Ben's foyer hovering over James.

All the stranger. All Matthias.

Matthias moved toward her. "Question: Which hikes more ratings? Juliana's abduction or Ben's demise?"

Juliana struggled against the twisted, resilient rope. Matthias swiftly jabbed the needle into her arm, grinning as if he had administered a delicious remedy. "Years ago, Ben abandoned me. I wasn't pleased."

Juliana felt her limbs go numb, then seemingly her body liquefied and pooled over the cement floor. Her lungs inhaled as if supplying air to her body were an afterthought. Her vision blurred and her eyelids refused to remain open.

Matthias said, "The drug is potent, but it won't render you unconscious."

She refused to shut her eyes, for fear they would remain that way. Her mind lessened its rapid thoughts and she forced her eyes to dart about to keep it active and on alert. Matthias removed the binding from her mouth and caressed it over her face. Ben's necktie. She noticed the dark patches and scoured her brain to recall if it had been the same necktie Ben had worn to the studio before this nightmare began.

Juliana wheezed, her lungs tightening with each cough.

He smoothed her cheek. "Did you realize we're nearly the same age?"

She had expected his touch to be callous, but his fingers felt downy against her damp cheek.

He sighed. "Your fever's rising. I'd satiate your thirst, but that would be against my principle."

Juliana knew if she shut her eyes, a surge of empowerment would mount within him. But to look into those eyes of unparalleled depravity threatened her resolve. In Boptang, South Africa she had witnessed illustrations of fetid evil. But Matthias Kingston's soul was a decomposing canvas of the most putrid regions of hell.

"I removed the gag so nothing would muffle your pleas for mercy. You can scream as high as your lungs allow. No one will hear."

If only she could move! If only she could raise her head and bite him. Juliana realized that even if she possessed control over her body, he could easily smash her skull against the concrete floor and end it all right then.

"Ben screamed."

Juliana swallowed.

"His blood was a sweet elixir."

She continued to stare into his depraved eyes.

"He begged me to end it." He bent to her ear. "But it was much too pleasurable."

Juliana tried to move away. Tried to will her body to return to normal.

Matthias quickly removed a high tech cell phone from his pocket that looked as if it had been swindled from Jack Bauer's CTU locker. It was glossy, sleek and petite.

"He..." Juliana muttered.

"What, Virgin? I can't understand you."

"Ben never..."

"What?"

"Stopped..."

Impatience edged his tone. "Speak up!"

“Loving...you.”

His gaze seemed to plummet to a dark chasm of wrath and degeneracy. The area stilled. Juliana nearly held her breath. Then gasped sharply fearing it may have been her last. For several moments, he simply glared down at her. Then he hissed, “If you speak of what I had with Ben again – if you pretend to comprehend what we shared – I’ll gut you and shove your heart down your throat.”

Juliana’s mind staggered at the possibilities of what she desired to do to him. Yet, she felt was powerless, tethered on the concrete floor as if she were livestock.

He stridently smacked her jaw. “Are we clear, Cupcake?”

Juliana battled the whispers in her mind to shut her eyes and submit to the beckoning dark.

Matthias dialed. “Special Agent Northern, I have Juliana DeLauer. I’ll return her for sixty million. If that seems too steep, then I’ll sever her in such intricate pieces and spread her all over this vast land that it will take your best forensics team decades to collect every morsel.”

Juliana watched as he disconnected the call, leaned over, and gently kissed her forehead.

Sheila’s heart pounded with disbelief. *How was such horror possible?* She craved answers only the deranged who conspired this plot could supply.

There was soft tap on the door. She rushed to meet Agent Northern.

“How is Mr. Powers?”

Sheila eyed the cluster of LAPD flanking the door. “Precarious, but stable. The doctor’s are hopeful. He was just taken to surgery.”

“That’s great to hear.”

Sheila dreaded asking, but the desperation to know pushed her trepidation aside.

“Any news regarding my aunt?”

Agent Northern’s partner answered. “Are you alone here, Miss Powers. Any family nearby?”

Sheila didn’t like that answer one bit. It meant this tragedy was deepening. “No. Eternity, but she’s...”

She wrapped her arms across her chest and forced herself to look Northern’s partner in the eye. “Are you suggesting what you are about to tell me requires more family be notified?”

Northern looked to his partner, then the cops, then back inside the room. “Due to the sensitivity of the case, I ask that we step inside.”

Sheila stepped aside and the men swiftly entered. Northern said, “Airport personnel confirmed that Mrs. Powers arrived at 2:35 P.M. and was driven from the airport by private car. Around 3 P.M. there was a 911 call placed from her cell phone. The dispatcher stated she identified herself then the call disconnected.”

For a moment Sheila couldn’t speak. Couldn’t seemingly think. “So you think there’s a connection?”

Northern’s partner injected, “Special Agent Blake, Miss Powers.” He extended

his bony hand and Sheila shook it. He and Northern were direct opposites. Northern was the color of pure maple syrup, had dark eyes that were both solemn, yet assuring and his tall frame bulged with thick muscle. Blake seemed to be one elongated lanky bone from the crown of his blonde crew cut to the arch of his sizeable feet. His grey eyes were so light they had undoubtedly unnerved countless deviants. "I'm sorry to inform you that it also appears Miss DeLauer has been abducted."

Sheila looked to the floor, nodded. She looked back at Northern. Blake's intense stare wasn't aiding in her determination to remain composed. "Abducted. Have the kidnappers contacted you?"

"Yes."

"Any demands?"

"Sixty million."

Sheila gnawed on her lip. "For both?"

"Only Miss DeLauer."

"A time frame?"

"Forty-eight hours."

Sheila's body slowly pitched to the right and both agents gripped her. She inhaled and exhaled repeatedly willing her body to remain resolute. The strength in Blake's hold shocked her. She was surprised she hadn't knocked him over.

"Maybe you should sit," Blake suggested.

Sheila held up a trembling hand. "I'm fine. Just give me a moment."

Once the room ceased to spin and her legs could stand on their own, she asked, "Was Juliana's bodyguard at Ben's house?"

Blake protested, “Miss Powers, it’s probably best for you – ”

“To get my questions answered.” Sheila smiled and felt her lips quiver. “Please.”

Blake sighed and placed his skeletal hands at his side. “He was.”

“What did he say happened?”

“Little more than what we’d already concluded. Currently, he’s in the ER receiving treatment for broken ribs.”

Sheila asked, “Sustained during the attack?”

“It’s likely.”

“That means there was a struggle to take Juliana. Not surprising. Ben said James protects Juliana as if his very life were tied to hers.”

Northern added, “We’re still piecing it together. But it appears as if Mr. Walker, uh, James, was drugged. He has a memory lapse of over an hour.”

Northern detoured the conversation. “There were fibers discovered on the staircase. According to Mr. Walker they matched Miss DeLauer’s pink workout suit.”

Sheila cocked her jaw. “They had just returned from their vacation in Puerto Rico three days ago and had closed on their Malibu property, but Ben was adamant against her going out in public. He had proposed while down there. Was extremely antsy about her being out. But, I saw the look.”

“The look?” Northern said.

“Juliana travels all over the world for her job at *Core* and to South Africa twice a year. Cabin fever all the way. So I went to Nordstrom and bought that outfit and a perfume set - Amazing Grace.” Sheila looked at the gloomy clouds, out the small window, rolling in turbulent succession. “It really cheered her up.”

She returned her focus to them and witnessed something deeply familiar in the agent's eyes. Three generations of Powers men had once lived and breathed the Force and bore the identical expressions. Agent Northern removed a pad from his pocket and jotted a few notes. "Go on."

Her green eyes blazed. "You found something else."

"Miss Powers –"

She inched closer to Northern. Then looked down at his pad. "Maybe this isn't in any of your paperwork, but there's a lengthy heritage of blue blood in my family. And, I don't mean money. My dad was a cop. My grandfather and great-grandfather, cops. So, my intuition anchors deep."

The agents didn't budge.

Neither did Sheila.

Then a subtle, yet affirming pulse swirled in her belly. It had taken Sheila months not to fear it or its purpose to guide, counsel and comfort. She nodded, not agreeing, but relinquishing. The Power that rose in her belly made her realize distancing them would be imprudent.

"Forgive me." She backed away. "God is still honing my character. Especially in the area of tactfulness."

Northern leaned forward. "Think hard. Can you recall anything peculiar within the last seventy-two hours? No matter how seemingly insignificant."

Her green eyes scanned the room as her mind reversed through the prior days. Suddenly, she smacked her forehead. "I'd completely forgotten! The nurses gave me a package just before Ben was taken for surgery. They stated it had arrived that morning at

the nurses' station."

The agents eyed one another before Northern asked, "May we see it?"

She rushed to her backpack, removed the folder and handed it to Northern. He removed a pair of protective gloves from a nearby box and held it. The return address was from the elusive Alpha and Omega. The addressee was to Benjamin Jacob Powers – Cedar Sinai Hospital – ICU.

"I had forgotten all about it because just as they were wheeling Ben to surgery his BP had swiftly dropped and it took vigorous treatment to raise it. I haven't even opened it."

She watched Northern hold it to the sunlight while partner Blake also studied. "You said this arrived this morning? Before Mr. Powers arrived in the ER?"

"Yes. Which means this Alpha and Omega prepared it all in advance. How else would they know to arrange a delivery to Ben here before he was even attacked?"

Northern marched toward the door with Blake in tow. As Blake passed her, he informed, "We've arranged for LAPD to escort you wherever you need."

"And just where do you think I'm going?"

He shook his head. "I meant if travel was necessary. You'll have protection."

Sheila rubbed the back of her neck. "Ben's older brother Sam and his wife Colette are on their way from Idaho. If you could use that protection to get them from the airport, *that* would be appreciated."

"Consider it done, ma'am."

They departed the room and the stillness seemed to engulf her.

She moved to the window and resumed her study of the shadowy sky.

“Ma’am?” Sheila whispered. Blake had to be at least ten years her senior. “Just how much has this ordeal aged me?”

* * *

Once Sam and Colette had arrived, while Ben was in recovery, Sheila updated her cousins of the promising outcome of Ben’s surgery, the FedEx package, and F.B.I visit.

Sam tipped his Stetson on his head. “No word on Mother?”

Sheila noticed a plentiful region of his blonde hair had turned silver since Christmas. She hesitated, hating that she had to say it. “No.”

“How soon can we see Ben?” Colette asked.

“Not until he’s out of recovery.”

Sheila led them to the private waiting and when she opened the door the trio of Ben’s closest friends – Marcus, Ian, and Hunter – moved toward her as one. They softly grasped her hands or caressed her shoulders.

Sheila said, “Ben’s in recovery. The antibiotics are successfully abating the infection. His recuperation will be a complicated process, but the doctors are optimistic.”

Ben’s friends locked one another in firm embraces then hugged each family member, eventually including Eternity. Sam and Colette looked quizzically from Ben’s ex-wife to Sheila. She chose not to diminish the expectant mood with an explanation. It felt good to revel in good news – even if it was slim and even if just for a moment.

Then Ian asked, “What’s the latest regarding the investigation?”

Sheila reiterated the distressing details and watched their expressions shift from

expectant to appalled.

The news settled over the group. There were looks of disbelief, or blank gazes in the distance. Hunter, the youngest in his early twenties, cursed, apologized, then plopped in a nearby chair.

“You think it was this Alpha and Omega?” Marcus said.

Sheila nodded, sluggishly. “Every time a new blow is thrown that name is behind it. Yet, the F.B.I. determined it was a bogus company while investigating Juliana’s threats.”

“Alpha and Omega,” Sam said, hands on his hips. “You all know what that means, right?”

Again, Sheila didn’t want to answer. “It’s a way God describes Himself. The Beginning and the End.”

Colette said, “I know it’s going to sound stupid, but if I say the meaning then it seems as if I’ve given up some power. As if I’m somehow acknowledging this evil can bear the same power as God.”

A nurse peeked in and informed that Ben was out of recovery. Sam and Colette bolted for the door.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Sheila said to the group, and then hurried out the room.

Hospital regulations stated only one visitor was allowed in an I.C.U room at a time, so she led Sam and Colette toward Ben, and stopped outside his door. “You two go in. One at a time. I’ll wait here.”

Sam looked to his wife. She touched his chest. “You go first.”

Sam quietly entered the room and the women watched him remove his Stetson and stare stunned at his baby brother.

Colette grasped her hand. Ben's strong. Always has been. Even in dealing with his..."

Sheila bit her lip. She had resolved to be tough. If her cousins broke down, fine. But she wouldn't dare.

Colette wiped at tears and cleared her throat. "What about the woman who did this?"

"Because of the high profile of this case and the fact a judge quickly signed the search warrant, they were able to search her apartment earlier this evening. Northern said there were pictures of her and Ben plastered everywhere. Juliana's face had been cut out and hers inserted."

Colette's expression twisted. You have got to be kidding!"

"I wish I were."

They returned their focus to Sam who now sat on Ben's bedside chair fingering the brim of his hat.

Colette wiped away tears. "I know it's real. I can see it happened just by looking through the glass. But I just can't wrap my brain around it."

Sheila removed a tissue from her pocket and handed it to Colette. "I know."

"Or why Eternity's here."

The divorce had been brutal. Ben's health had sharply declined to the point of hospitalization. After his release, he spent the several months visiting a psychiatrist bi-weekly. The tabloids reported that Eternity had destroyed the marriage by indulging in

one affair after another. Even after Ben had suffered through the private grief and endured the public humiliation, he somehow managed enough professional civility to remain a partner of their lucrative production company.

The first Christmas after the divorce was finalized, Joan had gathered the family and made them pledge to forgive Eternity. The motivation was slim, yet they knew Joan was right. They were the Powers and the Powers always took the high moral ground. Sheila hadn't prayed, hadn't even asked for God's assistance. She simply decided Eternity wasn't worth the effort it took to hate her. Now, she realized it would take more than a practical decision to have the wound not flash so fresh in Colette's eyes.

"She watched it happened, Colette. She watched that woman maul him. His blood covered her blouse. She could have just called for help and when it arrived walked away."

"I really thought I had forgiven her. I swear to God I did. Until I saw her just now." Colette paused to steady her breath. "So is that why she's wearing the sweatshirt I brought you as a birthday gift?"

"Regardless as to what she's done I couldn't allow her to walk around with Ben's blood all over her."

"I know." Colette dabbed at her face, took a series of deep breaths. "Hey, I forgot to tell you thanks for making such quick preparations for the private jet so quickly. That was twice today that you had to make arrangements in the midst of this hell."

Sheila grabbed Colette and held her until the urge passed. This was not the time to share that it had been Eternity who had planned Joan's trip.

The agents had exited Mr. Powers room and disappeared down the hushed corridor. But they hadn't headed to the FBI lab, as Miss Powers believed. Overcome by the adamant pull to discover the contents of the envelope, Northern ducked into an unoccupied room his hands still covered in rubber. Blake followed, frowning.

"What are we doing, Bobby?" Blake asked, his head cocked.

Northern didn't answer. Simply kept studying his gloved hands.

"We're probably should let forensics handle this," his partner reminded.

"You're convinced we can wait?"

"Yes. Although, the backlog at the lab is brutal."

"And it isn't as if we haven't been trained to execute procedure."

Blake sighed and removed a steel file from his pocket. "I'll swear I forced you."

Northern placed the envelope on the bed, carefully inserted the file along the seam, gently tugged and flipped open the seal. He held the envelope in his left hand and with the fingers of his right removed the mysterious piece. The velvety scrap of what appeared to be leather floated in a transparent solution within a Ziploc bag.

"What in the name of Rumpelstiltskin is that?" Blake grunted.

Included in the packet were various newspaper clippings.

Sheila's son, Tommy, had been victim of a terrible hit and run last November. Numerous clippings detailing the event tumbled out and landed on the bed. Also included were accounts of Juliana's bodyguard's gangland style slaying in *Core's* garage and the arrests of Grace Connors and Jessica Kimura.

“Is that ...?” Blake squinted at the bloody patch.

“What a minute.” Within Northern’s brain the leathery looking form shifted from obscure to lucid. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“It’s skin.” Blake shook his head.

It took Northern several moments before he could open his mouth. “Silvia.”

“What? I’m not following.”

He took his eyes off the skin and looked at his partner. “My wife, Silvia.”

“Yeah.” Blake’s expression had altered from probing to concerned. Northern rarely spoke of his deceased wife while on duty.

“She battled fluctuating insulin and testosterone levels. She bore these dark, velvety patches on the back of her neck. And just like Miss DeLauer, Silvia did everything to mask them.”

Blake sighed. “Effects from PCOS.”

Northern glared at his partner. “He sent us a piece of her.”

“Bobby.”

“Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome.” Northern looked away from Blake and stared at the submerged skin.

Blake said, “Let’s get out of here. Go grab a burger from your favorite joint. Huh? My treat.”

The floating fragment transfixed Northern as if it were the disease itself suspended before him. It took him back – reversed time – and he recalled the last days in this very hospital watching Silvia only hours away from her death.

“Come on, man.”

Miss Powers burst through the door. Rapidly, Northern returned the troubling matter inside the folder and tucked the parcel into his coat pocket. He suddenly wished he had just left the unveiling to the forensics team.

She peered. “What was that?”

Northern said, “Miss Powers –”

“I was on my way to grab some coffee when I pass by and see you two still here.”

“Come on,” Blake attempted to move her toward the door. “We’ll walk you –”

Sheila shrugged away from his hold. “You left the room without removing those gloves. Right. Telltale sign you didn’t want me to see the contents.”

The door opened again and Northern looked to the ceiling in despair. Agent Jahanpur entered and studied the uneasy faces.

“Stupid me.” Miss Powers jutted her jaw. “Now that it’s in your hands, it’s evidence. I should have opened it myself.”

Agent Jahanpur touched Miss Powers’s shoulder. “It is perhaps better if you allow us to complete our investigation.”

Miss Powers nodded then moved closer to the men. “Alpha and Omega is actually Kingston, isn’t it?”

Northern said, “We’ll determine that after our experts have had an opportunity for further examination.”

“Have you questioned the woman who attacked Ben?”

“We’ll see her next.”

Miss Powers squared those eyes that seemed sharper than any surgeon’s implement on him. “This case is developing like some demented creation from hell. I’ve

been thinking about all that has occurred. It didn't start with the murder of Juliana's former bodyguard in her office garage. It began when that drunken teenager with \$15,000 in a briefcase ran down my son."

Northern remained silent although similar thoughts tumbled through his mind.

"Find Kingston," she said.

Jahanpur patted her shoulder. "You should return to Mr. Powers."

Blake escorted her from the room. Northern internally cursed. He had crafted his expertise by meticulously following what the Bureau commanded. Yet, with this case, he had become distracted and sloppy.

The probable false arrests of Connors and Kimura.

The missed clues of pink fibers and blood on the stairs at Powers's mansion.

Now, the unorthodox handling of evidence.

"What did she see?" Jahanpur asked, closing the distance between them.

He exhaled sharply. "Nothing."

"She asked you about a package."

"Hospital staff received an envelope for Mr. Powers. They placed it in her possession since she was the next of kin."

"You opened it?"

"Right."

"Here?"

"Right again."

Northern moved to the door. Jahanpur called, "Agent Northern?"

He gripped the handle. "Yeah?"

“This isn’t like you.” She edged closer. “I’ve read your reports in previous cases. You are stringent with procedure.”

“It’s good to know someone noticed.”

“However,” she shook her head and the dark waves swayed across her shoulders. “I’m concerned with what I’m seeing of late.”

“So, what now Jahanpur? You file a grievance?”

“Should I?”

He shrugged, but the tension multiplied in his chest. “Do what you gotta do.”

“I’m not looking to steal your glory. I’m only offering my assistance.”

“That’s funny.” Northern smirked. “I get the feeling you’re trying to prove a point.”

“What point might that be?”

For several moments, he stood glaring at her. Then he snapped. “I said it once and I’ll say it again. I don’t need babysitting.”

He flung open the door.

“I questioned Mr. Walker in the ER.”

He halted. “Under what grounds?”

“The lab determined the blood on his person was human. We’re deciphering if it matches Miss DeLauer’s.”

“What’s the blood type?”

“B positive.”

He didn’t reveal that he already knew that matched Miss DeLauer’s blood type based on the police report detailing her assault in *Core’s* garage.

Northern exited, discovered Blake outside of Powers's room and motioned. "Let's go."